

Joe Purtell
Encountering India
Professor Rashna Singh
October 22, 2014

The Power of Privilege: Western Oppression of the 'Other'

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized help on
this paper.

The subaltern cannot speak. Denied even an identity to speak from, the subaltern can only make himself heard through action. Examined in detail by Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, both Aravind Adiga and Mohsin Hamid elaborate on this trend in their novels *The White Tiger* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

The subaltern is defined in relation to the privileged. As a result, "there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself" (Spivak 80). The subaltern knows himself only in relation to the wealthy, and lacks the ability to recognize his own identity. Adiga uses Balram to display the inner turmoil of the subaltern. Reflecting on his time as a subaltern, Balram states: "we are made mysteries to ourselves by the Rooster Coop we are locked in" (Adiga 160). The subaltern replaces his missing identity with the deeply rooted belief that the upper classes are inherently superior. When confronted with his master's misdeeds, Balram returns time and time again to the belief that his master is, "a good man: a cut above me" (Adiga 178). Adiga includes the clause "a cut above me" (with a colon

no less) to emphasize Balram's belief that he is a lesser entity. Ashok's goodness is above suspicion; Balram's inferiority is similarly unquestionable.

Balram's inferiority complex is no accident. He stresses that it "had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood" (Adiga 165). Generations of servitude form a layer of social conditioning nearly impossible to overcome. Adiga compares this conditioning to a rooster coop: "The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings" (Adiga 147). The social conditioning of the subaltern is so severe that many cannot recognize the possibility of escape even when faced with death.

The subaltern, even if able to escape the rooster coop, cannot be totally free of social conditioning. Balram eventually escapes but recognizes, "once a servant, always a servant: the instinct is always there, inside you, somewhere near the base of your spine" (Adiga 256). This latent servitude manifests itself even as Balram lures his master to his death. Balram hesitates to imply blackmail: "I *really* didn't want him to think, even in the two or three minutes he had left to live, that I was *that* kind of driver" (Adiga 243). Adiga emphasizes the absurdity of the thought with italics. On the verge of murdering his master, Balram is still concerned with Ashok's opinion of him.

The social conditioning of the subaltern is reinforced internally. Adiga states plainly, "the coop is guarded from the inside" (Adiga 166). When Balram is faced with prison for a murder his master committed, his family does not object, but

rather “go[es] about bragging... He was loyal as a dog. He was the perfect servant” (Adiga 145). The social conditioning of the subaltern is passed from generation to generation. Parents bestow an adherence to the constraints of the rooster coop on their children as a form of ideology.

Spivak argues that there is “no such thing as a ‘class instinct’ at work here. In fact, the collectivity of familial existence, which might be considered the arena of ‘instinct’, is discontinuous with, though operated by, the differential isolation of classes” (Spivak 71). The subaltern’s conditioned servitude is not a naturally occurring trait, but rather the product of generations of systematic oppression. Because of the rooster coop’s self-perpetuating nature, Adiga believes revolution will not begin internally. Balram wonders, “one night, will they all join together—will they destroy the Rooster Coop? Ha!” (Adiga 260).

Changez, the protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is also conditioned by a group with assumed superiority. A servant of a different nature, Hamid compares Changez to a janissary of the Ottoman Empire. The janissaries, Christian boys captured and indoctrinated by the Empire, were “ferocious and utterly loyal: they had fought to erase their own civilizations” (Hamid 151). Although the janissaries enjoyed prestigious social status, they were still servants subject to a similar social conditioning to that of the subaltern.

Changez steps into servitude, and the conditioning that comes with it, voluntarily and without full understanding of his actions. Changez describes his reaction to initiation into a prestigious American firm: “on that day, I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee, and my firm’s

impressive offices made me *proud*” (Hamid 34). His conditioning hides behind a curtain of wealth and status, disguising it from even Changez himself, who sees himself as “a veritable James Bond—only younger, darker, and possibly better paid” (Hamid 64). Wildly ambitious, Changez is too focused on worldly success to notice how much he is changing.

