
Caste, Humiliation, and the Architecture of Masculine Response: Precarious Manhood in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*

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ABSTRACT:

The recent Indian fiction literary scene has generated a considerable body of male protagonists whose social marginalization behaviour is characterized by complex patterns of gendered behaviour. However, the current literature on the subject has mainly used R. W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory in combination with postcolonial theories, thus neglecting the psychological processes through which social precariousness is channeled into specific masculine behaviours. This paper uses the Precarious Manhood Theory (Vandello & Bosson) in combination with affect theory to examine the caste- and class-based humiliation effects on two canonical Indian novels: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010). By close reading and comparative text analysis, it is shown that both protagonists, Balram Halwai and Ayyan Mani, are subject to the same conditions of masculine precariousness, but their humiliation affectively processed in opposite manners: openly aggressive in Balram and secretly passive-aggressive in Ayyan. This opposition cannot be explained by social position alone but by the complex interplay of memory, affective potential, and masculine assertion channels in each protagonist's specific institutional setting. By heavily relying on textual evidence from both novels, this paper contributes to postcolonial masculinity studies by showing that precarious manhood in caste-stratified societies needs context-specific theoretical approaches that consider the structural determinants of behavioural possibilities. This paper further extends the Precarious Manhood Theory from its original Euro-American experimental psychology settings into postcolonial literary studies, exemplifying how institutional access conditions the architecture of masculine restorative action.

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Introduction

In Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, the protagonist Balram Halwai describes the predicament of India's poor with a telling metaphor:

"The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel" (147).

This opening line sets the narrative's preeminent conflict: the problem of how and why a man living under systemic oppression might eventually decide to use violence to achieve liberation. By the novel's end, Balram kills his employer, embezzles his money, and reinvents himself as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. His masculinity, systematically unravelled by the degradations of servitude, is violently restored through an act of ultimate transgression. In Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*, two years later, another oppressed Indian man faces a similar topography of masculine impossibility. Ayyan Mani, a Dalit clerical assistant at Mumbai's elite Institute of Theory and Research, lives daily with the intellectual erasure made possible through upper-caste oppression. But Ayyan's reaction to this humiliation differs from Balram's in every way: instead of violence, there is deception, as he constructs an elaborate hoax in which he poses his ten-year-old son as a mathematical prodigy, thereby manipulating the very same institutional power structures that have excluded him. While Balram goes out in a blaze of fury, Ayyan goes in with a plan.

These two novels, appearing in quick succession and both featuring male protagonists living in the context of caste and class structures in modern-day India, form a problem that has not been adequately addressed by current scholarship on Indian masculinity. Both men live through what

can be termed as a condition of masculine precarity the social condition in which the signs of masculinity (autonomy, respect, agency, visibility) are systematically withheld. Both men are subjected to repeated experiences of public humiliation that threaten their very status as men. However, their behavioural reactions to these experiences could hardly be more different, with one tending towards overt violence and the other towards covert manipulation. This difference calls for theoretical explanation. What is the basis for the difference in the form of the masculine response to precarity? Why does humiliation lead to violence in one case and to passive-aggression in the other?

This study argues that the difference between the two masculine behavioural reactions in the novels can be explained by the application of the theory of Precarious Manhood Theory (PMT), a theory developed by the social psychologists Joseph A. Vandello and Jennifer K. Bosson to account for the defensive and restorative nature of masculine behaviour when it is threatened. However, PMT, as originally formulated, needs to be contextualized in a rather large way when it is applied to postcolonial Indian fiction. PMT was developed from experimental psychological research that was conducted largely in a North American context, in which the experience of masculine precarity is largely conceptualized as a problem of gender performance and peer evaluation. In the two Indian novels that are considered in this study, the experience of masculine precarity is further complicated and structured by the experience of caste hierarchy, economic subjugation, and institutional exclusion not merely a threat to masculine identity but a structural condition that actively forecloses certain forms of masculine response while enabling others. Therefore, this paper seeks to develop PMT by arguing that in the caste-stratified postcolonial society, the institutional

availability of masculine assertion conditions the behavioural architecture of restorative behaviour. Balram, working within a societal framework in which physical mobility and eventual escape are structurally feasible, chooses violence as his path to masculine restoration. Ayyan, working within an institutional framework in which physical confinement and eventual escape are not feasible but in which daily performance is mandatory, chooses manipulation as his path to masculine restoration. This is a form of masculine assertion exercised from a position of apparent powerlessness.

Literature Review

In literary studies, the work of Aravind Adiga has received a great deal of scholarly attention, though comparatively little of it has focused specifically on the topic of masculinity and gender. Claire Squires' reading of *The White Tiger* has emphasized the novel's engagement with neoliberal capitalism and the rhetoric of entrepreneurship. Pramod K. Nayar has interpreted Adiga's protagonists as figures of "subaltern cosmopolitanism," caught between local marginalization and global aspiration. Alex Tickell's study of Adiga has focused on the politics of narrative voice and the unreliable narrator. While these readings are highly informative, they sublate gender to class and economic critique. The question of why Balram's escape from servitude takes the particular form it does why, that is, masculine restoration requires violence rather than theft and escape is as yet untheorized in the existing literature.

Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* has received far less critical notice, despite winning the Hindu Literary Prize and being shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. Current scholarship on the novel seems to concentrate on its satirical treatment of scientific institutions in India or its treatment of Dalit identity. Arundhati Ghosh interprets the novel as a Brahminical critique, while Sourit Bhattacharya analyses Joseph's deployment of humour to lay bare caste hierarchies. Once more, however, the gender-specific aspect of Ayyan's

behaviour his imperative to demonstrate agency, to be acknowledged as intelligent and powerful, and to prove his superiority over Brahmin scientists who underrate him is conspicuous by its absence from the critical conversation. The complex plan involving his son Adi is seen as a form of resistance or social critique, but not as a gender-specific enactment of power.

The lack of attention to the social conditions and the behavioural responses they occasion. While the theory of hegemonic masculinity might locate Balram and Ayyan as subordinated masculine subjects, the postcolonial approach might locate the historical and structural sources of their subordination, it is not equipped to account for the mechanism of humiliation leading to action, or for the fact that such action takes a different form under similar structural conditions. This is where the Precarious Manhood Theory (PMT) makes its intervention.

Precarious Manhood Theory, developed by Vandello and Bosson in a series of experimental studies from 2008, argues that manhood, unlike womanhood, is viewed cross-culturally as a precarious social condition that must be actively attained and publicly displayed, and which can be lost through failure or feminization (Vandello et al. 173). The theory is based on three main assumptions: first, manhood is an achieved status rather than ascribed status, second, masculinity is easier to lose than femininity, and third, when threatened, men will behave in ways that restore their masculine status through public displays of aggression, dominance, and fearlessness. In a groundbreaking study, Vandello and Bosson discovered that men who were experimentally threatened with a loss of their masculinity (by being asked to perform stereotypically feminine tasks) were more likely to display increased aggression and physical risk-taking than men in a control group (Bosson and Vandello 84).

Although PMT has been very productive in generating insights into phenomena such as male violence, risk-taking, and resistance to seeking medical or psychological help, its use in literary

studies, especially in the postcolonial context, has been limited. One exception is the work of Kopano Ratele on African masculinities, which contends that PMT needs to be modified to consider the intersection of racism and economic marginalization with gender to generate vulnerabilities for black men in South Africa. According to Ratele, “the conditions under which manhood is made precarious are not universal but structured by race, class, and colonial history” (237). This observation has important implications for the current study. In a caste-divided India, the precariousness of masculinity is not simply a question of gender performance but is structurally determined by one’s location in pre-existing social hierarchies. Moreover, the way masculine restoration is to be achieved is determined not simply by individual psychology but also by institutional structures that make certain behaviours possible and others impossible.

Finally, affect theory offers the necessary link between structural conditions and behavioural outcomes. Sara Ahmed’s “The Cultural Politics of Emotion” (2004) argues that emotions are not simply internal psychological events but are fundamentally relational and directed they propel individuals towards or away from objects, people, and possibilities. Importantly, Ahmed distinguishes between shame and humiliation: whereas shame may lead to withdrawal and silence, humiliation, which is externally imposed and publicly suffered, more often leads to responses that are directed outwards, whether confrontational or calculated revenge. Brian Massumi’s distinction between affect (pre-conscious, bodily intensities) and emotion (named, socially recognized feelings) Further, this distinction enables the tracing of the way the bodily experience of diminishment is converted into recognizable emotional states such as rage, resentment, and contempt that, in turn, drive specific actions. In the novels that will be studied here, humiliation is the primary effect that needs to be processed, and the manner of processing

will determine whether the protagonist will resort to violence or to manipulation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three interrelated theoretical constructs: Precarious Manhood Theory (PMT) as the primary theoretical framework, affect theory as the process through which social condition influences behavioural outcomes, and caste-class intersectionality as the postcolonial condition that shapes precarity and behavioural outcomes. A brief explication of each of these constructs is in order.

Precarious Manhood Theory (PMT) was first developed in experimental social psychology as a corrective to essentialist theories of gender identity. Vandello and Bosson sought to replace traditional notions of masculinity rooted in biology or psychological essentialism by arguing that manhood is instead “a social status that is hard won and easily lost” (Vandello & Bosson 101). This means that manhood is precarious in three ways: first, that it must be earned through specific cultural achievements or demonstrations of masculinity, not automatically conferred upon individuals when they reach maturity or reproductive age. Second, that manhood is threatened by various forms of failure, including physical weakness, emotional sensitivity, economic dependence, or association with femininity. Third, that manhood is publicly conferred and therefore publicly defended against threats through specific behaviours intended to restore one’s status as a man in society. These behaviours are generally aggressive, risk-taking, and dominance-oriented, as these are seen as universally representative of masculinity regardless of cultural background.

Crucially for the purposes of the current study, Vandello and Bosson’s research established that masculine precarity is not evenly distributed. Men whose masculinity is socially secure based on their economic status, physical strength, professional status, or cultural capital will perceive fewer threats and hence less anxiety about their gender status. Men whose masculinity

is structurally precarious based on economic precarity, physical disability, racial oppression, or other forms of social marginality live with a state of constant masculine threat. In the Indian context, caste and class determine the level of masculine precarity from which a man begins. The professional Brahmin man begins from a position of relative masculine security, whereas the servile Dalit man begins from a position of constitutive masculine threat.

