Self-Formation in Caste and Communism

America, as a democratic community, is famous for its common belief in the necessity of individual freedom and self-formation. The Declaration of Independence declares “that all men are created equal” and possess “unalienable rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (The Declaration of Independence (1776)). But how much truth does this claim really hold? When combing through *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga and the short story collection by Ha Jin, *The Bridegroom,* the oppression of individuality is presented from multiple angles and sources, not strictly contained within the systems designed by the Indian and Chinese governments. Jin frequently reflects how the chilling effects of the Cultural Revolution and Chinese tradition impact individual choices by Chinese citizens, while Adiga performs a similar critique of the social structure of India, revealing through the assistance of language, symbolism, and characterization, how a citizens’ expression and formation of self is oppressed in both democratic and communist frameworks regardless of the society’s social construct.

In a communist society, the framework of an individual’s identity, her or his beliefs, is impressed upon her or him and even created by those in positions of power. Jin’s stories in *The Bridegroom,* take inspiration from the “Maoist culture of his youth” and employ character development, language, and symbolism to portray issue in Maoist culture (Sturr 2). This culture is dominated by the constraints of the Cultural Revolution that emerged during the reign of Chinese Communist Party leader, Mao Zedong. The revolution included mobilization of the country’s youth into a group known as the Red Guards who weeded out citizens that showed traits of being bourgeois and displayed a lack of belief in the revolutionary ideology of Mao Zedong. It was a period in Chinese history when educators and intellectuals were persecuted and executed in the name of Mao Zedong’s beliefs. These chains of constraint are prevalent in the very first story of Jin’s collection, “Saboteur” in which character development and symbolism are utilized in an effort to convey the government’s hold on the individuality of its people. The main character, an intellectual and scholar, Mr. Chiu is unjustly imprisoned following a disagreement with a Red Guard. While wrongly imprisoned, Mr. Chiu finds his friend and rescuer being tortured, leading Mr. Chiu to resign to the confession the police have constructed: “The chief resumed, ‘As a matter of fact, you don’t even have to write out your self-criticism. We have your crime described clearly here. All we need is your signature’” (Jin 14). Through the manufactured statements of “[disrupting] public order” and “[refusing] to listen to reason” made in the confession letter, the Chinese officers, assumedly Red Guards, place words in the mouth of Mr. Chiu (Jin 14). Through these actions, the police, or in a wider picture, the communist government, attach the moniker of criminal, of saboteur, to Mr. Chiu. Jin symbolically uses the confession to convey the government-sanctioned sculpting of Mr. Chiu’s identity. Mr. Chiu’s imprisonment is a result of his free-thinking, of his inability to submit when in disagreement with communist officials. However, this kind of behavior from those in positions of power lead their citizens down troubling paths.

Unless citizens are able to flee their repression like Jin who left China and its intellectually oppressive culture for America, what often results are travels down two paths. Path one is an acceptance of one’s societal role as established by the government; path two is a rebellion in light of oppression. Robert D. Sturr comments on these paths, these developments in characterization, in Jin’s work. In “The Presence of Walt Whitman in Ha Jin's Waiting” Sturr argues, “Jin repeatedly demonstrates how an unquestioning and stifling devotion to Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led to the obliteration of individuality and the private self” (Sturr 3). Thus the citizens’ submission, allegiance, and idolization of the Chinese Communist Party leads to the inability to form their identity and conduct their private lives freely. The reader can see the “obliteration” of the self, an evolution in character, not only through Mr. Chiu’s symbolic signature of the government’s manufactured confession but through the witness statements of the altercation between Mr. Chiu and the Red Guard (Sturr 3). Jin writes, “Mr. Chiu was dazed to see the different handwritings, which all stated that he had shouted in the square to attract attention and refused to obey the police. One of the witnesses had identified herself as a purchasing agent from a shipyard in Shanghai” (Jin 8). These citizens who claim to have witnessed Mr. Chiu’s crimes have lost their ability of free thought, a key aspect of individuality, by becoming agents of the Party willing to condemn their fellow citizens within the framework of communist ideology. When Mr. Chiu signs the confession, he rejects his own ideology for that of the Party, his character developing into acceptance of his societal role. As the reader continues with the story, however, Mr. Chiu travels down the second path.

