NEOLIBERALISM AND ALLEGORY

In “Third-World Literature,” the essay that sparked the memorable Social Text debate over national allegory several decades ago, Fredric Jameson suggests that all third world texts be read as allegorical because of that world’s specific entry into capitalism without western cultural markers such as the private-public divide (1986, 69). Without that divide, Jameson asserts, all characters appear as stand-ins for collective, social phenomena. To this Aijaz Ahmad, in his response essay, counters by asking whether some of the cultural markers of capitalism shouldn’t also manifest in the third world if the entire world is now securely in its grasp (13)? In a mediating essay that followed this initial exchange, Madhava Prasad sifts through the hasty generalizations on both sides and attempts to preserve the analytic usefulness of allegory as a deconstructive tool and form of cultural critique for writers and critical theorists who want to investigate the “production and reproduction of subjectivities” (57). In the spirit of that mediation, my essay attempts to reconceive the literary-historical legacy and afterlife of allegory in a way that not only questions its common displacement nowadays—from the developed North to the underdeveloped South (as a properly “third world” literary form)—but also situates some startling new versions that seem to have superseded allegory’s role in imagining the nation-state. Through a reading of Aravind Adiga’s recent novel White Tiger, I examine the refashioning of allegory from a national to a neoliberal frame and ask what that might tell us about new possibilities for representing a global political economy within contemporary fiction today.

Returning to Prasad for a moment: his most useful move in the discussion of the Jameson–Ahmad debate is to move allegory from Jameson’s Orientalist credo that all third world texts are necessarily allegorical to a critical reading where the allegorical is restored as a
theoretical project of bringing to the surface “the naturalized, concealed frames of intelligibility that enable cultural enunciation” and also produce “new conceptual frames which, by providing new perspectives on the problem, enable (re)thinking in the service of social transformation” (Prasad, 57–58). Thus, rather than arguing for allegory as culturally inescapable or as historically given in various postcolonial texts (a direction in which Jameson’s discussion ultimately leads), Prasad points instead to a condition of possibility for the nation as a naturalized frame of reference that remains “a constant presence” (rather than a monolithic referent) in contemporary cultural debates (78):

Prasad allows us to see why, in the neoliberal assertions about a modern and globalizing India today, for instance, this comparison/competition at the international level is still staged through the idea of a nation that is under the scrutiny of the world. A case in point would be the highly acclaimed advertising campaign by the national newspaper *Times of India*, which, on the first page of its January 1, 2007, issue featured a rousing full-page anthem titled “India Poised,” which began with these lines: “There are two Indias in this country. One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been recently showering upon us. The other India is the leash.” (“India Poised”).

The anthem is an example of what I call neoliberal allegory, where a dynamic new India with high rates of economic growth seemingly repairs the split geography of uneven development, class divisions, and political interests by unleashing the forces of entrepreneurship and competition. In this scenario, despite the suggestion of a historical break, neoliberal allegory still figures the nation as a struggling individual emerging finally from long-term postcolonial economic woes and ready to take its rightful place on the international stage. In the anthem the nation is held back, not by colonialism or imperialism but by forces within itself: “But now in our sixtieth year as a free nation,
the ride has brought us to the edge of time’s great precipice. And one India, a tiny little voice at the back of the head, is looking down at the bottom of the ravine and hesitating; the other India is looking up at the sky and saying, ‘It’s time to fly’” (“India Poised”). Poised, the anthem tells us, at a “rarely-ever historical choice,” the nation’s split personality confronts that choice: to slide backward into the valley of socialist stagnancy and bondage or forward and up into the neoliberal sky of economic growth and global power. Thus, in a wider cultural context (where newspapers and television are the dominant modes of messaging), the use of allegory in the public domain today as an effective recoding of political, economic, and social messages of neoliberalism (rather than nationalism-as-unity) reveals various strategies of representation within the mode of allegory. These strategies, it seems to me, while they reveal the complex and compelling drama of a developing nation coded within a rhetoric of neoliberal success, also give back to their readers and viewers an image of self-affirmation and at the same time refashion important dominant narratives about national history, identity, and class.

If, as Prasad suggested earlier, the allegorical can be restored as a theoretical project that brings to the surface “the naturalized, concealed frames of intelligibility that enable cultural enunciation,” then part of the work of cultural criticism is analysis of the allegorical as a powerful integument or cultural membrane in which political and economic arguments are still enclosed today. As the advertisement discussed above shows, neoliberalism can be reified and naturalized as an individual choice, at once removing it from the understanding one might have of neoliberalism generally—as a set of changed social and political conditions, many of which have intensified in the last two decades: the encounter of former state-driven, protected economies of postcolonial nations with global capitalism; the emergence of new class identities; the growing gap between global agents and national spaces; the tension between the rural and the urban; the growing interface between regionalisms and globalisms; the megacity phenomenon; and, finally, the residual forms of gendered arrangements now coalescing with and being interrupted by the new flexible labor arrangements.

A crucial ideological strategy by proponents of neoliberalism on the Indian scene has been to appeal to traditions and cultural values
in a way that disguises the economic and political consolidation of a particular class or castes as the ruling elite. Here the power of allegory to naturalize neoliberalism may have much to do with the structural similarity of the form to the axioms of neoliberal theory itself. In that regard, a succinct formulation by David Harvey could be a useful starting point:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutionalized framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade. . . . The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. . . . Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. (2)

The older tussle between the state and the individual (for citizen welfare) is now displaced by an individualism that makes itself the ground for political economic practices (“entrepreneurial freedoms and skills”) and by policies that call for the retreat of the state from its caretaking role and into the role of market facilitation and deregulation. The “India Poised” anthem figures this shift with a nation that is split into two characters that are opposed in their intentions but joined together inseparably. The image of a country pulling in opposite directions—an India that is poised to fly and another that holds back—may seem commonplace in talk about emerging markets and globalization in the South, but it also signals another important consolidation: the putting aside of the enunciative political function long associated with a modern state in the business of improving the lives of its citizenry and advocating social justice. Now, instead, we have an autonomous realm of self-propelled people who, like consumers, are making a choice among themselves about the nation’s future.

