

# THE MALE SOUTH ASIAN DOMESTIC SERVANT: MASTER-SERVANT RELATIONSHIPS, CLASS CHASMS, AND SYSTEMATIC EMASCULATION

## Introduction

This paper argues that the position of the male domestic servant in South Asia is one that is emasculating given the existent patriarchal context and deeply gendered social hierarchy. Contemporary relationships between South Asian masters and male servants are “a legacy of the pre-colonial feudal aristocratic culture that nurtured such relationships” (Banerjee, 2004: 689), but which do not necessarily translate well into the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper investigates the ways in which male domestic servants in South Asia negotiate their positionalities, their attitudes towards their employment and employers, and the treatment they receive.

Much research has been done on domestic servants, but the majority of this work has focused on the *female* domestic, the maid who cooks, cleans and undertakes child care and care of the elderly. The most widely studied domestics are possibly the female domestic *migrant* servants.<sup>1</sup> There has been far less research done on local male domestics and far less critical literature devoted to this, by comparison with the many extensive studies on female domestics. Nevertheless, a handful of good studies includes the work of Ray and Qayum (2009), Froystad (2003), and Adams and Dickey (2000). There have also been studies on the male migrant servant<sup>2</sup>, but this article focuses academic attention on a minority group, specifically, of the non-migrant, South Asian male domestic. Through a case study incorporating four novels and two short stories by Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan authors, this research will explore the role of male household servants within upper-class South Asian households. These selected literary texts showcase the male

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<sup>1</sup> There was however a study (Lau, 2010) of the relationship between mistresses and female non-migrant domestic servants, which argued that the position of the servant is an inherently vulnerable one, and where class divides eventually takes precedence over personal bonds and years of trust and intimacy.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Chin (1998) notes that Chinese and Indian migrant men worked as servants in European households from the mid 1800s.

domestic servant, utilising the positionality of the servant, in order to make social and class commentaries. The wide range of texts enables the examination of this issue from a number of different facets, allowing for a diversity (albeit invariably still limited) of representation.

In South Asia, male servants have commonly served as sweepers, cooks, butlers, valets, chauffeurs, gardeners, watchmen, errands-runners, and amongst the lower castes, as cleaners of bathrooms and undertakers of other contaminating or impure tasks. The relationship between South Asian masters and servants is not the well-studied colonial relationship of white masters and black boys<sup>3</sup>, where as Hansen tells us, "African menservants were part of the colonial households in the manner of pots and pans. As households commodities..." (1992: 72). However, although similar in some ways, the South Asian master-servant relationship is not that of coloniser and colonised. It is nevertheless a deeply unequal power equation. Coser regards the positionality of servants as "premodern", a situation of inevitable exploitation characterised by "personal allegiance, long hours and high levels of commitment [...] legitimated by religion and enforced by an economic context which offered no alternative employment opportunities", which only an "underclass of social inferiors who have no place in the social scheme of things would undertake" (1973: 39). Indeed, within certain South Asian contexts, there is an almost feudal expectation of servants' holistic and unquestioning allegiance, obedience and commitment, not only from the servant him/herself, but from the servant's family, even across generations.

The male domestic servant is by no means as ubiquitous as the female domestic servant and is consequently far less commonly depicted in literary fiction. Sharma (2003) noted that of the estimated 20 million domestic workers in India, 92% are women, girls and children, with male domestic workers accounting for just a very small fraction of domestic servants in India. Sharma further notes that in the case of domestic servants, it is mostly a surplus labour market, making it more difficult to regulate. The difficulty of regulation has enabled and reinforced a system which lacks transparency and fairness for domestic servants, and one in which their rights are seldom protected. It is also mainly an informal working agreement; for example, in "...Nepal or India where domestic labor for the most part rests upon ambiguous oral arrangements with practically little or no state regulation" (Shah, 2000: 90), the absence of a work contract or standardised requirements exacerbate the problem of regulating this industry. "In India, the history of this servitude [domestic workers] may be traced back centuries, but for however long men, women, and children have been keeping India's homes clean, it hasn't been long enough to grant them the legal status of "worker" and the benefits it infers" (Faleiro, 2006); benefits which would include minimum wage, pension, healthcare, insurance, etc. Servants typically work bereft of such securities and benefits, and consequently, are very much at the mercy of the goodwill of employers, which renders their position weak, easily exploited, and subsequently, subservient.

The aspects which will be investigated in this paper include the issue of the necessary servility of the male domestic, which is a gender role reversal within a typically patriarchal set-up. How is the male domestic servant treated or positioned in order to temper his resentment of or reconcile him to his position of servility? How fatalistic are the men, and how do they reconcile themselves to the emasculating position of domestic

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<sup>3</sup> Hansen's research was on the male domestic servant in colonial Northern Rhodesia.

subservience within the parochial South Asian context which sets up men as paterfamilias? The paper unpicks the threads of how this social paradox is negotiated between employer and male servant, as well as how closely male servants can sometimes come to identify with their masters/employers and the mutual reflection and consolidation of social class each affords the other.

The chosen literary texts also discuss the condition of servitude in a time frame: whether the men expect to be servants for life, or whether domestic work is utilised as a stepping stone to better things, a 'bridging occupation' whereby servants could acquire some capital (economic, social, etc) which could potentially transform and eventually improve their position. However, critical literature identifies that domestic service frequently fails to act as this 'bridging occupation'. "Educational support is probably the biggest contribution a mistress can ever extend to her helper, as it has a long-term impact, and can enable the helper to leave paid domestic work and enter into a more prestigious job" (Arnado, 2003: 158). However, in many cases as will be demonstrated in this paper, educational support is not provided or prioritised by masters or mistresses, and the employers' social capital is not at the disposal of their servants. Employers do not necessarily regard it as falling within the bounds of their duty to elevate the social position or even improve the social mobility of their domestic servants.