Once his signature is written, Mr. Chiu and his rescuer, the young lawyer Fenjin, are released and Mr. Chiu begins his rebellion through an embrace of his saboteur label. Fenjin observes this rebellious behavior: “Mr. Chiu bought noodles, wonton, eight-grain porridge, and chicken soup, respectively, at four restaurants. While eating he kept saying through his teeth, ‘If only I could kill all the bastards!’ At last he merely took a few sips of the soup without tasting the chicken cubes and mushrooms” (Jin 15-16). Mr. Chiu visits all kinds of restaurants, leaving traces of hepatitis, his illness that went untreated during his imprisonment, behind at local restaurants for other citizens to contract—his own act of revenge done in remembrance of the witness statements that cemented his imprisonment and Fenjin’s harassment. Not only does this show how a citizen in a communist framework adapts beliefs of the government into their own being and self, forgoing their own identity, it sheds light on how citizens rebel and harm one another in these adaptations as Mr. Chiu does by spreading his disease among his community. Jin weaponizes character development, moving Mr. Chiu through stages of acceptance to rebellion, revealing the effects to the self at the hands of communist constraints. As Jodi Daynard notes, citizens are “unable to triumph over adversity” and thus “become experts at revenge instead,” (“Ha Jin Explores Souls Under a Heavy Thumb” 2). Therefore, Chinese citizens dominated by the presence of a higher power, “an oppressive paternal regime,” acquire a mindset of revenge or rebellion in turn of their oppression (“Ha Jin Explores Souls Under a Heavy Thumb” 1). This change in their character and identity is similar to children dissenting from the rules and standards of their parents. These paths and themes continue in many of Jin’s short stories such as “Alive” and “The Bridegroom.”

In the short story “Alive,” readers partake in further analysis of identity constructed by a communist society through the main character, Guhan, as following a natural disaster, the government establishes a new identity for Guhan. Using character development in a heavy-handed manner, Jin shows readers the stakes the government has in creation of the individual; how the government operates as “an oppressive paternal regime” deciding the fates of its citizens (“Ha Jin Explores Souls Under a Heavy Thumb” 1). After disaster strikes in the form of an earthquake, the government takes control: “As soon as the residential shacks were built, branches of the Party, the Youth League, and the Union all set about matchmaking for the people who had lost their spouses…Since this was an emergency measure, love wasn’t always taken into account; so long as a couple didn’t dislike each other, a marriage certification would be issued to them” (Jin 29). At the hands of the government, one’s path is selected in marriage. Guhan is even “given a name, Sweet Apple, and was assigned to collect trash at the field hospital” (Jin 27). Guhan’s name, his job, and his family are all dictated by the government following displacement from the earthquake. In some respects, he has evolved into a completely different character. Guhan’s experience displays how pervasive communism can be in the lives of its citizens. The government injects itself into the private sector of the individual, as the formation of the self by the citizen is “[obliterated]” so much so that one can forget their past, their beliefs, if the ideas of communism take root and flourish (Sturr 3). In the experience of Baowen in “The Bridegroom,” the effects of self-obliteration, exploration of path one and path two are more aptly seen.

