

**Queer Transgressions:
Same-Sex Desire and Transgendered
Representations
in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***

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In Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai writes a letter to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, who is set to visit India in the coming week in order to "know the truth about Bangalore" (3). In writing to him, Balram seeks to provide the Premier with this truth through the presentation of his own life story. As Balram states, "If anyone knows the truth about Bangalore, it's *me*" (emphasis in original, 4). The son of a poor rickshaw-puller, Balram left his small hometown of Laxmangarh in rural India to work in New Delhi as a servant and chauffeur for Mr. Ashok and his family, which consists of his wife Pinky Madam, his brother the Mongoose, and his father the Stork. Throughout the epistolary novel, Balram depicts his attempts to win Ashok's approval and affection. Despite the few moments when Ashok seems to consider Balram as more than just a servant, the dramatic difference in their socioeconomic status precludes any sustained contact between the two. Ultimately, Balram takes advantage of Ashok's dismissiveness and his weakness as a master. Unable to gain Ashok's kindness, Balram decides that in order to survive in the metropolis of the new neoliberal India, he must forcibly take what he can in order to prosper, which leads him to kill Ashok and usurp his wealth and identity.

I argue that within the novel, the inherent master and servant relationship between Balram and Ashok places the two men in homosocial spaces that ask them to explore same-sex desire. At the same time, Adiga also bars the pursuit of any such exploration through the disapproval of other characters and the strategic placement of heteronormative rules and conventions throughout the text. I also discuss how crossing national borders into India and the United States, respectively, creates a transgendered experience for Pinky, and more specifically Ashok, whose Americanization leads to his feminized portrayal and, ultimately, his death.

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Homosocial Spaces

In examining these homosocial spaces, I do not wish to conflate what I refer to as “exploration” or “desire” with sexuality or outright sexual attraction. While Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s term of homosociality, “whereby men’s ‘heterosexual desire’ for women serves a more or less perfunctory detour on the way to a closer, but homophobically proscribed, bonding with another man” (“Poem” 204), helps to balance same and opposite-sex attractions, there is an implication that in such readings, a male character’s attraction to women is less “authentic” than his desire for an intimate relationship with a male character. I wish to honor the textual realness—if there is such a thing—of Ashok and Balram’s attraction to women, far from seeing it as a “perfunctory detour” to the “authentic” path of sexuality. In that way, I would like to continue pushing the term “homosocial” beyond, as Tim Dean states, the “impoverished notions of latency, dishonesty, or inference” of homosexual attraction and desire (8).

I categorize these moments as *queer* since it is a term of inclusion for all attractions and sexual behaviors which dissipate norms as we know and accept them. Dean and Lane write:

Rather than offering a politics based on individual identity, this school of thought advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms—a politics that connects gender and sexual oppression to racial discrimination, class inequities, ethnic hierarchies, and national chauvinism. Espousing a far-reaching politics suspicious of all norms, this strand of queer theory divorces sexuality from identity (7).

Despite the fact that, as Sara Ahmed points out, the word queer “still remains a term of abuse, and that not all those whose orientations we might regard as queer, can or would identify with this name...” (166), the word (or at least one interpretation of it) speaks to both the desire for same-sex intimacy embedded in these non-sexual moments, as well as the oppressive nature of the social frame in which they occur. In this way, same-sex desire for intimacy can coexist with sexual attraction to other opposite-sex characters.

When Balram drives Pinky Madam and Ashok to the city, Ashok asks him to pull over so that he can test his knowledge. Obliging, Balram does so and Ashok leans forward “so close that I could smell his aftershave—it was a delicious, fruitlike smell that day” (7). Tiny particles penetrate Balram’s olfactory senses to produce the sensation of smell. In essence a part of Ashok enters Balram in that moment of intimacy. This attention to smell is reminiscent of *Angels in America*, when Louis Ironson tells Joe Pitt, who has recently left his wife in order to pursue a relationship with Louis that:

Smell is . . . an incredibly complex and underappreciated physical phenomenon. Inextricably bound up with sex. The nose is really a

sexual organ. Smelling. Is desiring. We have five senses, but only two that go beyond the boundaries . . . of ourselves. When you look at someone, it's just bouncing light, or when you hear them, it's just sound waves, vibrating air, or touch is just nerve endings tingling. Know what smell is? It's made of the molecules of what you're smelling. Some part of you, where you meet the air, is airborne. Little molecules of Joe . . . Up my nose (30).

