**A perpetual identity crisis**

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Part - II

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Indian scholar Homi K Bhabha’s analysis of ‘mimicry’ seems more realistic. The argument that mimicry has an element of menace that disrupts the authority is also true. All leaders who fought for their independence adopted Western ways and etiquettes.

From Subhas Chandra Bose and a number of other freedom fighters in India, Dr Francis Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Simon Bolivar in Latin America to many anti-French and British politicians in the Middle East, all leaders mimicked the West in the sense that they received Western education and adopted their lifestyle.

They all adopted French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and English languages and studied Western culture, history and literature. In a way all mimicked their masters but such mimicry proved to be disastrous for the colonial masters, threatening their authority and finally disrupting them.

In 2021, Netflix released a movie called ‘The White Tiger’ (adaptation of Indian writer Aravind Adiga’s 2008 novel The White Tiger), which shows both forms of ‘mimicry’. For instance, the protagonist Balram’s “master” (as per the book) had hired a Muslim as his main driver who pretended to be a Hindu. In the book, Balram caught him red handed when he was praying and forced him to quit.

Balram’s imitation of his master in brushing his teeth, wearing perfume, buying new shirts, drinking alcohol and listening to music reflect the various forms of passive mimicry that are meant to earn the favour of the master. But since his class and caste indicate that he can never be the same, such mimicry does not pose any threat to the masters.

Thus, to get himself hired as a driver by his village’s landlord ‘the Stork’, he resorts to outrageous flattery and manipulative behaviour, putting up a “performance of wails and kisses” and sayings things that the Stork enjoyed hearing.

As the film progresses, Balram mimics his masters in other ways as well which proved to be menacing and threatening — disrupting their authority and power — helping him to rise from the bottom layer of social stratification to the status of an entrepreneur. He closely monitors and observes their corrupt practices: greasing palms of various officials, dealing with politicians, exploiting the poor and expressing the selfish desire to achieve one’s purpose by any means.

Balram starts stealing petrol besides putting Ashok’s (his employer who is the landlord’s son) vehicle on rent, making extra money to increase his income and finally when Balram sees his master withdrawing a huge sum of cash, he decides to murder him. He later uses the cash as the initial capital to become an entrepreneur in Bangalore.

Unlike the British or European bourgeoisie classes, the Indian business class, or at least a majority of it, seems to have a strong faith in Hinduism, especially when it comes to caste and servant-master relationships. They want their servant to be a model of fidelity, obeying their masters.

Balram understands his masters’ mentality and adopted their ideology that divides people along caste lines. He tries to serve his masters the way Hanuman did with Sita and Ram but he discovers that such mimicking of their masters’ ideology does not help him. It rather brings slurs and insults to him. His masters are so selfish that they want him to take the blame for the accident that was committed by Ashok’s wife Pinky.

He mimics this selfishness, and when he decides to kill Ashok, he does not bother to think about his family. From his masters through mimicking he learns that one should go to any extent to achieve his aim. Even after becoming an entrepreneur, he tries to appease people through bribes. When one of his drivers kills someone in an accident, he offers compensation, using money as a way to protect his interest like his master did.

Bhabha, while analyzing colonized identity, says, “…mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge.” For Fanon, the colonized are constantly taught that they do not have any past, any culture, any civilization and that they are leading a barbarous life and therefore they are inferior to the colonizers. The colonizers defend their action by arguing that they, through the process of colonization, are performing their moral duty to make the uncivilized people civilized and educated.

Out of an inferiority complex and an urge to rise up, the colonized start mimicking the colonizers. They put on the colonizers’ dress, practice their religion and behaviour and eat their food. But ultimately there are certain things that cannot be imitated, such as the skin colour of the colonizers. This is what Bhabha defines, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.

This is another aspect of Bhabha’s definition of mimicry where the mimicker is not exactly the same. For instance, despite being an entrepreneur, Balram cannot change his caste and colour. Such mimicry can also be found in the attitude of Pinky who is Westernized, shouting at Ashok’s brother and father, which is not quite common in Eastern culture where would-be daughters-in-law are supposed to be obedient to older people, especially her father in law.

One might argue that Ashok mimicked the dominant Western culture by absorbing some qualities of that culture like individualism — but he is not exactly the same. He cannot summon enough courage to challenge the authority of his father while in Western culture standing up to one’s father when he is wrong is not uncommon. Pinky lecturing Balram regarding fulfilment of self-interest also indicates that she mimics the individualism philosophy of the West that advocates the protection of individual rights.

Similarly, the elite class at the hotels of Delhi that Balram frequented also mimic Western culture and traditions — dressing and speaking like them. Their manners are also close to Western people, but their colour and caste are still there that cannot be changed. When Balram becomes an entrepreneur taking the name of his master, he is not the same either because he is from the bottom layer of social stratification whose kids cannot afford to go to elite schools or visit foreign countries.

So, although he is an entrepreneur like Ashok and has figured out — like his master — which business will flourish in Bangalore, he is not exactly the same as Ashok.

Bhabha thinks that this mimicry could be menacing. It could be true for leaders in the Global South who mimicked their colonial masters and then revolted against them. In some cases, they entirely altered the system bringing about a communist revolution but in The White Tiger Balram does not lead any radical or social change. It could be argued that it is a story of an individual who has a voracious greed to climb the social ladder by following criminal ways. His ascendance does not alter the social realities that are deeply embedded in Indian society.

Instead of prompting people to work for a social change that benefits society at large, the film could be a message for greedy and unscrupulous individuals to adopt any means for the sake of wealth accumulation or changing social status. The film is based on the novel of the same name, and this novel is different from Russian author Maxim Gorky’s literary works that talk about a rebellion that would not change the life of only one individual but would have profound impacts on society at large.