In “The Bridegroom” Baowen is charged with homosexuality, which happens to be illegal in China. Once again, the conflation of public and private within the Chinese government is displayed: “Chief Miao explained, ‘Homosexuality originated in Western capitalism and bourgeois lifestyle. According to our law it’s dealt with as a kind of hooliganism. Therefore, every one of the men we arrested will serve a sentence, from six months to five years, depending on the severity of his crime and his attitude toward it’” (Jin 96). If any citizen is found to be a homosexual or taking part in homosexual acts as Baowen was, they are arrested and put through intense, curative treatment. Throughout the short story, homosexuality is treated as a crime, an illness meant to be purged from the individual as seen through Jin’s language use, where words like “law,” “hooliganism,” and “crime” are associated with homosexuality, reflecting the views of the Party and those that follow Party policy. Even through Baowen’s treatment at a mental hospital, which includes electroshock therapy, the shackling philosophy of the Party is apparent. The electroshock therapy operates as a form of government-sanctioned punishment to reverse the supposedly negative behavior in citizens. The Communist Chinese government encroaches upon the private lives of the men and women in the mental hospital by handling their sexuality through public means of arrest and hospitalization. Although homosexuality is a public and criminal charge in “The Bridgeroom,” sexuality is strictly a private aspect of all lives. Therefore the Chinese government, in its communist enforcement effects its citizens’ lives in both the public and private sector as Daynard contends. She notes, Jin “brilliantly portrays a state that not only locks its citizens out of what they deserve, but also intrudes upon what little they might naturally possess: their families and love lives” (“Ha Jin Explores Souls Under a Heavy Thumb” 2). So the public and private lives are dictated and infiltrated through communist means—a concept prevalent in “The Bridegroom” in which Baowen is not allowed to love freely. However, at first, Baowen accepts the treatment—traversing path one. Baowen is one of the few hospital “patients” that only receives the electric bath treatment. As explained by his doctor, Dr. Mai, to Baowen’s father-in-law,

“You know,” he said to me, “your son-in-law is a very good patient, always cooperative.”

“He should be.”

“That’s why we give him the bath. Other patients get electric cuffs around their limbs or electric rods on their bodies. Some of them scream like animals every time. We have to tie them up.” (Jin 106)

At this point in the story, Baowen accepts his role as a criminal and undergoes treatment without trouble. Jin places Baowen’s character on path one, however Baowen’s character develops and eventually explores path two.

Typical of this oppressive construct often found in communist states, citizens either take to rebellion or adapt the beliefs their government touts. Baowen resorts to rebellion as seen in a phone call Baowen’s father-in-law receives from Chief Miao: “He informed me that Baowen had repeated his crime, so the police had taken him out of the hospital and sent him to the prison in Tangyuan Country” (Jin 113). Through the repetition of his crime, Baowen rebels against the oppressive guidelines of the Party, resulting in further punishment. Philosophy of the Party denies Baowen the love and a life he desires and deserves, “intruding upon” his “love life” as noted by Daynard (2). However, this unwarranted treatment leads Baowen to seek out his desires in reckless abandon and rebellion of the Chinese laws—displaying his exploration of path two and his development in character. Not only are oppressive constructs that lead to rebellion and a lack of self-identification prevalent in Chinese culture as seen in Ha Jin’s work, but these features can also be found in India’s social structures.

In contrast to the communism of China, democracy operates in India. One would think more freedom lies in democracy. However, India created its own societal hurdles with the caste system, a traditional social organization practice that shapes citizens’ identities. This is evident in Adiga’s novel, *The White Tiger*, through the use of language, characterization, and symbolism as the main character is born into a lower caste that defines his path in life and makes success nearly impossible. The main character, Balram, is part of the Halwai caste and Balram comments on how his Halwai caste as a “sweet maker” is “[his] destiny.” The language Adiga exercises in Balram’s statements suggests most within lower castes are unable to escape the destiny, the fate, tied to the caste in which they were born (Adiga 53). Kaya Göksel employs post-colonialism theory and Foucault’s analysis to explain how government and hierarchal systems, like the caste system, effect societies:

‘Discourse’, as Foucault theorizes it, is a system of statements within which the world can be known…that is to say, according to him, ‘it is the system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values upon dominated groups. As a social formation it works to constitute reality not only for the objects it appears to represent but also for the subjects who form the community on which it depends. (Göksel 2)

Thus these systems with their language, titles, and unspoken societal rules and limitations impose truth, a reality, to those living within it. Balram’s truth being a citizen of lower caste who must work for brahmins, those of higher caste, to survive and send money back home to family. Everyone’s realities, how they live, are formed by where they lie in the social construct. At first, Balram accepts his position in the lower caste. He walks along path one as a servant and driver to Mr. Ashok, a brahmin. However, Balram, to some extent, has been brainwashed into this acceptance by Indian society.