Nevertheless, the original PMT model, as developed, has limitations for the current study, which are related to the application of the model to literary and postcolonial studies. The original PMT model was developed through a series of experiments conducted within a controlled environment, artificially inducing masculine threat and measuring the behavioural responses to the artificially induced threat. However, masculine precarity within the context of structural inequality such as caste, class, and gender functions differently. The threat is not artificially induced, nor is the behavioural response freely available. The behavioural response is structurally predetermined, whereas the outcomes of restorative action are potentially life changing. This study extends the PMT model by arguing that, within the context of postcolonialism, the institutional availability of masculine assertion determines the form of behavioural response to the perceived threat. Where escape is institutionally available, as with Balram, violence becomes the preferred form of behavioural response. Where escape is not institutionally available, as with Ayyan, cognitive and rhetorical manipulation become the tools for masculine restoration. Men under precarity do not freely choose their responses, they only choose from the options structurally available to them.

Finally, the caste-class intersection is the specific postcolonial context within which the above dynamics play out. Balram's masculine precarity is economic and occupational: he is trapped in the "servant class," which denies him any of the key markers of masculine autonomy (control over

work, earnings, movement, and body). However, Balram is not subject to the ritual humiliation of the Dalits because of his caste-class position as a Halwai (Middle OBC). Ayyan's masculine precarity is based on his caste-class position as a Dalit intellectual working at the Institute of Theory and Research. His job gives him economic security but denies him intellectual visibility as a Brahmin-dominated intellectual space. The difference in the sources of Balram's and Ayyan's precarity enables different masculine responses. Balram's is an economic and occupational servitude his body is owned. Therefore, reclaiming masculine agency requires physical action (escape, theft, violence). Ayyan's is a cognitive servitude his brain is dismissed. Therefore, reclaiming masculine agency requires cognitive action (outsmarting, manipulating, exposing the intellectual limits of those who think they are superior).

Methodology

This research makes use of a qualitative literary analysis methodology, with close reading as the primary method of analysis. Close reading, as a literary analysis method, is the intensive study of specific sections of a literary text with the goal of illuminating the ways in which the text's language, structure, and narrative voice create meaning. In the case of the current research, the close reading method is informed by the Precarious Manhood Theory, which means that the analysis of the literary text focuses on the aspects of the text that are related to masculine threats, affect, and behavioural responses. The comparison of the two literary works allows for the controlled analysis of the ways in which the same social factors (masculine precarity caused by caste and class systems) can lead to different behavioural responses (aggression and passive-aggression).

There are also some methodological limitations to be acknowledged. Theoretical framework (PMT) that was originally designed to be used in an experimental study of psychology to analyse texts that are not empirical data but constructed realities. The second is that I have only been able

to analyse two texts written by Indian men who write in English. The results cannot be generalized to all Indian fiction or to Indian men as a group. I can only offer a theoretical framework for understanding the interplay between caste, class, and masculine precarity.

Textual Analysis

Part I: The Sources of Masculine Precarity

Both novels create a sense of masculine precarity among their protagonists through their experiences of humiliation in institutional settings that deny them access to the primary markers of manhood. The architecture of precarity, however, is very different in both novels, reflecting the caste-class status of each of these male protagonists.

The masculine precarity of Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* is created through his status as a servant, which situates him in "The Rooster Coop," a state of entrapment that also implies the constant presence of violence. Balram says of this state,

"The coop has so many holes in it, if someone simply raised his fist and kicked against it, it would collapse" (147).

The point is that no one kicks, since family structures ensure that individuals comply with authority

"They know that if they try to escape, their families back in the village will be hunted down and beaten and burned alive" (148).

This scene discloses that Balram's precarity is not individual but collective: his masculinity is held hostage by family obligations. This means that he cannot take independent action, since he is in a web of kinship that is designed to control him. The denial of autonomy, which is the primary marker of adult masculinity, is therefore not individual but structural.

This structural emasculation is also underlined through several scenes of bodily humiliation that are part of Balram's work experiences. While working for the Stork's family in Dhanbad,

Balram is given the task of washing the family's two Pomeranian dogs, Puddles and Cuddles. The scene underscores the humiliation of this task:

As he says: "I washed Puddles and Cuddles, gave them their biscuits, and took them for a walk" (74).

The inversion of the proper order man serving animals makes Balram less than human in the social order. Significantly, the humiliation is in front of the entire household, including the Nepali servant Ram Bahadur, who later makes fun of Balram:

"You'll be cleaning the dogs for the rest of your life, I guess" (83).

The public nature of this humiliation is important in understanding its impact on Balram's masculinity. Balram is not just doing undesirable work; he is being treated as someone who does not have the power to refuse such work.

The biggest psychological blow to Balram's masculinity happens during his stint as Mr. Ashok's driver in Delhi. One day, Balram listens in as Mr. Ashok and his girlfriend Uma talk. Uma says:

"Stupid as hell, but he is honest" (141)

As Balram recounts:

"I could not believe she said that. Stupid as hell. She had said it so casually, the way you might say, that car is red, or that house is big. Like it was a fact" (141).

The similarity to a statement of fact is important. It implies that Balram's stupidity is taken as a given and does not need justification or evidence. Balram is intellectually erased.

