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OF NEOLIBERALISM AND
ITS MASCULINE INTERLOCU-
TORS:

THE CASE OF BALRAM HAL-
WAI IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S
THE WHITE TIGER



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Betty Joseph's essay "Neoliberalism and allegory" (2012, 68) begins with a reference to a highly acclaimed advertising campaign by the national newspaper Times of India, which on the first page of its January 2007 issue, featured a rousing full page anthem titled, "India poised" This began with the lines: "There are two India's in this country. One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been recently showering upon us. The other India is the leash" (*TOI*, 2007).

The official video for this campaign featured superstar, Amitabh Bachchan in a tuxedo as the only spokesperson, lending his imposing baritone voice to the well-composed transcript—which reads more like a paean to a neoliberal utopia, than as an honest med-

itation on the socio-cultural complexities inscribed within the nation. Amitabh Bachchan is a well-recognized face in both the national and international space. He has served as a cultural ambassador for India on various international platforms. Quite predictably, his star text precedes his physical persona in India, triggering affective responses that straddles different socio-economic spaces. His star text allows him to position himself as someone, who inimitably through an exploration of affect, becomes the spokesperson for everyone in India: from struggling drivers like Balram in *The White Tiger* (Adiga, 2008), to corporate honchos behind slick glass-doored multi-national companies. People in India, irrespective of their social strata, have similar affective responses to this mega-superstar who has the credibility to single-handedly monopolize, the immense economic capital of the Bollywood film industry. He therefore becomes a convenient choice to peddle this version of a new-neoliberal India- an India that is ‘poised’ to fly, while another India that is looking “down from the edge of a precipice”. (*TOI*, 07)

This is a version of neoliberal India, that is advertised on glossy corporate magazines promising wealth and upward mobility under the lure of a ‘better tomorrow’, in a nation that is incredibly diverse in terms of socio-economic lived experiences. It is important to note, that Mr Bachchan in his corporate suit, is the only looming presence in the video; juxtaposed against a faded backdrop of the sea-side, where he locates himself.

However, it is a specific kind of socio-economic lived experience that is being prioritized here. This is a video by and for the people who can afford to live and benefit in a neoliberal world—people who have access to neoliberal markets, people who have different colored business suits, which they can wear to work daily to consistently feed themselves the myth of partaking in a neoliberal success story. They can afford to be dynamic in an India that is apparently poised to fly: the ultimate glorification of a neoliberal fantasy. The people who are however looking down from the edge of a precipice do not have any screen presence in this narrative. Their voices are obscured: silent, voiceless people who can only exist at the margins of this neoliberal fantasy.

What is endorsed in this anthem is a specific ‘way of life’ or a specific kind of upward mobility that is advertised more as an individual choice, than something which is dependent on the specificity of socio-economic lived experiences. The dynamic, new India that is envisioned within this neoliberal fantasy is an India where class, caste and gendered vectors apparently cease to operate. Instead, there is the suggestion of a uniform, monolithic and absolute neoliberal fantasy replete with foreign-markets and free trade possibilities, which everyone should aspire to achieve. Coded within this idea, is the implicit message, that diverse, caste, classed, gendered identities cease to matter in this neoliberal world where everyone has access to the same opportunities.

Aravind Adiga observes in an interview, "The past fifty years have seen tumultuous changes in India's society, and these changes--many of which are for the better--have overturned the traditional hierarchies, and the old securities of life. A lot of poorer Indians are left confused and perplexed by the new India that is being formed around them" (2008, n.pag.). The transcript of the advertisement also evinces the presence of this concomitant duality within this India: "One India lives in the optimism of our hearts. The other India lurks in the skepticism of our minds; or in Balaram's words, "The India of light and the India of darkness." By consistently foregrounding this apparent duality, the video seeks to achieve a dual purpose by presenting to its viewers--the sword and the shield: the sword represents the idea of 'free will' or a dynamic individualism; an India that is poised to fly and fight the shackles that has hitherto deterred its progress by opening itself to foreign markets and investments—and an India that shields, or protects itself against the onslaught of global liberalizing practices. Both these apparently conflicting ideas are coded within the same space which acts as a greater signifier for the imagined new nation that would effectively accommodate all these conflicting ideas, yet be "poised to fly" or accelerate its economic progress on the global stage. It is important to note, that the only medium which is directly referenced in this transcript is the mention of 'foreign-made goods', and the idea of purportedly taking over foreign companies which pro-

