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A Study on the Subaltern Issues in Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*

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Abstract

'Subaltern' is the term that defines the inferior rank of person from the below margin of society; the marginalized group who are considered being the suppressed and muting for years. Subalternity focuses on the quandary of those who are allotted sub or secondary space in the human society. The present article strives to analyze and highlight the issues of subaltern people in the postmodern Indian society as portrayed in the Man Booker prize winning author Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*. Aravind Adiga in his *Between the Assassinations*, has realistically revealed the pathetic and difficult conditions of the subaltern people who suffer from poverty, exploitation, class/caste distinctions, corruption, and economic disparity.

Keywords: *Subaltern, Aravind Adiga, Between the Assassinations, exploitation, disparity, dowry.*

1. Introduction

The Italian Marxist and theoretician Antonio Gramsci has introduced the term 'subaltern' in modern intellectual discourse. The term is essential for an understanding of history and the structure of any given society. Hegemony binds society together without the use of force (Culture Studies 49). In discussions of the meaning of the 'Subaltern' in Gramsci's writings, Spivak and others have argued that he used the word as a synonym for the proletariat, but this interpretation has been contested, with evidence indicating that it was a novel concept in Gramsci's political theory. 'Again, by going against the grain, Gramsci preferred 'organic intellectuals' those openly identified with an oppressed class, shared its interests and worked on its behalf (Culture Studies 51). This is what we find in activists and writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi, Arundati Roy, G.N. Devy and others.

In his several essays, the postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, mentioned the importance of social power relations in defining Subaltern social groups as oppressed, racial minorities whose social presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group; as such, Subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subvert the authority of the social groups who hold hegemonic power. Ranajit Guha has suggested that various Subaltern groups, whether women, peasants, outcaste, the working class, tribals, the downtrodden, or other marginalized people who had been relegated to

the periphery of Indian society, had been able to make history and constitute politics as an autonomous realm (web).

According to Dipesh Chakraborty, Subaltern studies is an intervention in the discourse of history by using the modes of poststructuralist study in order to effect a radical revision of the way peasantry inscribed itself through non-elite means like rituals, rebellions, religion and guerrilla- like boycott and resistance to modes of colonial and vertical domination, including caste and zamindari domination, peculiar to Indian society of the times (Agarwal 60). At the same time, Gayatri Spivak warns that not every victim is a subaltern. According to her.

Subaltern is not a classy word for oppressed for the other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie... in postcolonial terms everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern... many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word subaltern.. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (web)

Between The Assassinations contains twelve thematically linked stories in the backdrop of Kittur –a town on India's south-eastern coast, in between Goa and Calicut- describing some happenings during the seven-year period between the assassinations of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi. The first story is about a Muslim boy named Ziauddin, who works in a tea shop near the railway station. In this story, Adiga has spotlighted on what happens among the masses at the base level of society than among the dominant. Here the protagonist Ziauddin belongs to the poor farm laboring family up in the north of the state. Now he is working at a tender age, he decides to stay there as an isolated boy in the Hindu-dominated locale. As the odd-man singled out, he has to bear with insults and humiliations heaped on him. It is his family's poverty which pushes him to life's brink, at a tender age.

Often it was the lot of the subalterns to depend on the mercy of the feudal lords for subsistence. The latter were often cruel and indifferent to the plight of the poor. Everyone in the poor families went for work at fields. In Adiga's story, a week before the rains were due to start, the boy collected his bundle and was ready to go home to work in the fields. He was going to do his duty to his family, and work alongside his father, mother and brothers, weeding or sowing or harvesting some rich man's fields for a few rupees a day (BTA 6).

Through the above lines, Adiga has strongly revealed the day to day difficulties of farm labourers' life. As the low class people, they have to work in rich man's field for their basic existence. Though they are working every day and every year, they cannot reach the status of the rich. The reason is, that subaltern people, in all the stages are suppressed and exploited by the rich.

In his next story, Adiga has beautifully brought out how truth has been suppressed and destroyed by the upper class people in today's world. Adiga has captured how media is manipulated by the elite people. Once, Mr. Engineer, a big tycoon drives his car and kills a man. But the truth is manipulated with money:

Engineer hit a man on his way back home, 'Left him for dead'. So that the next morning two constables go to his house. Hasn't even washed the blood off the front wheels of the car.' Then why- 'he is the richest man in this town. He cannot be arrested. He gets one of the employees in his factory to say he was driving the car when it happened. The guy gives police a sworn affidavit. I was

driving under the influence of alcohol on the night of 12 May when I hit the victim (BTA 123)

Thus, money power is able to cloud the truth and manipulate facts. An innocent poor is made a scapegoat to accept the crime committed by his rich boss. This only proves the sad, modern reality : “A man might have been sent to jail for no good reason; a guilty man might be walking free” (125). This incident is a sample of Indian/universal condition; that is, the poor/subaltern are exploited at will by money/muscle power. The harsh conditions of life compel the hapless innocents to bear the brunt of ‘law’ for no fault of their own.