Being of the same nationality as their employers, being sometimes of the same race and religion too, the servant is nevertheless always and forever divided by class differences, "Class divides appear to take precedence over personal bonds, years of trust and intimacy, and individuals" (Lau, 2010: 33). Servants, although within the domestic household and set up, are always necessarily outsiders, never part of the family even though kinship terms are often employed. Hansen comments that "[w]hatever ties of affection developed between servant and employer [...] their relationship was inherently hierarchical and characterized by domination and subservience" (1992: 71).

### **Considering the Male Domestic**

Much of masculine identity and sense of self worth is commonly drawn from work, the work role, title, and achievement. Edwards deems work as being historically "the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity" (2006: 8). Not only is work important to men, he points out, but it is a part of men, "a key dimension of their identity and masculinity" (2006: 8). From work, men derive status, authority and positions of leadership and dominance within their families and communities. How then does the male household

servant reconcile his masculine identity with the work he performs, which necessarily is domesticated and oriented to serving the physical comforts and whims of others?

Male servants come in a wide range of categories. Banerjee, in writing of servants in colonial Bengal, mentions some examples: "...starting from *peons* (a footman), *chaprashis* (office messenger), and *ardali* (orderlies), who served the civil servants in government offices to the *sarkars* (financial accounts), *durwans* (gatekeepers), *malis* (gardeners),..." (2004: 687). By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these categories have shifted somewhat, and become less clearly demarcated, amorphously blending the roles of the male servants: in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, the male servant (Balram) although technically a driver, is a servant of many jobs, "...in India...the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants...anytime I was not driving the car, I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a long broom, or chase a cow out of the compound" (Adiga, 2008: 68-69). Balram also had to press his master's feet after soaking them in hot water, to cook for his master, buy food, play bartender. In addition Balram has to serve several masters, and also whomever else his multiple masters tell him to serve. "Playing cricket with any brat in the household who wanted to play – and letting him win, handsomely – was one of the prescribed duties of driver number two" (Adiga, 2008: 70).

The blurring of task boundaries, and the shift from prescribed roles and duties into a general 'servant' who can be required to perform any task, is, according to some, a deliberate move on the part of employers, who utilising the imbalance of power, find it to their benefit not to specify job descriptions. "Not only are the basic terms and conditions of the servant's work – such as hours, tasks, leave and payment – left unspecified, even the identity of the servant is indeterminate so that it can be actualised according to the contingent needs and powers..." (Shah, 2000: 91). Leaving his exact role ambiguous compromises a servant's ability to clarify his professional identity, thus making it harder to protest the different roles imposed on him. This kind of ambiguity within the domestic geography and hierarchy, Barth points out, causes the male servant to renounce his autonomy, and in so doing, "he is acting at the command of another person and is therefore inferior to that person" (Barth, 1965: 49), thus deeply emasculating the male servant.

Moreover, for members of a certain class, this emasculation of the male servant is important and necessary because it is "not the employment of coachman or gardener but of the male indoor servant that was long regarded as the prerequisite of gentility" (Horn, 1975: 72). In today's middle class India and South Asia, and in the social echelons above that, servants are part and parcel of that class structure, a class marker and a key foundation upon which the carefully observed class distinctions are built: "The ability to hire servants is a sign of having achieved middle- or upper-class status" (Dickey, 2000: 466). The keeping of servants, Ray and Qayum further add, not only confirms the class status, but "confers attributes of prestige, cultural capital, and civilisation on employers of all classes" (2009: 145). The notion of gentility acquired via having servants seems to be a continuing tradition.

Having servants and thereby having an inferior class in service proves and promotes the status and gentility of the employer, but it has the opposite effect on the servants. Ray and Qayum's work find that male servants and husbands of female servants are "failed men and patriarchs [...] The first because the demeaning domestic – read as feminine – tasks a male servant must perform compounded by the very characteristics that



make him a good servant – loyalty, subservience, obedience, placing the employer’s family before his own ....” (2009: 126). From conversing with and interviewing male servants, Ray and Qayum find that some male servants are domestic servants because they have failed to make a living in other ways, either from their native villages or in factories. Unlike the ease of interviewing female servants, Ray and Qayum were confronted with the obstacle that male servants, especially those of the older generation,

could not instinctively provide a narrative of their lives, as if they were unaccustomed to telling stories about themselves [...] the older generation rarely made eye contact and obviously found it difficult to recount decades of hardship and life on the margins. Once they broached the topic, however, we realized how difficult and unfamiliar it was for us, in turn, to hear first-person accounts of men’s sufferings, their bitterness about their compromised masculinity, and their regret in failing to be the men that their families and milieu expected. (Ray and Qayum, 2009: 23)

Clearly, the emasculation runs so deep that even framing a narrative which would articulate and thus confirm it is particularly difficult to perform.

It is common practise, with male and female servants, to utilise kinship terms in the address between servant and employers. This may well be in part at least, a way to dilute the masculine emasculation of the male servants, by the implication that they are serving their own family in carrying out their tasks. However, even the kinship terms can indicate the degree of emasculation on-going: Shah’s work notes that servants frequently refer to employers as “malik”, which is also a term used by wives to refer to husbands, and which indicates “total loyalty and fidelity in an asymmetrical relationship” (Shah, 2000: 88). The implication here is that the servant will be as obedient and subservient to the employer as the traditional wife to her lord and master, directly feminising the male servant.

