

Revealing the Social Stratums of Casteism in Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*

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Abstract:

Aravind Adiga's novel, *Between the Assassinations* offers a picturesque presentation of the implications of castes and religions in our country. The author through the novel explains, how religious and caste activists are exploiting the marginalized people in India. The manipulation is showcased, realistically in the form of life situations through his characters. *Between the Assassinations* is a collection of short stories that spellout historical events that happened during the seven years lapse of time, between the assassination of Former Prime Minister Indra Gandhi, and her son Rajeev Gandhi. The seven stories highlight the dynamics of multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious practices that are prevalent in India. Each story line is independent from the other, while the setting of each story and its character sprung up from the town Kittur. The story's milieu, portrays the hindrances, characters face and how they overcome such hazards from the religious activists.

Keywords: Casteism, Religion, Culture, Loss of identity

India has produced many literary giants, who have taken upon themselves the problems of marginalized people's cry and attempted to disclose their predicaments to the outer world through their writings. Aravind Adiga is one of the many writers from India, who has contributed through his literary scholarship, the ordeals of the mass and combat for their genuine cause. His writings have brought laurels to his credibility and it is vivid from the fact that his novel *The White Tiger* (2008) won the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Born as an Indian, and travelled across the world, he always reminds himself in carrying his, rich experience of exploring the lives of the ordinary people in India. The Novelist also unfolds the historical events which took place from 1984 to 1991. In 1984 Indra Gandhi was brutally assassinated by her own guards; In 1991 Rajeev Gandhi too became victim of assassination during the election campaign at Sri Perumpudur in TamilNadu.

India is known for its rich heritage. It accommodates multicultural, multireligious and multilanguage people within its geographical limits. But it is unfortunate to notice that in this great country divisions emerged among the natives in the name of religion, caste, heritage and culture. When tracing back to the definitions of casteism in India Chaudh Reetv quotes D.N. Prasad's definition of casteism like this "casteism is loyalty to the caste translated into politics". Indian caste system describes the social stratification and social restrictions in Indian society, in which social classes are termed as *jathis* or castes. These castes are named and classified according to the occupation of the ancestors and it subsequently passed on from generations to generations. Adiga's major characters are associated to the religious, social and economical practices that existed during that time. In India there are three major religions-Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Some people consider that religion is not essential to the society, while some others consider that religion is essential to live in society. According to Merriam Dictionary it defines religion as "a persona set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs and practices". It is said that Religion is for man, and man is not for religion, and no man is identified to be a good or bad being through his religion. But every religion calls a man to be good to his neighbors. The primary dictum of religion and its teachings are created to give an atmosphere for spiritual and moral development of individuals who embrace it for eternity.

Adiga speaks of a young Muslim boy 'pathan', (people who immigrated to India from Afghanistan) named Ziauddin. He worked in a tea shop of Rammana Shetty, who belongs to Hindu religion. In the beginning Ziauddin was very innocent and his innocence was misused to the advantage of Rammana Shetty, who ill-treated the small boy. He is suspected for stealing money and other articles from the place where he works, be it in a Hindu Rammana's shop or in Muslim restaurants. It is estimated that majority of Indian population follow Hinduism. Hinduism is one of the ancient religions in the world and it is a colorful religion with a vast gallery of Gods and Goddesses. In the ancient Indian caste system the fanatic attitude was inbuilt and the people were aggressive in their belief system on the basis of their religion. This idea is manifested in the characters of Adiga's novel *Between the Assassinations*. "There is no work here for a Muslim, and he has to fight with the one man who gives him a job" (*Between the Assassination*, p. 7). This is a classical example to substantiate Adiga's preposition that such was the reality that existed in the minds of the people. He also spoke of how a Muslim was forbidden to enter into a Hindu Temple, "When Rammana shouted for them to come into the temple, he darted in with the others a few feet, hesitated and ran back to the scooter: 'I am a Muslim, I can't go in'. (*BTA*, p.5)

After having been ill-treated and expelled from the tea shop, Ziauddin moves to work in the railway station as a porter. One fine day when he worked as a coolie, he came in contact with a foreign terrorist, who showed him love and affection by giving him money. By witnessing the terrorist's fraternal gesture towards him, he was pleased to do anything for him for the sake of getting money from him. Adiga points out how the rich ill-treats the poor class in Indian society with their power and money.

Adiga presents his next character Shankara, who was born to a Brahmin father and a low caste *Hoyka* mother of an intercast marriage. This story exposes the bitter reality of caste system that exists in Indian society which is deeply rooted in the lives of the people. Shankara neither belongs to Brahmin community nor to *Hoyka* community. Hence, he has been rejected by Brahmins and the *Hoyka* community members throughout the novel. He is in search of his identity and his religion as a stranger.

As a result he could not identify himself neither with the Brahmin community of his father nor with the Hindu religion that his father practiced. He was also at the receiving end from his mother's family, as a result he was forbidden to associate himself with his mother's *Hoyka* caste as well. He was thrown into adrift of confusion and dilemma, as he was not able to find out his own identity, and eventually he had to face a lot of struggles. He also felt a sense of alienation within himself since he was rejected by both communities of people. Adiga while referring to the predicaments faced by the lower caste people echoes, "We, brother and sister *Hoykas*, were not allowed into temple in the old days, did you know? The Priest stood at the door, saying: "You low – caste!" (*BTA*, p.60). It was something deplorable to see how people who hail from lower castes were ill-treated. These above quoted lines of Adiga's character reveals how the high caste Brahmins wrest power with them and degrade the low caste people.