What we see in the anthem is a particular mobilization of allegory as a tool of contraction, where social conflict, class divide, and contesting political interests can be reduced to affective states and where the interiority of the single mind is the sleight of hand whereby the exercise of a free will by a legislating consciousness can appear as a rational “choice” that tames, controls, and subjugates the differences
into a single identity. This is, however, not the split personality or the psychically delusional “national” character that Fredric Jameson identified, for instance, in his reading of Lu Xun’s story as national allegory (1986, 70–71). In neoliberal allegory, the nation is no longer figured as a unifying principle to talk about a common struggle or to call for the inclusion of the excluded citizenry; rather, following Terry Eagleton, we may call this personified neoliberalism a “neurotic symptomatology,” where what is presented as opposing tendencies within the same person is actually an internalization of a class and ideological divide (119)—between a class that purportedly works in everyone’s interest (the global bourgeoisie straining at the leash) and another that only works in its own interest (a class that includes welfare state proponents, socialists, and the poor), figured as the leash holding back neoliberalism.

My reading of Adiga’s *White Tiger* as a critique of neoliberalism that exposes these conflations depends first on foregrounding the ways in which the novel adopts the clichés of a neoliberal economic doctrine and transforms them into speech issuing from an illegitimate spokesman: an uneducated rural migrant and murderer who self-identifies as a successful “entrepreneur.” More importantly, my reading will attend to the novel as a strategic use of allegory that works not by putting the individual’s story in terms of a national story but by putting one discourse in terms of another. By placing the language of neoliberalism and entrepreneurial success in the hands of a character who originates in a world of rural poverty but thinks himself to be part of the new economic elite, Adiga brilliantly satirizes neoliberalism through ventriloquism. When the White Tiger is the mouthpiece, we hear neoliberal entrepreneurial shibboleths as criminality.

The novel is written in the form of a long letter addressed to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, whose impending visit to the city of Bangalore provides the occasion for the narrative. After hearing an announcement over the radio that Premier Jiabao is on a mission “to know the truth about Bangalore,” to meet Indian entrepreneurs, and to “hear the story of their success from their own lips,” Balram (a.k.a. White Tiger) offers his own life story as the real alternative to the official government story: that “booklet full of information about India’s past, present, and future” (Adiga, 4–5). In Balram’s letter the address of origin is...
Bangalore, also known as India’s silicon city, is the home base of its global cyberindustry, and by choosing it as the setting for Balram’s narration (even though much of it happens elsewhere), the novel signals its allegorical use of a neoliberal mecca.

Even though the plot of the novel follows the slow unraveling of a whodunit, when Balram’s letter to Wen Jiabao morphs into the confession by a servant who has killed his former master, it is difficult to miss the satire of a newly dominant economic discourse. Adiga works his allegory through quotation and parody, and the novel moves into this mode by appropriating the familiar language of possessive individualism for its narrator. The life story is exemplary and representative at the same time, for through it the narrator tells us, “You will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man” (6). Such a narrative conflation, the novel reminds us, is already part and parcel of the inspirational shibboleths in circulation when neoliberalism is believed to be, as Harvey points out in his quotation cited earlier, “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutionalized framework.”

The novel’s next joke is directed at the media-driven public fantasy of Indian and Chinese global supremacy (the “Asian Century”) as Balram addresses the Chinese premier with these words:

Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse, I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore.

By telling you my life’s story. (5–6)

As Balram settles into a narratorial role marked by a self-confident crassness, he starts by unearthing a familiar political mantra: “Like
all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in the Darkness” (14). The cognitive mapping of India into darkness and light is a brilliant parody of the India Shining slogan of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2004 national elections, where the BJP tried without success to showcase India’s globalizing urban economy as a world in which all Indians benefited equally. The novel thus draws attention to what lies hidden outside the penumbra of the political spotlight and outside the media appetite for feel-good numbers and data about economic success—the darkness or the impoverished rural. At another level the novel also alludes to the division of labor time into days and nights (Balram’s authorial labor—writing to Jiabao—stretches over seven nights), a temporal division that is part and parcel of the continuing international division of labor. Bangalore, the high-tech megacity where Balram’s story ends, is an outsourcing destination for U.S.-based companies, a city with time zones of worknights hitched to the workdays of the American employers. Bangalore comes to life in the dark as its call centers uproot in place a working class that works for another time zone. Balram’s taxi service or “start-up” as he calls it, comprising a convoy of SUVs that ferry young workers back and forth between the call centers and their homes during night shifts, provides the perfect cover for a murderer on the run. The start-up’s website and motto, which are announced proudly in the novel, are also tongue-in-cheek: “www.whitetiger-technologydrivers.com: We Drive Technology Forward” (301).

The darkness, where Balram’s story begins, is a reality that has been written over and removed from media coverage and public apprehension. The India that Balram narrates is not a mindset (as in the “India Poised” anthem) but rather a site of concrete lives, of the millions who are mere bystanders in the progress of a Shining India. When Balram’s birthplace, the village of Laxmangarh, makes its appearance, the narrator’s sarcasm is directed at this recent dissimulation of the rural in the story of development:

I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarh is your typical Indian village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables and lentils, will be found, when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum
height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organizations whose treaties our prime minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends.

Ha!

Electricity poles—defunct
Water tap—broken.

Children—too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India.