duces these goods. In other words, this is a, “new India” (Mattin 2017), which is both the consumer and producer of foreign goods. Rupal Oza reflects on the idea of ‘new India’ by pointing out that this catch phrase gained currency when the “complex political, economic, and cultural changes [which] began roughly in the mid-1970s with a series of economic liberalization policies led up to marketing India in the early 1990s as an important global destination for foreign investment” (Oza 2001, 1071). The idea of economic progress therefore becomes the fulcrum, on which this neoliberal fantasy is hinged. The video also insinuates, that this economic progress would bridge the supposedly (hidden voices in this video) incommensurable gaps within discrete socio-economic lived experiences through its foregrounding of a neoliberal grand narrative; where everyone irrespective of their social strata can be an equal participant—almost as if this neoliberal fantasy would pare down gross social inequalities and instead present a narrative of uniform socio-economic growth.

Aravind Adiga presents a compelling critique of postcolonial, neoliberal India that is ensnared within this binary abstraction of 'darkness' and 'light' in his debut novel, *The White Tiger* (Adiga, 2008). Adiga is engaging with multiple vectors in this text such as the politics of class and caste identity at the local level and the effects of neoliberalism at the global level. By foregrounding his protagonist, Balram's

narrative, Adiga consistently engages with the fundamental power dynamics of the murky society that he inhabits, to present a critique of neoliberal India. This is a “new India”, caught between the shiny, glittery, artifice of its chain supermarkets and high end malls and a dark, fecund India, infested with nameless, voiceless creatures who live and die like field rats, in a world too limited to celebrate their humanity.

Balram’s story is however presented in a complex manner. According to Shetty et al, it is not necessarily a revolt of the oppressed based on consciousness of class antagonism but rather one which uses it for the sake of individual profit. (Shetty, Prabhu, Pratapchandra T 2012, 277-87). Balram is the “white tiger”—the careful interlocutor who brings the worlds of ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ in conversation with each other. He believes in social mobility and actively resists the identity that he is born with. However, his social mobility comes at the cost of him turning increasingly corrupt in a world, where it is impossible to retain his sense of ethical morality. There is no scope for absolute heroism in this world. At best, he can inhabit a liminal space with his conflicted morality, in the form of an apparent celebration of the coming together of the periphery with the centres (Shetty, Prabhu, Pratapchandra T., 2012, 277-87) Balram constructs an independent identity for himself, which is aligned with his movement from ‘the darkness’ to ‘the light’. This self-fashioning however comes at a heavy price where he must compromise on some of

the core values and ideals that define him. Balram sees identity as fluid and malleable, which is stressed by the frequent name changes that he goes through. Ironically, the fact that he does not have any institutional presence arguably places him at a position, to take on different public identities that have more leverage in this kind of society. However, it is impossible for him to completely erase his past. To be successful at this game, he must imbibe the same rules of corruption that undergird the system. He can only be a successful interlocutor if he remains within this system, playing by its rules.

Quite early on in the book, Balram says, "My country is the kind where it pays to play it both ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere at the same time"(Adiga, 6). Balram is laying the grounds for his self-fashioning as a 'successful entrepreneur' at the very beginning, inviting his readers to critique the new, 'shining' neoliberal India. By doing so, he complicates the *Times of India* advertisement where one India is 'poised' to fly while the other India is looking down from the edge of the precipice. He positions himself as someone who straddles both these worlds, which are not in dialectical opposition to one another – but rather exist as an extension of one another. His consistent emphasis on the fact that entrepreneurs are formed from 'half-baked clay' further elucidates this point. He is a half-life caught between both these worlds, not fully belonging to either. He embodies a

specific form of entrepreneurial masculine subjectivity that is produced within this neoliberal discourse.

MASCULINITIES IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA

A close examination of this novel, reveals people as produced within the specificity of their lived experiences, as exemplars of unequal lives under precarious, uncertain situations. We also find people occupying liminal spaces, caught between tradition and modernity; between an old India and new, neoliberal India. It is in these interstitial moments that we see, moments of opportunity and possibilities for resistance, and modes of living and being that produce agentive subjectivities. This part of my paper foregrounds a close textual reading of Balram and Ashok in the novel. I intend to explore the construction of new masculine subjectivities that are produced within a neoliberal framework.