Throughout *The White Tiger*, Balram displays an admiration and instinct to tend to Mr. Ashok. As Balram is massaging Mr. Ashok’s feet, Adiga states, “Why did I feel that I had to go close to his feet, touch them and press them and make them feel good—why? Because the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga” (Adiga 165). In this instance, Balram willingly and almost happily massages the feet of Mr. Ashok and admits his culture is responsible for this indebted reaction. Balram even admires and favors Mr. Ashok despite his master being a member of the high caste. Thus, in the beginning of his servitude, Balram’s character does not possess any desire to escape his low caste status. Readers see how Balram is trapped, especially through the use of the symbolism Adiga designs:

On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. 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. They do not try to get out of the coop. (Adiga 147)

The chickens in the coop, unwilling to rebel and watching their brethren get slaughtered, symbolize the citizens of India within the lower castes, while the young butcher depicts those of the higher caste, prospering in the midst of others’ suffering. These various symbols converge creating one metaphor of the “cage society,” in which there is no escape from the destiny deemed by the caste system, no “[trying] to get out of the coop” for those of the lower caste (Waller 4; Adiga 147). Balram and his fellow low caste members lack the agency to develop their own futures, their own identities. Members of the low caste are brainwashed into accepting attitudes and destinies of servitude. They do not try to divert from the paths decided for them and “they do not rebel” (Adiga 147). Their paths are predetermined through an acceptance of their societal role and perpetuation of the caste and servant-master relationship. The car Balram drives as Mr. Ashok’s driver also maintains these submissive ideals, lack of opportunities for self-formation, and the “cage society” (Waller 4).

Kathleen Waller examines the role of the Honda City Balram drives. Waller asserts, “The physical space of the car surrounding the chauffeurs echoes the cage mentality, acting even as a more extreme wall that does not allow for the transference of sound. Freedom of thought, profession, money, and time are never accessed by these millions. Their time is filled up by tasks within society's definition of them” (Waller 4). Thus, the Honda City that Balram drives as well as the chicken coop display the constricting aspects of the socio-economic society that Balram finds himself within as a member of a lower caste—how the lives of the individuals in the lower castes depend on and are wasted by the brahmin and higher caste individuals. With a constant inability to form lives of their own, their own thoughts, some citizens accept their fates and do not attempt to move up the ladder of the caste system. Those of low caste also know that ventures outside their social role may “see [their] family destroyed—hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters” (Adiga 150). With family at risk and inbred social behaviors in play, the caste system compartmentalizes the wealthy and the poor, renders freedom of identity inaccessible for those of the lower castes as seen in Balram’s story and his service to those of high caste. Robbie Goh points out these trends of Indian society, noting, “Hinduism and the caste system now work as a corollary to a kind of economic free-for-all, reinforcing socio-economic inequality and Darwinian survival at all cost with notions of social place and ‘destiny’” (“Narrating a Dark India in Londonstani and The White Tiger: Sustaining Identity in the Diaspora*”* 335). Thus, citizens “do not rebel.” They live within the reality of an “economic free-for-all” and through their religion and caste, have a fate already decided and established (Adiga 147; “Narrating a Dark India in Londonstani and The White Tiger: Sustaining Identity in the Diaspora*”* 335). Although Adiga subverts this trend with Balram’s character development through the second path of rebellion.

By the end of the novel, Balram gains an elevated social status and escapes his fate by rare and rebellious means. A drive with Mr. Ashok in the backseat takes a dark turn: “The Stork’s son (Mr. Ashok) opened his eyes—just as I pierced his neck—and his lifeblood spurted into my eyes. I was blind. I was a free man…From now on I could play the music as long as I wanted” (Adiga 246). Balram kills one of his masters and steals 700,000 rupees in his search for freedom. His actions are committed in the spirit of revenge and an urge to escape the fate of his Halwai caste. The turn of events is indicative of the revenge characteristic of people in oppressed circumstances. Only in the death of Mr. Ashok and the possession of 700,000 rupees can a real identity for Balram be crafted by his own volition as now he can “play the music as long as [he] wants” (Adiga 246). Adiga develops Balram’s character from submission to rebellion, depicting the turn from acceptance to rebellion that people undergo to escape their confines. In fact, violence is most often a result of oppression, as Göksel argues. Göksel contests, “Hence, he (Balram) does not want to remain subject to him (Mr. Ashok) and the moment of his violent rebellion has just come to the surface and the philosophy of Frantz Fanon about violence which has an impact on *The White Tiger* comes into question. He writes that violence is a means for the liberation and self-expression of the colonized” (Göksel 2). Thus Balram’s violent actions are a result of oppression of the self, and his rebellion is the only form of self-expression possible within his society’s construct. Their rebellion becomes the only way to exert agency in their lives as everything else leading up to rebellion has been sanctioned by outside forces. To avoid these kinds of tragedies and rebellions, citizens should be capable to form and craft their own identities to avoid ventures down paths of crushing acceptance or rebellion.