The caste system among the ancient Indian natives of Hindus were divided in the following way - The Priests were known as 'Brahmins' and they were well educated; the warriors were known as 'Kshatriya,' and they were assigned with the duty of assisting the kings and safeguarding the nations from the enemies; The merchants were known as 'Vaishyas' and they got involved themselves in trades and businesses; The laborers were known as 'Sudras,' and they were assigned to do the menial jobs. There was another group of people, who do not belong to any of the above mentioned four groups who were also known as Untouchables. The Untouchables were ill-treated and ostracized in society, and forced to suffer extreme poverty. They were compelled to do all the menial jobs, which were looked down by the rich. As a result they had to live in despair and unhealthy conditions as they were deprived of their basic rights and became victims of other hazards. They were not allowed to enter into house of the upper caste people and were

forbidden entry into the temples to worship. They were not allowed to get married to any upper class men or women. Adiga presents one such situation in his novel. Once Shankara went to his friend's house and he was served tea and biscuits and he was made to feel at home. But as he was about to leave his house, he noticed that his friend's mother took the cleaning rag in her left hand and began to wipe the sofa where Shankara was sitting. (BTA, p.58). Having witnessed this horrific incident, he feels deeply hurt and imagines about the myopic mindset of the upper caste people, who disgrace the people of lower caste.

Adiga exhibits Shankara's frustration over caste discrimination and showcases how it makes him more aggressive and defiant. It is obvious when he clarifies to Professor D'Souza the following questions like "What do we do about the caste system, sir? How do we get rid of it?" (BTA, p. 63). Caste cannot be abolished by having meal together with people from different castes, and having inter-caste marriages. Caste is a state of mind; it is a disease which needs to be cured. Indian constitution gives a provision for all citizens of this great country, where every individual's right must be protected and safeguarded irrespective of caste, colour and creed. The author uses the following lines to vindicate his argument to abolish caste system in free India:

Who is that Member of Parliament? What is his caste? the professor asked.

The question confused Shankara

'He is one of us, sir A Hoyka.' (BTA, p. 62)

Indians strongly believe in their tradition and culture. The barriers of caste are not visible in the large cities, but they do persist in rural areas, and continue to prevail in various forms in modern India. The author substantiates the idea with more details when he says:

Today there is no such thing as caste, the man said, with regret. 'Brahmins eat meat. Kshatriyas get educated and write books. And lower-castes convert to Christianity and Islam. You heard what happened at Meenakshipuram, didn't you? Colonel Gaddafi is trying to destroy Hinduism, and the Christian priests are hand in glove with him. (BTA, p. 59)

Sarita Singh in her article entitled *Contextual Antithesis in Aravind Adiga's Between the Assassinations* states:

Shankara feels a sense of freedom that he is not alone to suffer humiliation and mockery. Various types of discrimination have proliferated in Indian society. He realizes that Brahmins live in constant fear of being robbed by lower caste, while the ten more divisions within their own caste threaten Hoykas. Muslims are hand in gloves with Christians to destroy Hindus who in turn are on the brink of demolition due to division of caste system. (p. 203-204.)

Aravind Adiga in his another story which revolves around Jayamma narrates the daily struggles of Jayamma, who has been suppressed by caste system and religion. Although she belongs to a Brahmin family yet she works in a lower caste Christian advocate's house since her childhood, as she had lost her parents. Always she practices the ancient Hindu traditional culture like keeping oneself clean before going to temple and getting up early in the morning and chanting mantras etc.... She always maintained a distance with the other workers, who work in the advocate's house. The novelist beautifully tells the outcry of Jayamma, who feels sorry for staying in a Christian's house:

For forty years I've lived among good Brahmins, Lord Krishna: homes in which even the Lizards and toads had been in a previous birth. Now you see my fate, stuck among Christians and meat-eaters in this strong town, and each time I think I am leaving, my sister-in-law tells me to stay on some more --- (BTA, p. 206 - 207)

It is a horrific reality to notice that despite being poor; the Brahmin woman wants to keep up her superiority and distances herself from the others, who work in the advocate's house. It is a classical example to show that how Casteism is rampant in India. It also proves that economic growth does not determine the respect of people, who hail from lower castes.

Adiga has highlighted the implications of caste and religion in his novels. He has also offered different interpretations, to connect the historical events of that time with his characters to prove how castes have created divisions within the fabric of the Indian society and manipulated the rights of the poor and women. The caste system in India ties people down to its own roots not allowing them to come out of their life hives. The Writer mentions that the caste is used as a tool to maintain the discrimination in the country. In order to validate and substantiate his claim of caste based injustice, he picturizes through characters of Ziadduin, Shankara and Jayamma the discriminations

and divisions which are prevalent. The discriminations that emerged due to caste system offer a bad image of India and its heritage, culture and tradition. It is the duty and responsibility of every Indian to seriously analyze all these evils which evolves around the caste system and try to minimize this evil so that people may live in peace and harmony as sons and daughters of a family.

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