

CHAPTER FIVE

MAPPING POSTCOLONIAL SUBALTERNITIES

Subaltern Studies...could not just be the Indian version of the "history from below" approach; it had to conceive the subaltern differently and write different histories. (Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism")

The aim of this chapter is to examine the presentation of the subaltern consciousness in novels like *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, from different perspectives: differences in insiders' viewpoints as well as those between insider and outsider. It also shows how the agency of the subaltern is often denied by narratives based on colonialist, nationalist or mutant discourses in *Coolie*, *Rich Like Us*, *English, August*, *The Inheritance of Loss*, *The White Tiger* and *The Hungry Tide*.

"The term "subaltern," drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/ dominated relationships in history" as pointed out by Gyan Prakash ("Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism", *The American Historical Review* 1477). According to Gramsci, a social group may "have its own conception of the world...which manifests itself in action...when...the group is acting as an organic totality" (quoted in *Subaltern Studies* VI, 170). However, this same group may through "reasons of submission and intellectual subordination," adopt "a conception which is not its own" because they normally operate without autonomy (170). Any study of the subaltern cannot ignore the dominant because the former are always affected by the latter. It addresses the subordination of the subaltern and tries to remove the primacy assigned to the elites.

Nectar in a Sieve and *A Handful of Rice* have thematic similarity in respect of graphic portrayal of the poor, rural as well as urban, who belong to the lowest echelons of Indian society. Both the novels reveal the author's deep concerns for the poor, her attempts to represent their sufferings and miseries from their perspectives. These novels are reflections of rural India and are based on the traditional pattern of life in countless villages across the country. At the same time the author's passionate protest against social injustice is implicit in these novels.

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) shows how, with changing time, industrial encroachment forces the rural poor to move with hope to the urban areas but to face a similar situation. *A Handful of Rice* (1966) portrays the plight of the urban poor, living with hunger, and consequent degeneration of human values. It depicts how the poor's migration from the village to the city in search of livelihood and social identity often ends in more suffering. *Nectar in a Sieve* is set just before Independence and the second, *A Handful of Rice*, about a decade after Independence.

Nectar in a Sieve

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) is about the rural poor presented through the story of a naive South Indian peasant couple, Nathan and Rukmani. The novel shows the poverty, despair and suffering of tenant farmers. The peasants' problems and sufferings increase when a tannery is built in their village on the land they use to till every year to earn their livelihood. This reduces the poor landless peasants to absolute poverty as they no longer have a means of livelihood. The predicament of Nathan and Rukmani could be taken to represent tenant farmers in India who have to suffer for industrialization and selfish interests of the landlord.

Rukmani is the daughter of a village headman, growing up in some comfort and abundance during her childhood. But deteriorating fortune and prevalence of the dowry system compel the headman to give his daughter in marriage to a landless and moneyless tenant farmer Nathan. Although Rukmani's marriage brings poverty to her life she adjusts to the new situation and identifies herself with the peasants around her. The days gradually become harder and harder for Rukmani as her family grows, the number of mouths to feed increases, but Rukmani accepts the change, the increasing hardship, as an inevitability and eventuality of life – she tries to explore ways to ease the financial problem of the family, she begins selling the best produce of her kitchen garden to Old Granny and the moneylender Biswas, leaving the bruised ones for domestic consumption.

She reflects:

We no longer had milk in the house, except for the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our means except on rare occasions. But we never went

hungry ... there was always food in the house- at least a bagful of rice, a little dhal, if no more .Then when the rice terraces were drained, there was the fish, spawned among the paddy , and what we could not eat, we dried and salted away. And every month I put away a rupee or two against the time Ira would be married. So we still could not grumble. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 26)

Even the increasing hardship fails to dampen Rukmani's zest for life and she seems to be content with whatever she has with her and tries to make it look sufficient for her. Markandaya describes how industrialization changes the attitudes of the peasants and affects their life in an adverse way.

Now what disturbs Rukmani most is that the otherwise calm and peaceful life of the peasants gets a jolt and is disrupted mercilessly by the intrusion of industrialization and consequent exploitation of the rich and the powerful. Rukmani and others in her class have been taken by surprise by the sudden and drastic change in their village. Rukmani expresses her reaction to this change thus:

Change I had known before, and it had been gradual. My father had been headman once, a person of consequence in our village: I had lived to see him relinquish this importance, but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came. I had seen both my parents sink into old age and death, and here too there was no violence. But the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye. (27)

The tannery's imperceptible but lasting consequences shake the very fabric of the social life in the village, and the serene and peaceful atmosphere of the village is destroyed permanently depriving the villagers of many of their social and environmental needs.

The construction of the tannery begins by "pulling down houses around the maidan" (27) and there arrive a class of people, the construction workers and officers, who are considerably well off than the peasants. Rukmani observes:

They were very well paid, these men, some of them earning two rupees in a single day, whereas even in good times we seldom earned as much, and they

bought lavishly: rice, vegetables and dhal, sweetmeats and fruit. Around the maidan they built their huts, for there was no other place for them, and into these brought their wives and children, making a community of their own. (29)

The newcomers draw a line of new class difference in the village, and they bring with them unexpected changes to the village. Rukmani's mind is filled with contempt for this class of people: "They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us" (30). They had in fact changed the whole topography of the place.

Rukmani takes stock of the relentless growth of the tannery and the expansion of factory site. The whole business seemed to be beyond her imagination:

It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw materials in- thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins-and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities-or that so many animals existed-but so it was, incredibly. (49)

She had no idea who or where those skins would be used in such volume. It involved a lot of workers as well as the white owner. She observes that gradually the social structure was changing too:

The officials of the tannery had increased as well. Apart from the white man we had first seen- who owned the tannery and lived by himself- there were some nine or ten Muslims under him. They formed a little colony of their own, living midway between the town and the open country in brick cottages with whitewashed walls and red tiled roofs. (50)

She is fascinated by the men and women who live there and as she sells some vegetables to one of these women, she notices the affluence:

Once, and once only, I actually saw one of those women, close. I was taking a few vegetables to market when I saw her beckoning me to come indoors. I did so,

and as soon as the door was closed the woman threw off her veil the better to select what she wanted. Her face was very pale, the bones small and fine. Her eyes were pale too, a curious light brown matching her silky hair. She took what she wanted and paid me. Her fingers, fair and slender, were laden with jeweled rings, any one of which would have fed us for a year. (50)

This shows how these people differ from the peasants, in their way of life, in their values of life. This difference disturbs the peasants. On the other hand the peasants are completely dependent on nature - nature controls their life and fortune. When the rains betray them, all their hard work goes in vain and their families remain half-fed most of the year. Sometimes, storms and lightning destroy their mud huts. They cannot think of a different way for survival.

A telling picture of the hardship the peasants accept with calmness as well as helplessness is painted by the author through Rukmani's observation:

To those who live by the land there must always come times of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. We live by our labours from one harvest to the next, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed ourselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. In our lives there is no margin for misfortune. (136-137)

Rukmani sums up the situation which happens to be the everyday reality in the lives of the older generation peasants. They think that their survival depends entirely on the land they till and produce grain to feed themselves even though they do not own the land, and they remain emotionally attached to this land owned by others. The thought of being exploited by the rich hardly comes to their mind.

This attitude of the older generation of peasants changes with time and the new generation is not prepared to accept or think of, poverty as a truth of life or an inevitability in life—they are ambitious, adventurous and ready to work hard if opportunities are available. Markandaya has very subtly portrayed this change in attitude

through some of the characters in the novel. The character of Dr. Kennington (Kenny), a European doctor, is introduced in the novel as a protesting and rebellious voice against social inequality and injustice, as a man who is angered by such calm acceptance of exploitation by the peasants and tries to arouse the peasants to fight against such inequality, injustice and exploitation. He asks Rukmani: “Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—cry out for help—do something” (46) ? Kenny repeatedly asks Rukmani to fight for equality and justice:

I have told you before,... I will repeat it again: you must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life (115) ?

Despite his encouragement, Rukmani and others like her belonging to that generation are too broken to even articulate their grievances, let alone seek redressal.

While the older generation is reconciled to poverty, the attitude of the younger generation is different and some of them are impressed by Kenny’s views—they are no longer passive to exploitation of bourgeoisie-proletariat type, and they are aware of the reality which makes them resist it. They are also willing to explore new avenues of livelihood to minimize their problems and improve the quality of their life. Nathan and Rukmani’s sons Arjun and Thambi who belong to the new generation are alert to various possibilities of economic betterment and conscious of their rights.

When Arjun tells Rukmani that he is going to work in the tannery, Rukmani tries to dissuade him by saying that their relatives would never approve of this as he does not belong to the caste of the tanners. Rukmani is still obsessed with the prevailing caste proscriptions in society – although in poverty, she thinks herself to be in a superior caste and so she is not willing to do certain things even for survival. Markandaya wants to assert that caste prejudice of the poor themselves can sometimes stand in their way as obstacle in finding means to ease poverty. But the younger generation realizes that caste vanity would not feed them – their ideologies are quite different from those of their parents. Arjun firmly replies: “I do not care. The important thing is to eat....I am tired of

hunger and I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry...” (53). He is not willing to accept caste constraints if they prevent him from earning his living.

Though Arjun and Thambi come to work in the tannery with much hope, they soon discover that the workers have been exploited by the employers paying much less than what the workers deserve by taking advantage of their helplessness and poverty. When they ask for more money, the employers make them work longer by taking away their “eating time” (66). This is nothing but exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. The workers decide to openly oppose such injustice and take active part in the workers’ strike demanding increased wages, with Arjun and Thambi being the spokesmen of the workers on strike. Thambi informs his mother:

We shall not go back until our demands are met... All the workers have stopped. We do not ask for charity, but for that which is our due. (67)

Arjun and Thambi want to assert themselves and are prepared to fight injustice and exploitation unlike their parents who are pointlessly attached to the land which they do not own, and rely more on fate than on their own endeavour. But for the poor and the powerless, fighting injustice and exploitation by the rich and the powerful is not an easy task. When the workers continue their strike for a whole week, the tannery management announces possible replacement of the strikers by new recruits if they do not return to work immediately. The management is aware that there will be no dearth of labourers because of prevailing poverty and that a battle against injustice cannot be fought with an empty stomach:

The next morning the tannery had its full complement again, most of them workers who had gone back, the remainder men who were only too glad to obtain employment. (67)

Arjun and Thambi choose to adhere to their decision to stand against injustice and not to surrender before the exploiters. However, their decision to fight injustice and oppression produces no impact on the powerful employer and it brings untold miseries to them and their family. In utter disappointment Arjun says bitterly: “The people will never learn...They will rot before they do” (67). Markandaya makes it clear that abject poverty

also stands in the way of viable or effective protest against exploitation. Acute hunger compels the exploited to turn to the exploiter – if he does not do that, he faces even harsher consequences.

