

Social Criticism in Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*

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In the words of Vikas Swarup “Aravind Adiga, has boldly gone where few Indian writers choose to venture, casting his gaze beyond the complacent smugness of middle-class drawing rooms to the anger and squalor lurking in the underbelly of urban India (Swarup 11).” The novel has been set in a fictional town of Kittur, a microcosm of India- a small and ordinary town in India. The author has given us a glimpse of the various ills affecting the town of Kittur and thus by implied comparison India through various character sketches. The characters are representative of various classes and castes that inhabit our society.

Between the Assassinations (2008) showcases the most beloved aspects of Adiga's writing to brilliant effect: the class struggle rendered personal and the fury of the underdog. Adiga has aptly captured the reality of our society in a kalideoscopic manner in his novel, *Between the Assassinations*. He has captured the various malpractices that are rampant in our society such as corruption, child labour, social discrimination on the grounds of caste, religion, class and gender through a story of ‘everyman’ of ‘everytown’ of the period of transition between the assassinations of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi viz. 1984 to 1991. Adiga seems to suggest that for our country to move on the path of progress we have to tackle these burning issues. According to Chandrahas, “Adiga's main theme, one at which he hacks away relentlessly, is power relations – between rich and poor, master and servant, high-caste and low-caste, majority and minority, even haughty English and the low vernacular – and, as a consequence of these relations, moral perversion and subaltern rage.” (<http://middlestage.blogspot.in/2008/11/on-aravind-adigas-between.html>)

Adiga has highlighted how religious fanaticism is exploited by some evil people in our country through the character of Ziauddin. Ziauddin, a twelve year old, sixth of the eleventh children of a poor family, works in a tea stall. Working at a tender age, he develops a sense of isolation from the society. Left to fend for himself, he has to struggle for survival like an adult. In the town of Kittur, Muslims are discriminated against and are not part of the mainstream society. The marginalization of the Muslims extends to employment opportunities as well i.e. the shopkeepers near the railway station never hire a Muslim worker but Ramanna Shetty employs Ziauddin due to his innocence. After a stay for four months with his parents, the boy returns completely transformed, losing his innocence. He develops a sense of pride in his religion and yearns to know his ancestral roots. Soon, however, the honest boy metamorphs into a thief stealing small things. This leads to his removal from one work after another. While fighting, he always affirms his identity as a Pathan, slapping his chest, “From the land of the Pathans, far off the north, where there are mountains full of snow! I'm not a Hindu! I don't do hanky panky!” (p.1) The religious pride and a sense of separation spreads poison in the mind of the young boy. A feeling of insecurity and mistrust makes him hate the Hindus with whom he had spent many happy moments of life. It is clear that he has been brain washed by some religious extremists and this makes the young boy hate the others. He shouts, “I am a Pathan!... We came here and built the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort in Delhi.”(p.4)

Ziauddin's quest for identity increases when he comes in contact with a north Indian Muslim Pathan, with whom he develops a sense of belonging. The stranger's

expensive clothes, handsome face and his perfume make him take a pride in his acquaintance. He feels “this man is a countryman of mine” (p.15). The stranger tempts Ziauddin to count the number of trains with Indian soldiers, which leads to some terrorist activity. Appealing to his Muslim Pathan identity, the stranger tries to get the work done. However, Ziauddin realizes that he is being used by the self-centered terrorist and escapes from his clutches and leads a normal life as a coolie at the railway station (Nikam,2011: p. 137).The novelist has through Ziauddin’s story tried to probe into the causes behind terrorism and how innocent people are used as pawns by the real perpetrators of terrorism.

In this bureaucratic world, truth is the first casualty as is discovered by the upright journalist Gururaj Kamath. He is fed up of the bureaucratic corruption, injustice and politics around him. (Nikam, 2011: p. 143) Adiga has beautifully brought out how truth has been suppressed in today’s world through the character of Gururaj, a journalist who is on a mission to discover the truth. Adiga has shown how several layers of pretension are peeled away from his eyes before he recognizes the fact that newspapers are a means of doing business and nothing more than that.