The inherent master-servant relationship between Ashok and Balram places them in homosocial spaces where we see manifestations of different forms of toxic masculine subjectivities. The reader is quick to interpret this space, as essentially coded within a stratified class structure, where servants like Balram are relegated to the inferior position of washing the master's feet. A passage in the novel reads, "I had to heat water on the stove, carry it into the courtyard, and then lift the old man's (Stork) feet up one after the other and immerse them in the hot water and then massage them both gently..."(Adiga, 60)

The Stork, as the head of the family is representative of the traditional idea of toxic hegemonic masculinity—the bullying, exploitative kind, who takes pleasure out of treating his inferiors in a cruel manner. His material wealth acts as an important component for him to be able to perform this role. Yet, we also see an instance where we see a subversion of his power, when he himself has to hold the spittoon for the political leader, who occupies an important position in the village. This is indicative of the fact, that power exist through different constellations and specific hierarchies that change in different social settings. In the village of Laxmangarh, the ultimate power resides with the politicians—the ones who mobilize public opinion by promising certain freedoms and opportunities that are never implemented after the elections. If someone like the upper class, higher caste Stork does not submit to his power—the politician has the power to destabilize his entire empire and livelihood. Hence, someone like the Stork who otherwise enjoys enormous material wealth also has to ultimately subjugate himself, in front of the politician who might or might not belong to an upper caste like him or enjoy the same kind of material wealth as him. Both Balram and the landlords are subservient to the politician's power. In the same scene, where Balram is shown washing the feet of the Stork, Ashok protests against the treatment meted out to him by his father, when the Stork hits Balram after the water had gone cold:

“Do you have to hit the servants, Father?”

“This is not America, son. Don’t ask questions like that.”

“Why can’t I ask questions?”

“They expect it from us, Ashok. Remember that they respect us for it.”- comes the warning admonition from his father. (Adiga, 43)

This is a very telling scene, where we see Ashok embodying a subjectivity that is relationally positioned in opposition, to that of the one embodied by his father. He is shown to be more outwardly progressive about his beliefs than his father, who clearly performs the traditional role of toxic masculinity, which is aimed more at producing fear than commanding respect. Ashok however commands respect because of his approach even though his father is quick to point out, that people like Balram expect that kind of toxic behavior from them. There is also the suggestion that naturalized power dynamics within the society need to be sustained, for its smooth functioning. People like Ashok who dare to reason are presented as an anomaly here, at the risk of being feminised/being considered weak, which is traditionally considered to be the worst affront to one’s masculinity in a heteronormative setting. A little later in the novel Balram writes, "I realized that this tall, broad-shouldered, handsome, foreign-educated man, who would be my only master in a few minutes, when the long whistle blew and this train headed off toward Dhanbad, was weak, helpless, absent-minded,

and completely unprotected by the usual instincts that run in the blood of a Landlord. If you were back in Laxmangarh, we would have called you the lamb.” (Adiga, 120) This is one of the first instances, where we see Balram perceiving Ashok as weak—thus positioning himself as the ‘white tiger’ against the meekness of Ashok’s ‘lamb’, in a jungle where natural laws of selection and survival of the fittest, work as governing determinants.

Ironically, as events unfold, we do see Balram increasingly disrespecting Ashok’s authority which finally culminates in that climactic event, where Balram ends up killing his master. Ashok is perceived to be weak by Balram from the beginning which becomes very crucial to the change in power dynamics, within the novel. There is almost an indication that weakness need to be defeated, for the natural order of the jungle to prevail; and for the ‘white tiger’ to assert itself and claim its rightful place at the throne. Ashok’s weakness is referenced many times in the text, which is further shown to be a direct product of his Americanization—which makes him unaware of the power dynamics encoded within this system. Initially, he is positioned at a distance from this murky world, having just come back from his stint abroad. As he gets increasingly drawn into this murky world, we see a reflection of the same kind of inherent biases that exist within his other family members. Even though, his performance of masculine subjectivity is shown to be

antithetically positioned to the one performed by his father; a closer examination of the text reveals, that his masculinity is nothing but an analogue or a variant to the one performed by his father and his brother (the mongoose). He embodies the same kind of toxic subjectivity as his other family members. However, his performance of masculinity is further complicated and produced within a neoliberal framework, which essentially peddles in the myth of fairness and equality, in a society that is undergirded by discrete class/caste divisions. Men in different cultural contexts respond to the exigency of neoliberal, cultural governance, in ways that defy a single, master narrative. What becomes visible, is more of a subtle process through which, we see a transformation of men's identities and ideas of masculinity, under changing material circumstances.