Hamid hints at both the homogenizing affect of indoctrination into the American Financial Empire and the Western sense of superiority eventually replicated in the indoctrinated through Changez’s reflection on his first years in the United States. Changez recalls:

Looking back now, I see the power of that system, pragmatic and effective, like so much else in America... Students like me were given visas and scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of the meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining. And for the most part, we were happy. (Hamid 4)

Hamid describes the educational system as an efficient means of instilling recruits with the American Dream. By specifying that students received financial aid rather than merit based scholarships, Hamid lays American condescension towards ‘lesser’ nations bare. Refusing to acknowledge the brilliance of international students until they are absorbed into the obscuring grey of meritocracy, American institutions lift potential earners from their unfortunate circumstances with a sense of charity.

Changez is Americanized, more akin to his coworkers at Underwood Sampson than his fellow Pakistanis. Although ethnically diverse, his coworkers “all exuded a sense of confident self-satisfaction,” proud and at ease in their elevated status (Hamid 38). Changez switches sides in ignorance, joining the American Financial Empire in exploiting nations much like his native Pakistan. In the eyes of

Changez's fellow Pakistanis, he is now indistinguishable from his coworkers. Changez encounters a Filipino man when driving through New York with his colleagues. The man's "dislike was so obvious, so *intimate*, that it got under [his] skin... perhaps he simply does not like Americans" (Hamid 67). Hamid unveils Changez's Americanization; the Filipino man does not like *Americans*.

Post September 11th hostility transforms Changez from servant to subaltern. Spivak explains the relationship between society's dominant groups and subaltern groups: "there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self... To confront them is not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves" (Spivak 84). In an encounter with a subaltern group, the dominant group does not seek to understand the subaltern, but rather to define the subaltern as what the dominant is not. After September 11th, the United States sought to define itself in light of the tragedy. This definition sprung from confrontation with Islam. *They* are terrorists, barbarians, savages; *we* are free, righteous, powerful.

Hamid highlights the transition into a new American identity with Changez's description of post-September 11th New York: "your country's flag invaded New York after the attacks... They all seemed to proclaim: *We are America*—not New York, which, in my opinion, means something quite different—*the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*" (Hamid 75). Changez now refers to the United States as 'your country.' America has defined itself, and Changez, the 'Other,' is no longer included.

The American identity morphs into the opposite of the Islamic. Hamid uses Changez as an example of how Muslims were forced to the outskirts of society, forced to choose between the United States and their own cultures. When returning from a business trip, Changez is singled out for questioning in the airport because of his race. He recounts the exchange: “‘What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?’ she [the customs agent] asked me. ‘I live here,’ I replied. ‘That is *not* what I asked you...’ I rode to Manhattan that evening very much alone” (Hamid 75). Changez, the American janissary, utterly unrelated to the attacks, is discarded because he is the antithesis of the new American identity.

Confronted with the new American identity, Changez realizes how far he has strayed from his roots. In his own words, “I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me” (Hamid 124). His Americanized exterior is destroyed fully when the United States fails to defend Pakistan (an ally) from Indian aggression. Although Pakistan assisted “America in Afghanistan, America would not fight at [their] side” (Hamid 127). America abandons Changez along with Pakistan, leaving him no choice but to cut ties with the United States and return to his Pakistani roots. In a moment of self-reflection, Changez realizes “the fittest and brightest... were leaving [Pakistan], those who in the past would have been most expected to remain. I was filled with contempt for myself” (Hamid 129).

Freed from his janissary indoctrination, Changez finally understands his betrayal of Pakistan. He ruminates, “I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the

American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war”(Hamid 152). Once Changez frees himself, he is able to internalize the scale of America’s betrayal of him, and of his betrayal of Pakistan.

When Changez becomes the American ‘Other,’ he joins Balram in subalternhood. Where he was previously a Pakistani American, businessman, and peer, he is now simply ‘Arab,’ identified by his difference from the norm rather than his own sovereignty as an individual. Changez is not ethnically Arab, but his resemblance is enough to land him in the category. The member of a newly oppressed group, Changez now shares commonalities with Balram. Both are denied a heterogeneous identity. Both are denied a voice.

For the truly oppressed, speech becomes a means to an end rather than an expression of the self. When speaking to his masters, Balram presents an image he hopes they will find appealing in lieu of his authentic opinions. His potential employer asks, “how much do you want?” Another test. ‘Absolutely nothing, sir. You’re like a father and mother to me, and how can I ask for money from my parents?’” (Adiga 55). Balram is forced to conceal his true motivations in order to survive. Constantly under duress, Balram is denied the opportunity to form an identity of his own.

