The Emasculated Male Servant in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

M. S. Veena
Assistant Professor of English
N.S.S. College, Rajakumari, Idukki, Kerala;
Research Scholar, Department of English
Amrita VishwaVidyapeetham, Kollam, Kerala
ryt2veena@gmail.com

and

P.V.Ramanathan
Professor, Department of English,
Amrita VishwaVidyapeetham, Kollam, Kerala.

Ramu Kaka is a name synonymous with the figure of the servant in Indian Hindi cinema — a greying old man, full of paternal love, affection and most importantly, loyalty for the family he serves. He is more of a family member than a servant. It is often argued that the stereotyped "Ramu Kaka" is an endangered, if not extinct species, in the modern materialist world. "Because of the long history of servant employment in India, we often do not reflect upon the institution — or if we do, it is to wish that servants these days were as loyal as servants of the past," notes Raka Ray in an article in *The Hindu* titled "The Everyday Embrace of Inequality". This paper is an attempt to study the representation of the servant in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Both these novels won the Booker Prize, which is regarded as one of the most prestigious awards in the English speaking world.

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai won the Booker Prize in 2006. The novel tells the readers about the lives of Sai, an orphan, Jemubhai Patel, her Cambridge-educated Anglophile grandfather and Biju, the son of Jemubhai Patel's cook. Sai lives with her grandfather in Kalimpong, an Indian town at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas. Sai is in love with her Nepali math tutor, Gyan who gets involved with a group of Nepalese insurgents demanding an independent Gorkhaland. Biju is one of the many illegal immigrants in New York moving from one ill-paid job to another. Tired of living an insecure life in another country and culture, he returns to his country and father.

The White Tiger, Aravind Adiga's debut novel, received the Booker Prize in 2008.The novel is in the form of seven letters from an Indian named Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Balram Halwai belongs to a village in rural Bihar referred to as "Darkness" in the novel. Balram was the son of a poor rickshaw-puller. He was very bright in studies. His talent is

spotted by a school inspector who calls him "the white tiger", a rarity in the animal world. However, Balram is forced to end his schooling when a moneylender forces him into work in order to pay the debt. Balram escapes the mundane life of his village to become a chauffeur in the city. He becomes a trusted servant in the household of Mr. Ashok who drives a car, cooks and runs various errands for the family. Greed and ambition drive him to kill his master and rob his money. He flees from the police and settles down in Bangalore as a successful entrepreneur.

Now let us focus on the male servants in the novels — the cook in *The Inheritance of Loss* and Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* — and their relationship with their masters, Jemubhai Patel and Ashok. To begin with, it will be helpful to understand the meaning of the word "servant". The etymology of the word "servant" can be traced to the 13th century French term *servir*, which meant "profess service, especially to a lady" (Chopra 22). Today, the word "servant" immediately brings to one's mind the image of a female, cleaning and cooking in a household for wages. Kalpana Sharma in "In the Name of Servitude" published in *The Hindu* notes that out of the estimated 20 million women, children and men in domestic work in India, 92 per cent are women, girls and children. However, our concern in this study is primarily with male servants who usually serve as "sweepers, cooks, butlers, valets, chauffeurs, gardeners, watchmen, errand-runners, and amongst the lower castes, as cleaners of bathrooms and undertakers of other contaminating or impure tasks" (Lau 36). Lau argues that "the position of the male domestic servant is emasculating given the existent patriarchal context and deeply gendered social hierarchy" (35). Qayum and Ray also argue that male servants who work as cooks, factotums, or sweepers—cleaners [sic] —fail as men on several counts" (117).

In the light of these arguments, let us look into the role played by the cook and Balram in the households of their employers. First, we will look at the way in which the cook and Balram find employment at their employers' houses. The cook had been selected by the judge on the basis of false recommendations that his father had somehow obtained for him. Though Balram had found his job at the Stork's house without any recommendations, he had to seek the help of the Nepali security guard at Ashok's father's house to become Mr. Ashok's chauffeur in Delhi. The Nepali security guard demands five thousand rupees for the favour, but Balram is unable to pay him. Luckily, Balram gets the job because he discovers that his competitor for the post, a fellow driver, was a Muslim and not a Hindu as he had claimed, forcing the driver to leave the job and run away. What is noteworthy in both these cases is that to get a job as a servant, a word of recommendation from others is required. The emasculation of a male servant can be said to begin at this stage of his entry into employment. As Chopra points out:

> Because domestic space is not open, workers will rarely be able to walk in off the street to get employment. To get work an individual worker's personhood needs to be 'vouched for' by others. Reputation and reliability are the key tropes that make young men employable as household labour. Like the veiled woman the sense of self is looped out through other people's 'tellings'; thus like a woman who can be approached only through