Ashok's lived experience in America, made him cognizant of a different kind of knowledge system, where dignity of labour existed and people, irrespective of their class background were valued to a certain degree, for the kind of work they performed. This kind of thinking presented itself at odds, to the general treatment meted out to servants in India, where they exist mostly tethered to the darkness, as invisible, voiceless citizens that have been both historically and systematically, institutionally silenced. There is a reference in the novel, to the corrupt election system in India, where a man is being shown forcibly dragged away from the polling

booth. Balram also points out the irony of his existence, a little later in the novel, when he says, that even though he is reported to be officially 'missing', there is still a vote that is religiously polled in his name, every year.

Ashok is produced within a specific neoliberal knowledge-system in America that expects him to be more conscious of his treatment towards other people. This knowledge-system is however rendered sterile, in context of his present lived experience in Laxmangarh, which is governed by a separate constellation of power systems, which are not so superficially visible in a place like America. By questioning, the authority of such malpractices (by his father), the master-servant relationship as coded within toxic, hegemonic homosocial spaces, is temporarily shown to be disturbed. However, the balance is restored by the Mongoose and the Stork, who continue to perform their roles as embodiments of toxic hegemonic masculinities. It is only when Ashok migrates to Gurgaon and becomes the direct master to Balram, do we see a formation of a new kind of homosocial space. This homosocial space can be read as a form of rupture from the previously existing homosocial space (the one occupied by the Stork, Mongoose, Ashok and Balram) with fixed power dynamics. It is crucial to our understanding of masculine subjectivity; to thoroughly examine this new space as a site of production of new variants of neoliberal, entrepreneurial masculinities. It is also important to interrogate how these masculinities are structured in this

new, emerging space, in relation to the previous homosocial space in Laxmangarh. Are there new, emerging possibilities encoded within this space, which manage to circumvent the strictures of the previous space? As we see, the hegemony of the traditional, toxic homosocial space being destabilized, do we see emerging possibilities of newer ways of living and performing masculinities within a neoliberal discourse?

In an early scene in the novel, we see Balram driving Ashok and his wife in their Honda city, when Ashok asks Balram to pull over to the side. Balram writes, “Following this command, he leaned forward so close that I could smell his aftershave- it was a delicious, fruit like smell that day- and said, politely as ever, ‘Balram, I have a few questions to ask you, all right?’” (Adiga 7) What follows, is a series of questions, where Ashok is trying to discern his level of education. Balram clearly does not have the right answers, which become a point of amusement for Ashok’s wife, Pinky who ends up laughing about the whole incident. Balram then overhears, Ashok telling his wife, “The thing is, he probably has.... what, two, three years of schooling in him? He can read and write, but he doesn’t get what he he’s read. He’s half baked. The country is full of people like him ... And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy’—he pointed at me—‘to characters like these.’ That’s the whole tragedy of this country.” (Adiga 6,7)

Adiga, is working on many levels here. There is of course a larger critique of the corrupt nature of the education system in India, which produces 'half baked' people like Balram. While Adiga is clearly involved in a consistent project to critique, the corrupt nature of the Indian society, he is also simultaneously involved in a critique of the modern, educated, upper-class neoliberal man. Ashok, with his education and genteel behaviour embodies a stunning degree of cultural elitism, which allows him to identify the problem— he is however, dismissive of the solution. Instead, he promotes the worst form of social hierarchy which enables people like him, who clearly occupy a position of power to institutionally silence people like Balram, whom he clearly believes should not be allowed to vote in this “glorious democracy”. His idea of democracy is extremely classed and casteist which sustains itself, through the systematic silencing of 'half baked' people like Balram. His meditation on the corrupt nature of the society is essentially undergirded by his fear, that people like Balram have political power to determine the workings of the nation. Ashok is produced within a neoliberal discourse, which promises free-market economy, within a closed, classed system, with people like him as gatekeepers of this society. He is the well-dressed man, wearing fruity after-shave who represent a modern, seemingly liberal outlook, but is essentially governed by the same kind of toxic knowledge-systems that are deeply embedded within people like the Stork and the Mongoose. There is always a noticeable refer-

ence to his fashionable sartorial choices, in the book which is meant to be seen in contrast to the Stork and Mongoose. Adiga is however engaged in simultaneously critiquing him by positing Ashok as another variant of the same kind of toxic, hegemonic masculine subjectivity, embodied by the other people in his family.