Another reason kinship terms may be employed is to bind the servant by ties of familial allegiances to the employers, and to give the servant a sense of vested interests, however misleading that may be, but a sense which employers can then exploit in various ways to their advantage. Adiga’s novel makes this point repeatedly, stressing the naivety and artless simplicity of the servant: “...master and mistresses are like father and mother to you...” (2008: 145); “‘Employers are like father and mother. How can one be angry with them?’” (2008: 162); and “‘...Balram. You’re part of the family.’ My heart filled up with

pride. I crouched on the floor, happy as a dog, and waited for him to say it again.” (2008: 166)

The use of kinship terms is mostly for the benefit of the employer, despite the sense that being part of the family extends the family’s protective custody to the servant. “Employers can switch from considering the relationship as contractual or familial, depending on what is most convenient for them” (Anderson, 2001: 31). Moreover, Shah points out that it is usually families of lower socioeconomic standings which employ these kinship terms, using this as negotiation and a way of avoiding paying higher salaries, whereas “wealthy, aristocratic masters actively discourage any kinship linkages from the servant; the emphasis is on distinction and difference” (Shah, 2000: 106-7).

Adiga’s novel indicates that the kinship terms are not always welcome by servants who understand that this is a social device which denigrates the servants and exploits them unfairly. Speaking of the drivers he later employs, Balram points out: “I don’t insult any of them by calling them my ‘family’ either. They are my employees, I’m their boss, that’s all. I make them sign a contract and I sign it too, and both of us must honour that contract. That’s all” (Adiga, 2008: 302). Balram recognises that the patronage system he came from weakens the servants’ position and compromises their dignity.

Apart from the address of kinship terms, male servants are also commonly denoted as ‘boys’, whatever their chronological ages, which has traditionally added a layer of emasculation by stripping these serving men of their right to status via seniority. Furthermore, the colonial construction of serving men as ‘boys’ “defuse[s] the threat of the presence of adult males” (Chin, 1998: 71) working in close proximity with women of the employer’s family and class.<sup>4</sup>

The employment of actual boys, i.e. young male servants, is popular in South Asian cultures, indoctrinating the tradition of service from a young age. In many of the case studies here (Triton of *Reef*, Manucci of *Moth Smoke*, Sam of *Sam’s Story*, Balram of *The White Tiger*), the male servants are mere boys, some barely teenagers. Such young servants are not only easily trained and malleable, but many develop a useful hero-worship of their employers, and an ingrained obedience which is encouraged by the servants’ own family: “‘Mister Salgado is a real gentleman. You must do whatever the hell he tells you.’ My uncle pulled my ear. ‘You understand, *kola*? Just do it.’ I was eleven years old...My uncle was escorting me to a house in a town I had never been to before” (Gunsekera, 1994: 15). Hero-worship of employers is a real and even fairly commonplace phenomenon amongst domestic servants who are anxious to associate themselves more with their employer and that better class, than with people of their own class. It is more common with the younger servants, who have yet to be disillusioned by realisation or experience of exploitation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Chin’s work is on colonial construction of Chinese male domestics as boys to defuse the threat of men of a different race working in close proximity with European women.

<sup>5</sup> In one of the case studies in Lau, 2010, the situation depicted a female domestic servant who was so bedazzled by her mistress that she forsook her own family to embed herself entirely in her mistress’ family, in serving the mistress’ needs and wants, to the extent of loving her mistress’ baby while ignoring her own, and even sleeping with her mistress’ husband in order to keep the husband from straying or leaving her mistress.

Some, as Adiga observes, never having been allowed to complete their schooling, are simply brainwashed:

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, 2008: 193)

Whether employing young boys or older men as male servants, the South Asian tradition of having male household servants is a long established one. In the majority of instances, as the case studies indicate, young male servants either serve bachelor masters, or else an entire household. It would be less common to find young male servants serving only a mistress – the former may find this just *too* emasculating a position, to be subservient to a woman, albeit one of a higher social class, and the latter may find it threatening, despite her higher social status.

That servants and employers must belong to different classes is evident. However, servants and employers have to live in close proximity; many in fact reside in the same house. They therefore are forced to share many intimacies (despite many efforts to create boundaries, such as occupying different domestic spaces, utilising separate sets of vessels, etc). The enforced shared intimacy unsurprisingly has an effect on class barriers and the relationship between employer and servant. “Domestic service...provides a setting where class is reproduced and challenged on a daily basis...domestic service interactions constitute the most intense, sustained contact with members of other classes that most [people] encounter” (Dickey, 2000: 463). This sustained contact commonly means that class barriers are doubly enforced, in order to enable intimacy without compromising status. On both sides of the class chasm, living so closely with members of ‘the other’ class means there has to be a constant negotiation within the domestic confines, power balances constantly shifting as the servant classes attempt to gain leverage and influence, while the employers attempt to prevent the same. This paper will investigate some close ups of these telling encounters, noting the constructed and carefully sustained chasm between master and servant, observing the extent of power masters have over servants, and the weapons of the servants in fighting this dominance and mastery.

