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MARGINALIZATION IN ARVIND ADIGA'S BETWEEN THE ASSASSINATIONS

PAVAN VITTHALRAO BHAISARE

Lecturer in English

Acharya Shrimannarayan Polytechnic, Pipri-Wardha, Maharashtra, India

Email id: pavanbhisare27@gmail.com



PAVAN VITTHALRAO
BHAISARE

Abstract

Arvind Adiga is a very talented writer who mainly deals with social issues. This paper focuses on issue of marginalization of people on the basis of caste, class, religion, social and economic status in his second book *Between the Assassinations*. This book is basically a collection of inter-linked stories set in a small town Kittur located on the South-western coast of India. The stories revolve around people of different classes, castes and religions in India. This book mainly reflects the sufferings, problems, humiliation and marginalization of various impoverished and underprivileged characters on the basis of caste, class, religion and status. The anguish, dejection and despair as a result of exploitation of the impoverished of the Indian society are highlighted. We observe poverty, hunger, child labour, exploitation, religious hypocrisy, illiteracy and the place of woman in the society as the common themes in his novels and short stories. It is obvious that Adiga has taken the themes of his works from real life; hence, all his novels and stories have social realism at its base. In all the stories Adiga leaves a positive social message for the readers, as silver lining in the darkest cloud.

Keywords: caste, impoverished, marginalization, humiliation, hypocrisy, poverty.

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This paper intends to critically analyse the role marginalization plays in the lives of the characters of Arvind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*. Adiga has been remarkable in presenting, through his characters, the sufferings of the impoverished. He has skilfully dealt with the sense of alienation his characters go through as result of dire poverty and other odds of life. They seem to be deprived of or denied access to even the basic needs like food, shelter and education which are enjoyed to the fullest by elites of the society. We observe his characters struggling and fighting

against the marginalization they are confronted with due to their caste, class, religion and status.

Marginalization is a process in which individuals are blocked from (or denied full access to) various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group (Wikipedia). *The Oxford Learner's Dictionary* defines marginalization as: "The process or result of making somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; the fact of putting somebody in a position in which they have no power". Similarly, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*

of Sociology defines Marginalization as “a process by which a group or individual is denied access to important positions and symbols of economic, religious, or political power within any society” (Marshall 380).

In view of these definitions, marginalization on the basis of caste, class, religion, culture, status, and gender etc. is one of the predominant evils of Indian society. From the time immemorial, the impoverished strata of society have been experiencing such marginalization due to social divisions that have left a permanent scar on the mind and heart of the downtrodden. These social divisions have their roots in the *Manusmriti* which is considered as the law book of the Hindu social code and domestic life since ancient India. *Manusmriti* has divided the humans in four Varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra and assigned duties to them as per their order in the Varna system. Women, irrespective of their caste, are also considered Shudra by this law book. There is another division which is not included in these four Varnas i.e. “Atishudra”, the untouchables. For centuries, women and untouchables are the worst sufferers who have been deprived of the various rights and privileges that the others enjoyed. Indian intellectuals and social reformers like Jotirao Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Swami Vivekanand etc. have hammered these social odds in Indian society that divide humans from each other. As Vijay Kumar writes, “A nation, a country, a society or a community can never be prosperous where people treat each other on the basis of religion, caste or creed. Where certain people try to get hold of anything and everything and thus deprived the rest of the masses even of their basic commodities like food, shelter, water etc.” (Kumar). Mahatma Gandhi was so much touched and grieved by the sufferings and agony of the untouchables that he expressed his wish to be born as an untouchable. In a speech at Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmadabad on 13th April 1921, he said:

I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable

. . . not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Sudra, but as an Atishudra. (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* 45).

Adiga, a brilliant writer of modern times, in all his novels, focuses his attention predominantly on the wretchedness, sufferings, humiliation and social marginalization of underprivileged characters on the basis of caste, class, religion and status. His second book *Between the Assassinations*, a collection of stories set against the backdrop of small town Kittur also deals with the anguish and dejection of various characters as a result of social marginalization.

In the first story of the book, through the character of Ziauddin, Adiga has underlined how teenage children fall prey to religious fanaticism exploited by some foul people in our country. Ziauddin, a Muslim boy, innocent and hardworking, develops a feeling of marginalization at a tender age from the society around him. At this tender age, where other children enjoy secured life with their family, he struggles for survival doing various kinds of odd jobs like an adult.