Yes, a typical Indian village paradise, Mr. Jiabao. (19–20)

With a single snort, Balram removes the smoke and mirrors of official data deployed by the dominant urban elite to show the readers the “other” India—not a tiny voice at the back of the head but home to the disenfranchised millions who live without infrastructural support. The neurotic split of neoliberalism is manifest when political conflict is represented in terms of obstacles to entrepreneurship and when the state’s abandonment of infrastructural development in the rural is not factored into questions of social disorder and economic inequality. Neoliberal political legitimacy, like those of the economic formations that preceded it, is based on narratives of “fading memory and blunted sensibility” that erase the historical violence of its birth (Eagleton, 119).

It is true that versions of a class divide circulate with equal regularity in the talk of economic downturns in the United States today, but the most compelling stories of geographical unevenness seem specific to newly globalizing countries like India and China. Reports of exponential growth rates of GDP in these countries are often interrupted by reports of a rural–urban divide where a zero-sum game is in effect: diminishment in resources and quality of life in the rural, on the one hand, and accruing of benefits in the new economic order showcased in the urban, on the other. In an essay that analyzes this divide, Gayatri Spivak remarks that the global city (and here Bombay, Bangalore, or Hyderabad is on the same axis as Shanghai and Beijing) is the scene where one encounters the “secessionist class” described by the economist Robert Reich: “top level managers, professionals and technicians [who] communicate directly with their counterparts around the world” (161).

But as the realities of the South show (in contemporary India for instance), this cosmopolitan, transnational class is also capable of
powerfully recoding the national: here secession is not only a movement from the national to the global, but it also lies in the consolidation of national resources into the development of global cities, which provide the nodes or connection points (either a redistribution point or a communication endpoint) for international capital. Thus, even in countries like India where the democratic revolution coincided with political independence from Britain and where many of the various social, religious, and ethnic agendas are now represented in a spectrum of political parties, the secessionist network is visible as a sort of interdiction of the rural–urban. This is especially so in the narrative of national progress and economic development, where infrastructure development is now in the service of electronic capitalism and high-end consumer goods, rather than the older socialist-welfare agendas of poverty alleviation, rural literacy, women’s welfare, and healthcare. The elision is so successful that the shock quality of stories that occasionally hit the metropolitan press is a measure of how this continuing and widening fracture is a sort of national split—a split that is visible not only as uneven development but as a split in the agendas of the classes that benefit directly or indirectly from neoliberal reforms. This was manifest most visibly at the level of political representation when, in the 2004 Indian national elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party seemed to be two parties in one: the party of nationalist and religious right agendas, on the one hand, and the party of neoliberal economic reform, on the other. This particular combination, of cultural victimage and economic success (the leashed and the poised), led ultimately to the neutralization of a party that had long held sway in Indian politics (Inden).

The remapping of the rural–urban within neoliberalism reminds us that a modernist aesthetic in India for a long time celebrated the city as the space of modern citizenship but also preserved the rural as a geographical metaphor for cultural ethics. To understand what Adiga’s White Tiger does with this geographical divide, we might find it useful to turn briefly to an example of what is being parodied in the novel. Here is Vinay Lal’s description of the rural as modernist aesthetic in a review of Bimal Roy’s classic socialist-realist film Do Bigha Zamin (1953):

The contrast of the village and the city is as old as literature itself, and it would not be too much to say that each has had its advocates. The village
furnishes a “moral economy,” which anchors lives and customs; but the village is also incapable of providing sustenance in conditions of modernity, and its inhabitants are bred in an atmosphere of ignorance, open to exploitation and oppression. Yet Bimal Roy is equally candid in his representation of the brutality of city life, of the callousness, anonymity, and instrumentality that appear to mark most human relationships in the urban setting. Not all that strangely, almost the only occupants of the city who display any humanity are recent migrants from the village.

The migrant to the city in the 1950s film is a reminder that the state’s caretaking role must extend to the rural (and preserve the small and the beautiful), otherwise the village will perish under the influence of the city. In Adiga’s novel, if the same message resonates it does this not by invoking sentimentality about a vanishing rural but by extending neoliberal values into that space of potential nostalgia. In Roy’s modernist classic, on the other hand, Lal tells us,

[I]f he [the rural migrant in the city] displays some ambivalence about how he might position himself between the village and the city, he is unequivocally clear that the morality of the oppressed is superior to the morality of the oppressor. In one touching scene, having lost the patronage of a family whose two children he ferried to school on his hand rickshaw, Sambhu forgoes another customer so that he can take the two little girls to school even though he is not to be paid for his labor. One cannot put a price on every human endeavor, nor ought human relationships be subjected to the laws of commodities.

In Adiga’s novel we get Balram, the rural migrant turned entrepreneur with a vengeance, rising up in a world where nothing and no one can escape the law of the commodity, his rags-to-riches story made possible by murdering and robbing his former employer. Meanwhile, Balram’s father, also a rickshaw driver (the figure of rural ethics), is consumed by hard labor, feudal oppression, and his own rapacious family—a form of cannibalism figured allegorically as the endemic violence that accompanies supra levels of rural exploitation.

The transgressive vein of Adiga’s rural in White Tiger thus lies in the notion that it is no longer the rural backyard of the modernist aesthetic but what Spivak, following Derrida, has called an interdiction: “An inter-diction in Roman Law was to come between two contenders to break up a dispute. It is a convenient name for a practice that does not take sides, but uses what is strategically important” (165).
“The rural” Spivak goes on to add, “is not trees and fields any more. It is always on the way to data” (171). The novel shows us this changed scene by using neoliberalism as a doctrine—captioned and ventriloquized by Balram, the White Tiger, who has crossed over from the devastated rural to the urban jungle, from communitarian ethics to criminality. Using Balram’s parodic imitation of his employers (the entrepreneurial elite) and their values, as well as the appropriation of their graft money as venture capital, the novel questions the optimism and hope of an India poised for exponential growth by asking who gains and at whose expense when national resources are directed one way rather than another.