### Selected Literary Case Studies

These case studies comprising four novels and two short stories are drawn from five authors of contemporary South Asian social realism fiction: Aravind Adiga, Romesh Gunasekera, Mohsin Hamid, Elmo Jayawardena, and Lavanya Shankaran. It is important have an appreciation of the positionality of these authors, whose work depict and discuss the master-servant interaction. Of course, the very fact that their works are written in English already badges them at one level.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, although ethnically and culturally South Asian (Adiga and Sankaran of Indian origin, Gunasekera and Jayawardena of Sri Lankan origin, and Hamid of Pakistani origin), all these authors have lived fairly international lives, which in itself is a marker of privilege. They are clearly members of the middle-upper, upper and elite classes, all highly educated professionals, many of them having attended extremely prestigious universities in the west, and all also having had international careers.

Their position, therefore, is that as members of the master/employer class, not of the servant class.<sup>7</sup> That said, many of these stories are written from the perspective and in the voice of the servants. In Gunasekera's *Reef*, for instance, the novel is written in large part from the perspective of Triton, the servant, who comes into service with Mister Salgado at a tender eleven years of age. It is a telling social commentary from the point of view of a child, as well as that of a servant, but it could also be said that Triton's thoughts and words are scripted by the member of the employer class. This could be seen as re-Orientalism at work, the subalterns continuing in their subalternism by being spoken for by their employers. However, although there is an issue of representation, in the absence of fiction in English being written by members of the servant class<sup>8</sup>, these texts were nevertheless selected for their detailed depiction of male servants within South Asian households.

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<sup>6</sup> **Aravind Adiga** was born in Madras, grew up in Mangalore, southern India. He emigrated with his family to Sydney, Australia, and later studied at Columbia University, New York and Magdalen College, Oxford. He now lives in Mumbai.

**Romesh Gunasekera** was born in Sri Lanka, educated in Colombo, and the Philippines, then read English and Philosophy at Liverpool University, UK. He lives in London but travels widely and has recently been a writer-in-residence in Copenhagen, Singapore and Hong Kong.

**Mohsin Hamid** was born in Lahore. He attended Princeton University and Harvard Law School, and had worked as a management consultant in New York and London. He now lives between Lahore, New York and London, and other places.

**Elmo Jayawardena** was Chief Pilot of Sri Lankan Airlines and an Instructor Captain with Singapore Airlines. He now lives in Sri Lanka after his retirement from Singapore Airlines.

**Lavanya Sankaran** attended Bryn Mawr College, US, and has worked in investment banking in New York and consulting in India. She now lives in Bangalore.

<sup>7</sup> There are very few if any at all known texts in English written by servants. *A Life Less Ordinary*, by Baby Halder (published by Zubaan in 2002) is the exception, and this too was a novel written by a Bengali servant with her master's active and extensive help and encouragement, and which was subsequently translated into English (by Urvashi Butalia).

<sup>8</sup> Their very class places considerable obstacles in the likelihood of servants being able to write fluently in English, having access to editors' and agents' services, and having connections in the literary publishing network.

*Reef* contains one of the most detailed, subtle and beautifully unfolded depictions of the 'boy' servant in South Asia. Once rid of Joseph, an older, crusty servant, Triton comes into his own. He is thrilled to serve his master, possessive of him, glad of Mister Salgado's happiness with Miss Nili, and becomes deft at anticipating his master's wants, and the wants of his friends and his girlfriend. Triton turns into an accomplished cook, and serves wonderful meals to his master's friends. He also watches and listens to his master and his friends very carefully. He clearly has a strong fascination with his master's social circle, while being very aware of his own place outside it. He appears to live his life through his master's life and through vicariously observing his master. Although Triton is a loyal and even hero-worshipping servant, it is clear from the novel that his services, his care and good provision of food and excellent domestic organisation, can only do so much to ease his master's heart. Triton is treated well, given a large degree of freedom to run the house and attend to his duties, but is never fully in his master's confidence, which is the place of privilege Triton himself would not have dared aspire to, even though he has clearly earned it by the length, excellence, and loyalty of his service.

In another piece of writing, a short story called "A House in the Country," Gunsekera portrays a slightly different situation, that of a much older male domestic servant, but in this scenario, it is the servant who largely takes charge of delineating his job and the limits of the relationship. Ray, the employer, having just returned to that part of the world, is hesitant to dictate roles and boundaries, and Siri, the man hired as a builder to help in house construction, turns himself into Ray's man-of-all jobs.

The old conventions of Colombo serfdom died years ago, but Siri kept saying 'Sir' and circumscribing their roles. He developed his job from artisan, to supervisor, to cook, night-watchman and, in effect, the servant. Ray felt things had to change incrementally; he acquiesced and played the roles Siri expected. Siri himself was too deep in this world of manners to feel the pull of revolution being preached across the country. (Gunsekera, 1992: 14)

In this story, Gunsekera depicts a servant who rigidly adheres to outdated social conventions and enforces the master-servant relationship of old, managing in a sense to control his employer – however benevolently – and to use his local knowledge and dignified bearing to gain the upper-hand, while insisting on his inferior position. It would seem that seniority, cultural know-how, and a diffident master may add up to the position where a servant is able to have a larger degree of control and power than is otherwise the

norm. However, as Adiga points out, servitude is so “hammered” into a servant that it would seem Siri, given every opportunity to do otherwise, prefers to play the role of the servant.