Just as Joe's inhaling becomes his first homosexual sex act with Louis, Balram breathes in Ashok in a shared moment of intimacy (Solomon 118).

Balram's answers to these questions amuse Ashok and Pinky at his own expense. "That's what he really thinks," Ashok tells Pinky. In his letter to Wen Jiabao, Balram tells him that "He [Ashok] was right, sir—I didn't like the way he had spoken about me, but he was right" (8). That Balram is hurt by such condescension speaks to his closeness to Ashok. He can, it appears, see things from his master's perspective. Interestingly, in master/slave relations, it is usually within the empowered that a sense of empathy develops for the subaltern. The psyche's acknowledgement of the existence of the other allows it to realize "that some of its origins are external to its own being and then to actively engage with aspects of those origins" (Gray 84). Consequently, some individuals in power see the need to fight for the rights of the disenfranchised. Here, however, it is the subaltern who has the capacity to see things from the other's—i.e. the master's—perspective.

When Ashok visits Balram in his room, for instance, Balram can take on the same perception that Ashok has of his living conditions. He writes that Ashok "sat down on [Ashok's other servant] Ram Persad's bed and poked it with his fingertips. It felt hard. I immediately stopped being jealous of Ram Persad. (And so I saw the room with *his* eyes; smelled it with *his* nose; poked it with *his* fingers—I had already begun to digest my master!)" (emphasis in original, 47). Balram's consumption of Ashok—this time through figurative taste—allows him to adopt his point of view. Not surprisingly, once Ashok later expresses his distaste for the room with its dilapidated conditions, Balram also starts to notice all of its flaws (76).

But while Balram demonstrates this capacity for being able to "see" as Ashok does, the same is not true of Ashok. When the two men literally switch places in the car, Ashok immediately feels discomfort. Balram begins his account by relating how he could, from the start, "understand what he [Ashok] wanted to say, the way dogs understand their masters" (66). In this way, subservience provides Balram with a direct connection into Ashok's desires.

He goes on, stating:

I stopped the car, and then moved to my left, and he moved to his right, and our bodies passed each other (so close that the stubble on his

face scraped my cheeks like the shaving brush that I use every morning, and the cologne from his skin—a lovely, rich, fruity cologne—rushed into my nostrils for a heady instant, while the smell of my servant’s sweat rubbed off onto his face), and then he became driver and I became passenger (65-66).

Again, Ashok’s smell enters Balram, and the encounter becomes more intimate as the two men actually touch for a brief instance and servant sweat combines with fruity cologne when they brush up against each other.

The Mongoose’s command, “Don’t do this, Ashok,” as he notices Ashok putting himself in his driver’s place is as much a condemnation of the master crossing over to the role of servant as it is of Ashok developing a boundary-less relationship with Balram—one where the two men can empathize with each other through smell, taste, touch, and sight. Balram’s description of the Mongoose as an “old-school master” who “knew right from wrong” confirms the immorality of same-sex intimacy’s permeable borders because it will destroy the master/servant hierarchy (68).

Indeed, the longing for touch plays a pivotal role in the unraveling of the plot. When Balram has decided to steal from Ashok and murder him, there is a moment when Balram reconsiders his plan. He reportedly is willing to admit his plan and face the consequences (which would almost assuredly mean some sort of physical harm) if Ashok displays some gentleness towards him:

“Sir, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while.” And I took my fingers off the ignition key. I swear, I was ready to make a full confession right there . . . had he said the right word . . . had he touched my shoulder the right way. But he wasn’t looking at me. He was busy with the cell phone and its buttons (153).

It is not surprising that Balram seeks the “right word” or the “right touch.” His encounters with his master and his family have been very violent throughout his tenure as their driver. Ashok’s general treatment of Balram has been very condescending, as evidenced by the questions with which he tests Balram’s knowledge for his and Pinky’s own amusement. Similarly, the rest of Ashok’s family physically harms Balram when they are displeased with him. It is in these moments that Ashok expresses a desire to reach out and comfort Balram when he is in pain (61), ironically, unaware of the damage that he, himself, causes when he belittles Balram. There is a particular instance when Balram is eager to comfort his master after Pinky abandons him, as he notices “[Ashok] lifted his hand—I prepared for his touch—but he wrapped it around the Mongoose’s shoulder” (112). This disappointment is coupled with harsh words from Ashok, as he thanks his brother for being at his side: “I had nothing but this driver in front of me for five nights. Now at last I have someone real by my side: you” (112).