> others who metaphorically stand before her, a young male worker is known and fleshed out by others who stand surety for him. (31)

Though the cook in *The Inheritance of Loss* had been employed primarily to cook and Balram in *The White Tiger* had been appointed as a chauffeur, their duties in the household were not restricted to cooking or driving alone. The cook did all the household chores, bought provisions, looked after Sai and even pressed the judge's clothes, including his undergarments. Balram was expected to not only drive the car, but also cook in the kitchen and clean the house. It was also his duty to massage his master's feet or play cricket with the children of the household and let them win. As Balram rightly points out: "[I]n India- or, at least, in the Darkness- the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants" (69). The cook and the driver, by performing other errands in the household, are stepping into the feminine shoes of a woman who runs the kitchen, takes care of the children and keeps the house clean and tidy.

Interestingly, the moment a servant gets employed, he immediately gets affiliated to the family. This form of affiliation is again found to be an act of emasculation. When Balram is asked how much he would like to be paid for his services, he says, "Absolutely nothing, sir. You're like a father and mother to me, and how can I ask money from my parents?" (65). Thus instead of demanding a just pay like a man, he demeans his worth by asking for nothing. The cook's claim to be a part of the family also leads to his feminization. When Sai comes home late, he complains, "looking round and womanish": "I've been waiting, waiting….In this darkness you have not come home! […] From childhood I have brought you up! With so much love!" (160).

Despite claiming affiliation to the family, these men do not enjoy the comforts of a decent lodging. The cook lived in a small hut in the judge's property. He had a narrow bed, a few clothes and some personal possessions in the hut. Balram also lived in a room in the servant quarters in the basement of the apartment in which Mr. Ashok lived. Balram rightly points out that " in India every apartment block, every house, every hotel is built with a servants' quarters — sometimes at the back, and sometimes […] underground — a warren of interconnected rooms where all the drivers, cooks, sweepers, maids, and chefs of the apartment block can rest, sleep and wait"(130). The quarters of the servants signify, despite tall claims of kinship, the servants' marginalized position in the family.

"Segregation of space is critical in demarcating the position of insider-outsider. Unlike the kitchen where the worker must be visibly present there are other spaces where a worker must remain unnoticed, especially in the presence of guests (the acme of the outside within the home). Employers congratulate themselves on servants who have successfully learnt their place" (Chopra 32). The cook forgets his place in the judge's house when the police come to investigate the robbery in the house. He tells the police that the intruders asked the judge to set the table and bring the tea. The judge severely reprimands the cook and shows him his place in the house: "Go sit in the kitchen. *Bar bar karta rehta hai"* (12). Balram tells us that the servants are

summoned using an electric bell: "When our masters wanted us, an electric bell began to ring throughout the quarters — we would rush to a board and find a red light flashing next to the number of the apartment whose servant was needed upstairs" (130). The cook in Desai's novel is nearly a ubiquitous presence in the judge's household, but always in the background, waiting for the orders of the judge. The novel does not even mention his name till the next-to-last page. Chopra compares the practice of ringing the bell and name avoidance of servants to that of the *parda* system which conservative families expected their women folk to follow. Chopra writes:

> In contexts where parda is practiced, name avoidance particularly of first names is an accepted mode of distancing and is practiced by both men and women particularly in cross gender interactions. When trying to catch a woman's attention for example, men cough or make a noise. This strategy is a form of communication that replaces speech and the necessity of direct address. Modern urban families who do not maintain such elaborate codes of speech avoidance between family members nevertheless reinstate parda practices like name avoidance and speech restriction vis à vis their domestic workers. Often speech is literally replaced by a bell to summon a worker. The bell asserts hierarchy and conveys initiates [sic] required actions literally without a word being spoken. (34)

The body language of the servants is also normally found to lack masculinity. "Domestic workers draw their bodies inward through a series of gestures that mute their maleness. Ways of standing with hands folded over the genitals, eyes lowered (nazar ka parda) […] Silence, soft speech tones, economy of speech (awaz ka parda) and a successful adoption of a 'listening' posture are read as incorporations into obedience" (Chopra 34). Balram is often found to adopt this kind of a body language. He often crouches before his master and when asked to sit, squats on the floor. When Balram sees the photograph of the Stork's pet dogs Cuddles and Puddles in Ashok's apartment, he avoids looking at the picture, because he couldn't stand the sight of them even in a picture. He kept his eyes to the carpet the whole time "which had the additional benefit of giving [him] the look of a *pucca* servant" (129). When the Mongoose asks Balram to take blame for Pinky Madam's crime of accidentally killing a child, he submissively signs a confession statement. He is not able to say much beyond "Yes, Sir". (166-69). The cook in Desai's novel talks with Sai a lot, often complaining in a maternal tone. But he hardly talks to the judge, except when it is necessary to communicate something important. When he is unable to find the judge's lost dog, he falls at the judge's feet, "clasping one of them and weeping for mercy" (352).

