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FROM SILENCE TO STRENGTH: THE GENDERED SUBALTERN IN ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE AND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the issue of the gendered subaltern in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable and Arvind Adiga's The White Tiger. In Untouchable, Anand portrays the suffering of women especially at the hands of upper-caste Hindus through Sohini, who is tried to be raped by a Brahmin, Pandit Kali Nath in the temple courtyard. She also faces humiliation at the hands of other lower-caste women. Aravind Adiga portrays the suffering of women through two major female characters in his novel The White Tiger. Kusum, a poor and lower-class woman breaks the stereotypes of the Indian patriarchal system as she rules over all the members of the family, whether they are male or female. She makes all the important decisions and has all the financial power. Another character is Pinky Madam, who belongs to the higher class, a very firm and determined lady. She stands against the wrong and makes her life decisions.

Keywords: Gendered Women, Subaltern, Suffering, Patriarchal, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marginalized and oppressed groups or individuals, based on factors such as caste, class, age, religion, and gender, are referred to as subalterns. These subaltern people lack a voice of their own, unable to assert themselves in society in the presence of the elite or powerful groups of society. Subaltern literature reflects oppression, marginalization, gender bias, silencing of women, and racial inequalities. Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci was the first to use this term in a non-military sense, introducing it in his *Prison Notebooks*. He applies it to social groups lacking autonomous political agency due to factors like ethnicity, class, gender, or identity. Gramsci employs "subaltern" when discussing the dominance of ruling or colonial groups over subordinates like peasants and similarly situated workers. He says, "The subaltern classes are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States" (Gramsci 52). Gramsci

coins the term to describe those groups in any society under the hegemony of the governing classes. The peasants and labourers who oppose the socially powerful and hegemonized dominating classes in contemporary Italy are commonly believed by Gramsci to be the "subalterns." He uses the word to describe the oppressed Italians, particularly the workers from the South of Italy, who are pushed to the margins by the fascist party's hegemonic politics. Later, he applies the theory to the study of colonial cultures to comprehend the groups that are subjected to cultural hegemony and that colonial powers control to maintain their supremacy in the region.

Later, the term "subaltern" was adopted by the Indian school of subaltern history from him. Some scholars use the phrase to refer to the oppressed, exploited, and marginalised communities. In an interview with Leon De Kock, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a prominent figure in the field of subaltern studies, states that the "[s]ubaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie… everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern-a space of difference" (45). Ranajit Guha published a series titled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, wherein, he and his collaborators, contribute to fill in historical gaps by exploring the perspectives of underrepresented groups in Indian society. Guha defines the subaltern as "a name for the general attribute of subordination… whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (SSI vii). The Subaltern Studies movement rapidly gains momentum within the realm of historical research, challenging authoritative viewpoints and striving to amplify silenced voices.

The fundamental aim of subaltern studies lies in investigating the history of peasant uprisings in colonial India and attempting to recover the history of marginalized individuals who are marginalized within the historical narrative. Guha, the central figure in the subaltern studies group, believes that the politics of peasants and other underprivileged people belong to their category since they are distinct from the politics of the elite. He regrets that such groups are not acknowledged as legitimate historical subjects. He notes that the "peasants" are marginalized, and overlooked for their historical significance, despite their unique experiences. The "history from below" philosophy reconstructs society's history from the periphery rather than the centre, offering a fresh perspective by examining history through the eyes of society's powerless, such as the colonised or subalterns (Ludden 5).

