Social Realism in Aravind Adiga’s Short Stories

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Abstract:

Aravind Adiga, a socially committed novelist, has produced a good deal of literature. His novels fall into two categories, namely social and autobiographical. He focused his attention on the sufferings, misery and dejection of the impoverished as a result of the exploitation of the downtrodden of the Indian society. Religious hypocrisy, feudal system, the place of woman in the society, poverty, hunger and exploitation are some of his common themes. In all the novels Aravind Adiga conveys a social message to the people of India regarding modern Indian society and how the poor people are living in crushing poverty. He stands in the front line of Indian Writing in English. He writes realistically and his characters are the persons whom he met. He is undoubtedly the greatest artist of Indian Writing in English. His great works represent to us the lives of India's poor in a practical and sympathetic manner. His novels and short stories present a minute pictures of Indian society, with special focus on the plights of poor people. Adiga’s first novel deals with the misery of the crushed and oppressed person and his struggle for a better life. His subsequent novels and short stories are almost a deviation on the same theme. Adiga’s Between the Assassinations has classic component as it deals with the struggle of the poor people in India against the traditional social order and the life history of young children, youth and starving millions of Indian people. In each stage their tragedy deepens and intensifies without any relief. Adiga has taken the theme of his novels from real life and so his novels are nothing but social realism. The present research paper is an attempt to highlight how social realism are reflected in Adiga’s short stories.

Keywords: hypocrisy, oppressed, impoverished, downtrodden.

Born and brought up in a traditional South Indian family, Adiga is a true Indian both in spirit and thought. Much has been said about Adiga as an outstanding and an unassailable story teller. If Mulkraj Anand is considered as a socially committed novelist, Adiga is often applauded as a painter of vivid Kittur, a microcosm of Indian social milieu. Adiga has published four short stories The Sultan’s Battery, Smack, Last Christmas in Bandra and The Elephant between 2008 and 2009, drawing upon social economic problems to explore the real picture of modern Indian society. These short stories are an abridged version of his second novel Between the Assassinations. It has been published in India, and apparently refers to that period between the assassination of our former Prime Ministers Smt. Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi. His novels and short stories promised the rise of a revolutionary novelist in India. His writings mainly reflected poor man’s problems and Adiga through his writings has never taken the eye of the underprivileged: he
strikes a blow on their behalf. His eyes miss nothing and some of his analogies are delightfully fresh. His short stories give the picture of the life of the extremely needy people like rickshaw pullers, scavengers, small poor children and also drug addicts.

Since the publication of The White Tiger, Adiga has been a controversial figure known for his unusual forthrightness. In his short stories like The Elephant, Smack Adiga draws upon the exotic to discuss about the injustice of some people having too much and some so little. The Sultan’s Battery is the story of a young boy who is having AIDS. In Last Christmas in Bandra, Adiga universalizes and makes public about his personal experiences suggesting that underprivileged people in India are living like stray dogs. He tries to give messages to the people that the life style of the deprived is miserable.

Adiga is an author in the confessional mode. The confessional writer deals with their personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo with a tone of utter sincerity. The facts are not always true, but there is no deviation at all from emotional truth. Confessional novelist always tries to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is. His novels characterize frustrations and disillusionments with a captivating frankness. He tried to assert his individuality maintaining his identity.

The Sultan’s Battery is an intriguing little story by Aravind Adiga, in which he has touched the point of ‘karma’ and fate. The moral of the story is that the man who sells fake medicines ends up caring for someone; it also reveals the existence of fraud doctors in our country. The story of Ratnakar Shetty, a struggling lower-middle class salesman who helps a young man to fight AIDS, reflects that one should not give up the fight. Adiga also highlights the custom of the boys visiting brothels and invites these diseases. To hide their diseases the young boys go to fake doctors and these doctors are cheating the innocent people who lose their lives by taking bogus medicines. Ratnakar also saw many people who were waiting to see the real doctor;

These were the same ones who came to him – older, sadder versions; men who had been trying to shake off venereal disease for years, who had thrown bottle after bottle of white pills at it, to find no improvement – who were now at the end of a long journey of despair, a journey that led from his booth at the Dargah, through a long trial of other hucksters, to this doctor’s clinic, where they would be told at last the truth (Adiga, Between the Assassinations 300).

Smack is the story is about the little children called Soumya and Raju, who became beggars in search of money to buy drugs for their father who was a drug addict. The children were forced to beg on the streets and earn money to get smack for their addicted father who work at a construction site. Adiga describes the pathetic condition of the drug addicts in their working places. He explains how the children’s father was ill-treated by the foreman.