That said, Siri may insist on being a servant, but he does make judgements about his employer, even if for most part he diplomatically reserves that judgement. The male servant judging the employer is not uncommon, and it is possible that this ability to pass judgement is a way of restoring to the male servant a sense of power. In a short story, Sankaran depicts the relationship between a male driver, Rangappa, and his “May-dum”. His first reaction to his employer is that of near outrage, as well as fear of his respectability being compromised:

Rangappa’s thoughts held him paralyzed in disbelief. He couldn’t reconcile the bizarre figure he had witnessed with the haughty memsahib of his imaginings. That slip of a girl, no older than his teenaged sister surely, was practically *naked*: wearing nothing more than a man’s banian vest and a pair of loose shorts that, together, exposed most of her legs, all of her arms and a good bit of her chest. The maid didn’t seem bothered by this, and Rangappa immediately worried: what manner of a house was this. He was a decent, respectable man. (Sankaran, 2005: 77)

Although a servant, Rangappa reacts as a South Asian male, judging his employer’s morals on gendered grounds of (in)appropriate attire. Although of a lower class, although fairly desperate for a good job, although ultimately dependent on his female employer’s goodwill, Rangappa is nevertheless able to assume the superiority of judging his employer’s morals because he is a man, even if a servant. In select instances, gender can apparently take momentary precedence over class.

Rangappa never forgets his place as socially inferior to his May-dum, nor does he step out-of-line in all his dealings with her, but there are flickers of indication that Rangappa perhaps is less emasculated serving a female than a male employer. There are still areas in which Rangappa can exercise his male prerogatives in ways which being accountable to a male employer would not permit him the freedom of doing. “The car had arrived from the showroom about six months after he’d joined. He had inspected it with extreme pride and possessiveness. This was *his* car, really – the one he would drive, the one that he’d be seen driving” (Sankaran, 2005: 81). It is questionable as to whether Rangappa would dare feel this degree of possessiveness towards the car if he was driving a male employer; but given that Rangappa perceives the car as being a male domain which his female employer would not seek to exert ownership over, he feels able to regard the car as his territory, without feeling he is presuming too far.

By contrast, the most emasculated male servant of our selected texts is Balram, Adiga’s protagonist in *The White Tiger*.<sup>9</sup> Not only does Balram serve a male rather than a female employer, he is forced to serve a whole family of masters, and this exacerbates his emasculation. In the course of service, Balram is routinely exploited, threatened, beaten,

<sup>9</sup> Adiga’s text is case studied quite extensively in this paper because Balram is a character who best exemplifies some of the points this paper is attempting to convey, and his situation is a detailed and candid depiction of the situation of a male domestic servant.



and is expected to show complete obedience and loyalty. He is even expected to take the blame for running over and killing a child which his employer's wife was responsible for. Eventually Balram kills his favourite and least-guilty employer, escapes his servitude, and sets himself up as an entrepreneur, leaving his family behind to face the dire consequences of his actions. Pushed beyond endurance, Balram may have managed to escape the daily emasculation of his servitude, but to do so, he has had to exile himself from his entire family, social structure and his place in the system. He has also had to accept irreparable damage to his family, but so hardened by his own hardships is Balram that he seems to accept even this without regret.

Sam, of Jayawardena's *Sam's Story*, stands as the exact polar opposite of the knowing, cynical, disillusioned and eventually corrupted Balram. Sam is a village boy from a destitute background who, like so many others of his age and class, is sent to work in a rich man's house. He is a little simple, a little slow-minded, and many things he encounters in an affluent setting are highly alien to his experience as well as to his values. The commentary from the slightly retarded/slow servant boy is an ingenuous take on class chasms in Sri Lanka. Sam's concerns are so far from his master's concerns that it shows up the gulf between the haves and have-nots. Strangely enough, perhaps protected by his simplicity and lack of guile, Sam is not particularly emasculated by his job or his role. He performs all tasks required of him willingly enough, and learns of the inferiority of his position without too much rancour. Sam is perhaps less emasculated partly because he is treated with thoughtfulness and generosity by his employers, but he is also infantilised by them, as they regard him as more ignorant than he is.

Unlike all the literary works heretofore discussed, Hamid's *Moth Smoke* does not seek to showcase the servant's positionality, nor is the relationship between master and servant the primary plotline in the novel. However, although a subplot, the master-servant relationship echoes and reflects the main storyline, of Darashikoh's downward spiral from upper-middle class to dispossessed. Refusing to partake in and derive unfair benefits from the class structured society he lives within, disillusioned with the system, Darashikoh, originally from a good background and socialising in the most elite of Karachi's circles, ends up jobless, penniless, and eventually resorts to crime. His young house servant, Manucci, who sees to all of his domestic needs, acts like a barometer of Darashikoh's descent of class and prospects, in terms of Manucci's diminishing regard and respect for Darashikoh, and the taking of ever increasing liberties. The reader, through Manucci's actions and judgements, is given a deeper understanding of how far Darashikoh has fallen

within the echelons of his own society's system. Darashikoh realises his lowest point is reached when Manucci deserts him.

Manucci is gone. My own servant has left me, left because of one little slap. That boy had better pray I never see him again. To think that I fed him, sheltered him for all these years, and this is his loyalty, his gratitude. (Hamid, 2001: 179)

What am I going to do? I don't know how to cook or clean or do the wash. And I'll be damned if I'm going to learn. The only people in my neighbourhood who don't have servants are servants themselves. (Hamid, 2001: 206)

This story implies that the class divide and structure is in large part upheld, performed, and enforced by the servant class, whether intentionally or otherwise. Darashikoh's superior position (which is already greatly weakened by his declining finances) had become partly dependent upon Mannuci's recognition of and obeisance to it, and can therefore quite quickly be undermined by Manucci when the servant withdraws his service and allegiance.