The gendered subaltern is the most discussed category of different subaltern classifications. Gendered subalterns suffer the burden of patriarchy. Subaltern studies have been shaped by childhood, unfulfilled desires, Hindu society, widowhood, untouchability, and a desire for independence. Subaltern Studies pay attention to all the disadvantaged and as soon as this group emerges many theorists raise the voice of women as well. They start writing and talking about this underprivileged group. In Indian society, women are always looked down upon by the male and the upper-caste and class

Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" puts forth the theory of subalternity, which is based on the idea that a subaltern cannot speak. She considers whether the subalterns can communicate with others, questioning why they are mute. She analyses the issue of subalterns within the framework of their status as gendered subalterns, concentrating on how women are doubly oppressed in the colonized and patriarchal world. Spivak describes the historical and ideological barriers that prevent the marginalized from being heard. She believes that as subaltern subjectivity is being rewritten, women's identities are being obliterated. She claims:

It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even deeply in shadow. (287)

In Other Worlds (1987), Spivak examines the gendered subaltern as a subject of history and literature. She argues that history is a "discursive narrativization of events" and uses a language "structured or textured like what is called literature" (243). Thus, the difference between history and literature in analyzing subaltern subjectivity is "a difference in degree rather than in kind," as the subaltern's silence distances it equally from both, requiring a blend of reality and imagination to achieve historical credibility (243). Spivak proves her point by using the example of Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* (Breast-Giver), claiming that Jashoda, the central character, might have existed as a subaltern within a particular historical context. She draws a parallel between the writer's imaginative attribution of Jashoda's identity and a subaltern historian's endeavour to reconstruct a muted history.

In *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984), Chandra Talpade Mohanty analyzes the universalizing of gender and patriarchy, emphasizing their cultural specificity and varied manifestations based on women's geo-temporal positions. She argues that Third World women face oppression through intersecting systems of gender, class, and caste, making their experiences complex to understand feminist frameworks. Portraying them as silent subalterns, she argues, reinforces colonial hegemonies in feminism. In *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), Mohanty

explores how political, economic, and social inequalities exploit Third World women as cheap, unrecognized labour. She calls for transnational solidarity to address these inequities and equality.

Hence, subaltern scholars make people understand these underprivileged people experience suffering and the mistreatment they receive in the society. Gramsci examined the concept of cultural hegemony, Guha explored the agency of subaltern groups within historical narratives, and Spivak represents the voices of women. Understanding the gendered subaltern, shaped by race, class, and caste, requires careful analysis of its historical context. This perspective broadens both Subaltern Studies and our understanding of the subaltern as a subject.

Mulk Raj Anand, who is regarded as the Charles Dickens of India, portrays the life of poor and oppressed people and how these people are socially exploited. Aravind Adiga's writings frequently explore social problems related to India, including the role of women in society, politics, democracy, corruption, the feudal system, poverty, starvation, exploitation, and religious hypocrisy.

Women in Indian society have long played essential roles in the family and community, yet their contributions have often been overlooked due to deeply ingrained patriarchal structures. Traditionally, they have been tasked with managing households, raising children, and maintaining familial organization, but this labour frequently goes unrecognized. Religious and cultural practices have significantly shaped women's roles, often emphasizing existing power hierarchies. Women have faced practices such as child marriage, dowry harassment, and gender-based violence, reflecting systemic discrimination. The British colonial period added to this suffering. While introducing Western ideas of gender equality and women's rights, colonial narratives often depicted Indian women as passive victims needing salvation. This duality promoted social reform while reinforcing cultural biases, and shaped the evolving status of women, creating tensions between traditional norms and emerging reformist ideals.

India has made significant progress in advancing women's empowerment and gender equality since independence, through educational reforms, and legislative changes. However, gender inequality persists in various areas such as politics, employment, healthcare, and education. Gender-based violence remains widespread, and women continue to face challenges in various fields like education and economic opportunities. The situation is further complicated for marginalized women, as factors like caste, class, religion, and ethnicity are also introduced which increase their struggles, inequality and make their path to empowerment even more difficult. Despite progress, these barriers highlight the need for efforts to achieve true gender equality.

In his works, Anand offers an honest portrayal of Indian society, focusing on issues such as caste, class, women's oppression, and power dynamics. In the novel *Untouchable* (1935), one of the central themes is gender subalternity. Anand strongly expresses the condition of women, particularly those from lower castes, and their subjugation within a complicated social structure. These novels emphasize the marginalised status of women as they experience the consequences of the existing class structure, which is based on the division between the wealthy and the impoverished. In Indian society, caste significantly influences an individual's position within the power hierarchy. The interplay of power dynamics, united with the gendering and sexualisation of bodies, significantly contributes to the subjugation of women within the social hierarchy. Krishna Nehru Hutheesing and Mulk Raj Anand say about the status of women in India, in their work, *The Bride's Book of Beauty* (1946), "Obviously woman in India has sometimes been exalted as a goddess, but mostly pampered as a doll or kept down and oppressed" (18).