It is also important to note that, in the novel, the village of Laxmangarh is not only a place from which the state seems to have withdrawn; it continues to be a site for resource appropriation. The urban-based virtual economy has not yet taken over the rural, but it has mobilized a residual “feudal” that is now effectively redone for the global (as a sort of local-in-the-global). There are, we are told, four landowners in Laxmangarh nicknamed the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar, and the Raven. Together they extract tribute from the villagers in the shape of river tolls from boatmen, a share of catch from fishermen, bonded work from sharecroppers, grazing fees from goatherds, and licensing bribes from rickshaw pullers. The novel thus sets up very early on the power lines of these feudal structures, reaching out from the rural into the Indian diaspora—from the rural to the secessionist globalizing class: “[T]he four animals had sent their sons and daughters away, to Dhanbad or to Delhi” (Adiga, 25). Balram’s employer, Ashok, we learn, is one of these returning sons, a banker who relinquishes his career in New York to come home and start up something new in booming India. Here Ashok joins hands with his brother, Mukesh, the Mongoose, who manages their father’s (the Buffalo’s) local connections and siphons bribes to bought-off politicians. Through conversations Balram overhears in the car, when employed as the family chauffeur, the reader learns that the new family business is a form of poaching on the old socialist state—illegally exporting coal acquired from the government’s nationalized mines in Dhanbad to China. Like the figure of Hadj in Ousmane Sembene’s film Xala, the landlords are not industrialists, and their business is by no means productive; they function as middlemen between multinational companies and local extraction
industries. Bribes sent to politicians in New Delhi to facilitate the export of coal thus complete the rural–urban–global circuit of capital (Laxmangarh–Dhanbad–New Delhi–China), as extraction from goat-herds joins ecological devastation of the planet. The novel thus makes its own plot movements into a story of multinational capital, where old residual power structures use the rural as a sort of interdiction of the global and the local, all without really touching the megacity of high-tech capital. This is not strictly secession of an elite but rather a sort of intercession between the local and the global.

In an interview with MEME 2.02, Robert Reich described the new class formation emerging within the tech-heavy spheres of globalizing countries as one that “enables the most successful to secede from the rest of society.” It is now possible, he argues, for top-level managers, professionals, and technicians “to communicate directly with their counterparts around the world to generate new products and services for other counterparts around the world without depending economically upon the productivity of lower-wage and less-skilled people.” This possibility for secession enables not only the sort of imaginative geography we saw in the “India Poised” anthem, where a nation is divided into an ideological landscape of optimism and pessimism, but also a real delinking of the global city and its international networks from the rest of the country. In that this secessionist elite is also associated with the urban scene and its self-representations, megacities like Bangalore become metonymic and metaphoric representations of a new economic order and privileged object of literary productions like films, memoirs, and fiction. Adiga’s novel thus poses a challenge to this contemporary mapping of social class and its economic base by reworking the “rural” into megacity as nightmare. What happens, the novel seems to ask, to that modern geography of marginality when accounts of globalization and economic booms compulsively stage themselves in urban settings? The novel’s subplots are, therefore, startling reminders of old tracings of the tracks of capital and class that remain invisible in the celebration of the global city phenomenon today.

In that Balram the entrepreneur is not the product of neoliberal indoctrination from the U.S. (the ubiquitous “American business book” [Adiga, 6] sold by Bangalore pavement booksellers) but, rather, like thousands of others in India, a product made from what he calls
“half-baked clay” (an incomplete schooling coupled with a “ideas, half-formed and half digested and half correct”), the novel begs the question about how neoliberalism can be universalized as a mindset (11). The novel satirizes this pretension to universality by moving a criminal at large into a sector normally inhabited by the secessionist elite, a group the narrator himself dismissively refers to as the “fully formed fellows” with “twelve years of school and three years of university,” who “wear nice suits, join companies, and take orders from other men for the rest of their lives” (11). The novel’s satire works not by caricaturing the normal agents of neoliberalism but, rather, by “speaking otherwise”—an allegorical mode where the servant appropriates the language of his employer, the underclass the language of economic success, and the criminal the mantras of the entrepreneur. In the novel this vocabulary is generalized so that it becomes part and parcel of every social class, not just the class of the new urban elite or the technocrats that have benefited most from the “virtual” global economy. When entrepreneurship is spoken from below, the discourse becomes monstrously discomforting, thus exposing it as deployment primarily for self-representing and consolidating the economic landscape for the economic elite.

The generalization of neoliberal language and its association with a virtual global is a primary reason why Adiga’s novel deals with a transnational rather than national frame. For Fredric Jameson, the notion of “third world allegory” was a means to mobilize a difference against which intellectuals in the United States and the postindustrial North could measure the ideological blinkers that popular literary forms like the novel set into place (in the West) with narrative requirements like interiority, social alienation, and individualism. Here, Jameson also imagined a literary scene shaped by a geopolitical master–slave dialectic where Americans imagining themselves to be “masters of the world” are epistemologically crippled and condemned to “psychologism” and “projections of private subjectivity,” while in the third world, where this standpoint is denied, culture “must be situational and materialist despite itself” (1986, 85–86). Although Jameson has faced plenty of criticism for the use of the obligatory “must,” his point about the sort of self consciousness manifest among writers and public intellectuals in the third world—their common conjuring of an imagined audience (ideal reader) larger than a local,
regional, or national one—is truer today than it ever was in the wake of the neoliberal transformations of class and nation. In *White Tiger* this transnational frame is implicit in the conditions of production and distribution of the novel, a Booker Prize–winning work in Indian English, to a worldwide audience; it is also implicit in the prestructure of the novel itself as an epistolary exchange between India and China.

