
Poverty as the Explicit Theme in Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*

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Abstract

Adiga is an influential voice of 21st century India. He depicts the agony of the subjugated class of India. In *Between the Assassinations*, Adiga presents a vivid picture of lives of the marginalized. The novel contains the theme of poverty, hunger and exploitation of poor as the main theme. The novel is a scrupulous examination of microcosm of India. It is a simmering fury at the wide gulf between the haves and have not's. The novel provides a glimpse of the India of Darkness through its twelve stories spinning around the assorted aspects of life in the town Kittur. The novel highlights the social and political turmoil of India during 1984 and 1991 and reflects how poverty, the mother evil, gives rise to other evils in the society. The novel contains a wide array of characters from famished person to the richest person of the town, Kittur. It describes the harsh realities of poor villagers who have to but migrate to cities in order to survive and live on the streets.

Keywords- Poverty, Exploitation, Vulnerability, Slum, Backward, Suppression

Aravind Adiga, the recipient of Man Booker prize for his debut novel *The White Tiger*, is the novelist of socially commitment. In all his novels he highlights the sufferings of vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of Indian society. His works include *The White Tiger*, *Between the Assassinations*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Selection Day and Amnesty*. In almost all of his novels he highlights the sorrows and sufferings of underprivileged classes. The theme of poverty and socio-economic inequality remains the major theme of his novels. In this respect he is compared to Charles Dickens, one of the most important commentators of the social life of England in the 19th century.

The novel *Between the Assassinations* truly summons an India where majority of population is not able to obtain the basic goods and services indispensable for their survival with dignity. It is a place where clean water, electricity, healthcare, hygiene and nutritious diet are supposed to be luxuries reserved for the rich. The stories *Day Four; Umbrella Street*, *Day Four (Afternoon)*, *The Cool Water Well Junction*, *Day Five: Valencia (to the first Cross Road)* and *Day Five (Evening): The cathedral of Our Lady of Valencia* present a heartrending

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image of poverty and the wide hollow between the rich and the poor. The stories are a harsh satire on the smug “India is shining”. These stories illustrate that India is in the era of liberalization and privatization but the position of the poor has got even worse.

In the story *Lighthouse Hill* the poor Dalit book seller Xerox Ramkrishana has to sell illegally photocopied or printed books of Mein Kampf, Karl Marx, Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and others at discounted rates to make his both hands meet. Xerox has been arrested twenty one times for selling banned *Satanic Verses* but after making free he again starts this business. His father’s profession was the traditional occupation of people of his caste i.e. cleaning the toilets of affluent landlords with his loincloth taking the crap out of their houses.

When Xerox is arrested he has to entertain the policemen with some or the other ingratiating stories. The miserable part is that the heart melting story of father of lower caste poor Xerox’s profession is the source of enjoyment for higher class rich jailor and the policemen. They laugh when Xerox narrates the pathetic story of his father as follows:

All day long, his old man would hang around the back wall of the landlord’s house, waiting for the smell of human faeces; as soon as he smelled that smell, he came close to the house, and waited, with bent knees, like a wicketkeeper waits for the ball in cricket. (Xerox bent his knees and showed how.) Then, as soon as he heard the ‘thud,’ of the boom- box closing, he had to run to the wall, put out the retractable potty through a hole in the wall, empty it into the rose-plants, wipe it clean with his loincloth and insert it back into the wall before the next person came to use the toilet. That was the job he did, his whole life, can you believe it! (BTA 44-45)

The poor deprived Xerox turns around on crutches and heads for the Lighthouse Hill. He climbs the hill with his daughter in two and a half hour to continue selling of the books the very next day his legs are broken by the police.

In the story *The Cool Water Well Junction*, Saumya and Raju, poor children of a drug addicted Tamil construction labourer, Ramcharan have to beg for bringing the smacked cigarette for their father. They keep begging from place to place and remain hungry for the whole day but do not get any money. Both the children resign themselves to destiny and sleep empty stomach.

The condition of the children of the poor people is really pathetic. Their poverty does not allow them to eat sufficiently and properly. Instead of going to school these children have to look after their younger brothers and sisters as Soumya has to do for her brother, Raju. How she feeds Raju is heartrending: “Mixing the dry rice with the rainwater, she squeezed it into gruel, and stuffed morsels into Raju’s mouth. He said he didn’t like it, and bit her fingers each time she fed him.” (BTA143)

The story *Day Five: Valencia (To the First Crossroads)* is the story of Jayamma, the poor cook. Her life is an “installment plan of troubles and horrors.” (BTA 160) She is waiting to “to strike a blow against the world”. She is the eight of nine daughters and total eleven children of her dear mother. Due to their extreme poverty, Jayamma is fed on an ass milk,

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“By the time Jayamma was born, number eight, there was no milk in her mother’s breasts- they had to feed her an ass’s milk in a plastic bottle. An ass’s milk, yes!” (BTA157)

Jayamma and her two sisters have to stay unmarried for their entire life because “Her father had saved enough gold only for six daughters to be married off; the last three had to stay barren virgins for life. Yes, for life.” (BTA156-157)