In *Untouchable*, he focuses on the oppression of women, using the character of Pandit Kali Nath, a temple priest, to expose the hypocrisy of high-caste morality. Kali Nath, who claims to uphold Hindu values, abuses his position to sexually assault a sweeper girl. When his attempt fails, he accuses her of defiling him, illustrating the exploitation of marginalised women as subalterns. Through this novel, Anand also highlights the practice of turning low-caste girls into Devdasis, where they are married to a God but used by priests for their sexual desires. These women, labelled untouchable by society, tolerate both physical and moral degradation, their oppression rooted in caste, gender, and patriarchy. Through these depictions, Anand emphasises the double standards and systemic violence women face, especially those at the margins of society.

There are many incidents in the novel which show Anand's observation of society and their treatment towards women. Sohini, the major female character, is a patient, quiet and peaceful woman, who goes to fetch water for her family. She is treated badly by the upper-caste Hindus. She waits for a long time to fill her pitcher because lower-caste people do not have wells and they need to depend on the mercy of upper-caste Hindus because they are not allowed to touch the water, as water gets polluted. Anand says, "The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted" (Untouchable 14). Such humiliation is very common for the untouchables. Anand points out that the upper Hindus misuse

their power and position as they have easy access to water for their use and to store but these underclass people have to wait for long to be helped by some upper-caste Hindus.

The untouchables not only tolerate mistreatment and humiliation from upper-caste Hindus but also face the same insult and ill-treatment because of the divisions within their community. "There are degrees of caste among the 'low caste' people, there being none low without one being lower" (Iyengar 337). For instance, Sohini, a member of the lower caste, belongs to the lowest tier within its hierarchy. While waiting patiently at the well, Sohini is confronted by Gulabo, a washerwoman who holds a relatively higher position among the outcasts. Driven by jealousy, Gulabo begins to abuse Sohini, who remains silent due to the rigid caste system. Anand observes, "Now Sohini being of the lowest caste among the outcastes would naturally be looked down upon by Gulabo" (Untouchable 16).

The rigid hierarchy of power and position reached its peak in early 20th-century India, a reality Anand vividly portrays in *Untouchable*. Through the character of Pandit Kalinath, the temple priest of Bulashah, Anand highlights the hypocrisy of caste oppression. Kalinath, who claims to be defiled by the touch of an untouchable, has a strong sexual desire for Sohini, an untouchable girl. Under the claim of helping her fetch water, he invites her to clean the temple courtyard with bad intentions. When Sohini reaches there, he tries to assault her but she resists his advances, he reacts by shouting and accusing her of defiling the temple. Anand writes, "'Polluted, polluted, polluted!' shouted the Brahmin below… Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony" (53). This scene clearly illustrates the exploitation and mistreatment of women from oppressed castes by those in power, reflecting the deep-rooted injustice faced by untouchables in India.

When Bakha learns about the incident, he is furious and wants to take up the fight against the pandit, but he feels powerless and trapped by his poverty and untouchable status. Reflecting on his helplessness, he regrets the burden of having a beautiful sister in a society that views her with lustful eyes, leaving him unable to protect her. He bitterly exclaims:

My poor sister! How can she show her face to the world after this? But, why didn't she let me go and kill that man? Why was she born a girl in our house, to bring disgrace upon us? So beautiful! So beautiful and so accursed! I wish she had been the ugliest woman in the world. Then no one would have teased her! (56-57)