Qayum and Ray therefore rightly argue that "male servants […] are failed men and patriarchs, and their very masculinity is questioned. Male servants because the demeaning domestic—read as feminine—tasks they must perform compounded by the very characteristics that make them good servants […] make them failed patriarchs" (117). Despite, this many men continue to work as servants as "they could best fulfill their familial duties by remaining within the confines of dependency and servitude" (Qayum and Ray 122). It is this hope that keeps the

cook going. "He was a powerless man, barely enough learning to read and write, had worked like a donkey all his life, hoped only to avoid trouble, lived on only to see his son"(12). Balram also speaks along similar lines when he tells the Chinese Premier that "the Indian family is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop" (176).

Chopra is of the view that a "servant's biography cannot be viewed within a single lifespan. It projects outward to a second generation, with which it is intrinsically linked. And it is in that reorientation toward a second life as it were, that [a servant's] masculinity is finally retrieved and reinstated" (35). The cook in Desai's novel pins all his hopes on Biju. He fondly remembers his son's childhood with pride: "He isn't scared of anything at all. Even when he was very small he would pick up mice by the tail, lift frogs by the neck…." (16). He dreams that Biju would come home from America one day, a rich, fat man and marry a nice girl and look after the family properly, thereby achieving a masculinity that he himself had never possessed because of his poverty in life. However, Biju is not able to fulfill his father's dreams. Tired of a rat-like existence as an illegal immigrant, he returns to his country and father in the midst of riots, only to be robbed of not just his earnings, but even of his clothes. The rioters give him a woman's gown to hide his shame. Biju's return in a woman's gown signifies his return to a world of poverty and servitude in which his chances of maintaining his masculinity seems slim.

Balram in Adiga's novel is unlike the cook in this respect. He is an exceptional servant, who cares less about his family and more about himself. He does not wish to marry because of the fear that his family would exploit him financially after his marriage, expecting him to send money every now and then. He does not hope that his descendants would lead better lives and thereby indirectly restore to him his lost masculinity. Instead, he finds a rather gruesome way to break out of the Rooster Coop of perpetual servitude and thus retrieve his masculinity. He kills his master Ashok and makes away with his master's money, trying not to think much of what the Stork would do to his family to avenge his son's death. At the end of the narrative, he expresses his desire to have children. He says, "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 a *minute*, what it means not to be a servant. I think I am ready to have children, Mr. Premier" (321). This ending is highly significant, for it is only when Balram escapes the humiliation of an emasculated servant's life and becomes a successful entrepreneur that he begins to think about having a family.

To conclude, one can say that the masculinity of the two male servants in these novels — the cook in *The Inheritance of Loss* and Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* — comes under constant question due to the nature of their work and the expectations associated it. While the cook dreams in vain of regaining his sense of masculinity through the success of his son Biju, Balram successfully restores his masculinity by a ghastly act of murder that helps him to escape servitude forever. "A servant is not really a man; a servant is a servant," remarked Mila, a seventy-two year old woman employer (qtd. in Qayum and Ray 112). To be a man, therefore, one had to cease being a servant.

Works Cited

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger.* New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2008. Print.

Chopra, Radhika. "Servitude and Sacrifice." *Masculinities and Social Change* 1.1(2012) 19-39 Web .2 Jan 2013.

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss.* New York: Grove, 2006.Print.

Lau, Lisa. "The Male South Asian Domestic Servant: Master-Servant Relationships, Class Chasms and Systematic Emasculation." *The Srilanka Journal of Humanities* xxxvii 1&2 (2011) 35-54 Web .7 Jan 2013.

Qayum, Seemin and Raka Ray. "Male Servants and the Failure of Patriarchy in Kolkata (Calcutta)." *Men and Masculinities* 13.1(2010) 111-25 Web .7 Jan 2013.

Ray, Raka."The Everyday Embrace of Inequality."*The Hindu Online* .The Hindu, 2 Feb 2012. Web. 2 Jan 2013.

Sharma, Kalpana. "In the Name of Servitude." *The Hindu Online* .The Hindu, 24 Aug 2003. Web. 4 Jan 2013.

****