The entirety of *The White Tiger* argues for a change in India’s social structure. The epistolary form of the work offers Balram, as the narrator, the chance to debate other frameworks like communism and start a conversation about hierarchy and the similarities between the supposed democracy in India and Communism. Waller states:

Perhaps this connection with a leader of a communist country is also a way to seek out political ideologies he feels may work for India. In the true definition of communism, this narrator, no matter what his caste, should be free from hierarchy and therefore equal to the social class of the premier. However, the reader knows that even a communist premier would see himself as higher and removed from the rest of society. Adiga thereby mocks the notion that communism could be a true answer and that there is any hope the premier would even listen to the story of this young man. (Waller 3)

Through democratic and communist systems of oppression, Adiga demonstrates that the presence of hierarchies in both structures renders segments of society without the power and ability to create identities and lives for themselves. Instead they are trapped in roles, destinies, and expectations outlined by forces outside their control. In all of these various texts, there is a struggle for the main character’s control in their development of their identity and future. This can happen in any form of society, either communist or democratic. In Jin’s stories, communism has the potential to develop the identities of citizens through government policy and ideology, while in Adiga’s stories development of the self is molded by the religious traditions and social systems of India rather than the government exclusively.

Perhaps the real culprit in both these novels is hierarchy. As those in higher positions of power frame the lives through which others live. Mark Olssen explains Foucault’s theory on civic freedom: “For liberty or civic freedom to exist, there must be a certain level of liberation conceived as the absence of domination (Olssen 3). In order for there to be civic freedom for self-formation, domination must be absent, otherwise, the formation of self will be mediated through a lens of those in power as seen through the stories of Balram, Baowen, Guhan, and Mr. Chiu. If these mandates persist in constrictive and oppressive means, then citizens will follow another form of self-expression through violence or rebellion.

These trends and paths are visible in various historic events such as the women’s suffrage movement in the late 1800s and the Civil Rights movement of the mid 1900s. The oppression of women and minorities led to rebellion in the form of rising activism and protests in the name of relieving their societal constraints. Even in the present day, North Korean society depicts a hierarchal oppression leading to a lack of self-identification as within the country, a domineering, communist presence tells citizens what to think and believe similar to the Party in Jin’s short stories. ~~where a domineering, communist presence tells citizens what to think and believe just like the Party present in Jin’s short stories.~~ Propaganda is rampant in North Korea, creating an echo-chamber trapping North Korean citizens similar to the Honda City in *The White Tiger*. In the western world, the United States suffers from socioeconomic disparity that has suppressed segments of the population in a variety of ways. One form of this disparity is in education as seen through the public school system of Chicago where students, “are significantly behind their peers in every respect,” so much so that “half of the more than 5,000 students attending these schools scored in the lowest category on the state exam in math, meaning they can only do basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division problems” (Illinois Policy). These children are subjected to poor educations that trap many attending these schools in cycles of ~~struggle~~ poverty specific to low income and poorly educated households. Their attainment of the American Dream or the ability to form their future lives, identities, and endeavors are only possible in ~~rare~~ extraordinary circumstances. For example, Balram’s rags to riches storyline. So not only is a lack of self-formation present in the language, characterization, and symbolism present in Adiga’s and Jin’s tales but in the everyday life of the American, in America’s social systems and social orders. In order to rise above these cycles, society must adapt a sense of community, work together, and forgo all sense of domination and hierarchy so that all citizens have freedom of self-formation.

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