This internal conflict highlights the deep despair and helplessness experienced by those marginalised under oppressive social norms. Under patriarchy, a woman is often treated as a possession, valued primarily as a product. Her body becomes the spot where dominant power hierarchies impose their rules, making it nearly impossible to see her body beyond the boundaries of gender and sexuality. In this system, a woman's virginity is seen as her most valuable strength, especially in Indian society, where sexual purity is supreme. Once lost, a woman is burdened with shame and forced guilt, further strengthening her subjugation. In a patriarchal society, a woman is always considered a burden on her father and a temporary member of a family. However, she still carries the burden of honour for her family. She must protect her body from the gaze of men, as illustrated in *Untouchable* when Bakha holds his sister responsible for the family's shame. Pandit Kali Nath avoids responsibility for his assault on Sohini, whereas Bakha places the blame on her for the incident. This shows a social inclination to examine and control female sexuality, emphasizing the notion that men lack responsibility regarding their sexual desires. Within this framework, Foucault emphasizes self-surveillance, where individuals monitor and regulate their behaviour through an internalized, examining gaze. The major female character in this novel is Sohini and Anand portrays her according to contemporary India. She is a dutiful daughter and sister but she is weak because of her caste and gender. She is unable to speak for herself whether it is to raise her voice against Pandit Kalinath or against Gulabo who is also a woman and belongs to the lower caste.

Anand is not only one who has presented subaltern realities but many others like Adiga have also dealt with this theme. Adiga's *The White Tiger* portraying the real picture of modern India has Balram, the main character, who is viewed as a subaltern and emerges as a symbol of all those people who are oppressed worldwide by hegemonic dominance and the way they unknowingly submit to their will while secretly dreaming about freedom from this centuries-old bondage. The development of socialists in India, crimes, opportunism, Balram's business success, and other factors raise the alarm that the voice of the underclass can no longer be ignored. The novel is basically about "India of Light and an India of Darkness" (Adiga 14). India of darkness represents the voice of the subaltern. The protagonist, who belongs to a sweet maker caste and is the son of a rickshaw puller, becomes Ashok Sharma. He goes from being Munna to Balram Halwai to Ashok Sharma, and that transition is the model for the growth of the underclass. Whereas "India of Light" is represented by upper-class characters including Ashok Sharma, and his family. Balram's narrative is attractive, yet the women around him show social inequalities in a complex way. The women in "India of Dark" are represented by Kusum, Balram's grandmother, Balram's mother and in "India of Light" they are represented by Pinki Madam, Ashok Sharma's wife.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga highlights the struggles of women trapped in a patriarchal society. From an early age, they are treated as burdens or objects to be exchanged. For example, the dowry system, depicted through Balram's sister, turns young girls into financial responsibilities. Women like Ashok's maidservant and Balram's mother are stuck in lives of hard labor, with little hope for their daughters to escape the same fate. Marriage, instead of offering safety, becomes another way to control women and keep them powerless. Through these incidents, Adiga criticizes a society built on caste, tradition, and poverty, which keeps women in cycles of exploitation and dependence. The female characters in the novel are supporting characters only but important characters.

Kusum, the grandmother of Ashok, represents traditional values and familial power in *The White Tiger* with her powerful female attitude. Kusum is depicted as an elderly woman from a lower-caste family, highlighting the challenges women face in marginalized communities in India. These women often struggle with inequalities in education, healthcare, and financial stability. Because Indian society is patriarchal, women have not been given equal rights as men. Mohanty believes that third-world women are "often located as implicit victims of particular cultural and socioeconomic systems" (57). In this context, Kusum's lower status makes her a victim of in-built social and economic differences.

Despite these disadvantages, Kusum has important control over her family, including male members like Balram's brother Kishan, father Vikram Halwai, and Balram himself. Through Balram's perspective, Kusum is portrayed as a dominant figure who influences the family's decisions, from financial matters to personal behaviour. Her authority within the household challenges the typical patriarchal structure of Indian families, where men traditionally hold greater power. Adiga's description challenges this norm by presenting Kusum as a woman using significant influence, even over the eldest male in the family, Vikram, who is powerless to oppose her wishes. In Balram's words, she "had grinned her way into control of the house; every son and daughter-in-law lived in fear of her" (Adiga 16).