Uncertainty grips Rukmani's family – the earning members become jobless, and her worries deepen as her reserves of grain begin to dwindle. Arjun and Thambi begin a frantic search for new jobs in the town. At this time of anxiety and uncertainty of the family, they come to know of an opportunity announced by drummers in the town, and Arjun immediately decides not to miss the opportunity and informs his mother:

‘They are calling for labourers’, Arjun said, not looking up. ‘It would be a good opportunity for us’... ‘They are paying well’, Arjun resumed. ‘It would be good for us to work again. It is not fitting that men should corrupt themselves in hunger and idleness’... ‘It is work in the tea plantations of Ceylon (Sri Lanka)’.
(69)

To Rukmani the idea of allowing her sons to go to a distant land to earn money to challenge poverty seems wildly unreasonable. Rukmani tells them that “money is not everything” (70). Arjun tells his mother:

It (money) is an important part of living...There is nothing for us here, for we have neither the means to buy land nor to rent it. Would you have us wasting our youth chafing against things we cannot change? (70)

Time and struggle have made her sons' attitude very different from that of hers. They are not willing to sit back and starve.

Nature's vagary doubles their misfortune as, even in a drought, they have to pay for the land to the landlord. Sivaji, the landlord's agent, arrives in time to collect his master's dues. He expresses his helplessness and tries to explain to them the rules of law: “‘You have had the land,’ Sivaji said, ‘for which you have contracted to pay: so much money, so much rice. These are just dues, I must have them. Would you have me return empty-handed’”(74)? When Nathan repeatedly expresses his helplessness and inability to pay the dues because of a poor harvest, Sivaji sternly informs them of the consequence of non-payment of dues: “The land is to be given to another if you cannot make payment”

(75). Sivaji is a part of the system of landownership which helps one class of people to thrive on another. Nathan and Rukmani are forced to sell their life's savings- clothes, utensils, bullocks and even the seeds to pay the rent. All they could accumulate is hundred and twenty-five rupees, less than half of what they owe.

They somehow persuade Sivaji to agree to wait till the next season for the remaining payment. They have no other way but to bear this exploitation silently.

Rukmani's acceptance of her life of suffering as inevitable is typical of the ideology and thinking of the peasants of the older generation living in poverty. When Dr. Kenny asserts that "there is no grandeur in want or in endurance" she replies passively and ironically: "Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree"(115). They have been subordinated for years into believing that that is their lot.

This is not the end of Rukmani's woes - her woes multiply as time progresses. Her third son Raja is killed with charge of theft in the tannery and the officials warn her not to ask for compensation for her son's death. Rukmani wonders what compensation is there for death. A timid man tries to explain that her son's death is accidental but not due to excessive torture:

He was not brutally treated or anything, you know. They merely tapped him with a lathi, as he was trying to escape, and he fell. He must have been very weak or something. (94)

Rukmani somehow manages a few words: "He was....He worked hard, and ate little" (94).The episode of Raja's killing confirms that poverty means voicelessness – voicelessness to claim justice. She is even told that with the death of her son she would have one less mouth to feed:

"Of course...it is your loss. But not, remember, our responsibility. Perhaps... you may even be better off ...You have many mouths to feed.... I did not intend to wound you. But sometimes the truth must be stated, unpalatable as it is". (94)

Markandaya presents the darker aspect of poverty which robs millions of people of their voice. She portrays, at the same time, a class of people who cannot see and feel these

wounds, not to speak of doing anything to heal them. But the greatest shock is yet to come to the Nathan family, and it comes with the announcement made by Nathan to Rukmani one evening: “The land is to be sold....We are to move. Sivaji came this morning. He says there is nothing to be done”(134). What they had feared had at last happened. There had been no consideration shown towards them for their long occupation of the place. They were simply being told to leave as they were no longer part of the landlord’s plans.

The landlord has sold the land to the tannery making a good profit. Now they have to vacate the land in two weeks time. It is the land which they have considered their own for thirty years, it is the land on which they have built their home and brought up their family. As if poverty and suffering were not enough, there were being asked to pull up their roots. Nathan and Rukmani decide to move to the city with the hope of meeting their son Murugan and finding refuge there, but they are dismayed to find that the city holds no joy or relief for them. They decide to return to the village and Nathan dies on the way.

A Handful of Rice

In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Ravi (Ravishankar), son of a peasant, leaves his home in the village in the hope of earning a living in the city. Through the story of Ravi, Markandaya presents some of the demoralizing consequences of the hard struggle to survive in a modern city. In doing so Markandaya unveils another world: the so-called underworld of petty criminals in the city controlled by antisocial elements indulging in unlawful activities with the motive to get rich quickly. This points to another facet of poverty in the city, usually not seen in rural India. The novel explores the vices of the city, the hard struggle for survival of the downtrodden and the erosion of human values and sentiment.

The very first scene of the novel expresses Markandaya’s deep concern for urban poverty which pervades the whole novel. The scene describes how Ravi, already entangled in the city’s underworld, forcefully enters into a tailor’s house in a drunken state to escape police chase, crying desperately for food: “I am hungry, I want a meal” (*A Handful of Rice* 3). Food is the first and most important item for a person to keep his life going. It is

hunger that drives Ravi to break into the tailor's house for food. The tailor's family gives him a meal, and also shelter for the night on Ravi's request. But next morning Ravi is surprised to find his hands and feet tied by a bicycle chain and the tailor's wife starting to beat him with a rolling pin. When the old tailor, Apu, angrily asks him why he broke in like a ruffian, Ravi simply answers that he was hungry and all he had was a rupee in his hand. The old man accuses him that instead of boozing he could have bought a reasonable meal with that rupee. The old man is shocked by Ravi's reply:

Yes, and what then? ... I didn't want to buy reason, I don't want to buy reason, what I wanted to buy was something quite different, something that would stop me thinking about tomorrow because the more I think of it the sicker I get- sick, sick of it! (6)

Ravi's reply makes the couple calm down. Apu advises him: "A young man like you – you must think of the future!" (6) To Apu's advice Ravi sneers: "What future? It's bad enough getting through the day, without dragging that in!" (6) Now Apu's wife, Jayamma, joins in: "You must not talk like that" (6), to which Ravi shouts: "Why shouldn't I? You know nothing about me, nothing about how I feel or why I feel it"(7). While Apu and his wife are willing to advise Ravi, they realize that he was desperate, and not a 'ruffian.' It is hunger (and poverty) that is responsible for driving Ravi to take such steps. Ravi's desperation marks the culmination of his continued frustration since coming to the city which has only aggravated his suffering.

It is poverty that compels Ravi to turn his back on the village and join the exodus to the city for a smoother life free from hunger. But he soon realizes that the city holds no promise to the poor if they choose to tread the ethically right path. There is no way a poor man can hope to succeed through being good. The city gives birth to all sorts of social evils, and helps black marketeers, hoarders and cheats to accumulate fortune by unlawful means, making the life of honest and simple people unsafe and harder. Ravi's expectations of attaining success are frustrated in the city nor can he go back to his native village.

Ravi's experiences in the city gradually change his general attitude regarding honesty, decency and all the so-called virtues of life. When he looks back, he feels *pity* for that

small struggling farming community of his native village. Those people are labelled “decent” (9) because they do not lie, they do not cheat and they do not steal but still all of them live in abject poverty. Ravi develops a kind of hatred and anguish towards poverty:

As far back as he could see they had all lived between bouts of genteel and acute poverty- the kind in which the weakest went to the wall, the old ones and the babies, dying of tuberculosis, dysentery, the ‘falling fever’, ‘recurrent fever’, and any other names for what was basically, simply, nothing but starvation. The pattern must have gone on a long time, for generations, because nobody objected, nobody protested, they just kept going, on and on, and were thankful that they were able to.(9)

As far as he was concerned this is what the village had to offer its residents. It was a combination of starvation and sickness. Unfortunately he finds:

The cities had nothing either, although they did not discover this until they arrived, but it held out before them like an incandescent carrot the hope that one day, some day , there would be something.(26)

Through Ravi’s hatred and anguish Markandaya describes the frustration of those who come from village to city in the hope of getting opportunities for survival. Nathan and Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* have similar experiences in the city when they come there after being asked to move by their landlord.

Coming to the city Ravi joins thousands of job seekers on the streets but only to get disillusioned. He has not even been able to find a permanent shelter in the city. The railway station becomes his temporary home, and hunger compels him to indulge in petty crimes to earn money. In the station he makes friends with aimless loafers and criminals like smugglers, bootleggers and black marketeers who operate and also take shelter at night in the railway platform. Sometimes he gets odd jobs at the docks or in coffee shops to earn a little. Gradually acute depression engulfs his mind when he comes to know that the city has no jobs even for graduates and he has only elementary school education. His depression takes him to drinking for temporary relief. One night in a heavily drunken state he forcefully enters the tailor’s house to get away from the police.

This incident is a turning point in Ravi's life. Even though he is tied and beaten by the tailor's family for unauthorized intrusion into their house, he develops a feeling of gratitude to them for providing food and shelter to him, and this sense of gratitude softens his anger and anguish against poverty. The tailor's advice, "You must think for the future." – rings in his ears, and he has now a dream - a dream of having a family of his own, a dream of having a loving wife serving warm and delicious meals, a dream of having a small yet comfortable home with the bare necessities, where poverty does not exist in the form he knows and experiences.

Ravi's accidental encounter with the tailor's family transforms his life, and his dream comes to be fulfilled to some extent. Because of his love for Apu's daughter Nalini whom he later marries, and his urge to improve his life in the city he accepts the apprenticeship in tailoring offered by Apu. On the other hand the tailor finds in Ravi an assistant deemed as his probable successor to take over his trade. Despite knowing Ravi's background, Apu approves his marriage with his daughter Nalini as his initial impression about him has already changed after that breaking-in incident and also he sees in him a support for him in his old age. Through this marriage Ravi also secures a shelter and a job, and the atmosphere of a home and plans to live a decent life not disturbed by poverty. But things seldom happen as planned, and it is difficult to have a life as smooth as expected.