Adiga shows how media is manipulative and what the readers perceive to be truth is nothing but a capitalist oriented truth. In one of the news, an employee of a big tycoon, Mr. Engineer, is involved in an accident but the truth is manipulated with the power of money. Gururaj gets the news from the Gurkha, a local watchman, that Mr. Engineer himself hit a man on his way back home; however the police reports were changed in favour of Mr. Engineer. The tycoon gets one of the employees in his factory to say that he was driving the car when it happened. The employee gives the police a sworn affidavit. Adiga has pointed out that how the tycoon with the power of money and influence is able to manipulate both the police and the judicial system. It is important to note that Mr Engineer gives the police four or five thousand and gets the car changed as it was a new Maruti Suzuki; giving the police another thousand to change the identity of the killer car to a Fiat, and Mr. Engineer has his car and drives around the town again. The police are aware of the truth. When Gururaj, a man of principles learns the truth he wants to print the truth and reinvestigate the matter but his editor tries to bury the matter. Gururaj bursts with anger, “A man might have been sent to jail for no good reason; a guilty man might be walking free. And all you can say is, let's drop the matter”(p.125). Gururaj looks at the editor-in-chief with new eyes. “The old man has a nimbus around him, of all the things he had learned over the length of his career and could never publish.” (p.125) The fact of the matter is that the newspaper is owned by a businessman who serves only capitalist interest: “This is the fate of every journalist in this town and in this state and in this country and maybe in this whole world ... It is a false earth I am walking on. An innocent man is behind bars, and a guilty man walks free. Everyone knows that this is so and not one has the courage to change it” (p.129).

In the novel, Adiga has focused on how venereal disease is a taboo in our society. Although many people suffer from it , they do not go to the hospital for fear of censure in society and resort to treatment from quacks and suffer in the process. A case in point is Ratnakar Shetty, a father of three daughters, who toils day and night to save money for their dowry in this materialistic world. He has adopted the profession of a fake sexologist to fulfill the needs of his family. While coming home in the bus, he sells books and pens among other things. Although, he has saved dowry for his first daughter, he is worried for the next two.

When he has fixed the match of his eldest daughter, he discovers to his horror that the groom suffers from a sexually transmitted disease, which he picked up from a prostitute. Strangely enough the same boy approaches Shetty for a cure. Though Shetty advises him to go a doctor, the boy refuses for fear of social discrimination. Ratnakar brings him to the real sexologist who diagnoses that the boy is suffering from kidney failure.

In India class differences die hard. Although discrimination on the basis of caste is banished by the constitution but in reality it is a part and parcel of everyday Indian life. Even if a poor man works hard and wants to rise up in life it does not mean that he will be accepted by the upper class society as an equal. George, the mosquito man who spreads the pesticides tries to establish a relationship with a rich lady, Mrs. Gomes but fails in the end. As a poor man George realizes, "the biggest difference is, between being rich and being like us? The rich can make mistakes again and again. We make only one mistake, and that's it for us" (p.186). George slowly wins her confidence and becomes her part-time gardener, and then driver.

He also manages to bring his sister, Maria, as a cook. It is his mistaken perception that Mrs.Gomes is different from other rich people. However, she feels that he is slowly trying to take over her household. The cook who is dismissed to make way for George's sister Maria says: "I know what you are trying to do with her! I told her you'll destroy her name and reputation! But she's fallen under your spell" (p.205).

In the words of Nikam, George feels happy to see that Mrs. Gomes has become more than just a mistress to his sister Maria, but a good friend. He hopes Maria can get married soon as she has a status as a cook in a rich woman's house. (Nikam,2011: p. 143) Due to bitterness, poverty and shame he had put off the thought of his marriage so long but "the regret still gnawed at him, created by his contact with this rich woman, that he could have done so much more with his life" (p.207). His delusion is soon shattered. He is instructed by her to spread the pesticides in the gutter in the same manner in the past but now he is aggrieved to know that she still treats him like a servant. Previously, he would move mountains for her but now he has extraordinary hopes from her to be treated with nobility and dignity. He understands, "Oh, these rich people are the same ... We're just trash to them. They'll just use us and throw us out. A rich woman can never see a poor man as a man. Just as a servant" (p.208). Knowing that her reputation is at stake, Mrs.Gomes removes him and his sister from work.

In India, the caste in which one is born leaves a permanent imprint on the person. These ideas are deeply embedded in our psyche and are resistant to change. Adiga has captured this through the case of Shankara, a child born from the union of a Brahmin father and a low caste Hoyka woman. He is not secure about his identity and tries to take revenge against the caste biased society by exploding a bomb in his school. He thinks he has "burst a bomb to end the 5,000 year-old caste system that still operates in our country. I have burst a bomb to show that a man should not be judged, as I have been merely by the accident of his birth" (p.59) .