Most notably, Balram suffers a certain kind of masculine humiliation when he is forced to serve as a bartender while driving the politicians around in the back seat of Mr. Ashok's Honda City. The scene occurs after an assistant to a minister forces his way into the back seat of the car and requests a whiskey. Balram is forced to serve the passengers while driving

"I turned around at once and turned myself into a barman" (150). The minister's assistant comments: "This driver is very talented. Sometimes they make a mess of pouring a drink" (150).

The scene is a performance of skill, but it is a skill of servility. Balram's "talent" is that he is able to serve without being perceived as a man with presence, without being perceived as a man with dignity. Throughout the scene, the two politicians discuss Balram's employer and his finances as if he were not there. He is treated as "furniture," to use his own description (158).

These various humiliations create Balram's masculine precarity as a total condition. He has no control over his labour, his income (which is sent straight to his family), his mobility, his body, or his social recognition. All the attributes of adult masculine status: economic agency, physical autonomy, sexual access, respect are systematically denied to him. The Rooster Coop is therefore an architecture of masculine precarity that is totalizing.

In the case of Ayyan Mani in *Serious Men*, the mechanism of masculine precarity is that of institutional marginalization as an intellectual outsider within an elite scientific institution that simultaneously employs him and renders him intellectually invisible. Unlike Balram, Ayyan has economic security. He is a personal assistant to Arvind Acharya, the Director of the Institute of Theory and Research. However, he is a Dalit, and he is never recognized as an intellectual peer, even though he has an intellect that far surpasses that of the Brahmin scientists who patronize him.

The early pages of the book reveal Ayyan's observational capabilities. He stands at Worli Sea Face and surveys the crowd. The text describes his observational nature:

"He often told Oja, 'If you stare long enough at serious people, they will begin to appear comical'" (4).

The sentence itself describes two things at one time: Ayyan's observational nature and his need

to prove his superiority over people who were in a better position than he was. The text describes how Ayyan has the intellectual abilities that transcend those of his employers. He can identify grammatical mistakes in their writing and can fulfil their requirements before they even ask. He can also comprehend complex scientific ideas that he hears in Acharya's office. His abilities, however, do not get recognized. Acharya talks about science and other issues in front of his colleagues, and Ayyan is present but remains a silent spectator. The strongest evidence of Ayyan's masculine insecurity is revealed in his daily experience of caste-based spatial segregation. The text describes Ayyan's daily commute from the BDD chawl to the Institute:

"Ayyan made his way home down the broken, cobbled ways which ran between the stout buildings. Men and women, hundreds of them, just stood around. As if something bad had happened" (6).

The place is depicted as a world where masculinity has failed. The men in the chawl have "vacant eyes and a resigned calm," and their unemployment has taken away their reason for being. Ayyan is different from these people. He is employed and educated and has the capabilities. His caste, however, makes him a part of this world of failed masculinity in the eyes of the upper-class scientists.

Joseph makes the cognitive aspect of Ayyan's exclusion explicit in a scene in which Ayyan puts up a false quote in the "Thought for the Day" board in Acharya's office. The quote reads:

"Reservations for the low castes in colleges is a very unfair system. To compensate, let us offer the Brahmins the right to be treated as animals for 3,000 years and at the end of it let's give them a 13 per cent reservation" Vallumpuri John (93).

The false attribution and content of the quote reveal Ayyan's political understanding: he understands the nature of the caste system as a system of dehumanization and has the cognitive abilities to express that understanding. Yet he can

only do so anonymously by putting up a false name. His cognitive abilities are invisible for him to retain his job. The greatest humiliation for Ayyan is not the physical abuse he suffers but his invisibility in the system. In one scene, Acharya is in a meeting with his girlfriend Oparna, who is also a scientist at the Institute:

"She laughed when she tried to imagine Acharya giving instructions for the daily message. 'Not the Director,' he said, 'Administration.' Oparna nodded. Administration was a word everybody understood here, though nobody knew who it was or where it sat" (93-94).

Ayyan, who is standing right in front of him, is reduced to a function called "Administration" – not a person with a name, but an organizational mechanism. This, in a way, is the peculiar humiliation of caste: whereas Balram, at least, is recognized as a servant, a subordinate human being, Ayyan is not recognized at all. This, as Joseph explains, is a particularly masculine dimension of what is going on here: "Ayyan's masculinity as a husband, a father, was linked with his ability to feed his family, to command respect within his household... Outside, within the Institute, he was considered intellectually negligible... The novel shows us what goes on in his mind after a particularly dismissive encounter with Acharya: 'Ayyan wondered what it was about men like Acharya that made them so blind. They could see everything, but what was right in front of them'" (112). This sentence, in a sense, encapsulates what his main complaint is: not that he is considered inferior, but that he is considered irrelevant.

Both protagonists, then, are experiencing a form of masculine precarity, albeit in different ways. Balram's precarity is somatic and economic – his body, his labour, are owned by others; his capacity for action, his autonomy, are precluded by his family obligation and his servitude. Ayyan's precarity, on the other hand, is cognitive and institutional – his intellect, his brain, are present, but his capacity for action, his autonomy, are

precluded by his exclusion from elite knowledge production based on his caste.