It’s one thing to take a little ganja, roll it inside a chapatti and chew it at the day’s end, just to relax the muscles – I can forgive that in a man, I really can. But to smoke this drug – this smack – at seven in the morning, and then lie in a corner with your tongue hanging out, I tolerate that in no man on my construction site (Adiga, Between the Assassinations 213).
It is really a heartbreaking story of civilized India. We may call it as the story of rural migration to cities and the life in slums is seen through the eyes of the little children of a construction labourer. The story portrays the true picture of India where we can see the oppressed women and children work hard or even beg to earn money so that the male can get alcohol or smack. Soumya’s mother also works as a labourer. It is a terrifying fact that the father is so arrogant that he sends his two children to earn some money so that he can buy drugs. The children face an arduous day without food, but keen to get the drugs for their father. The children were worried about their father’s condition without drugs. He was lying on a blue mat, apart from everyone else. They want to help him. Soumya and Raju are ready to get the drugs from the place called Bunder where drugs are easily available. For getting the drugs for their father these children face all the hardships for the whole day without food. The following words of Adiga are the real picture of Indian society which we used to see in our day to day life. “He was sitting on a wooden board with wheels. Whenever a car slowed down at the traffic light in front of the hotel, he rolled up on his wooden board and begged from one side; she begged from the other side of the car” (220). After begging for the whole rainy day they got only nine rupees. Instead of getting something to eat, they gave it to the people who are selling drugs. The children did not even know what is that. “Taking a pouch made of newspaper-skin out of his pocket, he tapped it: white powder, like crushed chalk, poured out. He took out a cigarette from another pocket, sliced it open, and rolled it tight. He held the cigarette up in the air and gestured with his other hand to Soumya” (224). The children did all this because they do not want to see their father suffering. Adiga, in this short story clearly picturise the worst condition of the poor people and also depicts the society we live in. He also gives the message that the children are sent by their parents for begging not only to lead their livelihood but also to meet their illegal demands. Adiga always wrote about the reality of our modern Indian society and his basic themes are hunger, poverty and exploitation. He used to write the real facts he comes across in daily life. He focused his attention on the suffering, misery and wretchedness of the poor people. Soumya Bhattacharya writes in The Independent about his short story Smack,

Adiga gets under the skin of these characters and writes about them with insight and empathy in a way few other Indians writing in English do today. In “The Cool Water Well Junction”, a father addicted to drugs sends his small daughter on an errand to get him smack from the other side of the town. The girl goes, with her little brother, and after an arduous day return with the little packet. But the brother, exhausted and annoyed by the long journey, comes home and loudly lies that someone had given the girl “a hundred rupees but she never gave me anything to eat or drink”. The dark denouement to the story - it takes all of a couple of hundred words – is terrifying (24 July 2009).

The exceptionally interesting short story Last Christmas in Bandra of Aravind Adiga is not only the story of a pitiable woman, but also the true picture of Indian society. He has asserted himself in larger than private contexts, and has discovered the means to release the energy of his hidden anger by creating powerful literature. Here he talked about the story of a woman who has been deprived of her natural power, pressure towards self sacrifice and does not care for her pains. But here is the story of a lady scavenger whose son is in an orphanage. When the foreigners wanted to adopt her son, she refused to give her son to them.
She left the child in an orphanage at birth. She has never seen him since she gave birth to that boy. When the author explained to her that these foreigners will take him to a good home, feed him well and give him clothes, even then she refused to give her nod. The author asked the lady why she is not giving the consent, she replied that he is her son. Then and there the author thought, this person before me was not a mother, who is meant to show selfless love for her children, but the incarnation of selfishness, like the dog that sat in the manger. Here the author shows his feelings which are filled with hatred for all the poor of our country, who live like animals, vote for the most corrupt politicians, and insist on staying poor dragging this country down. When the mother was asked to show her hands, to his surprise, he saw some terrific marks on her arms. Those are all rat bites. There were black welts that ran up and down her arms down to the fingers.

Not far from the gate there was an open garbage heap, and the car’s headlights would flash on it. Amoist the garbage lying in the heap, there was one item that always caught my eye – a pile of clipped chicken’s feet, thrown there every evening by some butcher, which were always shaking to and fro, like something living, as the rats ripped and chewed them in a frenzy (Adiga Web).

Chenayya is a man who is completely frustrated with life and the world. He is the protagonist of Adiga’s short story The Elephant. He works for the benefit of his master, but earns tips from the customers. He awfully feels harsh about his job because the remuneration is very low and the work is tiresome. Because of this he wants to leave this profession and get another job but faced only failures. He has tried in so many places, but could not find a job. Not able to resolve the problem, Chenayya realized that there is no option for him so he has to remain a rickshaw puller. The story ends unexpectedly, as Chenayya realizes that his career desires were stopped by corrupt employers. Throughout the story Adiga describes the suffering of the rickshaw pullers.

If the thing to be delivered was light, like a mattress, he was not allowed to take a cycle-cart; it had to be carried on his head … The weight of the mattress had seemed unbearable, it compressed his neck and spine and sent a shaft of pain down his back. He was virtually in a trance … Uphill again. Leaning forward out of his seat, Chenayya was straining hard; the breath entered his lungs like a hot poker (185 - 187).

All the novels of Aravind Adiga are Indian in sensibility and content. They deal with the Indian environment and reflects its civilization often ironically. The total freedom that language could offer was his exploration and language to express himself fully in all his intricate situations. There is no denying the fact that Aravind Adiga’s focus of the issues surpasses that of his predecessors and contemporaries. He with frankness and impervious honesty, deals with various problems of poor people, declares poverty is the true cause for breaking laws.

Adiga has tried to create rough characters in all their accuracy. Adiga shows his concern over the organized evil in the society which is the cause of the miseries of people who are living below the poverty line. This organized evil is the real enemy of the society. It deliberately denies the basic human rights to the unprivileged class. Adiga wants to awaken the exploited, suppressed, dehumanized classes of the society.
He feels that exploiting the working class has been our national sin which we are committing for centuries together. They are forced to such a depth that they sink lower and lower and cannot rise above. They have been pushed to such a deprived life that it makes them feel subhuman. Adiga wants to uplift them from the deep. He hopes for happiness for the entire Outcaste downtrodden who try their level best to exist under exploitation and strive for the good life. He feels that if the poverty is alleviated, they can free themselves from the slavery. Adiga wins the poise of his readers and establishes a close pleasant association with them as well as with his characters. His social realism is persistent by his creative visualization which are carried out for the purpose of art as well as for the manifestation of social reality.

Works Cited: