

Life in Kittur of between the Assassinations of Aravind Adiga

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ABSTRACT

Between The Assassinations (2008) is the book, a collection of short stories by the Booker Prize Winner Aravind Adiga. The title of the book refers to the period between the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi who had also served as Prime Minister and was running for parliament at the time of his murder. The stories in Between The Assassinations have a backup of rural, coastal south Kittur (fictional), India where it is set. Adiga is not the first writer to write about a fictional created by his own. We have Charles Dickens who has created Coke Town, Thomas Hardy whose fictional town is Wessex. This is about some of the British literature novelists. R.K. Narayan of Indian English literature has also created a fictional town Malgudi. In these novels the writers speak about the then condition of their respective countries and native places. Following that lineage Adiga has also created a fictional town named Kittur, a fictional town somewhere in South India. Its subject is the pathos, injustice, corruption and ironies of India life.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, Life in Kittur, Literature Novelists, Injustice, Corruption.

Introduction

The lives that Adiga is interested in exploring here are of the people who are leading a shattered life. Those people include: a journalist who dreams of redemption; Sowmya, a girl desperate for her father's love, who travels across the city to buy drugs for him; Jayamma the lonely cook sent to the home of wealthy "so that the cloud fatten other people's children", a sexologist who has to find out a cure of young boy with a mysterious disease that could be Aids and many others. (Abell, Stephen. Review). There is third person narrator in the stories who either speaks about other in the story or stays a silent spectator. All the stories, speak about the dislocation, dissatisfaction, dishonesty, corruption poverty, quest for identity and many such things. Almost all the events in the stories are narrated in the past tense and with flash back and flash forward of the events that took place. The narrative techniques used for exploring the themes are; Pastiche which is relative intertextuality. Pastiche puts together multiple elements. It can be seen as chaotic, Pluralistic, or information drenched. Maximalism describes a quality of excessive redundancy exhibited by a way of the overt accumulation trappings that reflect current society. It can refer to anything which is excessive, overtly, complex and "showy", or providing redundant overkill in features and attachments grossness in quality.

The Story of Forced Child Labour

First comes the story of Ziauddin. He was a Muslim boy, in search of work comes to Kittur as daily wage child labourer resented by all and tolerated by Ramana Setty, a tea shop owner on assurance that he would abstain from 'Hanky-Panky' and remain dedicated to work. There he makes friends and stays happily till the end of the season and sticks to the instruction of his father to get back to the village when rains come, so that he can help him on the farm. Ziauddin takes pride in his religion and establishes an identity of himself. Though he has the other siblings, The father sends him to city without money, and gives instructions to roam about in the market until somebody would take him to work. Ramana Setty says to Thimma, "This fellow was felt entirely on his own will" (3). As the days went by he was accused of stealing samosas from the hotel and was sent out. After that he works in many places and finally settles as a railway porter. He was identified by a stranger who comes to Kittur on a private mission, also happens to be a Muslim. That and the liberal tips the stranger offers, tempts Ziauddin to stay with a stranger.

The boy get attracted to his fair skin and voice. The stranger lures the boy by all means and offers work to him. He asks him to count the number of trains of kittur, and then number of trains coming to and going to kittur. When asked, for what purpose, "What're you making me do these things for The stranger says" "At last you ask. At last" (18).

When the stranger brought his face close to Ziauddin, He finds strange things in his face. The mment he had done that he found scars on his nose, cheeks and a small tear which raised a doubt in his mind and left the place saying, "I am not well"(19). At that moment the stranger asks in a soft voice "Is this any way to repay me, little pathan? The boy says nothing and goes out to the place where he previously lived with his friends. When the friends scoled him, he goes back to the platform of the railway station shouting at the customer – 'don't do hanky-panky!'"(20) Adiga is very subtle in raising several sensitive issues ranging from the plight of farmers, child labour, disowning children, encouraging them to live in their own, relationships and bonding, terrorist scheming, identity crisis to explanation.

The Story of Corrupt Cloth Merchant

In the second story one comes across life of a drunkard, the cloth merchant who introduces himself as 'Johnnie Walker Red Label blended' (24). He had to Textile factory which was closed for the reason that it's light and the work done by workers spoiled the vision of workers. He had to reopen the factory, for the workers are in need of money and forced to be bride the officials of all the departments. An official from state electricity board demands 'Five Hundred Rupees' (p.25) for 'one has to eat and live'. So abbasi had to give him that money. When his friend Sunil Setty asks him "What's bothering to Abbasi?"(28) his answer what that he has to bride from electricity department, that too 'a lower caste one'. Abbasi is one such person who takes pride in his own religion and caste. A man who offers brides comments on black marketing, counterfeiting, and corruption. Abbasi keeps company with friends like Mehmood, who stoles cars, kalam who imported drugs like hashish and a talented man who was named as professor. "They were all thieves and thungs, the professor never kept his word 'not to drink'".(31).