Part II: The Affective Processing of Humiliation

If the first movement defined what threatens masculinity in each work, then the second movement investigates the affective way these threats are experienced. The key point here, based on Ahmed's work, is that the same social reality (of humiliation) can be linked to different emotions depending on the position from which the subject views the world and the available narrative frameworks for interpreting pain.

For Balram, humiliation is always processed as rage, a hot, immediate, and outwardly focused emotion that yearns for confrontation. Adiga's narrative style contributes to the processing of humiliation as rage by making the entire narrative a retrospective letter to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier. This style ensures that every episode of humiliation is related after the fact of Balram's revenge, so that the humiliation can be layered with the triumph. The narrative is steeped in what can only be called vengeful glee. When Balram recounts the episode of washing the dogs, he does not indulge in self-pitying emotions but celebrates his own ingenuity at finally replacing Ram Persad as the main driver: "I slapped him too. I was servant number one from now on in this household" (86). The memory of humiliation is juxtaposed with the memory of revenge.

This processing of humiliation as rage structures Balram's thoughts throughout the novel. When Balram overhears Uma calling him "stupid as hell," he immediately steals Mr. Ashok's car without permission and drives around Delhi, dressed as the maharaja, with dark glasses:

"I drove the car out of the apartment block, dressed like a maharaja, with the dark glasses on" (143).

This is not the passive, suffering Balram of the narrative's opening chapters, but the active, transgressive Balram, whose rage does not

simmer, but erupts into immediate, if limited, rebellion.

But the most important aspect of Balram's narrative is that he deliberately maintains the rage as a form of preparation. This becomes clear from the narrative when Balram reflects on the murder of Mr. Ashok:

I could have left him and gone to work somewhere else there are many buildings in Delhi with expensive cars... But I chose to stay. And why? Because I was waiting for a chance... I was waiting for him to give me the key to the suitcase. (187)

The phrase "waiting for a chance" shows Balram's rage is not just impulsive. He has made his decision to use violence. He is just waiting for the right moment to do so. This shows that humiliation does not make Balram think or feel conflicted. Instead, it makes him think very clearly. The world owes him a correction, and he is the one to do it.

Humiliation is processed in *Serious Men* not through rage but through resentment and contempt, which are cooler emotions that are compatible with strategic manipulation over time but not explosive confrontation. The narrative technique of Joseph is very different from that of Adiga: whereas Adiga uses a first-person retrospective narration that allows the narrator to reinterpret his past considering his ultimate success, *Serious Men* uses third-person narration with close focalization into Ayyan's consciousness. This means that we are privy to Ayyan's humiliations as they happen, without the buffer of retrospective triumph.

The effect that is central to Ayyan's processing of humiliation is irony, a kind of emotional detachment that allows Ayyan to endure humiliation without taking it inside. When Ayyan puts up false quotations on the blackboard, this is represented not as an act of rage but of private amusement: "He pretended to look into a piece of paper and wrote a fresh thought" (93). The word "pretended" is important Ayyan is always

pretending, always acting, always keeping up an ironic detachment between his public self (obedient assistant) and his private self (superior intelligence that despises his employers). This irony keeps humiliation from becoming rage. Instead of acting out, Ayyan's response to humiliation is to cultivate his superiority in secret.

The most telling moment of Ayyan's affective processing is when he is watching Acharya try to write an email with writer's block:

"Ayyan observed with silent mirth how the great man sat staring at the computer screen, how he typed a few words and deleted them, typed again and deleted again. Acharya could not even write a simple email without agony. And yet this man, this mediocre mind, stood at the pinnacle of Indian science." (117)

The phrase "silent mirth" is the perfect description of Ayyan's affective tone. Where Balram might experience anger at the injustice of it all, Ayyan experiences mirth. This is not to say that the injustice is any less great. Indeed, it might be greater to be surrounded by someone less intelligent than yourself in a position that you should rightfully hold. However, Ayyan's affective processing causes him to experience the situation as one of mirth rather than anger. This has several different impacts on the actions that he takes.

The complex plan to make Adi a genius is a direct result of Ayyan's affective processing. The way that the idea for the plan comes to Ayyan is explained in the following way:

"It occurred to Ayyan that evening, as he was walking home, that if he could somehow make Adi appear extraordinary, then all of them Acharya, Oparna, Nambodri, all of them would have to acknowledge that a Dalit child could possess genius. And that would be his revenge." (134)

The temporal element is also worth noting: the idea occurs to him "as he was walking home." This is not an angry man seeking to act on his anger immediately. Rather, it is a calculating man

who is strategic and patient. The word "revenge" is used, but it is a revenge that will take months or years to achieve, requiring complex planning and performance. This is the affective signature of resentment: it does not go away but builds up over time, nor does it seek to achieve confrontation but reversal.

One of the key elements of the novel is that Ayyan finds joy in the process of deception. When journalists arrive to interview Adi, Ayyan stages the whole performance: "Ayyan had prepared him well. The boy knew exactly what to say, exactly when to pause, exactly when to look confused" (186).

The key element is that when the performance is discovered to have been a ruse and is exposed, Ayyan does not lament but continues to assert himself. In the final scenes of the novel, when the truth about Adi is revealed and riots are taking place at the Institute, Ayyan sits with his son and instructs him on how to bend spoons using sleight of hand rather than psychic ability

"This is the last time we do something like this. OK?' They looked at each other for a moment. And how they laughed" (309).

The laughter is significant it demonstrates the ironic nature of Ayyan's affective response. He does not internalize the exposure as a measure of his inadequacy. Instead, he continues to hold the perspective that the world is absurd, and his manipulations were an attempt to make the absurdity explicit.

The contrast between Balram's rage and Ayyan's resentment can be seen as a function of their structural roles. Balram's servitude is temporary in the sense that he can leave. He can physically leave the organization. He does. This possibility of exit makes the dramatic confrontation a viable choice. Ayyan's role, on the other hand, offers no such exit. He must go back to the Institute every day. He must perform the deference every day. He is locked into the same social structure. Under those circumstances, hot rage would be self-destructive. Resentment and irony are functional

affects. They allow the individual to survive the humiliation without internalizing it as justified or exploding into a pattern of behaviour that would guarantee the individual's own destruction.

Part III: Behavioural Response and Masculine Restoration

The third and final movement of the analysis is the examination of how the affective response is acted upon as behavioural response, and how each of the protagonists works to restore his masculine identity. Here the divergence between the two works is most striking. Balram uses violence, Ayyan uses manipulation.

Balram's killing of Mr. Ashok is the paradigmatic example of masculine restoration by aggression. Vandello & Bosson's study has shown that when masculine status is threatened, males are more likely to indulge in physical aggression or risky/dominance-displaying behaviour because these acts serve as a public affirmation of masculinity. In this case, Balram's killing of Mr. Ashok is a perfect fit because it is a physical aggression (the most extreme type), risky (he risks being caught and executed), and dominance-displaying (the reversal of master-servant roles is absolute).

What is interesting from a theory point of view is that Balram's aggression was not just impulsive; it was extremely premeditated. Adiga has carefully designed the run-up to the killing as a series of extremely premeditated preparations:

"I had already marked the place where I would dig a hole and bury it. Then I would stuff the hole with granite pieces that lay around the building site. I would insert a thin long wick into that pit of power. A wick that would trail me to what was to have been the foyer of the community hall. And then Balram... would light the wick" (189)

This is not the murder but Balram's other plan: to blow up the community hall that Powerhouse Ramakrishnan is building in his home village, part of another revenge scenario. The relevant point is that Balram's thinking is again in terms of explosions, destruction, and dramatic irreversible

acts. The murder is again consistent with this pattern of thinking. This is not a crime of passion but a crime of masculine logic: What will most thoroughly reverse my subordination? Killing my master and taking his money.

Adiga makes it clear that Balram knows that this is an act of becoming male. The previous quoted passage is again relevant: "I thought, now is the time to be a man" (192). This sentence makes clear that Balram knows that this is not a crime but an initiation into maleness. Before this, he was a "half-baked man," as Mr. Ashok once called him. After this, he is a complete man. This murder is not just revenge but also a rite of passage.

The murder also allows for a complete transformation of self. Having fled to Bangalore, Balram takes on a new name: Ashok Sharma, and becomes a successful entrepreneur owning a taxi business. The final pages of the novel describe his success: "I have twenty-six Toyota Qualisys. I am a self-taught entrepreneur. That's the best kind there is, trust me" (6). The transformation from servant to entrepreneur is that of a complete recovery of masculine status: he is now in control of his own labour, commands other men (his drivers), is wealthy, and is socially respectable. All of this was accomplished through one single act of irreversible violence.

Nevertheless, Adiga undercuts the triumphalism of this narrative in his own way by implying that Balram's restoration as a masculine hero is imperfect and troubled. Throughout the novel, presented as a letter to the Chinese Premier, Balram asserts his own moral integrity: "I'll never say I made a mistake" (195). But what about the form of the novel the compulsive telling, the need to explain, to justify? What about the fact that Balram feels compelled to tell this story at all? To whom is he really addressing it? The reference to Wen Jiabao is obviously a fiction; the true referent is himself. The novel shows us that masculine hero restoration through violence leaves a psychic after-effect that must be constantly narratively contained. Balram is a free

man, but he is still obsessed with the man he killed.

In *Serious Men*, however, masculine restoration assumes a completely different character. For Ayyan, it is not possible to kill Acharya; it is suicidal for Ayyan because he will be arrested on the spot and imprisoned for the rest of his life without any chance of escape or reconstruction. In Ayyan's case, masculine restoration assumes the character of a kind of cognitive dominance. He regains his masculine superiority by outsmarting the Brahmins; he creates a reality wherein he is the puppet master, and the Brahmins are the puppets.

The scheme of the genius assumes the character of masculine restoration precisely because it reverses the hierarchy wherein Ayyan is daily humiliated by the Brahmins. In the Institute, the Brahmins are treated like master's because they possess intellectual superiority by virtue of caste; Ayyan is treated like a fool because he does not possess intellectual capacity. Ayyan creates Adi as a genius; by doing so, he forces the Brahmins to acknowledge Dalit intellectual capacity. More important, however, is the fact that he forces them to do so while he knows that Adi is not a genius; in that sense, he retains cognitive dominance over them even when they acknowledge Adi's intellectual capacity. When Acharya expresses wonder at Adi's intellectual capacity and invite the boy to the Institute, Ayyan feels that he has triumphed over the Brahmins; "Acharya had fallen for it. The great Arvind Acharya had fallen for it" (198).

In fact, Joseph organizes the scheme along a series of levels that become increasingly complex. Ayyan first plants a false newspaper story that Adi has won a science contest in Switzerland. Then Ayyan coaches Adi in the recitation of prime numbers that Ayyan has memorized for him. Then Ayyan creates a series of false recordings that purport to capture Adi's voice explaining his scientific insights. The scheme thus becomes a constant demonstration of Ayyan's intelligence capacity not in spite of being a fraud, but because

it is a fraud. Only a superior intelligence could concoct such a complex scheme.

The key point here is that Ayyan derives aesthetic pleasure from the scheme. When the reporters arrive to interview Adi, Ayyan watches from a distance: "He observed with immense satisfaction as the journalists wrote down everything the boy said" (201). The word "satisfaction" is important here; this is the emotional payoff for passive-aggressive masculine restoration. It is different from the immediate gratification that Balram derives from violence.

The other key point here is that Joseph also shows the limits of passive-aggressive masculine restoration. In fact, the scheme eventually fails when Deputy Director Namboodiri investigates and discovers the fraud. More devastatingly, the scheme leads to caste-based riots in which lower-caste activists, believing that Adi's genius was genuine and that the Brahmin scientists are now falsely claiming that it was a fraud, storm the Institute and attack Namboodiri and his colleagues. The violence is brutal:

"They began to beat up the astronomers with the rods. The scientists screamed in mortal fear as they had never screamed before" (307).

Ayyan, who masterminded the plot, is not physically hurt but is morally culpable for violence beyond his intent. The ending is also open to multiple interpretations. On one hand, Ayyan has emerged victorious because the Brahmins have been made to look foolish, the Institute's authority has been breached, and Ayyan himself escapes punishment. On the other hand, Ayyan's son Adi has been exposed as a charlatan, Ayyan's wife Oja is ashamed of him, and Ayyan's attempt to reclaim masculine status through trickery is ultimately flawed. The final scene of the novel, where Ayyan instructs Adi on how to bend spoons using trickery, implies that Ayyan is continuing the same cycle but leaves open to question whether Ayyan is triumphantly defiant or hopelessly trapped.

The contrast between the two endings reveals an important point about masculine restoration under precarity. Balram's restoration is successful because it is violent: he escapes servitude, accumulates wealth, and rebuilds his identity. However, the cost is great because Balram is also psychologically damaged. The novel itself implies that Balram's need to continually narrate the murder is a sign of his incomplete recovery. Ayyan's restoration is unsuccessful because his trickery is exposed and his son is humiliated. However, Ayyan himself is psychologically unharmed because he is capable of irony and laughter. This implies that the behavioural form of masculine restoration whether violent or manipulative has important implications for the long-term effects on the psyche.

Discussion

With the parallel processes by which Balram and Ayyan navigate masculine precarity, the affective processing of humiliation, and the behavioural responses to precarity now established, the groundwork can now be laid for a more developed understanding of the concept of Precarious Manhood Theory, as it might be adapted for the postcolonial literary context.

The basic assertion of the current paper is that masculine behavioural responses to precarity are not individually chosen, because of the institutional presence or absence of restorative action. The original Vandello & Bosson PMT model indicates that men, when their masculinity is threatened, engage in restorative behavioural responses, generally aggressive or risky, as a means of reasserting their masculinity. The current analysis of the novels confirms the basic assertion of the original Vandello & Bosson model, as both Balram and Ayyan are not passive responders to masculine precarity but rather engage in behavioural responses as a means of restoring their masculinity. The difference between the restoration of masculinity for the two characters, however, cannot be explained as a product of individual psychology, as the difference is too stark, and must necessarily

be explained as a product of the institutional context.

This structural explanation is an extension of Precarious Manhood Theory. The original PMT suggests that masculine restorative actions are a product of individual psychology and immediate situational threats. The experiments that inform the original PMT measure responses to artificial threats in artificial environments with no relationship to the humiliators or the long-term outcomes of the actions. However, masculine precarity in the context of chronic structural inequality is very different. The threats are not artificial or temporary but rather constitutive of one's position. The humiliators are not strangers but rather institutional authorities with whom one must continue to interact. The responses available to the individual are further constrained by the position that one occupies.

This is an important insight that has broader implications beyond these two novels under analysis. This is that if we are to understand masculine behaviour in postcolonial contexts, we need to consider the institutional ecology of masculine precarity: "What forms of assertion are structurally available? What consequences attach to different forms of response? What resources geographic mobility, economic independence, social networks, institutional knowledge does the subordinated man possess?" These are not simply contextual factors that shape behavioural outcomes; they are "the field of behavioural possibility." A second contribution is that of affect theory's ability to link structure and action. The relevance of Sara Ahmed's contention that "emotions are not just feelings but also ways of orienting ourselves toward or away from objects and actions" is that we can understand why structurally identical situations are not affectively processed in identical ways. While Balram and Ayyan are both humiliates, humiliation is not a single emotion but an affective category that includes several possible forms: rage, shame, resentment, contempt, despair. The specific emotion that is activated in response to humiliation depends on "how the subject narrates

his humiliation to himself as an injustice that demands immediate confrontation (rage), as a temporary indignity to be endured (resignation), or as a reflection of the humiliator's moral or intellectual inferiority (contempt)."