Ravi's new life begins well in Apu's house – he gets daily wage for his work, and food and accommodation at subsidized rate for *his* family, and thus he gains some respectability in the society. But dreams grow wings which make one fly higher and higher in the sky of hopes and aspirations, with satisfaction as well as frustration. Ravi's dream also begins to grow wings:

Ravi would have liked this steady wage to be higher. He wanted to buy a bed, a nice new sari for Nalini, material for some smart new shirts for himself, a safety razor, a mouth organ (all the old gang had either mouth organs or flutes), and sundry other essentials and luxuries the list of which grew daily longer. The

longing for them grew too: and from constant denial affected him like a deficiency diseases. (75-76)

Ravi has moved from one level of poverty to another. This new level of poverty begins to haunt him and make him unhappy again. He begins to dislike his job: he finds it dull and monotonous, “a womanish trade” (76). The main reason for finding his job dull and monotonous is that he finds it much less rewarding than he expects. All day long he has to stitch loads of white aprons which do not have much demand. He would however have liked to stitch silk jackets with embroidered collars that would sell like hot cakes and make him earn more.

One day, Ravi is surprised to discover how he is underselling his labour to Eve, the fashionable shop which buys the clothes he stitches and sells them at a very high rate. He looks with astonishment at a garment—a coat—stitched by him and displayed by Eve:

It did not look the same here: it had become vastly richer, more sumptuous, since leaving his hands - he had to look twice to make sure it was the same. But there was no doubt about it, he could even see one little diamond where the quilting line wavered. Pleasure filled him. He felt like grabbing the nearest passer-by and pointing it out with pride, until his eyes travelled down to the straw hand-span waist where the price tag was. Rs. 125 it said, quite plainly. Ravi was stunned. He and Apu between them got Rs.80 per dozen, while *they*, doing no work that he could see, got Rs. 125 for *one*. It shook him. (77-78)

Ravi realizes that the city is a place where the rich exploit the working class people by not making adequate payment commensurate with their work. The very thought of being exploited makes him angry. Ravi’s anger swells when he finds Apu take it calmly: “Of course they get twenty times what people get. That’s because they’re not people like us.” (78) Ravi yells: “What sort are they then, devils? Gods?” (78) Apu makes it clear to Ravi that no protest, no revolt, no shouting can change it. Ravi’s mind is filled with surprise and disgust, and contempt for those of the older generation: “Apu, his father – all that generation, clinging trembling to what was for fear of what might be” (79). He realizes that the older generation are not prepared to protest or fight back despite being aware of injustices.

Ravi's obsession to acquire wealth and get rid of poverty constantly disturbs him and makes him observe the rich people more critically, and he becomes more conscious of his poverty. When he and Apu went to the luxurious houses of the memsahibs to take body measurements of the ladies to stitch their clothes, Ravi liked to peep into the rooms and wonder what it felt like to live in such places: "What did it feel like, he wondered, running his fingertips over satinwood surfaces, sinking an inquiring toe into inch-thick carpets, to live like this, without worry, without wanting, every need and craving satisfied?" (96) To live *without worry, without wanting*, and with *every need and craving satisfied* becomes his dream that begins to haunt him day and night, and even make him take his life as a challenge.

This dream makes him furious, and fills his mind with severe tension and drives him to his onetime underworld *friend* Damodar to seek advice how to get rich by any means whatsoever and escape from poverty. He is amazed to see Damodar's fat purse and tempted to go back to Damodar's world again. When he goes to Damodar he is more disturbed by the rich people's luxurious life. One night returning in a drunken state after a visit to Damodar he shouts to Nalini:

I want more, I want a bed for one thing! I'm fed up sleeping on the floor. *They* all have beds, the people we slave for, do you know that? Daybeds, night-beds, double-beds, divans.... (85)

Nalini says to him: "You've been corrupted. You go into all those big houses, see all these things, it gives you impossible ideas." (86) "They're not impossible ideas" (86), retorts Ravi. "They are. How can people like us can ever be like them?" (86) replies Nalini. Ravi is resolute:

They're not made of different clay are they? There's nothing lays down they should always have the best and trample over us and do us down, and we should always come off worst? (86)

Then comes Nalini's reply: "They are a different class, that's all. Ordinary folk like us can never be like them." (86) But Ravi won't stop: "Oh yes we can.... We can, if we stop thinking like stupid water buffaloes." (86) Ravi's mind is haunted by a sense of

deprivation – deprivation from what, he thinks, he deserves, and by a feeling of being exploited - exploited by those for whom he slaves and labours.

Unlike Ravi, Apu remains indifferent to the luxurious life style of the rich. He is content with whatever he has in his life – his feeling that he is not starving though unable to afford certain simple luxuries is enough to keep him in peace. He is satisfied that his family is still not in abject poverty. But, what Apu unconditionally accepts as truths of life irritates, rather infuriates, his son-in-law Ravi. Markandaya puts these two generations on two parallel planes with divergent views, values, ideals, dreams and aspirations – the younger generation, unlike the older one, is not prepared to tolerate or accept or ignore class disparities, oppressions and exploitations as social truths. In *Nectar in a Sieve* also Markandaya draws a similar picture of ideological differences of the older and the younger generations by narrating the story of Nathan and Rukmani and their sons.

As the family grows with increasing number of mouths to feed, Apu's household budget loses equilibrium, and he begins to feel poverty's onslaught on his family. Moreover, mechanization brings downfall to his trade - growth of textile mills and machine production of garments adversely affect his tailoring business resulting in sharp deterioration of the family's financial condition.

Things become even worse when Apu gets paralysis, and ultimately dies – now the whole burden of supporting the family is on Ravi. A declining business and soaring prices of essential commodities make Ravi's job still tougher. It becomes unmanageable for Ravi to continue his father-in-law's business. Ravi broods on increasing his prices to make some profit to tide over the hardship. But it puts him in a dilemma as he broods over the measures taken by his father-in-law to gain more business: “the fawning, the patience, the ingratiatory attentions, the bribes and the inducements” (215). The harsh treatment of an upper class *memsahib* for late delivery, only by a week, of a gown for the adequate reason of his father-in-law's death makes him very angry:

Bitches, he thought, nothing mattered in their eyes, not death itself could match the importance of a dress being ready on time. (215)

The customer, however, is not impressed as she draws a racially loaded conclusion:

Really they were quite impossible, impossible people inhabiting an impossible country. But if this cocksure young man imagined that she, who had lived so long in India, could be taken in so easily, he was very wrong. She said shortly, “Rather sudden, wasn’t it? Besides I don’t see why it should have stopped you working.” (215)

Apart from the obvious racial slur, it points to the lack of sympathy and compassion of the class of sahibs and memsahibs for the members of the working class.

Ravi becomes aghast and he chooses not to remain silent: “It was not sudden. My father-in-law had been dying on his feet for several months.” (216) Ravi’s terse reply makes the memsahib feel uncomfortable: “It was part of something that was new, new attitudes of people in a changing country to which she never intended to be reconciled. Impertinence, she thought ...”(216). Markandaya very subtly depicts the presumptions of the English memsahib as she tries to deny the subaltern, Ravi, any kind of agency.

Ravi himself knows that his craftsmanship as a tailor is not as perfect as that of his father-in-law. When he is berated by an Indian customer, he submits to her abuse. Moreover, she does not pay him. He returns home with empty pockets and a load of anger. The English memsahib paid him in full even though she found him impertinent to her in his behaviour. Ravi knows that he is losing customer after customer and his bad days have become worse. Gradually Ravi becomes disgusted by the profession he inherits from his father-in-law, thinks seriously of changing his profession, and decides to seek Damodar’s advice on possible options.

Ravi meets Damodar after a long time – he is amazed to see the change that comes to Damodar’s life during these years: “Ravi wondered in passing how Damodar’s ownership of what was almost a landmark could have remained unknown to him. ... Since being summoned he has passed and repassed the house several times, hardly able to believe that Damodar owned it” (250-251). While his conversation with Damodar is on he is offered drinks in a way unfamiliar to him: “Damodar clapped for the bearer and the man came up with a load of bottles and tumblers. There had been nothing before; no

sherbet, not even a jug of iced water. On a tray with the drinks were betel leaves and twists of tobacco. Joss sticks glowed in the window embrasures”(254). Damodar’s life style resembles that of sahibs and memsahibs. The underworld lifts Damodar and many others like him to this height, creating a class of people, whose ideology is very different from those of all other classes of people in the society.

After hearing Ravi’s lamentation about the insurmountable problems in maintaining his family and his willingness to do something with him, Damodar advises Ravi: “Go back to your village. It’s more your size, you’re not fit for anything else” (252). Damodar’s advice irritates Ravi and he expresses his hatred for the village:

The village, what do you know about it? It’s not fit for cattle, not even the sort of cattle you think I am. I know, I was born there, I tell you anyone who survives it is twice the man you are, yes, even a man like you that’s climbed to the top. You know nothing.” (252)

But what Damodar says to Ravi gives an image of the city and the treachery of the city on his past life:

Maybe not... But I know what a city’s like. I have been scavenging in it since I was so high, ever since they found me crawling on a garbage heap and threw me right back on to it. Well, I’ve got by. It drags the bloody entrails out of you before you do but I’ve done it. Now I’m at the top, and I don’t want any little runt like you telling me what the slime at the bottom’s like. (253)

The Damodars have to stick to the city for their survival – to find out the ways to fulfil *their* hopes and aspirations. Having pity on Ravi, Damodar offers him a job – a job resting on the exploitation of the poor: “... corner the grain market ... not all that difficult ... people have to eat, lakhs to be made ...” (255). Damodar’s words stun Ravi and begin to reverberate in his mind, and he goes down to the street. A clash of poverty and conscience – poverty and morality holds him back from accepting Damodar’s offer:

What held him back? Had respectability entered his soul, smirched it with the shoddy morality of a hypocritical society? Slough it off, join hands with Damodar. But they were dirty hands, hands that grew rich by squeezing people’s

throats. People like him. People like his wife who stood two hours each day in a line outside the grain shop, a line that lengthened daily as the shortage grew. When the lines were really long the money would come rolling in. Not peanuts, Damodar wasn't interested in peanuts: real money. All he had to do was to get in on Damodar's side, before the government pegs came down, while the money was still totting up. Get rich and get out.

He could not do it. (256)

Markandaya shows that conscience and morality prevail at least for the time being. Ravi wants money, an enormous amount of money, not by squeezing the poor people's throats. But one cannot live on conscience and morality alone. Ravi becomes furious and restless – poverty makes him wild with anger. In a fit of temper he even beats his beloved wife Nalini who leaves with her children without informing him where she has gone. The mother-in-law's abuses infuriate him so much that in his anger he rapes her. On one hand Markandaya shows how poverty cannot always kill conscience and morality, but on the other, she describes how it can make one behave like a beast.