The most important respect in which things have obviously shifted since the *Social Text* debate about allegory in the 1980s is in the degree of radical difference the third world cultural texts supposedly represent. The essential difference between first and third was in the form of allegory: that in the third world, as in early modern societies, the story of the individual was not merely the story of a singular life—more typical of later capitalist culture—but a representational bridge between the private and the public, so that the individual story could be read only in a field that is social, political, and economic at the same time. Thus, Jameson could assert that reading third world texts would give readers in the United States a window into “a way of life that still has little in common with daily life in the American suburb” (1986, 66). In his 1992 book on cinema and the world system, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Jameson 1995), however, Jameson’s focus on the city space now blurs such distinctions. Talking about the “globality” and “universality” of Taipei in Edward Yang’s film *Terrorizer*, Jameson offers it as “an example of some generally late-capitalist urbanization (which one hesitates, except to make the point, to call postmodern), of a now classic proliferation of the urban fabric that one finds everywhere in the First and Third Worlds alike” (1995, 117, emphasis added).

In his discussion of the geopolitical aesthetic, Jameson’s rethinking of allegory moves closer to the interpretive standpoint of Walter Benjamin when the latter moved from the critique of German tragic drama’s regressive use of an archaic form in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1977]) to the meticulous charting of allegory as a literary tool that blasts open the commodity form in the *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project* [1999]). Now Jameson’s apprehension of allegory’s expanded function shifts his attention from the national to the circuit of global capital, where “allegory allows the most random, minute or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system rise and
fall, with a fluidity that has no equivalent in those older national allegories of which I have spoken elsewhere” (1995, 5). This metonymic function in representing totality aside, it is the next of Jameson’s assertions that comes closest to Benjamin’s argument about allegory’s fundamental relation to social commodification:

On the actantial level, a host of partial subjects, fragmentary or schizoid constellations, can often now stand in allegorically for trends and forces in the world system, in a transitional situation in which genuinely transnational classes, such as a new international proletariat and a new density of global management, have not yet anywhere clearly emerged. These constellated and allegorical subject-positions are, however, as likely to be collective as they are individual-schizophrenic, something which itself poses new form-problems for an individualistic storytelling. (1995, 5, emphasis added)

Here, in a nod to Deleuze and Benjamin, the notion of “schizoid constellations” enables Jameson to imagine a subject-system relationship in transnational space, while Raymond Williams’s notion of “emergence” adds a temporal (or historical) aspect to allegory as a form appropriate to a “transition” (121–23) as opposed to the modern “crisis” posited in Benjamin’s Arcades. In India we might thus speak of Adiga’s novel as representing both the crisis of the nationalist-socialist state of the 1950s and the emergence of the neoliberal globalizing state in the 1990s. In the quote above, the crucial term is “constellation,” a term Jameson borrows directly from Benjamin. In Benjamin’s “Theses” (1969) essay as well as the Arcades Project, this term is instrumental in defining the critical force of modernist allegory. The astronomical metaphor is, in fact, a radical perspective on history, one that interrupts the linear and progressive trajectory of its narrative. Just as a constellation is made up of some stars that are nearer and others farther away, historical events, too, can from the here and now appear to take on a significant configuration. The notion of history as a continuum—what Benjamin describes as “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” is now transformed by a reconfiguration of past and present in a moment of startling juxtaposition (1969, 263). Just as cultural artifacts in the Arcades Project are fragments that can be arranged into countless texts, allegory is the means by which the text is reordered (or disordered) by the act of interpretation to a point where new meanings are assigned. (Here, like the social commodity
that deviates from its use value, allegory assigns a new code to existing signs.) For both Benjamin and Jameson disorder is a sign of emergence rather than of dominance, where classes and subject positions are partial and fragmented, and questions “rise and fall with a fluidity” attached to the “minute and isolated” through metonymy. Allegory is, thus, a form that successfully approximates a totality that cannot yet (or ever) be represented adequately.

In *White Tiger*, the narrator frames a similar constellation for the reader when he looks upon his village from afar. Because this scene is the sort of signature juxtaposition that is repeated in the novel, I will discuss it at some length. The village of Laxmangarh is presided over by an old ruined fort of unknown origin that overlooks it from a hill nearby. The image is ripe with the kind of allegorical power invoked by Walter Benjamin’s well-known proposition that “allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things,” where he asks us to think of allegory as a double structure—operating synchronically within language and diachronically within history (1977, 178). Here, the representational process of allegory is constituted by an internal difference: between an old meaning that is lost and a new one that replaces it, between a past historical ruin that is almost forgotten and its reappearance in memory as a transformative image for the future. Unlike ancient or early modern allegories where the mode was a gateway to a transcendental, often divine or didactic meaning, or where an ideal system was bent into a totality through highly organized interrelationships between images, emblems and agents, modern and postromantic allegory has undoubtedly used a different tack (Owens). They are more often than not contentious sites of negotiation between the text and reality, between history and theory, and between the form of representation and its ideological content. The critical consensus is that in the works of many twentieth-century theorists and authors, starting with Benjamin, allegory is characterized by “a sense of loss and decay, a structure of feeling steeped in mourning” (Tambling, 152–73).

In *White Tiger*, an iconic shot of a seemingly sleepy village viewed from the vantage point of an old ruined fort on a hill at first merely reminds the reader of the erstwhile princely and feudal lineages in the rural outpost, but, importantly, instead of a radical break with the past (where the fort might represent a vanished India), the novel reworks
the ruin as a trope of repetition and continuity. In an earlier reference in the novel, Balram describes the Black Fort as a reminder of India’s colonization by foreigners, although now, he tells us, “the foreigners have long abandoned the Black Fort, and a tribe of monkeys occupy it” (Adiga, 22). Then, this image that repeats history first as colonialism and then as postcolonial farce is redone into a trope in a different story as Balram announces that the fort holds the clue to his disappearance as a murderer and his reemergence as a rich businessman: “I bet you they [the police] missed the most important clue of all, which was right in front of them: I am talking about the Black Fort, of course” (40). The image of the fort thus connects, metonymically, the historical trauma of foreign conquest with Balram’s own life story, folding one into the other as the novel keeps a national frame in place even as the image is turned into a vehicle for psychomachia—an allegory about his inner conflict. The important point is that for the reader the psychological and the historical are now connected allegorically as parallel stories. Unlike the instance in the “India Poised” anthem where existing social realities of classes and interests were reduced to mental and affective states, here the psychology of the individual agent, Balram, represents, instead, a historical emergence and overcoming of seemingly inescapable social realities, not only for himself as servant-slave but also for a “servant class”—a collectivity with which Balram constantly self-identifies. As a child Balram was frightened of the fort because his grandmother told him that an enormous lizard lived there. After that point he could only watch the fearful beauty of the fort from a distance, mindful that it held the key to his liberation: “They remain slaves because they can’t see what is beautiful in this world” (40).