These selected texts show a wide range of roles played by male servants in South Asia, and expectations their employers have of them. There is a great diversity too, in the levels of ingratiation, subservience and deference expected from each servant, in the levels of autonomy afforded each servant, and consequently, in the levels of emasculation each male servant endures as an unwritten part of his job specification. However, what is common to all these cases is that there exists a definite class difference between employers and servants, and it is the perception of that difference which largely defines how employers treat servants, and how servants react to employers. The following section unpacks some of the ways in which masters exercise power over their servants, some of the commonplace abuses, and also how servants employ weapons of the weak in order to redress their powerlessness and regain some self respect and autonomy.

### **Performing class chasms**

In a number of stories about South Asian servants, the literature notes that the class difference between employer and servant can result in the employer regarding the servant as less than human, or at best, lesser humans. Maza observes that however much affection and concern employers felt for their servants,

[I]t never crossed their minds that these men and women were beings like themselves. Masters and mistresses allowed their servants into their bedrooms, undressed before them, slept with them, confided in them, and often tolerated their impudence because domestics, in their eyes, were creatures of a different species. So firm stood the invisible barriers of status that this freedom and intimacy posed not the slightest of threats to the domestic and social hierarchy. (Maza, 1981: p19)

Both Balram of *The White Tiger* and Sam of *Sam's Story* observe that in the affluent households of their masters, pet animals are commonly treated better than servants or members of the servant class. Balram states this more directly and uncompromisingly: "The rich expect their dogs to be treated like humans, you see – they expect their dogs to

be pampered, and walked, and petted, and even washed!...‘Don’t pull the chain so hard! They’re worth more than you are!’” (Adiga, 2008: 78). Sam, however, slowly unfolds his observations of how his employers’ dog, was treated when it fell ill.

Bhurus was lucky he was a rich dog. He got the best possible attention. The van was there to take him to the doctor. Harrison was there to drive and I was there to carry him...The medicine too was free. ...People came to see him because he was sick...

Life was never like that for us, the poor people. Back home in our village, it was very difficult when anybody got sick. That is why so many died young. There were no vans to go and no Harrisons to drive; no one to carry us to the doctors. No one visited to see the sick. We were lucky if we got any medicine.

When we got really ill we had to find our way to the nearby town and wait for hours in a long line to see the doctors who worked in the government hospital. These doctors ...seldom had the kindness to say something nice to us.

Such times we were worse than dogs.

Bhurus was lucky. He was from the river house. The river house was a rich house. That made all the difference. (Jayawardena, 2005, p78-79)

Sam and Balram both learn that the class chasm is so sharp that it transcends species. Their place on the social hierarchy, as servants and as poor members of society, ranks below that of the dogs of their employers, in material terms, in practical needs, as well as in luxuries. This valuation of him is likely to further erode the servant’s self-worth.

A servant’s identity, moreover, can be further eroded by the expectation the employer may have of ownership over the servant, not just in terms of the servant’s time and obedience, but over his actions, body, emotions, even over his innocence, as Adiga illustrated:

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid, middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse...Doesn’t the driver’s family protest? Far from it. They would actually go about bragging. Their boy Balram had taken the fall, gone to Tihar Jail for his employer. He was loyal as a dog. He was the perfect servant. (Adiga, 2008: 170)

Adiga presents a scenario where the perfect servant equates to a total loss of selfhood, and perversely, pride in that loss. It is, of course, as his novel takes pains to underline, an abuse of the relative positions of master and servant, and also an abuse of the person of the servant, physically, psychologically, and socially.

In much of the literature on male servants, it is clear that abuse of servants is commonplace and even casual. Verbal abuse is the norm, and even rough treatment seems standard behaviour.

“A sharp blow landed on my head...

‘Know what that was for?’

‘Yes, sir,’ I said – with a big smile on my face...

‘Do you have to hit the servants, Father?’

‘... ‘They expect it from us, Ashok. Remember that – they respect us for it.’”

(Adiga, 2008, p71-72)

Adiga also points out that the body language of the servant class is circumscribed to constantly demonstrate and reinforce their lowly status: “They [the rickshaw-pullers] were not allowed to sit on the plastic chairs put out for the customers; they had to crouch near the back, in that hunched-over, squatting posture common to servants in every part of India” (Adiga, 2008, p24).

The body language and even facial expressions of servants are typically forced into placating and deferential modes, as part of the unwritten emotional labour where workers are expected to display certain emotions via a facial and/or bodily display, as part of the job (Hochschild, 1983). Although male servants have much more control than female servants over what they may wear, where they may venture, and even how they use the spaces they occupy, they are nevertheless still expected to conform in terms of emotional labour, and to fit the role of the ingratiating, eager, ever-amiable servant. In many of the literary texts, the male servants grin or smile a lot to demonstrate obedience, amiability and ingratiation.

He was always that busy. I had time only to grin when he asked these questions. So I grinned. This was a ritual every morning when he was home. As he saw me, I think he got ready with his lines and I was ready for him with my grin. (Jayawardena, 2005: 53)

In *Moth Smoke*, when a visitor teases Manucci, he responds at once, in the usual servant over-reaction:

“Well, well, Mr Manucci,” Fatty Chacha says. “Looking very smart this evening.”

Manucci’s face breaks into an enormous smile. (Hamid, 2001: 70-71)

When Balram in *The White Tiger* is undeservedly struck on the head by his employer, he too responds with a big smile. The receiving of queries, authority and even abuse with smiles and grins is part of the servant’s attempt to placate the employer, minimise further abuse, and may constitute part of a survival strategy, a management technique to keep the employer continually reassured of having the upper-hand. Desperate to please in order not

to be found wanting, the servant performs his compliance and strives to appear non-threatening and utterly docile in all interactions with his masters.