Ravi brings back Nalini and his children from his sister-in-law's house and he feels a sense of relief and wants to begin everything anew. He manages a new additional job of hemming sheets of cloths for a hospital, and the additional earnings give him some relief. He works harder and harder, and very often he and Nalini are engrossed in working with their household budget to keep pace with house rent and food bills and other expenditure.

Then comes the greatest shock to them – death of their eldest child, the only son Raju, death from meningitis, without adequate treatment because of their poverty. Markandaya creates two touching conversations – one between Nalini and Ravi and the other between Raju and his father Ravi just before Raju breathes his last:

'He's no better,' she said worriedly, indicating the sleeping child. 'I think a doctor ...'

'A doctor', he cried. 'What are we, memsahibs or something to send for a doctor for every ache and pain? Will you pay his bill? Five rupees before he even steps out of his house!' 'I know,' Nalini's lips began trembling 'but it may be serious. I ...'

‘We’ll see when he wakes,’ said Ravi. ‘Don’t drive me to distraction. I’ve said, we’ll see when he wakes,’ and he flung out of the house. ... The doctor came and examined the child. ...He rebuked them, sharply, for not calling him earlier, pondered on whether to move the child to hospital but decided against it, wrote out a prescription and left. (270)

As Ravi watched over his sick son, Raju opened his eyes asked:

‘Do you still love me?’

‘Of course my son. I always have, I always will. Do you have to ask?’ (271)

Raju’s death leaves Ravi heartbroken and mentally devastated. Meanwhile his business further deteriorates and makes him feel the brunt of poverty once again.

His conscience and sense of morality begin to prick him:

No more blocks and restraints. No more loyalties and responsibilities for he had none. Neither to the land nor to the people nor to their society nor to society’s betraying ramshackle codes. Only one thing: to renew the oath he had taken on the lives of his children to gain them their rights; and this time to keep it. (274)

With his new resolution Ravi runs to Damodar:

‘I’ve come,’ he said simply to Damodar. ‘And this time it’s anything.’

‘Anything,’ said Damodar, ‘Are you fit for anything?’

‘I beg you,’ said Ravi, ‘I beg you, do not desert me now. Whatever you say, anything. ...’ (274)

Poverty makes Ravi compromise with his conscience. But he is greatly disappointed and humiliated when Damodar says to him: “Now you are empty. No heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts. Something’s been at them.” (274) Damodar “began to laugh, a high sharp ugly laughter” (274).

In the afternoon Ravi sees a crowd slowly growing and then marching on the street. Out of curiosity Ravi joins the crowd without knowing to where and for what they are marching. From the slogans raised by some of the marchers he comes to know that it is a hunger march: “Rice today, rice. Rice today, rice.” (276) They reach a shed, a godown supposed to store rice, guarded by a lone watchman, and break into it: “Revealed within

was a vast granary, stacked high with pile upon pile of gunny bags. Upon this the mob cast itself, plucking, tearing, stabbing at the bulging sacks until the grain began to flow.” (277) Ravi “almost believed he could hear the rustling of the grain as it poured from the sacks although he was too far behind to see.” (277) He tries to make his way to the front to collect “his share before the place was picked clean,” (277) thinking that “it was his right, his children’s right.” (277) Ravi becomes obstinate and ignores what Kannan, the blacksmith, poorer than him, roars at him:

Ravi! Ravi you fool! Keep away, this is nothing to do with you, this crime, none of your business, work of madmen...

Ravi, keep out! ...The rice is for all, this way is wrong, this way the innocent suffer! (278)

Ravi shouts at Kannan: “They have already suffered!” (278)

But the police drive away the raiders before Ravi can help himself. He runs away and finds himself with another crowd, a mob, going to attack and break an upper class shop where the nobs, the wealthy persons go for shopping. Some of the mob asks Ravi to join in the attack. When the stones begin falling Ravi cries bewildered with a brick in his hand, “But there is nothing here. ... No rice, no grain, only what the nobs want” (280). ““What difference does that make, you fool,” a rough voice answered. ‘We want what the nobs want’” (280)! Ravi immediately perceives the insensibility of such an attack and he withdraws from the mob without throwing the brick. Thus this novel shows how poverty leads to a clash of ideologies—a conflict between right and wrong—and indicates at the end that poverty may drive someone over the edge, even lend him a voice but without much effect.

Coolie

In *Coolie* (1936) Mulk Raj Anand tries to represent the predicament of the downtrodden subaltern. The story of a young boy’s struggle to earn a decent living amidst indifferent people in impersonal cities, covers the confusion, the hurt, the anger, the grim resolve as well as weary acceptance that are part of the common man’s everyday experience. The novel presents the consciousness of Munoo, the subaltern, as he moves through life working at different jobs till he is defeated by life into an early grave. There is no

subaltern resistance in action—the workers' strike at the mill is undermined by communal strife engineered by the management—and the end result is death and suffering, or at least loss of livelihoods for some of them. What emerges in this novel is that the story gets told by the other side. The common man's view, however undermined, is presented in the novel.

Anand's novel *Coolie*, set in pre-independence India in the 1930s, documents proletarian misery and wretchedness, indicative of the complexities of the class system, which turns out to be no less an evil than the caste system. In *Coolie* some facets of pre-independence India are seen through the curious eyes of a poor naive fourteen year old orphan Munoo, from a remote village in the Kangra hills, where he leads a carefree life climbing trees, playing with the village boys. Soon he is forced to begin a journey which takes him to towns and cities, away from his home, to Mumbai and Shimla, working long and hard as household servant, factory helper, coolie and rickshaw puller. By describing Munoo's journey Anand shows an India of pre-Partition days, an India which cannot be visualized by an average Indian now, exposing the grim fate of the masses during that period.

Munoo's idyllic life is abruptly cut short and his fight for survival begins, when he is forced to step out of his village and enters a materialistic world of the towns and the cities. Though a high caste Rajput, a Kshatriya (belonging to the warrior caste) by birth, his sufferings are no less acute than those of untouchable Bakha, who appears in Anand's previous novel, *Untouchable*.

For the underprivileged class, suffering seems to be a legacy, an inheritance, which is passed from one generation to the next like the stamp of caste. Munoo's parents are ruined by the landlord and usury system, and what Munoo inherited from them is their impoverishment, and the memory of his mother's tragic life:

He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father's five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and the harvests bad. And he knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar, to support a young brother-in-law and a child in arms. (*Coolie* 2-3)

Munoo's memories of his parents make him realize the possible hazards that might befall his life as well. This is an example of class exploitation - exploitation of a lower class by an upper class, by taking advantage of the prevailing feudal system. In a way, feudalism is akin to casteism, for it *economically* suppresses a section of the people and makes them struggle for their survival. Anand asserts that the underprivileged and the exploited section of the people cannot raise a voice of protest like the untouchables. Suppression and oppression are inherent, directly or indirectly, in the class ideology that exists in India.

Hardship makes Munoo follow his uncle Daya Ram to Sham Nagar, a nearby town, to look for work in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a sub accountant at the Imperial Bank. Poverty is at the root of Munoo's tragedy. He is put into Babu Nathoo Ram's house as a domestic servant by his bullying uncle who appropriates his wages, where he is often abused with violent invectives and insults by the Babu's insensitive wife for the slightest folly. Her abuses constantly remind him of his low social position:

He realized finally his position in this world. He was to be slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten, though as yet it had not come to that. He felt sad; lonely. (31)

He had to eat on his hands, being considered too low in status to be allowed to eat off the utensils. The insult stung him. He could hardly swallow his food. (32) Munoo is exploited as well as oppressed – exploited by his own uncle, and oppressed by Babu's family which belongs to a social class, higher than that of Munoo. Munoo's feelings resemble those of Bakha, and it appears that there is little difference between the social position of Munoo and that of Bakha, though one is a low-caste untouchable and the other a high-caste Hindu.

It appears that the caste and class systems have similar effects on social behaviour. While food is *thrown* at Bakha, Munoo is *served on his hands*, considering him undeserving to have proper plates to eat. Munoo comes to realise that all this happens because of money:

‘Money is everything’, his uncle had said on the day of his journey to the town.
‘Money is, indeed, everything’, Munoo now thought, and his mind dwelt for the

first time on the difference between himself, the poor boy, and his masters, the rich people, between all the poor people in his village and Jay Singh's father, the landlord.(55)

In the complexities of class relations rich-poor relation is the most important, and it is comparable to Marx's class relation. Contemplating on his low position in society as a domestic servant, and ruminating on the kind of treatment meted out to him, Munoo reflects thus:

I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and Varma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The Babus are like the Sahib-logs, and all servants look alike: there must only be two kinds of people in the world, the rich and the poor. (55-56)

Munoo equates the Indian Babus to the British Sahib-logs, indicating colonial influence on the behaviour of some Indians.

Munoo conviction that social position is determined not by caste alone - it is only money that matters, which can overcome even caste barriers - becomes deeper in his mind. Through the character of Munoo, Anand has expressed his view that for the proletariat caste does not matter.

Munoo's dilemma is that he is unable to express his hatred and anger for his tormentors. His failure to rebel is rooted in his inferior social position that has weakened him physically as well as mentally to revolt against injustice. Munoo has never been considered a part of his master's family and hence forbidden to play with his children. When his innocent mind fails to obey the order and negligently bites his master's daughter while playing, he has to pay a heavy price for it. The furious Babu slaps him hard with his thin hands and kicks him with his black boots until it makes him sweat and then with a thick stick hits him blow after blow, which startles Munoo with hate and humiliation:

The boy's soul surged up in rebellion and hate, a hate of which he had not thought himself capable. He was startled. But he dared not revolt. (59)

The reaction of the touched man to Bakha's fault and the reaction of Babu to Munoo's fault have no difference in nature, although one is for caste prejudice and the other for class prejudice. Sometimes it is difficult to say which one is more prominent in social behaviour.

While in Babu Nathoo Ram's house as a servant, Munoo realizes that the caste system is no longer relevant; it is the class system based on economic status that controls the society. His hunger for money becomes more acute, and his urge for raising his class status becomes more dominant. However, he does not know what to do or where to go. Ultimately, to end his miseries at Babu Nathoo Ram's house, he decides to run away, aimlessly and without any destination, and boards a train where he meets a man Prabha Dayal who was once a *coolie*, but now a Seth, the owner of a pickle factory at Daulatpur, and is in partnership with Ganpat Seth.