This story totally stresses on corruption. The protagonist keeps referring to corruption while indulging in it. An income tax raid makes him realize that it is an inevitable act in business. And his friends like Kalam, the dealer also agrees to it. For Abbasi, 'corruption' is "like a demson sitting on my brain and eating it with a fork and knife". Also they speak of politicians and agree that they were in need of brave, honest man". (32)

He tries to outsmart the income tax officials but realized that he cannot be honest and still continue in business. His personal needs like son's education and workers take priority before being honest. He expects someone to come forward to curb corruption and later decides that he cannot do anything for survival but comprises himself to Allah is difficult. He decides to quit and reconcile to the fate. This makes one understand that survival is not possible without corruption.

The Life of a Dalit Book Seller

Next is the life of story of a dalit books-seller Ramakrishna who had been arrested many times for selling a copy of '*Satanic Verses*'. Here one meets Ramakrishna, the book seller selling the '*Satanic Verses* of Salman Rushdie, the inspector who wanted to know stock market quotes and D'Souza who is lawyer of book sellers. These three are compelled to continue with their work as they have no alternative. Ramakrishna who was born in lower caste had been arrested more than twenty times for selling pirated versions, or Xerox copies of books or the '*satanic verses* of Salman Rushdie. He would be arrested in the morning and released in the evening. During this time he was asked to entertain the officers through his behavior, stunts, jokes about and description of the people he had seen during the day. Also he keeps of his family story and their occupation. For Ramakrishna who had come out of the family of scavengers, loss of human dignity is associated with going in and out of police station and much worse is the plight of his father. It was the removing of human shit from the house of rich. 'He used to take out the human shit, wash the box, and wipe it with his own cloth. That was his work'. (43) Ramakrishna convinces himself that his father would be happy seeing him earning his livelihood through selling books. The only one time it became a problem for Ramakrishna was that when somebody complained that he sells copies of a Salman Rusdie's '*The Satanic Verses*'. When he he is booked the case is handled by two strange individuals who have had experienced dislocation in their respective jobs. One is D'Souza, the lawyer and another is Ramesh, the inspector. "D'Souza wanted to be a pilot and Ramesh was interested in stock market quotes". They fail to realize their dreams and compromise with the jobs that they were destined to take up. Ramesh files a case on Ramakrishna and put him in jail for overnight with serve punishment which makes him lame. After a week when he gets discharged 'Xerox' comes to the police along with his daughter says, "You can break my legs, but I can't stop selling books. I am destined to do this sir". And

he said 'I am going up the hill sir' (48) they think that he was testing them but he defies them and changes the location of selling business. His daughter spreads the sheet in front of Deshpremi Hemachandra Rao Park and 'Xerox' starts selling the banned book *The Satanic Verses*, by Salman Rushdie. Notional dignity in the face of ugly reality makes one sensitive to the transition in life from oppression to outlawed practices.

The Story of a Rich Spoiled Half-Caste

Next is the story of a rich spoiled half-caste student who decides to explode a bomb in the college. After the blast hoe people respond and what action is taken is the core of the story. The first reaction from the principal is "The youth of this country have gone to hell and will ruin the names of their fathers and grandfathers". (51). The Central issue is Shankara's revolt against the caste and class system. He decides to shoe his resentment by exploding the bomb in the college. The unity among the students is so strong that Shabbir Ali Bhakt, twins Ifran and Rizwan, Shakara P.Kinni and Pinto refuse to divulge the name of the culprit as they knew the punishment is the suspension from the college. The reason for creating a hoax situation is not to hurt people around but to get some free time to indulge in frivolous activities such as watching a pornographic movie or eat biryani. All knew that Shhankara is the culprit and it becomes his turn to accept their resentment. Talking about the isolation of the child's experiences, Adiga comments about educational institutions, psychology of students, parents' negligence in understanding children, religion not as an institution but as a matter of convenience and the like. Shanakara gets alienated from his peer group, teachers, parents and friends. Alienation makes him convinced that it is caste that should be blamed for all the things that were happening to him. It wash his mischief and all resent him. The reason for the act is revenge. 'He was revenge on the teachers who spoke rude to him, caned him, and even he was sure that he was mocked at his back for being a Hokya, a lower caste'. Shankara wants to be, recognized as a good boy and taken into confidence by one and all. When he fails to make good impression on any one he decides to rebel and watch other suffer. He isolates himself and goes to desolate places and hurt himself. He even decides to go for conversion into Christianity. "Then he went down to the back of the college, the way which was not used because of a suicide. The road was called" Old court Road". It was relocated and all the lawyers had shifted long back. After the new ways was opened no one had used it. But it was Shankara's favourite place from his childhood. He ordered the driver of his car to wait for him down the steps that day. While coming back in that way he was sweating, he was always like that.

"Many of the boys had handkerchiefs but he never carried and used an odd method of wiping himself, with large leaves of nearby tree, until his skin was red". (p.54)

Caste becomes an oppressive proposition for Shankar. He thinks that the professors are punishing him due to the caste discrimination. The ill treatment that he meets at his friends' house humiliates him. When all the doors are closed on him, it is the stranger at the cricket ground that encourages him to understand that he is not the only one who is experiencing marginalization. There are others too. He gave him the direction to meet his caste people. Later to this incident he spoke to a professor and a member of parliament of his caste, he came to know about different sections in caste. At the end he realizes that it is not the caste that is the culprit, it is the attitude of the younger generation and their love for mischief. His attempt to apologize to the teacher too is misunderstand and Adiga closes the story hinting at the end there is a change in attitude of Shankara.

In Search of Relatives and Livelihood-

On day three of the collections of incidents one encounters Keshava, the son of a barber from Gurupura who has come to Kittur along with brother Vittal. They came to the town in search of their Kinsman Janardhan. As soon as they arrived they were cheated by autowallah. Kesava and Vittal are the orphans whose others had passed away and their fathers had left them as orphans. Their uncle had taken care of them until he lived. After that they were now sent to city in search of relative. They are unwanted vulnerable and loners in the town Kittur. Janardhan a distant relative, an insignificant petty merchant, the only person whom they know by name is the only contact for them. Reluctant to have them as his wards he makes a make shift arrangement at for them for a 'stay in home' run by thugs. The type of live they are exposed to is a reflection on the society they are living. They are not only the sufferers, like them. There are many who compromise with life, in whose company they spend time. Once in a way, a ray of hope flickers and keeps them going. Adiga shows how anti-social elements thrive on monopolizing illegally occupied areas or slums, which belong to the government.

Vittal and Keshava part their ways, working in different places. Keshava becomes a conductor decides to live with dignity. There too fate plats havoc with him leaving him without work when he meets

with an accident. Back on the pavement near the garbage dump he ruminates about his life. Thugs, cheats politicians, prostitutes all have a role to play in the lives of these drifters to urban slums. The word 'Hoyka' keeps recurring in the story, the only fact that the boys know and associates themselves with. Politics and caste are closely associated and collectively they thrive is what Adiga suggests. Opportunity that comes doesn't last longer when the victims contemplate on dignity.

This story gives out in detail about the evils of poverty, caste system and child labour. Keshava and Vittal who are trapped by this evils stand as an example for atrocities on children in the country. They express the desires of young people of the day while some are caught by the people like brother; others compromise with that they have. This story proves that 'life begins where it ends'.

The Story of an Honest Journalist

After discussing the life of an illiterate Kittur the drifter, Adiga moves on to the story of a journalist who 'looks for the truth', Guru Raj Kamat. As an honest journalist he earns name and fame when he champions the cause of minorities during Hindu, Muslim riots. Truth which is camouflaged and reveals to him through various sources, leaving him confused, and perplexed. A bachelor, committed to work gets disillusioned with life when he realizes that truth never walks naked. It has to be observed and understood and is not meant for discharging. It is the Gurkhas, night watchmen, police and rich that hold the truth. It exists; it survives but never in black and white. All the atrocities that are possible, happen when rich are involved, like hit and run cases, power of money, power of politics, media houses, Adiga explores. When he was shown the door, Gururaj, creates an alternative world to look for truth in a language which calls for decoding. Truth alone triumphs, the norm for which he was to be dedicated as journalist, becomes the watch word for him when decides to stand outside truth expecting it to triumph. The mismatch between professional ethics and reality is very deftly delineated in this story. Guru Raj the liberated man decides to write the true history of Kittur, not the history he watches during day time but what he finds out during night, the authentic source.

Life of a Cart-Puller

Life of Chennaya, a rickshaw puller working for a furniture shop located in Umbrella Street, near the central market in Kittur, is a saga of woes that his, class experience, who are strata above beggars. The dreams, hopes, aspirations and desires that these people mocked at them as 'one' misstep he would be down with them, the beggars. The small pleasures denied, Chennaya turns bitter towards society. The statue of Gandhi makes him wonder. "He passed by a statue of Gandhi and he began thinking again. Gandhi dressed like a poor man- he dressed like Chennnaya did. But what did Gandhi do for the poor?," was his question. (p.205). Poverty experienced and assumed are two different things for him. The world of instincts and experienced poses challenges before him. His determination to "You have to attain a certain level of richness before you can complain about being poor, he thought. When you are this poor, you are not given the right to complain" (p.205) speaks of his bitterness in life. The hope of winning a lottery makes him most of his savings in buying tickets which never bring them luck. His observation of life around him, prompts him to try his hand on things modeled on others' attempts to success. He attempts to become a factory worker, a party man, a henchman to a politician. But all attempts seem to go in vain as the selfish world around him uses him as a tool, not a means. The story of Chennaya is not different from the story of Keshava or Ziauddin who come to Kittur in search of livelihood. Left to fend for themselves in the wilderness of an urban concrete jungle, they are at a loss reconciled to their fate. A kind gesture helps them face life with equanimity only to face bitterness in succession. In his anger Chennaya vents out his anger on the journalist who wants to write an article on the plight of cart pullers

"Those who are born poor in this country are fated to die poor.