She has full control over her family's income and she is the one who makes all the major decisions of the family like making the marriage decisions; she is the one who approves Balram's job as a chauffeur because she believes that he will earn good money from the job and will help to support the family financially. Kusum challenges the common image of the self-sacrificing, helpless woman. Her character shows a strong desire for power. She keeps taking control of the family's resources to maintain her influence. Kusum's need for power is not a matter of choice but a result of the difficult economic situation she faces. Even though she does not fit the usual portrayal of a victim, she is still a victim of her financial struggles.

Kusum's dominance and authority over the women in her family lead her to exploit them in various ways. She treats them as a product, controlling them to stay silent, and oppressed, and continuously provides income. She is controlling and harsh towards the women around her. The women, like her daughters-in-law, lack the same independence that she possesses. The divisions created by class, income, and urbanization result in women being treated as objects and different from one another. These social and economic inequalities make it difficult for women to build unity or a sense of "sisterhood." Women are oppressed depending on their social status, preventing resistance. Instead of challenging this social system, women are often set against each other, lacking mutual sympathy and solidarity, even within the same class structure. Kusum, Balram's grandmother and his mother is a good example of this.

Adiga's portrayal of Balram's mother in *The White Tiger* reflects the harsh realities of women oppressed by patriarchy, poverty, and social inequality. Voiceless and unseen, she is confined to a life of unending domestic labour, serving the wealthy landlord's family while her needs and dreams are ignored. Her life is shaped by a lack of education and economic opportunities, leaving her trapped in a cycle of slavery and subjugation. There are a lot of burdens and responsibilities for Balram's mother like supporting her family and working tirelessly to meet basic needs in the absence of a male worker. Despite her determination, social norms restrict her independence, encouraging her exploitation and subjugation. Her silent suffering and eventual demise symbolize the systemic inequalities faced by several rural women in India, whose lives are shaped by intersecting forces of caste, gender, and class. During her funeral, her mother-in-law Kusum, states her qualities which clearly show the oppression of women, she states, "She was a good, quiet girl the day she came to our home, Kusum said" (17). This is the only time, after her death, when Balram sees his mother in any new, silk cloth. This is the reason that he considers her mother's death grand as compared to her miserable life, "Her death was so grand that I knew, all at once, that her life must have been miserable" (16). Her story not only exposes the brutal realities of oppression but also underlines the resilience of women who, despite overwhelming odds, fight for survival and dignity. Here the gender inequality and suffering of women deeply rooted in the Indian hierarchical system is visible.

The novel also addresses the oppressive cultural practice of dowry, which heavily impacts women, particularly from low-income families. According to Kuiper, "dowries demanded by grooms and their families have become quite extravagant,

and some families appear to regard them as means of enrichment" (46-47). In Hindu marriages, dowry is not merely a gift but an important factor in the family's social status. This tradition places immense financial burdens on the bride's family, compelling them to provide cash, jewellery, bicycles, and other expensive items to secure a marriage. Failure to meet these demands can result in social disgrace and reduce a woman's chance of marriage. Poor families often resort to borrowing large sums from landlords, leading to cycles of debt they cannot escape. Balram recounts,

My Cousin-sister Reena got hitched off to a boy in the next village. Because we were the girl's family, we were screwed. We had to give the boy a new bicycle, and cash, and a silver bracelet, and arrange for a big wedding - which we did. Mr. Premier, you probably know how we Indians enjoy our weddings - I gather that these days people come from other countries to get married Indian-style (36).

Balram's family is poor and they live on the kindness of the landlords. The village follows the Zamindari system, which is responsible for the subjugation and exploitation of the poor. Four landlords in the village exploit the underclass people. The villagers live on their obligation; for example, when Balram's family needs money to get her cousin married, they look towards the Stork, a landlord. He provides them with loans, resulting in the lifelong slavery of Balram's family. Balram drops out of school because he has to work to support his family, for which he has to work in a tea stall, wipe tables in the tea shop, and break coal. Though he is a good student, he has to quit his studies and start earning money, which candidly shows the subjugation of the underprivileged at the elites' hands.