Prabha who succeeds in raising his class status feels compassion for Munoo and gives him employment in the pickle factory. But, Prabha himself finds it impossible to maintain his newly acquired social status as a Seth because of the complexities of the class system. His partner Ganpat's conspiracy leaves Prabha mentally and economically broken. Ultimately, he decides to go back to the hills with his family.

Prabha Dayal's story asserts that climbing the class ladder is not an easy task; it is a thorny path because of the complexities of class ideologies.

With the help of an elephant-driver of a circus party, Munoo manages a free train ride from Daulatpur to Bombay. On their way to Bombay the elephant - driver warns him:

The bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam ... You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe. (152)

In no time, the elephant-driver's warning comes true. Munoo's illusion of a rich, benevolent city soon becomes blurred in its murky atmosphere. Emerging from Victoria Terminus station he finds himself in the city of his dream—"strange, hybrid, complex, cosmopolitan" (152). Munoo had high hopes on this new place, where he wanted to earn enough and, if possible, go beyond the Black Waters. What he sees and finds in Bombay is one of his horrible experiences in life:

‘So even here the coolies sleep in the streets!’ he suddenly realized, and the memory of the words of the coolie who had said that money was strewn about the streets of Bombay sounded falsely hollow in his brain. (155)

The very first day in the city Munoo comes to realize that even if he has the money he needs to buy a cool drink, he does not have enough to buy the social position to share it with the rich sitting on chairs. Unaware of such kind of class gradation, Munoo enters a rich man’s restaurant and asks for a cool drink of soda. The manager sternly instructs him to sit on the floor and then gives him the frothing drink:

The sharp, cool, sweetish taste of the soda water tingled in Munoo’s mouth and brought tears of acid into his eyes. He would have liked to have sipped it slowly and enjoyed the full flavour of the drink in comfort. But he was nervous and feeling extremely guilty for having intruded into the rich man’s world. So he gulped the water down as fast as he could. And, placing the glass in a corner, he made to go. (157)

Munoo feels humiliated although he pays for the drink. The ambience of the place as well as the manager’s attitude makes him feel like an intruder begging for something.

The poverty and suffering in the streets of the city against the backdrop of tall and swanky buildings is indicative of the existence of two contrasting worlds-the world of the rich and that of the poor. On one such street where coolies sleep at night, Munoo meets the peasant Hari and his family and with Hari’s help he manages a coolie’s job in Sir George White Cotton Mill. Munoo, with lot of hope, joins Hari and his family as they proceed towards their working place.

His experience at the Mill opens up a different world to him. The Mill where Munoo, Hari and other coolies work together symbolize the degrading domination and exploitation of the Indian proletariat by British imperialists. The labourers, including wives and children are forced to work for long hours in barbaric conditions for nominal wages. Working at the mills, Munoo is overwhelmed by the din and rattle of the machinery and gets claustrophobic: “they gave him the feeling of being shut in a cage....He felt alone and isolated. He felt he would go mad with the din” (185). Feelings

of severe despondency and dejection envelop Munoo as he reflects: "I would like to die. It was better to be dead. Yes, better to be dead, because this town has turned out wrong" (189). The mill shows the inhospitable conditions under which workers are forced to work. It also is a reflection of the imperialist ideology of exploitation of the natives for the colonizer's own economic benefits.

At times however, the other side of Bombay flashes in Munoo's mind:

The visions of the gay bazaars with their mixed populations of superior Sahibs and rich merchants and poor men, the pictures of gigantic, wonderful houses in the town, of the tall houses in the workers' colony, the view even of the factory in which he was enclosed, cast the glamour of the strange, as yet unknown, about him. The illusion gathered force from the sound of the money the Chimta Sahib had fixed as his pay, more money than he had ever earned, from the feel of all the desirable things....But these were secret wishes, secret hopes, not to be spoiled by looking at. (190)

In the meantime he enjoys the sights of the city and not being able to buy anything, he would "caress them in his heart...with the warm hope that one day he would be able to possess them" (209). However, Munoo realizes that there is no end to proletariat's struggle. He cannot revolt and dare to usurp the system because the proletariat like him are too poor, too burdened with numerous problems to rise and fight against injustice with courage and confidence. That, however, does not mean that he is not aware of the unfairness and injustice meted out to some people.

Life becomes complicated for the coolies as politics enters the Mill. The leftist Red Flag Union incites the exploited workers to go on strike. While such unionism is an instrument of protest against oppression and exploitation, the employers have their own instrument to thwart such protests. To foil the strike the employers instigate a bloody Hindu-Muslim communal riot which robs many workers of their livelihood, and even their lives. This is the 'divide and rule policy' which the imperialists successfully apply wherever they go, and this policy is a part of imperialist ideology. Munoo somehow escapes the turmoil, but he gets lost in the city of Bombay. While fleeing, he is knocked down by a car belonging to one Mrs. Mainwaring, a lady, residing in Shimla. Kind and

sympathetic Mrs. Mainwaring takes Munoo to Shimla with her, calls a doctor to treat him whenever he is ill. Munoo serves Mrs. Mainwaring as her personal assistant (servant) as well as a coolie for her rickshaw. However, Munoo experiences pride and a feeling of superiority for working as a personal servant of a *memsahib*. But, even then, he has to struggle as a coolie and a rickshaw puller till he dies a premature death. Munoo's journey full of woes, miseries, frustration, suppression, oppression and exploitation, comes to end. Munoo's dream of becoming rich enough to change his future dies with him.

Unlike his earlier novel, *Untouchable*, where he endeavours to provide a solution to the problem of caste exploitation, Anand does not provide any solution in *Coolie* to prevent class exploitation of the proletariat. This indicates Anand's feeling that class exploitation is a greater and more complex evil than caste exploitation, and that no simple solution to eradicate class exploitation seems to be available.

Rich Like Us

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) is a novel combining history and politics. Its setting spreading over a period of forty years from mid-nineteen thirties to mid-nineteen seventies focusing on political turbulence that grips India from time to time. However, the main focus of the novel is on the socio-political ethos of India during the period (25 June 1975 – 21 March 1977) of so-called State of Emergency proclaimed by the government to stall the prevailing political unrest in India. The author highlights the social tension created by the Emergency and describes how the very basis of the ideology of democracy is threatened by implementation of an ideology which seems to be based on personal whims of a class of people controlling the power.

Sahgal portrays on one hand the India of the rich, the westernized upper class, the ruling elite comprising the bureaucrats and the politicians, and on the other, the India of the subalterns, the poor and the unprivileged, who have been denied their rightful claims with abrogation of their rights after more than twenty five years of independence.

During the Emergency period the weak and the poor are made the target for implementation of some of the programmes. Sahgal in her novel depicts the experience of the weak and the poor as forcible sterilization was implemented on them. The males are forcibly castrated or vasectomised and the females tied with the tubes, creating horror and panic among the weak and the poor who are the main targets for implementation of this programme. The New Entrepreneur wives assemble in a suite in the Intercontinental arranged by the bureaucrat Ravi, an ardent supporter of Emergency, with free supply of coffee and snacks to discuss their plan. Nishi takes the lead in the discussion to prepare an action plan to make the Emergency a success. They finally decide to work on the sterilization programme and begin action with their household maids and servants who are told that “it was either vasectomy or dismissal until it came to Kumar,” an old servant who resists. It was left to Rose the Englishwoman to point out “This man... is your father’s age. Would you drag your father off to a vasectomy camp?” (*Rich Like Us* 97). When Nishi pounces upon an armless beggar next, Rose has to tell her that the man is already incapacitated.

The views of Rose and Nishi are diametrically opposite – Nishi sees no wrong in the process completely overlooking the agony of those who suffer. But Rose feels that logic, conscience and compassion bear no meaning to these ladies, they are blinded by their unreasonable enthusiasm, and their whole plan seems ridiculous, mainly because of the nature of its execution. It is surprising that Rose, coming from a different land with different culture and language can appreciate the feelings, agonies and sufferings of the downtrodden in another land. She is described in the novel as coming from a humble blue-collar family of England, and has experience of the pre-independence days in British India in the wake of the freedom movement when people from all walks of life mingle together in the prayer meetings organized by Gandhi’s followers – “rich men, poor men, beggar men, even thieves, all sorts and classes of Hindus and Muslims collected daily in a brown and white blur.” (142) Rose notices the change that has come to the society. She can see erosion of Gandhian values and ideology and degradation of humanity in modern India.

The handless “panting beggar, regaining his breath after combat, raised one stump of an arm in a shaky salute to Rose”(98) declaring silently that things like gratitude are still

alive among those who suffer. And at the same time Rose's compassion for the beggar signifies that humanity still survives in certain sections of the society. The handless salute leaves her thinking about his hands, his struggle to live like a human being. For those overzealous ladies exhibiting their support to the Prime Minister, finer human qualities like gratitude, compassion have no meaning at all.

Rose later discovers that the handless beggar takes shelter at night in the tomb which can be seen from her bedroom window. Since then Rose frequently comes down to meet the beggar in the evening near the tomb and feeds him, and talks with Sonali, an I.A.S. officer who has been removed from her job for not agreeing to go against the rules during the Emergency, about getting a pair of artificial hands fitted for him. The handless beggar is a representative of a class of people born to suffer at the hands of his own breed, born to be suppressed and punished when they speak of their rightful claims. There is no end to his nightmares. One night the handless beggar witnesses a ghastly scene – the scene of Rose's murder by Dev's men by throwing her body into the well near the tomb. Dev gets his step- mother murdered so that no one is left to claim the property of his father who is now paralyzed and invalid. Dev takes this extreme step when he comes to know that Rose has been informed by the Bank about his forgery of cheques for withdrawing huge amount from his father's account and that she has tried to get legal help in the matter. Even the Bank is afraid of taking any action against Dev because of his stature and proximity to the ministers. Rose's death is presented as suicide.

Sonali gets a pair of artificial hands ready for the beggar and comes to meet him after Rose's murder in the tomb. Sonali recollects:

After a while I saw him, part of the moss-covered wall, curved foetus-like against it, and I called out softly saying I had a message for him. He woke with a frightened jerk and came towards me shivering and muttering, moving with his sideways crawl. I sat down facing him and I knew what Rose had meant when she said, a man should at least be able to wipe away his own tears. Helpless as he was, I felt as helpless, not knowing whether I should reach out and wipe them with my handkerchief. Social etiquette does not cover such situations. But I was glad I

could tell him about the artificial hands I had arranged for him and that I would take him in a day or two to get them fitted. (290)

Sonali is very much disturbed to see a human being inside the tomb in such a condition in the same place where the Devs and Nishis and Ravis live in abundance and luxury as described in the novel. Sonali is horrified to know the details of the ghastly spectacle of the murder and decides to take him away from the tomb for fear of Dev's men killing him as well to eliminate any witness of Rose's murder. She is equally horrified when the beggar describes on their way away from the tomb how his hands were chopped off by the landlord's men when the villagers agitated for not getting proper share of the rice they produced.