In yet another story of Adiga, George, the poor mosquito man whose duty is to spread pesticides, is also working in a cathedral, under Mrs. Gomes, a rich woman. George tries to earn her goodwill and to establish a relationship with her. George slowly wins her confidence and becomes her part-time gardener, and the driver. At home, George has Maria, his unmarried sister. Their poverty goad both of them to take jobs. On the financial front, they manage; still, they are unable to win the goodwill and approval of the elite (as Mrs. Gomes still treats George as a cleaner of gutters). This makes them feel bitter, especially after their being thoroughly exploited and then being dumped at convenience: ‘Oh, these rich people are all the same,’ George said, bitterly. ‘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’ (BTA 208).

Subalterns like George and Maria often remain mute sufferers; they cannot or do not want to raise their voice against the master class, the ruling authority. Historically the subalterns have had remained victims at the hands of the elite; they nurtured everlasting issues remaining to be addressed. True, the subalterns tried hard to raise themselves and come up in life. But in their efforts, they are not helped by the elite who want to maintain the social structure rigid so that they can maintain their supremacy. This is what Adiga tries to highlight through the characters –George, Maria and Mrs.Gomes.

The position of women in India was not very higher because they were never allowed to get their basic education. On the other hand, most of the girls were trained to be domesticated at a young age for their marital life. Among the subalterns, the predicament of women is more unenviable. They were not educated properly; their poverty and caste conditions curbed whatever ambitions they had.

Saiyeda Khatun explains a cultural practice that degrades women: ‘the system of dowry encompassing all classes very effectively sums up the different degree of subalternity devaluing all women. Although nobody calls it dowry, a bride’s status in the in-law’s family is directly related to when she brings from the natal family in terms of money and goods. (kulsumandsteph.blogspot.com).

Adiga in several of his stories, highlights the state of female subalternity. Dowry is a big menace crippling the Indian society; the abominable system hurts the low- and middle-class families more where people have to sacrifice their desires and ambitions and have to experience pains and sufferings in their day-to-day life. Even today, one can witness countless dowry victims in the Indian society. Adiga speaks through his characters about the dowry menace.

‘Dowry,’ Ratna gave the evil its proper name in a soft voice. ‘Fine. I’ve saved money up for this girl’. He breathed out. ‘Where I’ll get dowry for the next two, though, God alone knows’ (BTA 219). Jayamma’s mother, in a space of twelve years had given birth to eleven children. Nine of them had been girls. Yes, nine. Now that’s trouble. Her father saved enough gold only for six daughters to be married off; the last three had to stay barren virgins for life (BTA 158) so the old Woman put her hands on her daughter’s head. ‘She is unmarried, sir. We are begging some money to marry her off that is all’. (BTA 255)

Ratna is a working-class man, and he has three daughters, Aditi, Rukmini, Ramnika. Ratna, by his hard work has earned enough money for his first daughter’s marriage, but for the remaining two

daughters he did not save the money. As the result, marriage for them remain pipe dreams. Jayamma was born in the poor family and she has eight sisters. Her father had saved enough gold only for her six sisters to be married off; but Jayamma without marriage still she is working in her old age as a cook and doing household chores in someone else's house. The reason is dowry practice. In another story, an old lady belongs to the poor class. After her husband's death, she struggles in vain to get her daughter married. Adiga has shown in many of his stories, how the dowry system plays havoc in the Indian social scene. Many times, the poor become poorer by giving dowry.

2. Conclusion

Adiga, in his *Between the Assassinations* has captured the issues of working class/ of downtrodden people of the uneven Indian society. He has shown the ill-treatment meted out to the subaltern by the hegemonic forces. His treatment of the subaltern issues in India has universal tone as Spivak points out, "The subaltern must be seen only as the vehicle of a greater meaning" (72). Often, the suppressed people are unable to extricate themselves from the subjugation and the clutches of the merciless machinations of the elite. Still, the subaltern display guts and manage to survive but at a price. Still, social equality and economic prosperity remain dreams to be realized by the subalterns, even in this 21st Century, in the postcolonial India. According to 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).

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