This is not the first instance that Balram's selfhood is negated. At the construction site near the mall, Balram acknowledges that if it were not for his maharaja tunic (which Ashok and Pinky make him wear for their amusement), men who wear shirts, ties, and pleated pants would normally ignore him (78). It is this constant negation of his body that causes him to want to shout "Balram is here too!" when he is walking around the President's house listening to important men make important decisions (78). After leading a life of invisibility, he would like nothing more than to relish in the fact that he can even come close to such prominent figures of India. And yet, what matters most to Balram is the absence of his master's intimacy—the acknowledgement that "Balram is here" through words and actions. In the end, Balram is willing to suffer through the painful consequences of his admission of guilt for a single moment of intimate contact free of verbal or physical violence—a moment, which, were it to exist, would threaten to dissolve long-established clear boundaries.

This silencing of queer intimacy between master and servant has precedent in Indian culture. In her "Alienation, Intimacy, and Gender: Problems for a History of Love in South Asia," Indrani Chatterjee criticizes C. M. Naim for omitting that homosexual love poetry was directed at slaves. She writes, "This is possibly part of South Asianists' intellectual, moral, and psychic resistance—a resistance built upon engagements with liberalism and egalitarianism—to associate the emotion named 'love' with master-slave relations. The term *slavery* in English has become so associated with plantation-type servitude that it is hard to conceive of its coexisting with love" (emphasis in original, 62). I do not wish to conflate slavery with Balram's servitude as a driver for Ashok. Nor do I wish to label the relationship that the two men have with each other as "loving" by any means. My point is to show that historically, it has been difficult to describe or to explore a power relation between two men as in any way queer.

Heteronormativity

Adiga focuses very little on the role of women in neoliberal India. Femaleness and femininity seem to function only as a mechanism for eliding intimate same-sex moments and making heteronormativity an acceptable option—or imposing it on the text as the only acceptable option. Prostitutes, in particular, provide a channel through which the male characters can—and should—direct their sexuality, thus helping (them and the reader) disregard other kinds of sexual exploration. Most of the women in the text are women that Balram notices and is sexually attracted to. His first action after learning how to drive is to lose his virginity to one of the nameless prostitutes in town. His account of the event is hypermasculinized, as he refers to the women as "wares on offer," all of whom were "begging me to dip my beak into them" (48). This close association between driving and sex resembles the traditional rite of passage in the West from youth to adult, which culminated in the derisively dubbed "passion pits" of drive-in movie theatres in the 1950s—"the only place where teenagers could be alone together"

(Sanders & Sanders 95). More aptly, Greggor Christian Mattson has noted the fundamental role that cars play in the solicitation of prostitutes (123). This scene in the novel, however, is not described in a salacious manner. In fact, it is a joyous, celebratory moment that Balram boasts about, ending with an excited exclamation: “My first time!”(35).

Balram continues to report on his sexual feelings throughout the novel, not shy about the fact that his beak became aroused, for instance, at the sight of Pinky Madam when she wore a low black dress and “I [Balram] could see half her boobs hanging out of her clothes each time I had to look in the rearview mirror” (83). There is certainly an excess of avenues for Balram to focus his sexual energy throughout the novel. Using women as a conduit to encourage male heterosexuality is by no means unusual in itself. As Supurna Bhaskaran details in *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/National Projects*, there was a constant fear by the British in India during colonization that the men stationed there would succumb to homosexuality without the presence of their wives or any other avenues for sexual release. She writes, “A popular cure for men (both Indian and British, civilians and soldiers) who might deviate from normative sexuality or ‘pukka-ness,’ was sending them to female prostitutes” (81). This eventually even became regulated so that “The mid-1850s saw the establishment of state-regulated brothels in which native women had to register and undergo regular medical exams” (81). Much like officials in colonized India feared these homosocial spaces, the text seems aware of the potential for “unnatural” sexuality and finds the solution to this problem by regulating “official” (hetero)sexuality via readily available female prostitution.