No protest or agitation by these people against injustice and oppression can succeed because of their poverty and helplessness, because of the alliance between the ruling class and the class of the rich and the powerful. There are no laws to protect tenants, sharecropping arrangements, and land records are manipulated by the landlords to their advantage:

“It's the landlord's raj in my village, record or no record.”

“Didn't any political party help you to get your due?”

“They are all landlords at heart.”(292)

After so many years of independence landlordism and bourgeoisie-proletariat clash still exist in different forms, with no end to the suffering of the weak and the poor. The minister's comment in the meeting organized for inauguration of Dev's Happyola Factory that “the weak and the poor, the oppressed, the repressed and the suppressed were the first concern of the government” during the Emergency seems totally off the mark as oppression and suppression of the weak and voiceless by those in power take the ugliest form during this period(49). Branding as ‘troublemakers’, ‘left adventurists’ or ‘right reactionaries’, innocent people are harassed and tortured and put in jail without any evidence against them (49).

These episodes in the novel express Sahgal's deep concern for the suffering and the oppression of the subalterns at the hands of the privileged and the rich and the powerful.

They expose a reality that exists even after more than twenty five years of a democratic independent India. Nobody wants to know what the dominated section wants. The welfare schemes of the government are imposed on them by cynical officials without finding out their real needs.

English, August

Upamanyu Chatterjee in *English, August* (1988) examines the world of bureaucrats and the difference between the urban and rural spheres. *English, August* also expresses subaltern consciousness of the author when the story of the novel is narrated in a satirical way. The story of the novel revolves around a 24 year old young Indian Administrative Service officer Agastya Sen who is posted as a trainee in an interior town, Madna, of independent India. Born and brought up in urban India, having no knowledge of what rural India is he now feels like a foreigner in his own country. While narrating the life of Agastya in Madna the author draws a picture of the poor and the weak in independent India.

Agastya gradually discovers a new India hitherto unknown to him. He also comes to know, although disinterested to know, from his seniors in the cadre how these I.A.S. officers run the administration. He also gradually comes to know of various types of gradation and corruption that have infiltrated the administrative system. Agastya fails to digest what his senior K.N. Srivastav, Collector and District Magistrate of Madna, says to him:

As an I.A.S. officer you can't mix with everybody. It's not a job, bhai, where what you do after office is entirely your own private business, you're also responsible to Government in the after-hours. (*English, August* 81)

Agastya becomes aware of a type of classification in the society he has stepped into. It reminds one of the colonizers separating themselves from the colonized in the colonial days; now the administrators are separating themselves from the administered in the post-colonial days.

The author depicts how the boss uses his subordinates for doing his personal work. When Kumar, the Superintendent of Police, and Agastya board the train to Delhi, Kumar goes on giving instructions to his subordinate policemen:

Kumar instructed them until the train moved, and even after, largely about himself and his personal matters....And ring them up and remind them to meet me at the station, hayn, we'll reach at about seven tomorrow morning . . . and remind them to book me on the night train to Kanpur, and if reservations are not available, then *any* train . . . You tell Bakhtiar that the fridge is still giving trouble and he should send another man soon, otherwise I'll give *him* trouble . . . that tailor will come with two shirts, tell him I'll pay him when I return — otherwise you pay him . . . Then he impressed his identity on the coach attendant, thereby ensuring for the two of them excellent blankets for the night.(141-142)

This is a kind of subaltern exploitation, and it defines a boss-subordinate relationship.

It is also a common practice that the government *malis* (gardeners) are used to maintain the private gardens of the officers:

Some of the families (of IAS officers) tried agriculture too, but, of course, none of their sweat ever dropped on the soil. The gardeners on the municipality pay roll were summoned to the house and made to plant paddy and potatoes and cabbage. Some Collectors who did not carry the belief in the dignity of office to any pompous extreme, even made good money on the sale of rice ('In a developing country we must never waste food,' they explained). (53)

This is another instance how the officers exploit their subordinates to serve their own purpose.

Although Mrs K.N. Srivastav declares that "these servants are impossible." (58), many of the officers' household servants are peons from the office. It seems to be a kind of subaltern exploitation again:

Many peons, officially government servants, did the domestic chores of successive Collectors. (58)

But many of these government servant-turned domestic servants take it as an opportunity to advance their own interests:

Many coveted the job, preferring to clean the shit of the progeny of a Collector than to shuttle files in an office. Their priorities made sense, for in the office the Collector was a million rungs away, but at home while they were bringing him his shoes or taking away his slippers, they were close enough to grovel for their desires, for a little land, for the expedition of a government loan, for a peon's post in some office for their sons. Their fathers and grandfathers had done much the same ... (58)

This is how this class of people get stuck at a certain step in the ladder generation after generation.

As if taking favours from subordinates is part of the perks of the job, Kumar, the SP, informs Agastya that they can easily accept favours from the public:

In government, you'll realize this over the years, Sen, there's nothing such as absolute honesty, there are only degrees of dishonesty. All officers are more or less dishonest — some are like our engineers, they get away with lakhs, some are like me, who won't say no when someone gives them a video for the weekend, others are subtler, they won't pay for the daily trunk call to Hyderabad to talk to their wives and children. Only degrees of dishonesty. But, of course, honesty does not mean efficiency. (138)

Agastya learns about the degrees of corruption ranging from accepting petty favours to diverting development funds into another quarter. He gets a chance to see things from the perspective of the common man, when he is transferred to a rural area called Jompanna, which was mainly a tribal territory.

Before he leaves for Jompanna, Agastya is told by his superior that there was unhappiness amongst the politicians over his posting: "Half the population of the block of Jompanna is tribal, try and help them as much as you can. The main fear of the politicians there is that you will...." He learns further that

The tribals there have been ignored for decades, primarily because most of them stayed in those inaccessible hill forests. The money that was pushed into Jompanna was directed by the politicians to benefit the non-tribal population of the plains, you know, primary schools, dispensaries, roads, wells, bank loans — in return the same politicians were voted back to power in the local political body, the Block Panchayat. Your sabhapati, for instance, has been President of that Block Panchayat for almost thirty years. (239-240)

Agastya realizes:

Jompanna was Indian oblivion ; life for most was slow and unheroic there. No First Page politician had ever gone there, and the visits of those who had, had been quinquennial, to make the promises and get the votes. (248)

The ignorant people are not even aware of their rights and what to demand from the administration. Finally a woman comes to inform Agastya about the lack of drinking water:

A tribal woman, thirtyfiveish...in front of him in his office... She came from Chipanthi, she said....There was only one well in the area, and it had dried up, it needed to be cleaned, they had complained to the earlier officer, but no one had done anything. (253)

When Agastya visited Chipanthi to sort out the water issue he met there a man called Rao, around fifty, from Telengana who was a Naxalite. He informed Agastya that not only minor officials but also respectable officers took advantage of the innocence of these tribal women and informed about the Gandhi incident. Rao said to Agastya:

At Pirtana the new Assistant Conservator of Forests, too. A man called Gandhi, even he abused the honour of the tribal woman who cooked for him. The men of her village were very angry. They visited Gandhi three nights ago, and surprised them both. In revenge, and as punishment, they cut off his arms. (259)

Rao had no sympathy for Gandhi and tried to justify the tribals' action. Rao and his friends said:

“These tribals needed help to think...because they felt anchorless in the new world. Look at the way they struggle for water. You have seen how simple they are” (260).

Agastya is forced to retort:

Don't keep calling them simple, your attitude is condescending. They are not merely simple, they are also extremely violent, something you seem to have encouraged. Don't say they are simple, say they are different, that's all. (260)

Violence appears to be a part of the artillery of the inarticulate people. However savage they may appear to the outsiders, they can fight back in the only way they know. Prior to his coming to Jompanna he was told by the former collector of the area, Panda, that “you're lucky to be a BDO in Jompanna. It'll be a wonderfully new world...As BDO you'll see grassroots development...in a developing country. You'll implement all those programmes that you merely read about in the papers, Rural Development, Tribal Welfare, Family Welfare, it's a tremendous opportunity to learn” (188).

Instead of development, he finds an area left to God's own mercy, where people are not even sure of meeting their daily needs. As an administrator, Agastya learns the difference between brilliant paper schemes for rural development and the reality of their non-implementation, caught as they are between time-bound utilization constraints on one hand and gross corruption at different levels on the other.

The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) presents the silent conflict between classes in the person of the judge and his cook in the Indian town of Kalimpong near Darjeeling. The judge who has been joined by his granddaughter Sai, is presented as an anglophile who demands all the creature comforts including afternoon tea accompanied by cakes as well as salty items like cheese straws and so on. When his tea comes with only biscuits he wants to know what is going on and Sai tells him that the baker had gone for his daughter's wedding. The judge's response is typical: “how dare he go for a wedding? Is that the way to run a business” (3)? He next falls upon the cook for not preparing cakes

at home simply because there was no oil or gas for the stoves. The matter is resolved with the cook “hurrying out with the leftover chocolate pudding warmed on the fire in a frying pan.” The judge ate it and his “face took on an expression of grudging pudding contentment” (3-4). The judge expects and gets what he wants.

But things change when insurgents connected with the Gorkha Liberation Movement, raid their home and the judge is ordered by them to prepare tea and lay the table:

The judge found himself in the kitchen where he had never been....Wailing and pleading for his life the cook fried pakoras....the judge fumbled for a tablecloth....(6)

After the departure of the young men with two loaded trunks filled with supplies and the old rusty guns belonging to the judge, the cook started wailing “what will become of us? The judge asks him to shut up, thinking: “These damn servants born and brought up to scream” (8). The judge’s reaction is not simple as he tries to control his rage and humiliation. Both Sai and the cook who had averted their eyes from the judge, continued to look away for fear of retribution from him.

The cook is sent to the police station the next day and to his surprise the police treat the matter seriously. They arrive in the afternoon in several jeeps. When the police asks “Any threats made, sir”? the cook replies promptly: “They asked him to set the table and bring tea.” The police break into laughter and the cook is ordered out of the room by the judge. While the cook may not have reported the judge’s humiliation out of malice, the effect is still the same. Moreover, they were as curious as the militants and “took the opportunity to have a good nosy look around....And like the robbers, they were not impressed by what they saw” (11-12). It was as if the house and its secrets were being exposed to the outside world a second time.