Apart from direct verbal or physical abuse, there are also other forms of abuse, such as Rangappa's otherwise kindly "May-dum" who takes the liberty of changing his name to Raju, casting him into a different identity altogether, and one which suits her better, without consulting Rangappa himself. Rangappa's response goes beyond smiling and grinning; he makes himself entirely sensitive to her wants:

He learned to anticipate her movements, running to carry her bags as soon as she emerged from the shops, staying alert for the sudden sound of her voice. Watchful to see which side of the car she approached, so that he could have the car door open and ready for her. After awhile, he learnt to tell, just by looking at her dress, whether she wanted to visit the gym, go shopping, or meet with her friends. Sometimes, he could even guess correctly what music she would play on the car stereo. (Sankaran, 2005: 83)

Perhaps it is by behaving in this solicitous manner, with an element of protectiveness, that Rangappa is actually negotiating his position, not just as that of the menial to be commanded, but the intelligent service provider who can act on his own and therefore could regain autonomy and even command some degree of respect for his abilities. Perhaps, therefore, it is not by defiance or sabotage, but by eager compliance that the relatively disempowered servant can restore some degree of self-worth.

While this may seem a wise strategy, it is likely one born out of necessity as there are few ways for a servant to defy effectively. A master can command the servant's entire life whereas the servant is peripheral, dispensable and easily replaceable for a master. In *Reef*, Triton's gentle and easy going master showed how easily even such a master could cause much impact on his servant's life: "You'd better be out of this house before dark. Take your things and go. I don't want to see you here again.'...The course of Joseph's life had changed with those three short sentences" (Gunasekera, 1994, p50). A servant's place and dismissal is entirely at the whim of the master, who can terminate employment in a

moment, without advance notice, compensation, severance pay or any other softening of the blow.<sup>10</sup>

The servants' only security – if security it is at all – may well be that of Rangappa's strategy, to become as indispensable as they can make themselves, even if that involves bowing and scraping, and emotional labour. "The cardinal virtue demanded of them [the servants] was loyalty (fidelite), or gratuitous attachment to their masters' interests" (Maza, 1981: 1). The word "gratuitous" is significant, because it is likely that not only is this attachment without grounds, it is likely to also be non-reciprocal. And yet, it is precisely gratuitous attachment which seems to be a currency which employers are willing to accept, and servants may in fact coin this currency as part of the limited number of ways in which they are able to renegotiate their positions, and thus decrease the emasculating nature of their work.

### Weapons of the Weak<sup>11</sup>

The texts under discussion in this paper demonstrate a wide range of coping mechanisms that the male servants employ, some consciously and some less consciously, to neutralise the emasculating effect of servitude and to regain some sort of pride which can be a balm for the bruised pride of having to submit to another man so thoroughly as a male servant often does to his master.

Many of the servants depicted in the literature spend a lot of their time just watching and observing the employers. Some seem to be fascinated by their employers, some are merely learning from them. Balram, for example, routinely eavesdrops on his employers and their friends, even pretending to examine the car, to sweep the floor, listening in on their conversations on any pretext. Perhaps the ardent desire to learn and to know more is also a way of learning how to survive and best cope in the world of their employers. For some servants, like Triton, fascination spills over into hero-worship, and then even possessiveness. Triton would refer to his employer as "My Mr Salgado" and similarly, Balram to his employer as "My Ashok".

My Ashok's face reappears now in my mind's eye...It was such a handsome face that sometimes I couldn't take my eyes off it. Picture a six-foot-tall fellow, broad-shouldered, with a landlord's powerful, punishing forearms; yet always gentle...and kind to those around him, even his servants and driver. (Adiga, 2008: 46)

So delighted and enraptured with 'his' Ashok, his employer, Balram even says that "[...]where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began, I could not tell: no servant can ever tell what the motives of his heart are" (Adiga, 2008: 187). It is

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted a servant can also leave his master's employment without notice, and this is not uncommon also, but the impact on the employer is usually far less serious, and will not directly sever the employer's entire livelihood.

<sup>11</sup> This phrase is borrowed with reference from the title of James Scott's 1985 *Weapons of the Weak*: a study of everyday local resistance on the part of peasants, illustrating how the powerless resist but not overtly through formal action.



possible that Balram (or Adiga) is here pointing out that the servant can be so utterly mastered that he is no longer even master of his own interests.

Balram, aspiring to be the perfect servant in his devotion to Ashok, wishes to associate himself as closely as possible, even become part of the family in some way. In fanciful terms, Balram expresses his vision of them, placing himself consistently on lower social rungs, but finding fulfilment in his service to them: "I would drive them wherever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant-god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress, Ram and Sita" (Adiga, 2008: 46). It is possible that this is another instance of the servant's gratuitous attachment to the master's interests (Maza, 1981), which is intended to secure him a place in their loyalty, but Balram of course fails to take into account that loyalty is not reciprocal between master and servant.

There are instances when the literature demonstrates servants deceiving their employers as a management technique and flagrantly lying. Rangappa in *The Red Carpet* plans to bring his employer to his home, to meet his family. At first Rangappa is delighted his mistress has agreed to come, but then he suddenly has an attack of anxiety:

He had a sudden image of her appearing in scanty shorts, a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other, and his heart almost failed. What if she did dress like that? Then, he immediately resolved, he would just have to pretend that he couldn't find the right directions; he had lost his way, lost his mind, something like that. (Sankaran, 2005: 89)

This passage is at once hilarious and revealing. So different are the class standards, expectations, social norms, and values between the mistress and the servant, that in this instance, the servant genuinely fears being shamed by his mistress. In order to cope, should such an eventuality occur, Rangappa is prepared to lie, to appear incompetent, or play the madman, to do the absurd all in order to avoid confrontation as well as to avoid compromising his own position and respectability. This passage demonstrates the response of the relatively powerless, who are prepared to go to extremes, rather than lose what little self-respect and prestige is left. Or as Sam from *Sam's Story* puts it, "I guess when you are poor it is alright to lie. That's the only way you can get others to notice you and make you feel important" (Jayawardena, 2005, p45).