As in other parts of the country, in Kittur also, the Muslims are discriminated and alienated from the mainstream society. This marginalization is not limited to daily give and take but extends to job opportunities also. Muslims in Kittur are not given jobs by the locals whereas others get jobs easily. The treatment of Hindus to Muslim in Kittur has developed a sense of alienation in Ziauddin. Their contempt, apathy and insecurity in hiring Muslim are revealed as Ziauddin says: “The Hindus don’t give us jobs; they don’t give us respect. I speak from experience, sir” (12).

He leaves Kittur as innocent. And after four months, he returns to Kittur, completely transformed, with lost ignorance and “with a wildness in eyes” (05). A strange metamorphosis is visible in his nature, attitude, and he has also developed a sense of pride in his religion. He seems brainwashed and his mind has been poisoned with religious fanaticism and feeling of separation. He seems to have developed a sense of belongingness to some other place, may be somewhere in Afghanistan. About the stranger Pathan, he says, “This man is a countryman of yours, Zia. A

countryman of yours!" (12). With this new-born insecurity and mistrust, he develops a feeling of hatred against the Hindus with whom he had shared many joyful moments of life. Thus, the novelist probes into how innocent people are fetched into terrorism and become the target of religious marginalization. The story of Ziauddin is a slap to the Muslim extremists and the Hindus in democratic country like India where the Muslims are humiliated in the name of patriotism and are treated like outsiders.

In India, caste is so deeply rooted in the minds of people that after the independence also the upper-caste people have a feeling of subordination and resentment against the low-caste untouchables. With the Fundamental Rights that the Indian Constitution has bestowed them, they are trying to come out of darkness and make progress. They are trying to uplift themselves socially and economically. But the upper-caste people feel that the untouchables are snatching away their degrees, their jobs and their privileged supremacy. This is depicted in the story of 'Xerox' Ramakrishna, a low-caste, Dalit bookseller. He sells illegally photocopied books at discounted rates on the pavement for which he has been arrested by the police 21 times. Being an untouchable, he is insulted, humiliated and made a laughing stock by the upper caste policemen.

'Xerox', the untouchable, wants to rise himself up socially by doing a respectable work of selling books to earn his living and discarding the filthy family work of cleaning the shit from the toilets of the upper-castes whereas the upper-castes want the "fucking untouchable" to get entrenched to his filthy work, thus, depriving him of the social upliftment. However, he has a rebellion inside who wants to come out of this caste-based marginalization and live life with dignity as he says, "I just love books: I love making them, holding them, and selling them. My father took out shit for a living, sir; he couldn't even read or write. He'd be so proud if he could see that I make my living from books" (39).

The upper caste police inspector arrests him and torchers him with cruelty for selling the banned book *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. 'Xerox'

pleads for his ignorance but is unheard; finally decides to rebel openly against the police. For the lawyer and the policeman who torture him in custody, 'Xerox' is not just a petty bookseller but a representation of the marginalized oppressed class who have begun to challenge the dominant ones.

Despite all restrictions, banishments and humiliation, 'Xerox' tries to set an example for his daughter to select the right job or profession and not to let her will down and: "His daughter sat down too, keeping watch over the book, her back stiff and upright" (43). Though born as an untouchable, 'Xerox' feels a need to rise himself up in the social order which is the only way for an untouchable caste to live with respect and dignity. As Dr. B. R. Ambedkar writes in *Annihilation of Castes*:

There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you challenge your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilize your community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundation of caste will crack and will never be a whole. (Ambedkar 58)

Xerox's rebellion and his daughter's attitude are symbolic that the Dalit will no longer succumb to the marginalization and oppression.

In India, the caste leaves a permanent imprint on a person's identity. Caste-based marginalization is again depicted by Adiga in the story of a low-caste Hoyka boy. Shankara, born of a low-caste Hoyka woman and a Brahmin father becomes the target of humiliation. He finds his identity at stake and tries to avenge the caste-biased society by exploding a bomb in chemistry lab of his school. He assumes 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" (59).

His mother was a low caste Hoyka, married to a Brahmin. She is not accepted by her husband's Brahmin relatives and has always been humiliated by them for being a low caste. She has always been

under fear while facing her husband's relatives: "She did not want to face the Brahmin woman alone. Her sole claim to acceptance, to respectability, was the production of a male child, an heir . . . She was just a Hoyka trespassing onto a Brahmin's household" (52).