Despite the reports of the robbers being insurgents, the police refused to leave the cook and his residence out of the investigation: “Everyone knew that it was the servants when it came to robbery, more often than not” (12) . At the cook’s hut the police turn

everything upside down and even read his letters from his son in America. Watching them Sai realizes with embarrassment:

The police had exposed the cook's poverty...that his dignity had no basis; they ruined the facade and threw it in his face. (18)

Sai recalls meeting him for the first time nine years ago when she got the impression of a "poverty stricken man growing into an ancient at fast forward. Compressed childhood, lingering old age" (19). Coming back to the present Sai sees that there is age in his temperament...his clothes, his kitchen, his voice, his face..." (19). As they bent to collect his belongings, the cook replaced the letters in their right envelopes. "One day he would return them to Biju and his son would have a record of his journey and feel a sense of pride and achievement" (20). For him this was enough and all he could do.

The judge, we learn, is tight fisted in reality and does not believe in paying his servants properly. The cook has to continue on the same salary more or less for years. When he asks for a raise the judge has this to say: "All your expenses are paid for—housing, clothing, food, medicines. This is extra" (54). He is made to feel that his meagre salary is a bonus instead of hard earned wages. The judge fails to consider that his cook might have needs or even desires to fulfil.

As if in response to the judge's meanness, the cook starts a side business—brewing liquor from millet called chhang and selling it to a small restaurant:

It filled him with pride to see men sitting in the steam and smoke with their bamboo mugs full....The cook urged his customers to keep some chhang near their beds in case they felt thirsty at night, claiming it gave strength after illness. (54-55)

Apart from brewing and selling home made liquor, the cook also acted as a channel for sale of subsidized Army liquor in the black market. For this he received a small amount of money.

In his own way the cook had been spreading stories about the judge's eminence and contribution to society with embellishments about his background and wealth. He had created this fiction to lend a better stature to the judge and by extension to himself. He does this because "He had found out that there was nothing so awful as being in the

service of a family you couldn't be proud of, that let you down, showed you up, and made you into a fool" (55). There was serious rivalry amongst the servants over stories of their employers' kindness and the cook has to resort to lies:

Mainly about the past, since the present could too easily be picked apart. He fanned a rumour about the judge's lost glory....A great statesman...a wealthy landowner who gave his family property away, a freedom fighter who left a position of immense power in court....A man so inspiring but brought to his knees, to austerity and philosophy, by sorrow at his wife's death. (56)

The cook had so warmed up to his story that he started believing it himself. Instead of depending on his employer's reputation and status, he gives his employer a spurious reputation. His word of mouth had spread so far that people took it as true. Here we have a case of history from below narrating not the truth about subaltern lives but lending stature and gloss to a petty employer whom he knew to be mean and unkind, in a grotesque reversal of facts.

If the cook has problems with the judge, the judge looks upon the cook as a representative of all that he detests in humanity. The cook is poor, uneducated and submissive and accepts the ill treatment of others as his due. This is seen in his acceptance of the unjust treatment the police of the police towards him. Even when the judge's dog disappears, the cook takes the blame and allows the judge to vent his anger on him. It is as if he expects no better from a man he had served for so long. His resignation to circumstances reflects his class consciousness: right or wrong his employer has the authority over to be angry. He expects no less and suffers for that. Underlying such an attitude is his opinion of those in higher class and position. It is as if one cannot expect any better from them. He appears to be ashamed of the judge's lack of affluence and perversely feels that his image could do with what is known in other contexts as a 'makeover.' This is why he indulges in all that fanciful story-telling about the judge: the reality would have sounded mean and pathetic. Moreover, knowing that stories of the present could be easily checked, he decides to weave a 'glorious' past for the judge.

There is also the story of the Gorkha Liberation Army demanding a separate state for themselves. While the men fighting for this cause are looked upon cynically by others because of the methods they adopt—their members had robbed the judge of his guns and other goods—Gyan, Sai's tutor, recognizes his friends amongst the protestors and sees the sincerity on their faces as they march ahead. Gyan follows them:

As he floated through the market, Gyan had a feeling of history being wrought, its wheels churning under him, for the men were behaving as if they were being featured in a documentary of war, and Gyan could not help but look on the scene already from the angle of nostalgia, the position of a revolutionary. But then he was pulled out of the feeling, by the...worried shopkeepers watching....Then he shouted along with the crowd, and the very mingling of his voice with largeness and lustiness seemed to create a relevancy, an affirmation he'd never felt before, and he was pulled back into the making of history. (157)

Gyan battles with his troubled thoughts as he wonders whether the patriotism is false, maybe just frustration with “the leaders harnessing the natural irritations and disdain of adolescence for cynical ends; for their own hope in attaining the same power as government officials held now” (157). But as the men continue to shout he sees that they were sincere, “they felt a lack of justice”(157). They come to a stop in front of the police station where the policemen had locked themselves inside. Some people start addressing the gathering, a man gets up and speaks:

In 1947 the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslims Pakistan...leaving everything taken care of....Except us....The Nepalis of India....We are laborers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers....We are kept at the level of servants. We fought on behalf of the British for two hundred years. We fought in World War One....We fought in World War II. In Europe, Syria, Persia, Malaya and Burma. Where would they be without the courage of our people? (158)

After reminding the people about the Gorkhas' contribution in the past, the speaker turns to the contemporary times:

We are soldiers, loyal, brave. India or England they never had cause to doubt our loyalty....But we are Gorkhas We are soldiers....And have we been rewarded??

Have we been given compensation?? Are we given respect?? (158)

He adds, “Can we compete for jobs when they have already been promised to others”? Importuning the people to join the struggle he continues:

We must fight, brothers and sisters, to manage our own affairs. We must unite under the banner of the GNLFF....We will build hospitals and schools. We will provide jobs for our sons. We will give dignity to our daughters....We will defend our own homeland. This is where we were born, where our parents were born, where our grandparents were born. We will run our own affairs in our own language. (159)

This episode can be contrasted with the cook’s construction of the judge’s history. If the cook’s putting together a history for the judge was out of vanity and a perverse pleasure in giving his master added stature, the narrative of the Gorkha activists is a serious attempt to fill in the gap left by the master narrative of the country. They are giving voice to their struggle and recalling their services to the country and its people amidst perceived injustice.

Later in the evening as Gyan meets his friends in a small canteen, he is affected by the fervour and submits “to the compelling pull of history” (160). He tells them about his great grandfather and his great uncles who fought alongside the British: “And do you think they got the same pension as the English of equal rank? They fought to death, but did they even earn the same salary” (160)? As the anger of his friends joined his, it reminded them of all the indignities and injustices, in the past and in the present:

It suddenly became clear why he had no money and no real job had come his way....Most of all he realized why his father’s meekness infuriated him....For a moment all the different pretences he had indulged in, the shames he had suffered, the future that would not accept him—all these things joined together to form a single truth. (160)

While earlier Gyan had looked on as an outsider, he now joins his friends in feeling the same for their cause. They are charged up with anger at the past injustices as they resolve to fight with greater energy in the present. Gyan feels liberated enough to tell people the

truth about themselves at the same time as he decides to do things to change the course of their lives.

Thus Desai's novel studies subalternity at different levels, from domestic resistance to armed political militancy as each party tries to tell the story from his perspective. In the case of the cook, we see instances when he lapses into the abject subordination, imposed on him by his lowly position and allows the judge to get away with hitting him. At others, he indulges in presenting a constructed history of the judge's family to the world as he thinks there is nothing much to talk about in reality. In the case of Gyan and the other young men fighting for their own state it is a serious attempt to present the truth and seek redresses for past damages.

The White Tiger

Like *Coolie*, Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) also revolves around the life of a poor man Balram, a rickshaw puller's son, from the village of Laxmangargh, who is brought up in independent modern India. Balram's story described in the novel is contained in the form of a letter he writes to the Chinese Prime Minister who is visiting Bangalore, narrating the circumstances which lead him to become an entrepreneur from very humble beginning.

Like Munoo in *Coolie*, initially Balram also has to adopt servitude for his livelihood. There are many similarities in the feelings of Munoo and Balram about poverty. Munoo believes that there are only two classes of people – the rich and the poor whereas Balram thinks:

In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up. (*The White Tiger* 64)

This realization expresses Balram's deep hatred towards the *Men with Big Bellies*. Balaram's perception of his country is very clear in his mind: "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness." (14) This perception always motivates Balram to get out of darkness as the author describes in the novel, and it is a marked

difference in the attitude of Balram from that of Munoo. With this motivation Balram becomes a successful entrepreneur while Munoo perishes prematurely.

Balram himself is conscious that he is a half-educated person and he blames the society, his family for his deprivation of good education: “Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling.” (10) Balram’s anguish over the prevailing conditions is apparent from his words and it begins when he is taken out of school by his parents and put to work as a servant in a teashop – to break coals and wipe tables under the scolding of the teashop owner. But this does not deter and diminish his avidity and endeavour to uplift his class and economic status. Balram recalls in his letter: “Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave.” (41) Balram nurses from his childhood a desire, a dream to discover a new world where he can earn wealth, dignity and status. This shows how different is Balram from Bakha or Munoo in his attitude of life.

Balram’s dream drives him to learn driving and he is recruited by a rich upper class landlord of Laxmangarh as a chauffeur of a Honda City to be used by his son Ashok and daughter-in-law Pinky who have come from America to their home land for a few months. But this does not make Balram free from servitude as he is assigned to do many other odd jobs for the landlord, Ashok, Pinky Madam and their two Pomeranian dogs. Although being a chauffeur in a highly sophisticated upper class family turns out to be no escape from servitude, it comes to him as a great opportunity to enter into a new world which eventually changes his life drastically, especially when Ashok and Pinky Madam move to New Delhi and take him with them. In Delhi, Balram is exposed to the world of corruption, especially in the government. He sees how Ashok becomes increasingly involved in bribing government officials for the benefit of the family coal business.

From behind the wheel of the Honda City Balram sees the different faces of Delhi – the big buildings, the shopping Malls, the slums, the crippling traffic jams which make the contrast between the poor and the wealthy more evident to him. Balram’s anguish

becomes more and more acute as he sees Delhi better and better. Seeing servitude in Delhi he writes to the Chinese Prime Minister in his letter:

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent - as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude ... (176)

Balram expresses how the majority of the population are being suppressed and exploited in modern India by a handful of privileged and powerful people.