Indian women, especially those from lower socioeconomic groups, are portrayed as helpless victims of their own cultural institutions. Kusum, Balram's grandmother, suffers and benefits from the same oppressive system. Kusum takes the biggest portion of the dowry, which includes a Hero bike, five thousand rupees, and a heavy gold necklace when Balram's brother Kishan gets married. This action highlights the fact that women can be both the targets and victims of discriminatory structures, as they exploit other women. This is how Balram describes the dowry that Kishan received:

It was one of the *good* marriages. We had the boy, and we screwed the girl's family hard. I remember exactly what we got in dowry from the girl's side, and thinking about it even now makes my mouth fill up with water: five thousand rupees cash, all crisp new unsoiled notes fresh from the bank, plus a Hero bicycle, plus a thick gold necklace for Kishan. (51)

This illustrates the financial and emotional burden dowry traditions impose on families, continuing systemic oppression against women.

In *The White Tiger*, Pinky Madam emerges as a significant figure, symbolizing the dissatisfaction and disagreement of the urban elite in contemporary India. Her character complicatedly reflects the contradictions of privilege, where wealth and status coexist with deep personal dissatisfaction. Representing a modern Indian woman shaped by her years in America, Pinky Madam resides in Delhi with her husband, Ashok Sharma, and belongs to a socio-economic class far removed from Balram's impoverished world. Her existence, interactions, and decisions highlight gendered subalternity and women's subjugation throughout the novel.

Pinky Madam is portrayed as a contemporary Indian woman. Despite her modern education and exposure to Western culture, her experiences highlight the complex relationship between traditional Indian norms and a desire for independence. After their marriage, Ashok and Pinky Madam return to India to visit Ashok's family in Dhanbad before heading back to New York. Balram, their servant, initially idealizes them as a perfect couple, comparing them to Ram and Sita. However, the reality of their marriage soon comes out. Pinky Madam is described as unpredictable and distant, avoiding interaction with Ashok's family and retreating to her room. Her independence and detachment clash with the expectations of an Indian daughter-in-law. Her refusal to adapt to traditional roles is symbolized in small details, such as her demand for wearing black glasses while playing badminton.

Despite being a woman, Pinky Madam shows many of the same traits as other masters in the novel, including verbally abusing Balram. She demeans him, calling him rural and useless, and mocks his attempts to speak English. Her fluency in the language, gained from her time in America, becomes a tool to claim dominance over Balram, reinforcing his feelings of inferiority. In one instance, she corrects him harshly, saying:

"'It's not piJJA. It's piZZa. Say it properly.'

'Wait - you're mispronouncing it too. There's a T in the middle. *Peet*. *Zah*.'

'Don't correct my English, Ashok. There's no T in pizza. Look at the box'" (154).

Adiga uses Pinky Madam's character to explore themes of power and oppression, showing how even within the patriarchal structure, women can exercise control over others, particularly those below them in the social hierarchy. Her marriage to Ashok is marked by unhappiness and conflict. Pinky Madam's hit-and-run accident on Delhi Road reveals the deep moral failings of Ashok's family, who forcibly attempt to frame Balram for the crime. Pinky Madam is also the only family member who shows some concern for Balram, she is the only one who raises the voice for this injustice.

Disappointed with her husband's family and unable to settle with their corruption, she takes a flight back to America, leaving Ashok behind. Her departure signifies a rejection of the oppressive family structure but also interrupts the traditional Indian values of family loyalty.

Pinky Madam represents ambiguity in Adiga's narrative. On the one hand, she represents feminist ideals, declaring her right to a better life and rejecting social expectations of a passive Indian wife. Her decision to leave Ashok can be seen as a bold act of independence. On the other hand, her use of power, be it through her language, status, or sexuality, supports her role as both a victim of patriarchy and a participant in its oppressive dynamics.