Adiga presents a different kind of lying in the instance of Balram making a mockery of his employers' naivety and ignorance. When Ashok notices Balram touching his eye, he calls his wife's attention to this gesture, mistaking the random gesture as a mark

of respect and piety. "The two of them kept an eye open for every tree or temple we passed by, and turned to me for a reaction of piety – which I gave them, of course, with growing elaborateness: first just touching my eye, then my neck, then my clavicle, and even my nipples" (Adiga, 2008, p90).

Deceiving an employer, sometimes even without material gain, is part of a servant's revenge. And revenge is taken not necessarily because of a wrong directly perpetrated on the servant by that master, but simply by the emasculation of the servant as a result of their relative positions. "(A time-honoured servants' tradition. Slapping the master when he's asleep. Like jumping on pillows when masters are not around. Or urinating into their plants. Or beating or kicking their pet dogs. Innocent servants' pleasures.)" (Adiga, 2008: 184-185). Adiga, in fact, goes further, and adds, "Of course, a billion servants are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses" (Adiga, 2008: 125).

In addition to getting revenge upon their employers, servants can also be antagonistic to fellow-servants, particularly in the battle for dominance, where the arena for power is already so limited. In *Reef*, Triton was delighted when Joseph was made to leave, as that left Triton in sole charge, and he no longer had to share his master or the household space he had control over. Adiga writes: "Is there any hatred on earth like the hatred of the number two servant for the number one?" (2008: 77), and shows Balram blackmailing and cowing his fellow servants to force them to do his will, which is in this instance, to be made the family driver in Delhi. "Servants need to abuse other servants. It's been bred into us, the way Alsatian dogs are bred to attack strangers. We attack anyone who's familiar" (Adiga, 2008: 130). In-fighting between servants shows the weak turning on each other, very likely because attacking the powerful is usually not a viable option. Adiga adds that "(servants, incidentally, are obsessed with bring called 'sir' by other servants, sir.)" (2008: 106), showing a craving for respect, to neutralise the rankling of having to submit to a master and emasculate themselves. Servants establishing a strict hierarchy amongst themselves is evident in much of the literature, and that hierarchy matters all the more because each miniscule step on the much foreshortened ladder means a lot to those who are trying to retain some vestige of self-respect, despite the nature of their jobs.

### Conclusion

Male domestic servants are usually far more visible than female domestics, and their presence and servitude is part of the status accorded to employers, of being able to afford a male domestic. It would appear that given the South Asian gender hierarchy, being waited upon by men is even more prestigious than being waited upon by women.

This article has considered the social gulf that exists between master and servant, and, in fact, it is that very differential which identifies and defines these relative positions. It is also this differential which places the servant in such a powerless position, so much subject to a master's whims, and so much at the mercy of the master that he is forced to play a deeply subservient role to ensure the security of his position; which for the *male* servant in a South Asian context, can go beyond being merely degrading, becoming deeply emasculating.

The emasculation of the male servant is something which may embitter the servant and which may define his identity and compromise his masculinity, but is an issue which is of no apparent concern to the employer. The servant offers loyalty, ingratiation, gratuitous

attachment, accepts abuse, and performs unpaid emotional labour, all in the hope of strengthening his position and even becoming indispensable to the employer. Adiga even suggests that this can become so deeply ingrained that it may not be mere performance: "A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse" (Adiga, 2008: 176). And much of the reason for this situation is, as Adiga identifies, the Indian family. In order to keep his family fed, safe, and merely surviving, the male servant sells his masculinity and self-respect to the master, along with his labour and time.

However, it is not completely one-sided, as examples in this paper have shown. Some like Balram play the servile servant, the pious, the ignorant whatever role wanted of him, in order to defuse the employers' anger and suspicions and earn their trust. Rangappa in Shankaran's short story, dares to hold the higher moral ground, partly because of the gender superiority he assumes, even though his class places him far below his female employer. And even the most beneficent of employers, like Sam's boss, are not universally loved:

Secretly I hoped that one day I would catch my Master plucking *gotukola* and *kankun* from the riverbank. It was a very bad thought. I didn't like to think like that. But sometimes it came and went away fast and I must admit there was a little fun for me just to imagine the boss man standing in the riverbank mud and bending to pick *gotukola* and *kankun* leaves to eat with his coupon rice. (Jayawardena, 2005: 167)

It is possible that these fantasies or imaginings are just one more technique which male servants use in the attempt to equalise their highly unequal positions, and to regain some sense of power in relation to their employers, a management method which would enable them to stand a little taller and feel less emasculated.

These stories all indicate that emasculation is likely to happen to male servants whether their masters are kind or cruel, whether they serve one or many masters (and/or mistresses). The worst of masters abuse and exploit, while even the kindest of masters patronise and control. Servants are able to negotiate and regain a degree of control over their roles, and perhaps even over their employers, through strategies such as being deceitful, being ostentatiously subservient and ingratiating, through triumphing over other servants, and a whole range of weapons of the weak. However, all this is merely to limit

the damage of emasculation male servants endure, rather than be able to avoid being emasculated at all.

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