In the scene below, the novel makes it clear that while the Black Fort represents the fears that condition Balram’s childhood, it also marks a psychic boundary that limits his ability to leave behind the economic and familial structures of oppression in the village. Balram’s repeated attempts to climb the hill fail when he is overcome by paralyzing fear. The narrative thus directs our attention to the fort’s iterative function as it works on an actantial level—as an agent in Balram’s personal and social overcoming. What is therefore a meaningless clue for the police (who cannot access Balram’s confession and the fort’s allegorical coding) serves as the catalyst for Balram’s murder of his employer, Ashok. One day, after his return to the village,
Balram tries to climb the hill and succeeds for the first time, and we witness at that moment the death of the child-servant and Balram’s rebirth as the White Tiger. Here, then, is the scene in full:

For now, all I want to tell you is this: while Mr. Ashok and Pinky madam were relaxing, having eaten lunch, I had nothing to do, so I decided to try again. I swam through the pond, walked up the hill, went into the doorway, and entered the Black Fort for the first time. There wasn’t much around—just some broken walls and a bunch of frightened monkeys watching me from a distance. Putting my foot on the wall, I looked down on the village from there. My little Laxmangarh. I saw the temple tower, the market, the glistening line of sewage, the landlord’s mansions—and my own house, with that dark little cloud outside—the water buffalo. It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth. I leaned out from the edge of the fort in the direction of my village—and then I did something too disgusting to describe to you. Well, actually, I spat. Again and Again. And then, whistling and humming, I went back down the hill. Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok’s throat. (41–42)

In the last sentence, the anachronic deviation makes an explicit connection between Balram’s act of spitting on this scene and the subsequent murder. That link is drawn gradually in the paragraph through the paratactic accumulation of details that operate metonymically—with fragments—but these fragments are not a neutral piling up of facts about “my little Laxmangarh.” Instead, the temple tower and market are already ominous symbols, along with the sewage (environmental degradation), landlords’ mansions (feudal oppression), and a fattened buffalo (appropriation of labor power). From his vantage point, Balram sees a scene of continuing colonization of the rural.

The temporal split in the narrator’s achronic perspective also juxtaposes two separate pasts (the time of the picnic and the time of the murder), thus analogizing the historical constellation of past events and the split consciousness of the subject, or “I,” that constellates into an allegorical double vision. The “I” that narrates unifies the scene’s two separate pasts but reveals a subjectivity that is unavoidably split: there is the ‘I’ that watches this scene on the day of the picnic and the “I” that describes the scene after he has already killed his master (the night of the telling of the story). The two “I”s cannot be the same because one has been radically transformed by the murder and retroactively influences the perception of the time and scene before that event. The allegorical significance is clear now—the village scene has
already fulfilled its role and brought about Balram’s transformation as the novel transposes the original temporal data into the figurative spatial simultaneity of Laxmangarh. Now a future where symptoms and narratives accumulate—in the way Benjamin’s Angel of History signals the resurrection of the future from the ruins and destruction of the past—is not just the story of a single murder but a portent of the political violence of liberated servants to come.

What is without question interrupted and critiqued here, as I have argued earlier, when Balram walks away from the “most beautiful sight on earth,” is also the image of the rural rife in many literary and cinematic representations of Indian modernity, where the village is the custodian of rural, idealized peasant virtues. Although his employers (Ashok and his wife, Pinky madam), who live in the industrial city of Dhanbad, are picnicking here on a visit to the ancestral home (one of the landlord’s houses mentioned in the passage), Balram, the authentically rural inhabitant displaced to the city, only comes back to spit on it.

We might see this as the rural on the move, where the reader already knows the affective and structural violence that lies under the most beautiful sight on earth. The representational rupture is most evident in an earlier scene, a few pages before Balram trots up the hill to the fort:

A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh. They were fighting and wailing and shrieking. My uncles would resist, and managed to keep some of their money, but my father got peeled and skinned every time. “I survived the city, but I couldn’t survive the women in my home,” he would say, sunk into a corner of the room. The women would feed him after they fed the buffalo. (26)

In an essay for the Boston Review, Amitava Kumar, otherwise an enthusiastic advocate of the new South Asian fiction writers in English, singles out this scene about the Bihari migrant workers for criticism. He writes that he could not continue reading Adiga’s book because of the “presentation of ordinary people” that seems “trite” and “offensive.” Kumar then goes on to add: “I have witnessed such men, and sometimes women, coming back to their village homes countless times. The
novelist seems to know next to nothing about either the love or the despair of the people he writes about. I want to know if others, who might never have visited Bihar, read the passage above and recognize how wrong it is, how the appearance of verisimilitude belies the emotional truths of life in Bihar.”