The privileged, incapable of relating to the subaltern’s life, nonetheless claim the right to speak for them. When Balram receives a letter from his village, Ashok’s brother opens it first. Ashok asks why and “his brother replied in English, and again [Balram] guessed, rather than understood, his meaning: ‘He won’t mind a thing like

this. He has no sense of *privacy*. In the villages there are no separate rooms so they just lie together at night and fuck like that. Trust me, he doesn't mind'" (Adiga 162). The conversation is held in English, the language of privilege, denying Balram the ability to join a conversation in which he is the subject. Their representation of Balram is fundamentally flawed as everything he says is designed to perpetuate their image of him. If asked directly, Balram would confirm the factuality of their representations.

In order to even attempt the representation of the subaltern, the aspirant must acknowledge and offset his or her own social conditioning. Spivak argues that "the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness... so that the elaboration of the insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-conscious, does not freeze into an 'object of investigation'" (Spivak 82). The aspirant will, by definition, not be subaltern himself. He must actively attempt to represent the subaltern accurately. If the scholar struggles to provide an accurate representation, it is unlikely that the average man will stumble upon one in the course of casual conversation.

Without accounting for their own personal predispositions, ingrained as deeply as the subaltern's own, the privileged's representation of the subaltern will inevitably be distorted. Balram muses, "the dreams of the rich, and the dreams of the poor—they never overlap, do they" (Adiga 191). Any representation of the subaltern is twisted by the agenda of the privileged. A western speaker will, unless actively resisting the tendency, speak from an "interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject" (Spivak 66). When speaking from a

subconscious assumption of Western superiority, the Westerner tends to speak with a “typically *American* undercurrent of condescension” (Hamid 55).

Balram’s master is subject to the same conditioning found in the Western elite. Although born in India, like Changez, Ashok becomes Americanized during his time in the United States. In his master’s eyes, Balram “saw the most unexpected emotion. Pity” (Adiga 102). Ashok relates to Balram as the West relates to the developing world—with pity rather than empathy. As his relationship with Balram is based on pity, Ashok cannot fully represent him. To Ashok, Balram is not a full subject. He can recognize that Balram leads a life more difficult than his own, but cannot relate to him man to man, as equal entities.

Lacking voice, power, and accurate representation, the subaltern (lucky enough to recognize that the choice even exists) is faced with a two options: live in the rooster coop, resigned to fate, or escape. Spivak uses the example of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, an Indian woman charged with the assassination of a politician. Rather than carrying out the assassination, she killed herself. She “had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation” (Spivak 103). Denied the opportunity to speak, Bhaduri represents herself through action, explaining the plight of the subaltern far more effectively than she could have with words. Bhaduri chose to leave the coop, even at the cost of her own life.

Both Balram and Changez opt to escape as well. As the more oppressed of the two, Balram’s escape is brutal and dramatic. Starting by stealing small sums from Ashok, he eventually kills his erstwhile master and steals a fortune in bribes, for the

first time speaking for himself: “I am my own master” (Adiga 197). Changez, an oppressed member of a higher class, simply leaves his firm and returns to Pakistan, refusing to support the American Financial Empire (Hamid 154).

Once outside of the coop, Balram and Changez can fully recognize its oppressive nature. For Balram the realization comes after his first small acts of theft. He recounts, “the more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me” (Adiga 196). For Changez, the full scope of anti-Muslim discrimination becomes visible. Changez explains, “the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment in history—not just from the government, but from the media and supposedly critical journalists as well—provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger” (Hamid 167). Having escaped the coup, no one will voluntarily return. Balram reflects, “I’ll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master’s throat. I’ll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a *minute*, what it means not to be a servant” (Adiga 276).

Both Balram and Changez are forced into action by the oppression exerted on them by their social ‘superiors.’ In Balram’s case, action manifests in a violent form. If the subaltern are oppressed so extensively that they can speak only through action, can they be blamed if that action is violent? Spivak states simply: “to ignore the subaltern today is... to continue the imperialist project” (Spivak 94). In essence, to ignore the subaltern is to ignore our financial exploitation of the subaltern, and thus passively support the actions of the American Financial Empire—a position for which we are recompensed in the form of cheaper goods and services. As Americans, we must take a stand to end exploitation by refusing to support the

Financial Empire. How long can we prioritize our own comfort over the suffering of millions?

Works Cited

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New York: Free Press, 2008. Print.

Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. New York: Mariner Books, 2008.

Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan,

1988. Print.