Jayamma acknowledges the eternal reality that in modern time the social status of a person is decided by his wealth. Though she gets a kind of false contentment in ignoring Shaila as a lower caste demon but she is also conscious of the fact that Shaila is her true mate in the world because both sail on the same boat. She calms Shaila in the words: “Stop crying. You’ve got to get tough. Servants like us, who work for others have to learn to be tough.” (BTA168)

It is the irony of this poor Jayamma’s fate that she is denied to take a punctured ball by the boy Karthik whom she nourishes and she has to commit the sin of stealing that punctured ball. If upper caste Jayamma is sent to fatten other people’s children, Shaila is also compelled to live away from her family just to earn her living. If it is the destiny of Jayamma to remain virgin forever, poor Shaila also is also a victim because her marriage is also cancelled as the gold necklace fails to satisfy prospective in laws of Shaila.

The story *Smack* also depicts the poverty of Kittur. The story is about a village hick Keshava who starts working from street sleeper and rises to bus conductor. It is really pitiable that he has to sleep in a filthy alleyway with other unfortunate ones and pay the rent of sleeping even in the alleyway to the local gangster with whom he has to work to earn his livelihood. These gangsters exploit him for their own motif. By his dedication to work and devotion to his master, he elevates to the position of bus conductor. All goes on well till he can serve his masters but as he meets an accident and loses his leg, he is fired him from the job of bus conductor. Literally Keshava becomes speechless, realizes the sordid realities of the world. The story implies that the life of the deprived is still miserable and they have to live on streets like stray dogs.

The story *The Elephant* is the story of a poor 29 year old Chenayya who works as one of the delivery men for Ganesh Pai Fan & Furniture Store. Rickshaw is allowed to be used for big furniture and electronic items and other articles are attached to his cycle for delivery. It is the misery that if the thing to be delivered is light in weight, he has to carry that on his head. “Every turn of the wheel undid him and slowed him down. Each time h e cycled, he was working the wheel of life backward, crushing muscle and fiber into the pulp from which they were made in his mother’s womb, he was unmaking himself” (TE web, The Newyorker).

He feels wrathed about his low paying and physically exhausting job. Chenayya provides a realistic portrait how a poor man is filled with anger and jealous to better himself when all his pains prove to be insufficient to wipe out his poverty. At the end of every delivery, he has to hand over two rupees to Mr. Pai; one rupee for the dinner, and one rupee for the privilege of having been chosen to work for Mr. Ganesh Pai.

His meagre salary does not allow him to eat sufficiently. Here Adiga comments on the pathetic condition of the cart pullers that even with the savings of whole life, a cart puller is not in a condition to own an auto rickshaw or a small tea shop. The job of cart pulling is so arduous that a cart puller's life is reduced or he may suffer from tuberculosis:

Assuming you saved everything you could, you were lucky to earn four hundred a year. An auto rickshaw would cost twelve, fourteen thousand. A small tea shops four times as much. That meant thirty, thirty-five years of such work before they could do anything else. But did they think their bodies would last that long? Did they find a single cart puller above the age of forty around them? (TE web, The Newyorker)

The salary is not enough to let him have sufficient diet. When under nourished Chenayya has to frequently go for delivering the articles of the rich over light house hill, there is the burning sensation through his chest and lungs and his sinews begin to bulge from his neck like webbing. Even though he has to keep on moving. Chenayya feels infuriated at the way of the world, "When an elephant gets to lounge downhill without doing any work at all, and a human being has to pull such a heavy cat?" (TE web, The Newyorker) Chenayya does not find much difference between his condition and that of beggars as he thinks "Only one group was lower than he was. The beggars. One misstep and he would be down with them." (TE web, The Newyorker)

Chenayya thinks that the condition of the poor is like an animal. He as well as other cart pullers has to urinate onto the side of the wall exact where they sleep. He sleeps under a plastic sheet at the time of rainfall. He performs ablution next to a stray pig: "God, what I am becoming? ...there is a difference between men and animal, there is a difference". (TE web, The Newyorker)

No change comes in the life of a poor person till his last breath. Chenayya is unable to even protest out loud because it is the world where "You have to attain a certain level of richness before you can complain about being poor. When you are this poor, you are not given the right to complain" (TE web, The Newyorker)

In the story *Sultan's Battery*, Ratnakar Shetty has to assume the role of the fake sexologist and go to dargah to sell bottles of sugar pills prepared and packed by his daughters as the treatment for venereal diseases. Along with the white pills he also sells General Knowledge books to overcome his poverty so that he may get his three daughters married.

Thus, poverty is the extensive theme dealt in the novel *Between the Assassinations*. The novel is crowded with the characters that belong to the lowest stratum of the hierarchy of society. The characters include cart puller, construction workers, beggar children and poor cook. The novel is a document on the brunt of the servitude and widens the understanding of the sufferings of the downtrodden. The novel is the striking novel, voice of the voiceless poor people. Through this novel Adiga has shown that though India is growing economically; it has not succeeded that much in improving the condition of the poor and plummeting the gulf between the poor and the rich.

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