Kumar has a brilliant eye for detail and irony, especially in his own journalistic and quasi-ethnographic accounts from India’s heartlands. So my response to his reading of White Tiger, while partial to his knowledge of the region, disagrees with his critique. I think Kumar is asking for the rules of verisimilitude in a narrative that itself is an allegory of realism, a play with the very expectations already in place for a realistic story of social, economic, and political oppression of the subaltern. In Adiga’s novel, from a class standpoint, it is the fate of a new petty bourgeoisie, or what Jameson has called the “professional-managerial segment,” that is the object of satire (1995, 146). The poor rural folk’s ability to love would be their allegorical role in a larger story about the cannibalism of consumerist society. But Adiga’s satire is directed at the mechanisms that create the despair, and with a laugh at the back of the throat, the novel transforms them into the W 5 r e of the monstrous gangster-like Balram. Here the reader watches the impossibility of love and despair in the same way she puts those expectations aside when reading Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather as an allegory of American capitalism.

As long as the critique of neoliberalism in India depends on holding onto the rural as a site of essential values, we miss the point of the novel. Adiga, it seems to me, wants to show the as if: What if this last bastion of imagined collectivity also falls to neoliberalism? What if even the poor villager is now in the pores of global capitalism? When we can no longer imagine a binary opposition between rural and urban values, then all differences are merely on the scale of monetary success. To me, the iconic symbol that works here is that of the buffalo. Anyone following the writings by proponents of microcredit and its so-called transformative power in the rural South will have noticed that the most ubiquitous examples of “small capital” for poor people raising themselves out of poverty are often a cell phone and a buffalo. The buffalo is thus a parodic allusion to microcredit: a fattened animal remains the hope of all members of the family, yet the entire family seems to be working for it rather than the other way around.
The cannibalistic urge of Balram’s family to devour its own mirrors the landlord class’s predatory brutality toward the villagers, a tendency that is invoked by the animal imagery associated with them in the novel. Balram’s father’s body is consumed by work, the buffalo gobbles up the family’s resources, and predatory behavior in the novel seems to occur at all levels of society—from the landlords and the educated urban elite to farmers, their families, workers, and domestic servants. This is not realistic or naturalistic representation of cutthroat capitalist or market competition, but the satire—like most satire—does carry a utopian impulse. Indeed, what Fredric Jameson says of Ousmane Sembene’s rural in *Xala* could very well apply here: “The social world of collective cooperation is inserted into the corrupt and westernized money economy of the new post-independence national or comprador bourgeoisie” (1986, 81).

I suggested earlier that, unlike the case of Baroque allegory that emerged, as Benjamin argues, at a time of crisis, the neoliberal allegory of *White Tiger* is closer to the modern allegory of Charles Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century Paris in the *Arcades Project*, coming into play at a time of apparent optimism and progress. Here, instead of the arcades symbolizing material progress, in *White Tiger* it is the shopping mall where the perspective of a melancholic flaneur is transformed into a dialectic, and the novel exposes change-as-progress to be urban phantasmagoria. The rural–urban binary of the modernist landscape is now reconstellated as the city and becomes a hunting ground (an urban jungle) for the White Tiger. In this reversal, progress, materialism, and the commodity are expressed in the allegorical relation itself—a hollowing-out of the real or use value with a substituted meaning, the expression of the social value of a thing expressed in an arbitrary price, and the possibility of things transforming themselves into emblems, fetishes, and love objects.

However, the novel does not neutralize its staging of the “truth” about Bangalore by offering a truer narrative that is hidden or intrinsic; rather, it places its own representational process within parentheses along with the credentials of its narrator. Balram’s knowledge base is a collection of catchphrases, fragments of books read at the pavement sellers, headlines from the radio news programs, overheard conversations—these fragments abound in their parodic vengeance. Just as the reader begins to feel piqued at having to take Balram seriously,
the novel quickly links that point of view with the arrogance and entitlement of the class that employs Balram. Ashok, his employer, rehearses the lament of an elite that resents sharing power with the unlettered: “He can read and write, but he doesn’t get what he’s read. He’s half-baked. The country is full of people like him, I’ll tell you that. And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy . . . to characters like these. That’s the whole tragedy of this country” (Adiga, 10). Balram’s response to his employer’s tirade makes the perspective of the novel’s narrator into a general rather than an exemplary one:

I didn’t like the way he had spoken about me, but he was right. . . . Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls and look in with a penlight, and you’ll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks . . . sentences about politics read in a newspaper . . . bit of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half-hour before falling asleep—all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger into one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. (11)

Balram’s flawed and fragmentary perspective is thus the “true” story of Indian illiteracy and infrastructural abandonment—indeed, we might argue it is the fragmentary perspective of the millions who have been disenfranchised without access to education. In channeling entrepreneurial success through one of its illegitimate interceptors, neoliberal ideology is hence parodied as Balram, an avid “reader,” imitates his employers’ games assiduously—political graft, money laundering, bribery, extortion, and finally murder. The reader cannot help but recognize some of the voices Balram overhears and memorizes in the cybercafes of Bangalore: “I completed that computer program in two and a half minutes”; “An American today offered me four hundred thousand dollars for my start-up and I told him, ‘That’s not enough!’” (298). The novel’s final joke about cyberconsciousness is staged when Balram compares the graft money stolen from his murdered employer to venture capital that enables his entry into the global technology circuit with a “start-up”—a taxi-service company with the proud motto: “We Drive Technology Forward” (301).
Just as the frequenter of Benjamin’s arcades perceives things object by object and shop by shop, so we, as Adiga’s readers, assimilate the book’s contents piece by piece, fragment by fragment, and are thus inducted into new forms of historical and cultural awareness by the shocks and flashes of unexpected juxtapositions and connections. Adiga’s novel asks that we turn the inevitable fragmentation of knowledge into an exercise of critique. As we watch Balram’s piecemeal worldview come together with its self-contradictions and cruel instrumentality our own repulsion is part of the novel’s shock effect. A disenfranchised population without its own master narrative takes lessons from a rapacious new urban class.