New Delhi, the heart of modern India, teaches him a new morality, not comparable with traditional morality, which, he believes, can only make one a successful man in India. Balram rationalizes this morality in his pursuit to get to the top. He has no regret or guilty feeling when he murders his master Ashok and escapes to a free world. Neither does he feel for the murder of some of his family members by Ashok's men, as he suspects, to take revenge on him. Rampant corruption in all spheres makes him discard old traditional morality and frame his own moral values. Balram overhears a conversation that takes place in the car he is driving between Ashok and his Dhanbad-based brother Mukesh who says:

The minister wants more. It's election time. Every time there's election, we hand out cash. Usually to both sides, but this time the government is going to win for sure. The opposition is in total mess. So we just have to pay off the government, which is good for us. I'll come with you the first time, but it is a lot of money, and you may have to go a second and third time too. And there are a couple of bureaucrats we have to grease. Get it? (239-240)

Balram records this in his letter to the Chinese Premier to expose how the elections which are the basis of democracy in India generate corruption in the country.

Ashok and Pinky move to Gurgaon expecting it to be a better place to live in:

Today it's the *modernist* suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls - each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her. (122)

...it's the most American part of the city. (121)

The striking heterogeneity of Delhi, both Old and New, is depicted in a part of Balram's letter:

Delhi is the capital of not one but *two* countries – two Indias. The Light and the Darkness both flow in to Delhi. Gurgaon where Mr Ashok lived is the bright, modern end of the city, and this place, Old Delhi, is the other end. Full of things that the modern world forgot all about – rickshaws, old stone buildings,..., the great second hand book market of Darya Ganj...it is one of the wonders of the world. Tens of thousands of dirty, rotting, blackened books on every subject ... (are) heaped on the pavement ... (251-252)

Balram realizes that India cannot discard the old and the outdated and modernization cannot sweep it completely.

Balram's experiences in the heart of India enable him to see the many faces of India and her elite from close quarters. He recalls how, one night, Pinky Madam, takes the wheel in a drunken condition and then the car runs over a street urchin, probably killing the child, and later for fear of a police case Ashok's family pressurizes Balaram to confess that the accident occurs due to him and make a confessionary statement:

I, Balram Hawai, ... do make the following statement of my free will and intention: That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects, on the night of January 23rd this year. That I then panicked and refused to fulfil my obligations to the injured party or parties...That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.... (168)

Surprisingly nobody comes forward to register a police case regarding the accident and no compensation is claimed by anybody. But the lie remains, a blatant lie framed by an upper class lady for her own safety with possible victimization of an innocent person. Balram records this in his letter to the Chinese Premier and remarks: "What I am describing to you here is what happens to drivers in Delhi every day, sir." (169) Balram's indignation for upper class exploitation of the helpless poor increases day by day and his urge to get out of the cage deepens further.

Balram's obstinate determination to get to the top cuts off the bond with his family in the village and he becomes more and more selfish every day. He now does not like to keep

any contact with his family in the village and he discontinues sending money to his grandmother. But one day his nephew arrives from the village to collect money for his grandmother and to learn driving from him. One day a trip to the zoo with his nephew makes his determination to break the cage stronger when he sees a white tiger, a rare creature “that gets born only once every generation in the jungle” (276) remains captivated in a cage:

I watched him walk behind the bamboo bars. ... He was walking in the same line, again and again, - from one end of the bamboo bars to the other, then turning around and repeating it over, at exactly the same pace, like a thing under a spell. He was hypnotizing himself by walking like this – that was the only way he could tolerate this cage. Then the thing behind the bamboo bars stopped moving. It turned its face to my face. The tiger’s eyes met my eyes. ... All at once the tiger vanished. (276-277)

In the restlessness of the caged white tiger Balram sees a physical manifestation of his inner self. When the tiger vanishes Balram has a great revelation that it is possible to escape from the cage. The sight of the helpless caged white tiger makes Balram faint near the cage. Balram’s restlessness for being himself caged in this world is expressed in the letter his nephew Dharam writes in the evening, on the insistence of Balram, to the grandmother describing their trip to the zoo:

Uncle’s eyes were open now. ‘Are you all right Uncle?’ I asked. He took my hand and he said, ‘I am sorry, I am sorry.’ I asked, ‘Sorry for what?’ And he said, ‘I can’t live the rest of my life in a cage. ...’ (278)

Even in a semi-conscious state of mind Balram’s thought revolves around getting freedom – freedom from what he considers himself to be living in a cage which seems to be possible as the white tiger vanishes from the cage.

The name *White Tiger* gets associated with Balram’s name in his school days:

The inspector pointed his cane straight at me, ‘You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?’

I thought about it and said: ‘The white tiger.’ ‘That’s what you are in this jungle.’
(55)

Since that day Balaram identifies himself with the white tiger, and he loves to use this new name in place of Balram with pride and satisfaction whenever he gets an opportunity. He even uses this name in the letter he writes to the Chinese Premier, “*From the desk of: ‘The White Tiger’, A Thinking Man And an entrepreneur*” (5) So seeing a white tiger caged mercilessly in the zoo, he is greatly shocked and faints.

But the white tiger in the cage awakens his inner white tiger and emboldens his desire to get out of darkness and triumph in this world by any means however atrocious and gruesome it might be. This psychological upheaval in his mind makes him plan to eliminate Ashok whom he considers to be the final hurdle in his way from darkness to light. Balram murders Ashok in the most gruesome way with an empty whisky bottle while driving Honda City with Ashok carrying a fat bag of money for the purpose of bribing someone:

I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains. It’s a good strong bottle, Johnnie Walker Black – well worth its resale value. The stunned body fell into the mud. A hissing sound came out of its lips, like wind escaping from a tyre....
(285)

The white tiger in Balram is aroused and becomes ferocious and kills the prey in the most ghastly manner. This is the way how he gets himself liberated from the cage and proceeds to Bangalore, the South Indian counterpart of Gurgaon, in search of Light with the fat bag of money that was carried by Ashok for bribing.

Balram gets a ‘start-up’ (501) with his taxi service business by bribing the police with a small part of Ashok’s money. Balram, now he calls himself Ashok Sharma, narrates in his letter to the Chinese Premier his success story with pride and satisfaction:

Now the start-up has grown into a big business. We have got sixteen drivers who work in shifts with twenty six vehicles. Yes, it’s true: a few hundred thousand rupees of someone else’s money, and a lot of hard work, can make magic happen in this country. ... See for yourself at my website. See my motto: ‘We Drive

Technology Forward.” In *English!* See the photos of my fleet: twenty-six shining new Toyota Qualises, all fully air-conditioned for the summer months, all contracted out to famous technology companies. If you like my SUVs, if you want your call-centre boys and girls driven home in style, just click where it says:

Contact Ashok Sharma Now!

Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. (501-502)

This part of the letter expresses Balram’s relief, satisfaction and pride for being successful to get out of the cage. It does not matter for him by what means he attains this freedom.

After fulfilment of his dream and establishing himself as an entrepreneur Balram becomes his own man. He maintains a cordial relationship with his employees; he is full of sympathy and compassion for their difficulties. Unlike his onetime master Ashok he goes to meet the parents of the boy killed by one of his taxis and pays adequate compensation to them. Satisfaction in life makes Balram a normal man. It is human psychology.

But Balram never regrets for what he has done to move from poverty to prosperity, from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom:

I’ll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master’s throat.

I’ll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a *minute*, what it means not to be a servant. (521)

For Balram any action taken to attain freedom is justifiable. He is a different personality during his struggle towards freedom from darkness.

The Hungry Tide

Although this novel has been discussed in different contexts, it is of seminal importance in this chapter mapping postcolonial subalternities. Only that aspect of the novel will be discussed here. The novel tries to present subaltern consciousness as well as a slice of subaltern history. It depicts the lives of people residing in the Sundarban deltas and

offers a view of life and living from their perspective as they continue with danger dogging their footsteps. As one of the characters says, that is the only life they knew, living and striving against the odds in the tide country. Anything else would be alien to them.

The novel shows the firm belief of the residents of the tide country in the protection of Bob Bibi the goddess guarding those waters. For these people death is an everyday reality when somebody is taken. For them Nature is both an awesome force which changes shape on a daily basis, and something to be negotiated. Their struggle, their faith and their resilience presents a philosophy not found elsewhere. They also believe that man and animals can live together without one encroaching on the other's space. That the wild animals and crocodiles prey on human beings as they gather food is something they have had to live with. But the question they ask is should human beings be exterminated from animal habitats simply to protect the wild animals? This issue gains central space in connection with the methods adopted by the West Bengal government to remove human presence from the island of Morichjhapi in 1979 by starving them or crushing them to death.

The novel tells the story of the Morichjhapi massacre by government forces, through the initially misplaced and then found journal of the retired schoolmaster Nirmal, whose sympathies lay with the desperate people who had settled there. Nirmal hastily records things during the last couple of days leading to the killing of thousands of people on the Morichjhapi island by official agencies. He thought he might perish with them and wanted their story told to the world. The government had presented them as criminals and gangsters intent on ruining the reserved forests. The people who had sought refuge in India after the Bangla Desh war of 1971, had been treated as unwanted baggage by the Indian Government and placed in detention camp like setups in the remote forests of Dandyakaranya, far away from the Sundarban deltas.

After staying in these camps with restrictions of movement imposed upon them amidst local hostility, some people managed to escape and make the long journey to the unoccupied Sundarban island of Morichjhapi which they had earmarked as the location for their permanent settlement. They were hounded and hunted during the journey and

after their arrival on the island. However, these people numbering several thousand refused to listen to government diktats and leave the place.

The Government which had declared the area a reserve forest for the tigers, refused to listen to the people and tried to remove them dead or alive. The High Court had to order the government to resume food supplies to the island after it had tried to starve the residents to death for a week. Finally plans were made to eliminate the settlers and they were declared as criminals hiding there. Nirmal Bose's diary tells their truth—that they were ordinary men and women trying to live in conditions they knew best, without any harmful intent. Most of them perished in that massacre, but this novel narrates their story recorded by someone sharing their point of view and believing in their cause, against layers of obfuscating official rhetoric.

Thus this chapter brings together different kinds and levels of subaltern consciousness and positions. In most cases it is the poor, the destitute, the marginalized or the oppressed whose perceptions are presented from their positions and not some imaginary position attributed to them. If at times it is a critique of the oppression by the dominant upper castes and classes, at others is about their misconceptions, lack of awareness or web of lies hiding the truth, which these narratives try to present. At others we find ironic portrayals of people and social groups who cannot see beyond their own needs and desires, and at the same time presume to know what others think and feel or what is good for them. This chapter covers a range of subalternities from the tragic to the ironically comic as seen in the novels discussed above. What emerges is not one subaltern position of history from below but histories from multiple perspectives.