Shankara feels an outrage and humiliation and wants to detach himself from his Brahmin relatives. He tells his mother, "If they don't want us, let us not want them" (53). Despite humiliation, his mother wants to be accepted by the relatives. The reason for her rejection and marginalization is her "low caste". The Brahmin relatives thought Shankar to be "a product of buccaneering adventure" (53) of his father; a corruption, that is a mixture of "one part premarital sex and one part caste violation" (53); and outcome is- "this cute little Satan, Shankara" (53). Being a bastard child he faces marginalization from his close Brahmin relatives. Feeling insulted and humiliated by this ill-treatment, once he even thinks to be converted to Christianity and free himself from the agonies of the caste-based humiliation.

Mr. D'Mello, a kind hearted and ardent assistant headmaster who has been working in St Alfanzo School for 33 years and has kept everything in order and discipline. All his life at the school, he has been working hard to keep the boys "pure" in the world of "betrayal, bulging and backstabbing." Although he has the appropriate claim for the post of headmaster, he has been side-lined as the management wanted a headmaster "full of modern ideas" and "smart in appearance". He has been denied of his constitutional and legal right of becoming the headmaster only because he was "old fashioned" rather than "new fashioned" and not "trained in Bangalore or Bombay" (84). He is made to feel unwanted and unimportant. Mr. D'Mello has always been a matter of insult and humiliation on the basis of his ugly appearance and posture as Adiga describes:

He was an overweight man entering the final phase of middle age, he breathed through his mouth, and a thicket of hair poked out his nose. The centerpiece of his body was a massive potbelly, a hard knot of flesh

pregnant with a dozen cardiac arrests. To walk, he had to arch his lower back, tilt his head, and screw his brow and nose together in a foul-looking squint. "Ogre," the boys chanted as he passed. "Ogre, Ogre, Ogre!" (80).

Despite being a good teacher, caring for the students' future and wishing to keep them pure from the corruption of every kind, he was humiliated, insulted and denied opportunities. This is an irony of the modern world where the worthy is side-lined and the unworthy is often praised and benefited.

In the story of Chenayya, a rickshaw puller, Adiga focuses on the harsh reality and predicament of the underprivileged that are bound to live in dire poverty. Chenayya finds himself entirely frustrated with life as he has to survive on the petty tips given by the customers and the work assigned to him is extremely painful. The amount of pain he suffers makes him express his rage to the traffic, "Don't you see something is wrong here?" (168). Dire poverty and drudgery have deteriorated the lives of the rickshaw-pullers as the journalist comments, "The work you are doing exceeds the amount of calories you consume. Every day, every trip you take- you are slowly killing yourselves" (172). The rich-poor divide has broken him from inside and filled him with a wrath against the rich and he speaks out:

Those who are born poor in this country are fated to die poor. There is no hope for us, and no need of pity . . . You keep us like this, you people from the cities, you rich fucks. It is in your interest to treat us like cattle! You fuck! You English-speaking fuck! (172).

Fade up with the job, he leaves it and searches for another but gets failure only. No one in Kittur is willing to give him a job and he finds himself back in the same tiresome work of rickshaw pulling. Many around him have been bestowed with all sort of richness but he has been experiencing sheer poverty as a curse. This rich and poor divide has become intolerable as he says, "A man has a right to do what he has to do. The condition of the poor is becoming intolerable here" (181). He wants to fill this gap thinking, "You have to attain certain level of

richness before you can complain about being poor. When you are this poor, you are not given the right to complain" (181). But all his efforts to make him wanted are in vein. Adiga bluntly assaults the mainstream society that doesn't accept Chanayya's efforts escaping poverty and let him drenched there. Chenayya realizes: "As he was cycling, he was working the wheel of life backward, crushing his muscle and fibre into the pulp from which they were formed in his mother's womb; he was unmaking himself" (173). Like many other characters portrayed by Adiga, Chenayya also is unstable, prone to anger, and unable to change the harsh reality and hardly find any relief from the predicament.