Balram, later that night remembers the conversation and admits to himself that Ashok was right, even though he did not like the way Ashok had spoken about him. He then writes, “The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. ...Fully formed fellows, after twelve years of school and three years of university, wear nice suits, and take orders from other men for the rest of their lives. Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay.” (Adiga 8)

His self-identification as an entrepreneur is important here. By doing so, he posits a competing performance of entrepreneurial masculinity, which can be arguably seen in opposition to the kind of neoliberal, educated masculinity performed by his master, Ashok. There is also the suggestion, that this specific performance of entrepreneurial masculinity has possibilities that are eclipsed in the performance of neoliberal masculinity. There is an apparent degree of mobility associated with this kind of performance, which enable ‘half-baked’ interlocutors like Balram to navigate the interstices of an otherwise classed/casteist neoliberal society. Entre-

preneurial masculinity becomes the conduit through which people like Balram, write back to the casteist/classed neoliberal society. By embodying this specific performance, Balram is able to negotiate the interstitial niches of this society, where people like him can also be a mainstream participant in the larger neoliberal framework. Through this performance, Balram legitimizes himself as an 'authentic' narratorial voice, who writes himself into being as someone who has emerged from the 'darkness' into the 'light'. He fashions himself as the worthy interlocutor, who has straddled both these worlds and have intimate knowledge of the structural complexities of both these worlds. In fact, there are several moments in the novel, where he triumphantly announces that he has made it to the 'light' from 'darkness'.

However, his aspirational status in the India of light is inextricably linked to him being increasingly corrupt, as he tries to negotiate the interstices of this neoliberal world. It becomes difficult to read his physical mobility from the India of 'darkness' to the India of 'light' as a complete success story, even though Balram would want his readers to read his life as a 'success' story. To achieve this status, he has to murder his master and conform to the laws of the neoliberal jungle—replete with massive levels of exploitation and corruption. He has to bribe the police officers, in order to set up his business. Balram, as the legitimate interlocutor in this story, sees his identity as fluid but

he cannot aspire to rise in the ranks, with his original name. He takes on the name of his master, Ashok Sharma towards the end. By rejecting his own name—Balram Halwai-- which is indicative of his sweet-maker caste, he takes on a separate identity—one that automatically elevates him in the caste hierarchy.

Shetty et al therefore explain this entire process of Balram turning into Ashok Sharma as a neo-capitalist coup. The transformed individual becomes a representative of neo-capitalism who bristles with sophistication, dynamism, exhibition, make-believe and astute cunning (Shetty, Prabhu, Pratapchandra T., 2012, 277-87). His entrepreneurial performance cannot succeed in isolation. It is thus necessary for him, to locate himself in an upper-caste 'neo-capitalist' narrative, to succeed in the India of 'light'. His position as an interlocutor in this interstitial space can only work, if he manages to write himself in an upper class-caste narrative. In that sense, his journey can be inscribed within a tautological paradox. Even though, he sets out to disprove, the inescapability of his lived experience, as someone hailing from a lower class and caste background; he ends up reiterating the master narrative of a classed, casteist neoliberal world. In this world, 'half-baked' people like him cannot succeed without upending moral ethical codes and colluding in the greater web of corruption that governs this India.

Several critics have read the novel as an account of the “greater process of self-examination.” (Jeffries 2008), while others have panned the novel for its bleak portrayal of neoliberal India. However as P. Sunneetha writes, “Adiga is at his best when he sharply portrays the glaring contrast of the life of darkness of the rural people with the light--the successful entrepreneurship--of the urban masses. (Sunneetha 2012, 170) Prasannarajan further comments, “He sympathises with the lack of good manners on the part of the rural masses, and "[w]ith detached, scatological precision, he surveys the grey remoteness of an India where the dispossessed and the privileged are not steeped in the stereotypes of struggle and domination" (Prasannarajan: 2008). Adiga writes a nuanced description of this extremely fraught social moment, by stripping down the gloss and exposing neoliberal India, with its warts and questionable ‘subjects’.