For Balram, his humiliation is a violent injustice that shapes his orientation towards violent revenge. His narration to Wen Jiabao focuses repeatedly on the theme that he was wronged: "They stole my salary, they made me wash dogs, they treated me like furniture." The use of the passive voice in Balram's narration reflects his experience of being acted upon in the world. The desire for revenge stems from his wish to reverse the dynamic and become an actor rather than a subject. Ayyan's narration of his humiliation, in contrast, frames his experience as a manifestation of Brahmin mediocrity. His narration focuses less on what he experienced and more on what the Brahmins failed to perceive: "They could see everything, but what was right in front of them" (112). Ayyan's narration orients him towards a desire to prove his own superiority through cunning. The frames in which these narrations take place are also not freely created but are shaped by cultural scripts and available stories. Balram's narration is shaped by a long history of revolutionary violence in Indian political discourse. He references the Naxalites and Chinese communism in a positive light and frames his murder as a form of class warfare. Ayyan's narration is shaped by trickster tales in Dalit cultural memory. The figure of the cunning servant who outsmarts his master is a common figure in Indian folklore. Ayyan situates himself in this cultural memory. Balram and Ayyan are both working with cultural scripts that offer templates for how subordinated men should react to domination.

Finally, the analysis shows that masculine restoration in the postcolonial context is always incomplete and haunted. Neither Balram nor Ayyan can achieve a triumphant restoration. Balram kills his master and becomes wealthy. However, the form of the Novela compulsive narration addressed to a fictional reader may

indicate that the act of violence has left a psychic wound that must be managed. Ayyan creates a complex ruse that inverts the caste hierarchy. However, the ruse fails, his son is humiliated, and the restoration is unsustainable. Both novels end with a sense of the possibility that masculine precarity in a caste society may never be resolved on an individual level because it is a structural problem. A servant who kills his master has not ended servitude. He has simply escaped it himself. A Dalit who demonstrates his intellectual superiority has simply demonstrated the contingency of the caste system while the system itself remains in place.

This tragic dimension is key to an understanding of the novels' political implications. Both Adiga and Joseph refuse the narrative of individual bootstrap triumph that is so central to neoliberal discourse on escaping poverty. Instead, they imply that masculine restoration via aggression or manipulation is either partial or pyrrhic it may restore individual status, but it does nothing to alter the structural conditions of masculine precarity. This is probably the most important thing that the novels have to say: that masculine behaviour under precarity, no matter how dramatic or clever, is not free action but always a response to conditions not of one's making, always constrained by structural possibilities that are prior to individual will.

Conclusion

The above paper has argued that Precarious Manhood Theory, when viewed within the context of postcolonial Indian literary analysis and complemented by affect theory, offers a promising perspective for understanding disparate masculine behaviours under structurally similar conditions of precarity. By examining Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* as parallel case studies, the above analysis has shown that masculine restoration assumes different behavioural forms overt aggression vs. covert passive-aggression not based on personality differences but based on the

structural contexts within which each protagonist acts.

The paper makes a three-fold contribution. Firstly, it applies Precarious Manhood Theory from its origins in experimental psychology to literary theory. Secondly, it develops Precarious Manhood Theory for postcolonial societies by arguing that how masculine restoration is achieved depend upon institutional availability rather than choice. Finally, it applies affect theory to explain the process by which structural humiliation results in emotional orientation and subsequent action. The analysis revealed that both Balram Halwai and Ayyan Mani suffer from a deep-seated masculine precarity based upon caste and class subordination. Both characters suffer from repeated public humiliations that place their masculinity in question. The key difference between Balram and Ayyan is that Balram's precarious manhood is in the institution of domestic servitude and hence physical violence is a structurally viable means by which he can restore his masculinity since geographic relocation is a possibility. In contrast, Ayyan's precarious manhood is in a Brahmin-dominated institution of science and hence physical violence is not a viable means by which he can restore his masculinity. Instead, cognitive dominance is a viable means by which he can assert his masculinity.

The paper demonstrates that Precarious Manhood Theory, when appropriately contextualized, is an important analytical tool for understanding the construction of masculine identity in postcolonial fiction. The key insight masculine behaviour under precarity is structurally constrained rather than individually chosen has broader implications for how we read not only these two novels but recent Indian fiction. Anyone concerned with masculinity studies, postcolonial fiction, or affect theory will find in this paper a template for how interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks can be brought to bear on the complex interplay between social structure, emotionality, and representation.

The paper has shown that the question "How do men behave under precarity?" cannot be answered by psychology alone. It requires us to think about the structures that constrain individual behaviour, about history, about the ways in which individuals make sense of their subordination or dominance through the stories that they tell themselves. The *White Tiger* and *Serious Men* are both treasure troves for such a study. They both tell us that masculine identity in

contemporary India is neither essential nor freely created; rather, it is always being negotiated in structures of domination that allow for some kinds of behaviour while closing off others. In seeing this, we move away from individualist notions of masculine triumph or failure and towards a more complex understanding of gender identity formation in, and against, postcolonial social structures.

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