Similarly, the shock effect of constellation also works through its appropriation of the culturally significant—as a way not to get to its true meaning but to transform it through the addition of another image. Here we might think of allegory in its prosopopoecic function of awakening congealed life in petrified objects and of scrutinizing living things so that they present themselves as ancient, “ur-historical,” and abruptly release their significance. Allegory appropriates the fetishism of commodities for itself, for in the metamorphosis of things actually coming to life and speaking (like actantial agents in a narrative), the catastrophic spell of things is broken. In the novel, for instance, Balram’s transformation of the sacred, archaic Ganga river into the profane and scatological “black river” of “suffocating and choking” mud, with “faeces, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion and seven kinds of industrial acids,” works in this vein. Such a reorientation of the sacred, spiritual landscape into one of ecological devastation exposes the ideological cover provided by “public service” advertisements that only showcase an “India of Light.” By overturning the symbols and terms of this ideological cover, the novel raises important questions that go to the heart of neoliberal reform. If the rural lurks on the scene not as a binary of the urban but as interdicted rural–global, how might that affect resource appropriation or determine the way India enters globalization? How do we as cultural critics hold on to the city as city or the rural as the rural when the country-to-city plotting of modern progress is no longer adequate?

Because allegory in its contemporary forms moves across material boundaries (cyber, print, virtual material), stylistic and generic categories, linguistic registers, and geographies (global–local), it enables
a recognition of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of signs spun by new media as well as the continuing residual power of signs that are not yet completely in ruins (because uneven development also produces a cultural palimpsest of meanings). In this clash of registers, the reading of neoliberalism as an allegory that needs the transformation of the banal, the subjugated, the sacred, and the archaic into the commodity, the hunter, the criminal, the profane, the obscene, and the scatological is what produces the shock of recognition as the reader recognizes what is being transformed into what and for whom.

In shifting the focus from national allegory to neoliberal allegory, writers like Aravind Adiga draw attention to the changed circumstances of a world where it is no longer plausible to speak of the collective voice, a “we the people” that was mobilized in the work of postcolonial writers as diverse as Raja Rao, representing the nationalist struggle (Kanthapura), and Salman Rushdie, imagining the aspirations of a newly independent nation (Midnight’s Children). Moreover, in Adiga’s novel the modernist vision of including those excluded from full citizenship (whether the rural migrant, the urban poor, or the tribal) is rendered ironic by disavowing the representational idealism such subjects enjoyed. Such an idealism, too, the novel suggests, has lost its power when the state is being slowly picked to pieces by neoliberal agendas and is gradually losing its grip on economic resources and caretaking of the excluded. As such, it is toward neoliberalism itself that allegory now attaches itself, not in the mode of one voice speaking for all, or the representational void and silence of the excluded in vox populi, but in a radical and perhaps inadvertent return to an earlier derivation of allegory in the Greek allegoreo formed from allos (other) and agoreuo (to speak in an assembly or the agora, the marketplace). In Adiga’s novel the double representation of allegory (as another meaning and political speech) is served no longer by making one voice stand for a collectivity as in representative politics but, rather, by the act of speaking otherwise—through the satiric possibility of ventriloquism or a “speaking other”: first, by having us “hear” neoliberal ideology from Balram’s illegitimate mouth and, second, through that character’s appropriation of the neoliberal virtue of entrepreneurship as primitive accumulation, extortion, bribery, and criminality, thus exposing for its readers the dissimulations of contemporary
political and economic agendas that are posed as inevitable and universal choices for everyone seeking to move ahead in the world.

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**Notes**

1. In an editorial written by Jaideep Bose in the same issue of the *Times of India*: “We’d like to believe we were prescient when we titled our front-page editorial on January 1, 2006 and our special 22-page pullout the same day ‘A Leap Year For India.’ India and Indians have finally made that leap—of faith and finance. Lakshmi Mittal’s dramatic acquisition of Arcelor in the face of every possible odd, and his unquestioned dominance of world steel, is one more milestone in the rise of India as a global power—it doesn’t matter that he built his empire in foreign lands. Regardless of whether he considers himself 25%, 50% or 100% Indian, the one thing he has done is give Indian businessmen a large dollop of can-do confidence.” For more about the expanded *Times of India* campaign, see Nair. The anthem is also narrated in a televised public service advertisement (“India versus India”), one of a series commissioned by the newspaper in 2007. Here, the iconic Bollywood mega-star Amitabh Bachchan appears, walking along a near-completed flyover that stretches into the distance, as he begins, in a voice now familiar to millions around India: “There are two Indias in this country.”

2. The date of the letter coincides with Mr. Jiabao’s actual state visit to India in 2005, when in a surprising departure from normal protocol, the premier stopped to visit IT companies in Bangalore before going on to the nation’s capital, New Delhi.

3. In an article in the *New York Times*, Vikas Bajaj notes that India, despite its “ambitions as an emerging economic giant, still struggles to feed its 1.1 billion people.” With an economic growth rate of nearly 9 percent, four decades after the so-called Green Revolution, Bajaj reports, “nearly half of Indian children age 5 or younger are malnourished.”

4. See especially Inden’s response to this question: Interviewer: “The yatra style of politics, obviously an attempt to draw on older, more orthodox Hindu mores, has worked well for the BJP so far. So are you saying that in political communication in India, the traditional and the modern (‘India Shining’ campaign) don’t really go well together?” Inden’s reply: “In this election, the BJP appeared to be two different parties, but not because of some inherent conflict between traditional and modern forms of communication. Mahajan’s ‘India Shining’ and
electoral campaigns made the party and the government it directed appear as if they embodied the values of liberalisation. . . . But if the pursuit of liberalisation policies had already produced a prosperous India, then where was the need for further purification of Hindutva? If the creation of a Hindu nation was itself the prerequisite for prosperity, how could the government led by the BJP coalition claim that India was already shining? By extending the ‘India Shining’ theme into the Yatra, the BJP may have resolved this contradiction, but in doing so, it gave up its own reason for existence.”

Works Cited