Adiga's portrayal of Pinky Madam highlights her duality. She is deeply rooted in Indian values yet shaped by a modern, Westernized perspective. Her struggles show the limitations imposed by the patriarchal Indian cultural and socio-economic structure, where women are often viewed as objects within the family. While her departure challenges these norms, it reflects her inability to escape them entirely. Pinky Madam's character becomes a critique of the rigid rules imposed on women, showing how they navigate, resist, and at times, strengthen the systems that bind them.

Women have long been subjugated and marginalized through deeply ingrained power dynamics, with internalized social norms perpetuating their objectification. The female body is often perceived and treated as an object by men, while women are socialized to exist for others, particularly for men. A woman's worth is frequently tied to the male gaze, leading some women to internalize this objectification, shaping themselves to align with masculine desire. This dynamic renders women "other" to themselves, as their identities are defined and measured through a patriarchal lens that seeks to personify and restrict them. Adiga captures this patriarchal view in *The White Tiger* through Balram: "I had stopped the car at a traffic signal; a girl began crossing the road in a tight T-shirt, her chest bobbing up and down like three kilograms of *brinjals* in a bag. I glanced at the rearview mirror – and there was Mr. Ashok, his eyes also bobbing up and down." (199)

Prostitution often serves as a reflection of the objectification of women, reducing them to mere objects of male desire. Many women are forced into this trade by family members, partners, or the harsh economic and social realities they face. Some fall victim to some agencies that promise employment or marriage abroad but lead them into slavery-like conditions in brothels, where they are physically abused and exploited. Trapped in this exploitative system, their helplessness increase, as the illegal status of prostitution in many countries prevents them from seeking protection or justice, even in cases of rape or abuse.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga exposes prostitution as an ugly tool of oppression, reducing women to sexual objects in a patriarchal society. Through Balram's narration, Adiga illustrates how this trade flourishes in urban India, encompassing both local and foreign women. Balram explains to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that in big cities, like Bangalore and Delhi, there are red-light areas, due to poverty or other reasons, and most of the women are forced to adopt this profession.

Adiga illustrates this dark reality through Mr. Ashok, Balram's employer, also. When pressured by the minister's corrupt associate, Mr. Ashok unwillingly engages with a Russian prostitute. The narrative underlines how the objectification of women transcends class, with even Balram, a servant, longing for such women, revealing his internalized patriarchal mindset. He observes the painted women negotiating prices with men on Delhi's streets, and his encounter with a prostitute is narrated with a mix of guilt and detachment: "She gave me a big smile - I knew it well: it was the smile a servant gives a master… I climbed on top of her - and held her arms behind her head with one hand. Time to dip my beak in her. I let the other hand run through her golden curls" (234-235). Adiga portrays prostitution as a system created by men to fulfil their sexual desires, subjecting women to cruel male dominance. Through Balram's observations, the novel sheds light on the dark realities of this trade, critiquing the patriarchal and socio-economic structures that perpetuate the exploitation of women.

Thus, it is evident that women in Indian society have historically been victims of patriarchal social, cultural, and economic systems, often denied equality with men. Anand and Adiga portray women's struggles within their respective contemporary contexts. Anand's *Untouchable* portrays Sohini as a weak and voiceless character, a symbol of the marginalized and oppressed. Her plight reflects the oppression of females on the basis of gender and caste, as seen when an upper-caste Hindu priest attempts to molest her and then falsely accuses her of defiling him. Sohini's silence and her hesitation to not let her brother Bakha defend her highlight her lack of power. In contrast, Adiga's *The White Tiger* presents female characters like Kusum and Pinky Madam as more confident and empowered, despite experiencing social and gender-based oppression. Kusum, a lower-caste woman, shows authority within her family, flaunting her strength. Pinky Madam, a modern Indian woman fluent in English and firm about her desires, breaks traditional gender norms. Her decision to leave her husband, Ashok, symbolizes a rejection of patriarchal expectations and a quest of self-

determination. While both authors highlight the subjugation of women within cultural and socioeconomic frameworks, Adiga's women are portrayed as subjects with the agency to influence and challenge the men around them. This evolution from voiceless victimhood to empowered individuality reflects shifting attitudes toward gender roles in Indian society.

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