There are shared moments of empathy between Balram and Ashok, which is inevitably subverted to conform to the laws of this neo capitalist, neoliberal vacuum, where possibilities of slippages are rare. There is a passage in the novel, where Balram writes, “From the start, sir, there was a way in which I could understand what he wanted to say, the way dogs understand their masters. 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.” (Adiga, 94)

Balram and Ashok share a strange moment of intimacy, which has been hinted at many other places in the novel. Balram wordlessly interprets Ashok’s desire, to drive the car. This moment is described by him in a protracted manner, with highly visual and sensual imagery. There is also a shared sense of identification and acknowledgement of where Ashok is coming from alongside a hint of physical intimacy with the touching of their bodies, the exchange of scent and wordless communication. The imagined (by Balram) fluidity that exists between the master and the servant, is realized in this moment as an actual instance of symbolic physical exchange between them, as Ashok takes over Balram’s position. Fernando Sanchez in his article, “Queer transgressions: Same-Sex desire and Transgendered representations in Aravind Adiga’s *White Tiger*” reads this moment as an instance, where the homosocial space in the novel is effectively queered. Sanchez interprets a version of the word ‘queer’ as a desire for the same-sex, coded within a non-sexual moment while at the same time, being a critique of the oppressive nature of the social frame, in which it occurs.

While we see Balram identifying with his master, during several instances, Ashok fails to do so. Ashok changes place with Balram, only to realize that the seat is uncomfortable. Similarly, later on in the novel, after Pinky leaves him, he asks Balram to take him to the place, where he eats his food, only to focus on the abject, decrepit nature of his surroundings. Even though, there are moments where you see a shared sort of empathy on Ashok's part, for Balram—he is never fully able to comprehend or identify with Balram's lived existence. As the story progresses, we find Balram, waking up to the hypocritical liberated front put up by Ashok. His twinned identification of the world as “darkness” and “light”, makes him increasingly violent, as he sees through Ashok's blatant hypocrisy; designating him as a rival that must be defeated, in order for him to succeed in this world.

Adiga creates a hyper-masculine, homosocial space in the novel, where women are mainly reduced to being sex-objects. Their presence in the novel exist in tandem to the purported queering of the homosocial space, as if to serve the express purpose of eliding same-sex exploration of desire. Sex-workers specifically serve as a conduit, through which the male characters in the text, channel their desire, almost as if to direct the readers to channelize their gaze on the implicit, heteronormative structure of this homosocial space. Even when, there is a perceived queering

of the homosocial space, between Ashok and Balram, an event almost follows it, where we see both the master and the servant, desiring a female body.

My reading examines how the performance of hegemonic masculinities (Connell 2005, 829-859) are re-configured under a neoliberal framework through the production of new, complicated subjectivities. Balram and Ashok embody specific iterations of hegemonic masculinities that cannot be read in a linear way. By looking at this twinned pair, I do not necessarily see Balram and Ashok as instances of opposing masculine subjectivities but rather as variants that are produced within the same neoliberal discourse.

As James Ferguson (2010) points out, it is important to take into consideration the polyvalence of the term, 'neoliberalism'. There are many associated dangers to reading neoliberalism as a singular, monolithic category. Doing so, elides important, diverse and divergent ways in which neoliberalism affect the gendered nature of people's lives, in different social and cultural contexts. The first part of my paper critiques the idea of a neoliberal success story by drawing attention to the absent voices in the Times of India advert. I argue that by deliberately foregrounding megastar Amitabh Bachchan in the video, similar affective responses are invoked from diverse lived experiences in India to give credence to a seemingly shared neoliberal vision.

I go on to argue that while this advertisement promises development across a broad spectrum, it is only a certain class-caste lived experience that is prioritized. However, the second part of my paper complicates this idea by throwing light to the multiple differently textured worlds that are caught in between the two ends of this spectrum (light and darkness)—where people like Balram who occupy a liminal space, can seek out ways to participate in this neoliberal fiction. People like Balram occupy an interstitial space between both these worlds and fashions a neoliberal ‘success story’ for themselves by simultaneously sustaining and subverting its rules. As this paper shows, Balram’s specific performance of neoliberal masculinity is dependent on, “context and the specific and immediate relations between actors and audience.” (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 10). His relationship with Ashok and the homosocial space that emerges out of that interaction is the pivotal setting, which provides the grounds for his self-fashioning as a neoliberal entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurial masculinity, as embodied by Balram, in a neoliberal framework is primarily undergirded by his natural instinct to survive and succeed. His masculine subjectivity is almost radically rooted in the present: in tandem with his zeal to survive in his immediate circumstance. Balram’s uncertainty regarding his future existence and the precarity of his circumstances are encapsulated in the neoliberal moment. As

part of this complex constellation of different kinds of masculine subjectivities, we see a re-writing of traditional ideas of hegemonic masculinities in an India that is 'poised to fly'. There are moments when you see Balram, looking down from the 'edge of a precipice,' or 'the black fort' in his case—and at other times, he is preparing himself for flight. Balram's story can be read as both the promise and plague of neoliberalism.

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