There is no hope for us, and no need for pity.

.....

You think I need your notepad and your
 English to tell me this? You keep us
 Like this, you people from cities, it is
 Your interest to treat like cattle! (p.195)

The life of minorities, oppressed, vagabonds, destitutes alongside of the rich, the privileged 'nova rich' is captured through the life of Chennaya the non-entity.

The Life of Desperate Labourer's Children

The story of Soumya and Raju, the minor children of construction labourer, is even pathetic. They are victims of parental demands. Since the father happens to be a drug addict, they are forced into begging and procuring in the drug called 'snack' of their father. Even at this juncture she sticks to the advice of her father not to beg on the roads but only at landmarks. The dreams and disappointments of the children are very well captured by Adiga in this fragmented story of the two children. The perseverance of the children to accomplish the task given to them by their father is a reflection on poverty which can take ugly turns. The innocence of the two children is manipulated such an extent that they learn only to dream and not live as they should looking forward to being citizens in modern India.

Life of a Poorman's Daughter as a Cook

The story of Jayamma, an old cook, a Brahmin by caste, is an installment plan of troubles and horrors with no one to listen to her except her personal god little Krishna. Jayamma the eighth daughter of poor parents never had the opportunity of speaking her mind as she is shunted for family to family fend for herself at the discretionary judgment of her sister in law and brother as she happens to be a spinster, with no hope to get married due to the inability and poverty of her parents.

To escape from this mental agony she gets she gets used to inhaling the DDT sprayed on the walls so that she can slip into sleep state. Slowly the relationship between the servants turns into friendship and making personal notes. By the time it comes to departure time for the servants from the advocate's house that she had to go for work. These two women belong to different castes having poverty as the base line in their lives. Adiga traces many issues ranging from poverty, orthodoxy, modernity, sense of displacement to the plight of people who had live all through the life with joy and hope. At the end of the narrative Jayamma hopes that her plight might change into next birth which gives her feeling of joy. There are many stories which also speak of many life problems. The above are a few of them.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga is fast establishing a reputation as the Solomon Grundy of contemporary novelists. Just as his Booker-winning debut *The White Tiger* tells the story of a particular week in the life of its murderous narrator, so *Between The Assassinations* takes seven days in the life of fictional Indian city called Kittur, south of Goa and north of Calicut. The organizing principle is crucial-successive chapters are headed Day three (Afternoon) and so on – because without it the book would be just a loose collection of sketches of discrete lives. The week in question takes place apparently in 1990, six years after the killing of Indira Gandhi, one year before the assassination of her son. All of Adiga's characters have comparable burdens to bear, but mostly what they shoulder is the weight of history and accident of their birth. Shankara is a pupil at an elite Jesuit boys school; his father is plastic surgeon in the gulf, but he is lower – caste and aware of that at every turn. When he explodes a home-made bomb in a chemistry laboratory, it is with the same intent, We are lead to believe, as the terrorists who undermine Indian "progress", but the effect is benign and comic, only serving to bring out the rage of a teacher who cannot separate his f's from his p's and yells at his classroom, "you Puckers! You Puckers!". This lightness characterizes much of the life in Kittur, the citizens, particularly the dispossessed, may see their lives in tragic terms, but Adiga's sense of a great Indian comedy is never far away. (Tales of an Indian City).

As a conscientious exploration the microcosm of Indian and as Vignettes of town life, The individual chapters work well, but as short stories they are a mixed bag. Some, such as the story of the assistant headmaster trying to keep his favourite student away from a pornographic theatre, or that of the gardener ogling his mistress with its undercurrent of sexual tension, are pitch perfect others, such as those relating to the beggar children and the cycle-cart puller are a touch earnest. The tail of the crusading journalist descends into the bizarre while that of the sexologist ends too abruptly.

These are stories, to borrow a line from the book, "at once vague and full of substance, half-obscure but all too present." Their core will serve to remind us of the work that needs to be done to heal the faultiness of caste and class and bridge the gap between master and servant, rich and poor. Meanwhile, as Narayan told VS Naipaul in 1961, India will go on. (the guardian.com)

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