Yet, this imposition of heterosexuality is not always embraced by Balram. At times he seems to indicate that his bodily reactions, as pleasurable as they are, are also somehow disconnected from his conscious choices. For instance, he finds relief in the fact that the next time he sees Pinky, “at least her boobs were covered” (85). Similarly, on one of the trips to the mall, Balram sees men and women waiting in line outside and states, “I trembled with fear to see what these city girls were wearing” (116). Balram seems to both enjoy and fear his heterosexual reactions at the same time. In essence, the rampant availability of heterosexuality and the socially required foreclosure of intimate homosociality cause a schizophrenic split in Balram between pleasure and discomfort in heterosexual situations.

Curiously, Balram seems much less “torn” in sexual situations involving Ashok, as if he has something at stake in matters involving his master’s sexual acts. When the minister’s sidekick, as Balram calls him, sets up Ashok with a prostitute who looks like Kim Basinger, Balram drives them to a hotel room and waits outside in anguish. He states, “Half an hour passed. I was outside, my hands on the wheel the whole time... I began to gnaw at the wheel. I kept hoping he’d come running out, arms flailing, and screaming, *Balram, I was on the verge of making a mistake! Save me—let’s drive away at once!*” (emphasis in original, 131). Similarly, when Uma, whom he thinks is a

prostitute, is affectionate with Ashok in the backseat of the Honda, Balram immediately takes issue, saying that he disapproves of “debauchery inside cars...I thought he would ask me to drive him home now, but no—the carnival of fun just went on and on” (172-173). Balram continues, “On the way back, the two of them were talking at the top of their voices; and then the petting and kissing began. My God, and he a man who was still lawfully married to another woman! I was so furious that I drove right through four red lights, and almost smashed into an oxcart that was going down the road with a load of kerosene cans, but they never noticed” (123). It is intriguing that Balram is free to engage in sexual acts with prostitutes because it fulfills a natural desire, but when Ashok does—or even when Balram thinks that Ashok does—it is a “mistake.” Indeed, Ashok’s only safe passage from such debauchery is through Balram, safely driving the two of them away together.

We can see how within the novel women serve mostly as a way of making heterosexual sex available to male characters, thus foreclosing on any queer exploration of same-sex intimacy. There is one moment, however, where overt heterosexuality in effect leads to a homosocial instance of shared desire. When Balram stops the car at a traffic signal, he sees a girl “crossing the road in a tight T-shirt, her chest bobbing up and down like three kilograms of brinjals in a bag” (117). Again, here Balram is basking in his heterosexual attraction to women, and yet he restricts Ashok from doing the same. As he looks in the rearview mirror, he sees Ashok’s eyes “also bobbing up and down. I thought, *Aha! Caught you, you rascal!*” (emphasis in original, 117). Similarly, Ashok “had seen my eyes and he was thinking the exact same thing: *Aha! Caught you, you rascal!* We had caught each other out” (emphasis in original, 117). Interestingly, instead of each man “outing” the other’s queer desire, it is their shared heterosexual attraction which is kept secret and discovered by the other. It is in this moment of mutual desire that Balram states, “Now I understood why . . . my beak was getting stiff as I was driving. Because *he* was horny. And inside that sealed car, master and driver had somehow become one body that night” (117).

This echoes Sedgwick’s theorizing of “erotic triangles” in which two men who desire the same woman enter a circuit of sexual ambiguity—which is, at the same time, *both* and *neither* exactly homosexual and/or heterosexual (*Between Men* 21). Balram’s and Ashok’s heterosexual attraction to the same woman creates a space where both men are sexually aroused in the other’s presence. Moreover, each man catches and outs the other in the vulnerable act as he gazes at the other, understanding what is transpiring between them, yet never verbalizing anything to each other.

Ashok’s marriage to Pinky and Balram’s services as their driver can be seen as a type of erotic triangle, but there is insufficient evidence to claim that Balram desires Pinky. What is of more interest in the creation of queer spaces is looking at moments where Balram blatantly wishes to *usurp* Pinky’s position as Ashok’s love object. Once Pinky departs, Balram states that he had to be like a wife to Ashok, providing him with all the food that he would

need, when he would need it (109). As he reports, he has gotten to “know his master’s intestinal tract—from his lips to his anus” (81), two openings which apart from serving as the beginning and end of digestion, have also been heavily policed as areas of sexual penetration.

As Bhaskaran shows in “The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code” British Indian lawmakers of 1860 took great pains to define what constituted unnatural—and therefore illegal—penetration. Briefly, the law states that:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life...The offense consists in a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by a person with a man, or in the same unnatural manner with a woman, or by a man or woman in any manner with an animal (17)?