Shankara is under the false impression that his teachers at the school must be mocking him behind his back. Exploding a crude bomb in his school is his way of hitting back at the caste discrimination he faces. After the bomb explosion he dreams that he would be treated in a different way in jail, as a martyr of some kind. The Hoyka self-advancement committee would take out marches for him, and the police would not dare touch him. Perhaps, when he was released, great crowds would wave for him- he would

be launched on a political career. Shankara is always treated as someone special among his Hoyka relatives as he is a half-Brahmin and hence much higher than them in the caste scale. He is also rich and hence much higher than them in the class scale. His father, a Brahmin plastic surgeon in the Gulf had married his Hoyka mother to the dismay of Brahmins. Shankara, as a result gets a very problematic identity in the society; neither a Brahmin nor a Hoyka. He would always remain a bastard. He feels that he has the worst of both the castes in his blood: the anxiety and fear of the Brahmin and the propensity to act without thinking of the Hoyka.(Nikam,2011:p. 140)

Social disconnect and his ignorance makes the boy more violent. The Brahmin relatives see him as the product of a daring adventure on the part of his father and consider him as a mixture of started feeling that his father belonged to no caste or race; such people lived for themselves. His mother feels herself inferior in the company of the Brahmin relatives: "She did not want to meet the Brahmin woman alone. Her sole claim to acceptance, to respectability, was the production of a male child, an heir- and if he wasn't in the house, then she had nothing to show. She was just a Hoyka trespassing into a Brahmin's household" (p.61) . Shankara thinks that it is her own fault if she feels distressed in the Brahmin relative's presence. Repeatedly he tells his mother to ignore the Brahmin relatives.

According to Nikam, Adiga through the dilemma of Shankara raises a question whether caste or class is worst in society. Shankara though rich is not given recognition by the upper caste. Although he is the son of a Brahmin, he is never considered a Brahmin. However, his driver who belongs to upper caste, is poor. The old Brahmin who shows sympathy to him cannot afford a car for travelling; however, Shankara has ample wealth (Nikam, 2011: p. 140). He contemplates, "He is of a caste higher than me, but he is poor. What does this mean, caste? Is it just said to yourself ? Caste is a fiction, would it vanish like smoke; if you said, 'I am free', would you realize you had always been free?" (p.69)

Corruption is a major evil affecting India today. It is a rampant and ever growing malaise that affects our society. The point is highlighted by the character of Abbasi, a God fearing muslim businessman. He shuts down his factory as he is aware that the fine needle work done by the women workers in his factory leads them to blindness. Most of his friends who also own similar factories do not have enough social conscience like Abbasi to shut their factories.

To reopen the factory, Abbasi had to overcome several hurdles. He had to face many visits by corrupt officials from various government agencies who had ostensibly come for inspection but had in reality come for taking bribes. "A man has to eat these days, Mr.Abbasi. And prices are rising so fast. Ever since Mrs.Gandhi died, this country began falling apart" (p.26). Since he decides to reopen his shirt factory, he had to pay off the electricity man, water board man, income tax official, sanitary inspector, health inspector, union leaders, and political leaders among others. This is against his principals, however, for his survival, he has to offer bribe: "Rules of the game must be followed at all time" (p.29). Out of frustration he says, " In black-marketing, counterfeiting and corruption, we are the world champions. If they were included in the Olympic games, India would always win gold, silver and bronze in these three" (p.31).

In one of the stories, Adiga has highlighted how the wretched labour class of the town has lost all sense of self-respect and many of them compel their children to go for begging. Ramachandran, who smashes rich people's houses in the Rose Lane of Kittur, is

a smack addict. He beats his wife and forces his children- Soumya and Raju to go for begging from the tourists coming to the town. He has been arrested and beaten many times but nobody can make him leave this addiction. It is really pathetic that his young daughter begs and then brings cigarettes laced with smack for this demonic father who often beats her. The pathetic and sad condition of brother and sister are portrayed thus: "When she came to lie down next to her mother, Raju was still complaining that he had not been given food all day long, and forced to walk from here to there. He saw the red marks on her face and neck, and went silent. She fell on the ground, and went to sleep" (p.155).

It shows that morality is at its lowest ebb here and even children are being exploited for selfish and mean motives. The fact that he indulges in and is addicted to smack and for this exploits the innocence of his young children is brought out in a poignant fashion by Adiga.

To conclude, Adiga has focused our attention towards the various ills that plague our country. It is a social criticism focusing on the poverty and misery of India and its religio-socio-political conflicts. Gross violation of people's liberty and equality, poor-rich divide, corruption, religious fanaticism, child labour and utter sufferings of the subalterns is the theme of the text.

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