"The Cool Water Well Junction" also published with another title "Smack" is a pathetic story of poor little children Soumya and Raju, who are forced to begging by none other than their drug addicted father. This heart-breaking story of civilized India focuses on the rural migration to cities in the scarcity of employment but is treated as outsider in cities. It portrays the real picture of India where the poor men and women toil hard at the construction sites and even get addicted to drugs and alcohol. Adiga highlights how the poor labourers of the cities have lost their self-respect and force their children to beg to satisfy their addiction to drugs. This story is a pathetic example of how thousands of poor children are deprived of their fundamental rights and left to their fate, without food, without shelter, without money and without education.

In another story "Valencia: to the First Crossroad", Jayamma, despite born as a Bramhin has to work as a cook. She feels pride as a Bramhin but grumbles at her fate as she has to work as a maid servant along with low-caste Hoyka girl whom she looks down upon. It evident from Indian history, that, Bramhins, being upper-caste, have enjoyed every privilege for centuries. But, as "marginalization is a shifting phenomenon", "individuals or groups might enjoy high social status at one point in time, they lose this status as social change takes place, so and become marginalized" (Burton and Kagan). Jayamma feels, "what had she done in a previous life- had she been a murderess, an adulterous, a child devourer . . . and live next to a lower caste?" (207).

Her upper-caste superiority feeling is visible when her master advocate teaches Shaila, a low-caste Hoyka girl to read and write. Jayamma feels that the rules of caste system are being violated: "Were the lower castes meant to read and write?" (165). This upper caste superiority complex is so deeply rooted in the mind of people like Jayamma that they don't want the lower-castes to rise above them in any respect and want them to be savages. As Dr. B. R. Ambedkar puts it in *Annihilation of Caste*:

Caste is, therefore, the real explanation as to why the Hindu has let the savage remain savage in the midst of his civilization without blushing or without feeling any sense of remorse or repentance . . . Not only has the Hindu made no effort for the humanitarian cause of civilizing the savages but the higher-caste Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of the higher castes (Ambedkar 41-42).

In the story of Gururaj Kamath, Deputy Editor of *Dawn Herald*, "Kittur's only and finest newspaper", we come across the fate of journalism, and the predicament of true journalist. The honest and committed journalist, Gururaj hunts for the truth and truth only but realizes that the freedom of press is a thing of past and "it is a false earth I am walking on. An innocent man is behind bars, and a guilty man walks free" (147). His every effort in the pursuit of truth is neglected by the editor since he [editor] has become a mere puppet in the hands of corrupt politicians and elites. The editor-in-chief tells Gururaj, "You and I and people in our press pretend that there is freedom of press in India but we know the truth" (146). Despite being most eligible and outstanding at his work, he is thought to be a nuisance and systematically side-lined whereas Menon, a junior, rises above him. Adiga, thus, through this story, very aptly presented the condition of mainstream media and the plight of people working for it.

The story of George D'Souza, a low-caste catholic mosquito man, provides many instances of class-based marginalization that separates rich master and poor servant. Here, Adiga explores how

poverty and class become a divider. Although the constitution has banned discrimination of every kind, but in reality it is still there in the inner psyche of people. The economic disparity George observes around has affected his conscience deeply. The social distinction between the 'haves and have-nots' has always been in existence around him. The rich elites have access to all the privilege whereas poor like him has to long for everything. He says, "Ah, madam, but you people have it all, and we people have nothing. It's just not fair" (242). Even if the poor work hard to rise up in life, there is hardly any chance to be accepted by the upper class society. He says, "The rich abuse us, man. It's always, here, take twenty rupees, and kiss my feet. Get into the gutter. Clean my shit. It's always like that" (237). He attempts to establish a relationship with Mrs. Gomes but her resentment makes him "re-establish the proper radius between mistress and servant" (240). He 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" (231). Despite his hard work, loyalty, commitment and respect at her service, he, along with his sister, Maria are thrown out of the house. 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" (250).

To conclude, almost all the characters in *Between the Assassinations* deal with conflict of some kind or other and are alienated in one way or another. It is reasonably quoted, "Adiga invites reader's attention towards the disparities between the poor and the rich, communal disharmony, corruption, violence and hypocrisy" (Nikam & Nikam). Adiga keenly draws our attention towards the countless evils that plague our country. These evils purposefully deny access to their very basic rights and opportunities; and when they strive hard to somehow break the shackles; their paths to emancipation are completely blocked, leaving them there where they started.

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