Since then, courts have subsequently had to define what consists of as being “natural” and “unnatural” in sodomy cases. For instance, Bhaskaran writes that one judge in 1968 “quotes [Havelock] Ellis, noting ‘cunnilinctus (often incorrectly termed cunnilingus) and fellatio cannot be regarded as unnatural for they have their prototype forms among animals and they are found among various savage races’” (21). Yet, in another case from 1987 involving anal penetration and fellatio, a judge “points out that both kinds were against nature and carnal because they were not intended for ‘coitus.’ Both entailed where a ‘visiting organism is enveloped at least partially by the visited organism’” (21). For Balram to “know” his master from beginning to end also touches on these sexual zones that men are forbidden from knowing too closely. This unconscious attention to the lips and the anus subverts the text’s overt heterosexual tendencies and allows Balram another hidden homosocial space with Ashok through, as he sees it, “wifely duties.”

Interestingly, this connection between eating and sexuality is not entirely new. In “Alienation, Intimacy, and Gender: Problems for a History of Love in South Asia,” Chatterjee describes how the term *gandu*—a derogatory term for “one who has his anus taken”—stems from the sharing of a meal:

Gandu is used as a term of abuse in an eighteenth-century document from the Hindu kingdom of Orchha in central India (emphasis in original). One contender for the throne had incorporated his slave-born children into the lineage. His rival’s scribe used the term *gandu* to describe all the free men within that lineage who had sat and eaten with these slave-born children. In a clearly homological way of thinking of the body and its orifices, polluting oneself through the mouth by eating with the slave-born was equivalent to acting like a slave by offering one’s anus for sexual penetration. No free, honorable man, it was understood, should readily undertake either activity (72).

Balram makes this association between food and sexuality in a much different manner in his conversations with his grandmother, Kusum. When he returns home to Laxmangarh, and everyone sees by the look of his uniform how successful he has become, the conversation turns to his future. At the dinner table, as Kusum serves Balram curry and chicken especially made just for him, she tells him, “We’ll fix up the wedding for later this year, okay? We’ve already found someone for you—a nice plump duck. The moment she has her menstrual cycle, she can come here” (52). Like almost all the women in Balram’s life, Kusum plays a role in normalizing heterosexuality. However, unlike the other women he meets that merely provide options for heteronormative behavior, Kusum *imposes* it on Balram.

That heteronormativity, from Kusum’s point of view, is *not* discretionary causes Balram to protest, surprising and concerning his grandmother:

Her jaw dropped. “What do you mean, not yet? You’ll do what we want.”

She smiled. “Now eat it, dear. I made chicken just for you.”

I said, “No.”

“Eat it.”

She pushed the plate closer to me. Everyone in the household stopped to look at our tussle. Granny squinted. “What are you, a Brahmin? Eat, eat.”

“No!”

I pushed the plate so hard it went flying to a corner and hit the wall and spilled the red curry on the floor. “I said, I’m *not* marrying!” She was too stunned even to yell. Kishan got up and tried to stop me as I left, but I pushed him to the side—he fell down hard—and I just walked out of the house (Emphasis in original, 52).

In this instance, food and heteronormativity come to be associated together, as Kusum responds to Balram’s refusal to marry (“What do you mean, not yet?”) and at the same time asks him to eat the food she has made (“just for you”). Balram’s steadfast, “No!” rejects both of his grandmother’s desires to partake in the cultural norms of his family through food and marriage.

By the end of the novel, Kusum sends Balram a relative, Dharam, to take care of along with a note which reads, in part:

Also we have decided to arrange for your wedding on our own, and if you do not come here, we will send the girl to you by bus. I say these things not to threaten you but out of love. After all, am I not your own grandmother? And how I used to stuff your mouth with sweets! Also, it is your duty to look after Dharam, and take care of him as if he were your own son. Now take care of your health, and remember that I am preparing lovely chicken dishes for you, which I will send to you by mail (Emphasis in original, 157).

This is a curious set of events. Firstly, this letter contradicts an earlier letter from Kusum, in which she states that she has changed her mind and will not

force Balram to marry. Secondly, she ends her letter by mentioning the same food that he associated with her desire for him to lead a heteronormative life. This desire is so strong, that she has already gone to great lengths to arrange it without his consent. Finally, either deliberately or unknowingly, Kusum ends up mocking heteronormativity somewhat with her request that Balram take care of his relative Dharam. As the “normal” progression would involve marriage followed by consummation and conception, Balram’s refusal to comply has forced Kusum to impose a family on him in the opposite order. Balram must raise Dharam as his son, and later, his wife will arrive. Regardless of this atypical arrangement, Kusum will eventually end up with the traditional family she demands of Balram.

In the end, Balram cannot comply with his grandmother’s desires for a family and the economic and heteronormative advantages that it would bring her. Sara Schotland explains that “On the eve of [Balram’s murder of Ashok], Balram writes his demanding grandmother a sort of apology for his refusal to knuckle under her demands and marry a girl who will bring a cash dowry that the grandmother would no doubt appreciate, as she did when Balram’s brother married: ‘I can’t live my life in a cage, Granny, I’m so sorry’” (9). Balram very early on recognizes that in order to prosper in a neoliberal society, to be one’s own master, he must sacrifice his family (104), a prospect which he proves himself capable of at the end of the novel with very little conscience. He hypothesizes that his murder of Ashok and theft of his money probably meant that his own family had been murdered by the Stork as retribution, or they’d been shunned by the neighbors and cast out to “live under some concrete bridge, begging for their food, and without a hope for the future. That’s not much better than being dead” (189). Symbolically, as well, the “destruction” of the traditional family dynamic is the only way to be free of heteronormative constraints and to pursue one’s queer desires.

Transgendered Experiences in Transnational Spaces

On a particular night when Balram is driving Ashok and Pinky Madam through the city while the two get drunk in the backseat of the Honda City, Pinky gets it into her head that she wants to drive. Despite Ashok’s protests, Pinky manages to get her way and ends up speeding down (what she assumes is) an empty road. Failing to brake in time, she runs over a child, and Balram is asked to sign a false confession by Ashok’s family in order to spare Pinky any jail time. It soon becomes apparent, however, that no one has come forward to report the child’s death to the police; as a result, Balram will remain free.

When Pinky Madam shows disgust over the fact that no one has actually told Balram that he will not be going to prison, Balram writes, “Who would have thought, Mr. Jiabao, that of this whole family, the lady with the short skirt would be the one with a conscience?” (106). This sentiment is echoed in Robbie Goh’s essay, “Narrating ‘Dark’ India in *Londonstani* and *The White Tiger*,” as he states that Pinky “provides the only member of the novel’s

middle class who has a conscience and some degree of sympathy for India's downtrodden such as Balram" (337). He points to the fact that Pinky "insists on going back to help the victim and strongly objects to her in-laws' plan to make Balram take the blame for her accident" as evidence (337).

However, a close examination of the events that take place lead one to a somewhat different conclusion. Aware that she has hit something and refusing to believe that it was a dog, Pinky voices only a minor protest to the situation at hand. "'We hit something, Ashoky.' She spoke in the softest of voices. 'We have to take that thing to the hospital'" (97). Her soft voice undermines any concern she is seen to have for the "thing" (as she calls what she ran over) on the road. Pinky has shown that she is a very forceful character. If she had truly wanted to go back and help, she could have ordered Balram to turn around as vehemently as she demanded that he relinquish control of the steering wheel to her in the first place. She does not, ostensibly, protest too much because she, in fact, does not want to face the consequences of her actions, even though she does know that she has committed an immoral act. This simple knowledge in itself cannot elevate her above Ashok, since he is also aware of the act's iniquity.

I also struggle to find any passages that indicate that Pinky "strongly objects" to Ashok's family framing Balram for her act. She does not make any appearance in the text until after she learns that there is no need for Balram to take the blame, and even though she seems disgusted by her in-laws' silence, which leaves Balram in the dark, she herself never speaks to Balram to either communicate her concerns or to tell him the news personally. This raises some question as to the "degree of sympathy" that Pinky may have for Balram. In the end, Balram is saved from his dismal fate independent of Pinky and whatever objections she may or may not have had. As Goh, himself, points out, "... Balram is only saved from a prison sentence by the callousness of a society that cannot be bothered with the death of yet another poor street person" (335).

One could point to Pinky's final actions in the novel as a sign of her conscience. However, leaving Ashok's corrupt environment to go back to America and then hurling an envelope full of money to Balram without saying a word to him as she heads to the airport don't seem like scrupulous acts. From her first appearances, Pinky has been adamant in her demands to leave India and head back to America, where she and Ashok met. In fact, Ashok had originally promised her that it would only be two months, but later went back on his word (54). To appease her, Ashok has Balram take her to shopping malls, as this is what he thinks she misses most about New York. And while this does little to calm her desire to return home, she does not protest these excursions.

Pinky's "unfeelingness" and lack of conscience in India create a dissonance with her female body (which is "supposed" to carry with it the traits of nurturance and caring). Juxtaposed with that is Ashok's male body,

which is associated with passivity. These feminine traits are directly the result of his time in America. Crossing national and cultural borders seems to create a transgendered experience for the two. In the end, Pinky's successful escape indicates that masculinity can successfully fluctuate between these two spaces while Ashok's death signals that femininity is antithetical to and cannot survive in neoliberal India.

Repeatedly, we witness how out of place and weak the Americanized Ashok has become because of his marriage to Pinky. Balram writes that Ashok had "returned from America an innocent man" (116). When Ashok questions the Stork's abusive treatment of his servants, the Stork somewhat disgustedly replies, "This is not America, son. Don't ask questions like that" (43). By his own admission, Ashok is a vegetarian, a concept which seems truly foreign to others, such as the Wild Boar, who responds, "I've never heard of a landlord who was vegetarian...It's not natural. You need meat to toughen you up" (50).

Even before his murder, this symbolically eliminates Ashok from maintaining his position of power in society. Balram reports that after the British left India, there were no longer any "zookeepers," and the larger predatory animals ate the smaller ones: "The cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies" (54). In Adiga's vision of postcolonial India, everyone has been left to fend for himself and the most ferocious prey on the weak. It is not surprising that Ashok attributes his weak non-meat eating identity to America (50).

Similarly, white people—primarily Americans—as Balram sees it, "are on the way out. All of them look so emaciated—so puny. You'll never see one of them with a decent belly. For this I blame the president of America; he has made buggery perfectly legal in his country, and men are marrying other men instead of women. This was on the radio. This is leading to the decline of the white man" (183). Again, we see the connection between an inability to eat as concomitant with weakness. The larger, predatory animals feast on the smaller. America's "emaciation" is a sign that white people are prey, not predators. And the main reason for this lack of predatory aggression comes from the permissiveness (indeed, the promotion, in Balram's opinion) of homosexuality in America, which is equated as being unmasculine and weak.

Alan Sinfield writes that up until the Oscar Wilde trials in British culture, effeminacy "meant being emotional and spending too much time with women...To be manly of course was to go with women but in a way that did not forfeit masculinity" (27). Similarly, Ashok's masculinity has been compromised by the influences of America's weak/feminine/vegetarian culture. Indeed, the final moments of his life, which Balram takes from him in order to gain his freedom, are noteworthy precisely because of their lack of aggression and meaning. Balram tricks Ashok into inspecting what he

claims is a broken tire. Ashok, not wanting to act, hesitates, but Balram preys on his innocent nature by requesting, “Come out of the car, sir. Trust me” (171). Ashok inspects the vehicle but doesn’t see anything wrong with it, which causes Balram to panic, thinking, “*That landlord’s brain of his has figured it out. He’s going to stand up and hit me in the face*” (emphasis in original, 172). But the trusting Ashok decides he will “take another look,” at which point Balram kills him (172). Ankhi Mukherjee gives a brilliantly simple account of the event, stating only that, “[Balram] kills Mr. Ashok on a rainy night with an empty bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label, crushing his skull, and slitting his throat, and disappears to Bangalore with Rs. 700,000 in cash” (283). Mukherjee’s description—or lack thereof—accurately captures the swiftness and sheer ease of Balram’s struggle with Ashok and his escape.

Conclusion

Throughout the text, Balram places himself in positions where he can listen in on other people’s conversations. By the end of his tale, he has become the speaker, and we are forced into the role of audience. Just as Balram inhabits these two spaces of listener and speaker—being passive and active—*The White Tiger* provides ample opportunities for interrogating existence along the continuum of gender and sexuality. Same-sex spaces can be read as moments of queer desire and hidden transgression; authorized heterosexual norms can be linked to historical impositions of heteronormative behaviors; and feminization and Americanization conflate to signal that weakness is incongruent with the wild jungle of neoliberal India.

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