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Masterpieces of Literature: A Mirror on Darkness

Muzifar Yousuf

Research Scholar,
School of Studies in English,
Vikram University Ujjain (M.P.)

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Abstract:

Darkness of any society has been mirrored through literature from times immemorial; across the world by different insightful writers. However, in this particular research paper the whole literature cannot be assessed but evaluates some works of literature to justify the credence of the title. The literary works which are analyzed here have milieus in different countries, particularly India, England and America written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Joseph Conrad, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga. In this context; it is evaluated that caste system of Indian society is found to have its inherent weakness which rendered it unjust and exploitative over a period of time, giving rise to social injustices, disabilities and inequalities among a vast majority of the people. It gave birth to the division of society while promoting disunity and caste prejudices. The caste system was based on birth rather than individual talent and vocational choice. So, this created many disabilities for the talented individuals belonging to the lower castes. Therefore, the age-old evil of casteism has cast its grey shadow on the future of lower caste. It has been aggravated by narrow scope of its economic growth. This socio-economic destitute almost closes to it; the door of any political hope except using right to vote. Even the modern pollution has rendered the Indian society very ugly so for its depiction through literature is concerned. Infact, with the passage of time, its condition has worsened. All policies of reform have fallen far short of their goal. The urban population is enjoying the benefits of modern world after a fashion. But the rural life is lost in darkness. Besides, the Indian works of literature, in case of the European ones it is found that there the depiction has basis on distorted version of morality, inhuman relationships, social waywardness, moral erosion and so on.

Keywords: Darkness, immemorial, prejudices, destitute, analytical, divinity, imperialism, hypocrisy, mechanization, pessimistic, Servitude.

In a general way, darkness implies ignorance, the very want of knowledge be it academic, moral or spiritual. However, literature takes a more penetrating view of darkness. It attempts to study its nature and multiple meanings associated with it. Often its working is subtle, and which can be revealed only through a keen insight. Reality, as is said, is different from appearance. Likewise, what is hidden to a common eye can be x-rayed through an analytical sight. Many a scholar delved into the concept of darkness and interpreted it in diverse ways. Infact, darkness is as old as humanity. The earliest humans lived a life of ignorance. They knew as much about the world as could help their survival. But they were possessed of an inborn drive for knowledge. They wanted to understand life better and

discover what it could offer them. It certainly led them to more improved ways of living. As a result, the course of human evolution was determined. In this way, from ignorance to enlightenment a long distance was covered. But darkness could not be completely wiped out. Human self-satisfaction was its major reason. Many were simply content with food and sleep, and never wanted to think beyond. They did not see any point in intellectual feats and remained indifferent to it. Obviously, this ignorance was at their own cost but not trusted on them.

However, there were some unfortunate ones who were deprived of knowledge. They were not allowed to see light and were doomed to a bleak fate. They had to be satisfied with few bits and pieces of knowledge that they could gather from scattered sources. And they had no right to test whether what they got was right or wrong.

This unfortunate lot of the people was thrown into darkness for the sake of those who craved to bring them under their control. Evidently, the ignorant can be easily ruled, freedom comes from knowledge. In this context Jesus Said, “Know the truth and it will set you free.” It was outright against the lust for power. So, for their mean ends, some of those who had possessed knowledge held it from the masses, thereby forcing them into mental bondage. For instance, Shudras were fortified from reading the Vedas. Likewise, clergy barred laymen from reading the Bible. They were made to believe what so-called religious gurus preached. Karl Marx criticized it “Religion is the opium of the masses.”

Later on, this ill practice took new forms. Sometimes, colonizers tried to belittle the moral values of the colonized and to enforce their own idea of morality on them. The perception of darkness is also related to insignificance and vagueness, particularly moral issue which are not clear. Other times women were forced to accept that it was a men’s world and they were subordinates. Such disparity could be found in the different groups of any society also.

In the above cases, one group kept the other in dark for their selfish motives, which led to acute suffering and injustice. As a result, it began to be treated as a critical concern for literature. The causes and effects of darkness founded the basis of various literary theories and themes, which explored the subject widely.

To highlight the same, a significant portion of dark literature is centered on the western imperialism. The main goal of imperialism was to exploit the physical resources as well as to establish the political supremacy of the Europeans over African and Asian countries. But it did not seem to satisfy them sufficiently, their ambition rose higher. In their invasion, they saw a good chance to exploit the natives morally also. Having assumed their moral and intellectual superiority they took upon themselves what Kipling called ‘the white man’s burden’. The subject race had to submit to it because of their weak positions and had to learn what their white masters taught them.

Unfortunately, the prime motive of these moral reforms was to demean the native values and cultures. Infact, the natives were filled with love for what was foreign and hatred for what belonged to them. Their self-identity was trampled and borrowed identity was placed instead. The reformists thought that mere conversion to the western ways could free the ruled from darkness. This mistaken view further blurred the latter's vision for their immature minds could not tell good from evil and light from darkness.

However, though the majority of natives were unaware of the Western hypocrisy, the voice of truth could not be suppressed long. Some Western thinkers rose against injustice and fought for the cause of the victimized. Being close to the imperialists, they could closely see their shallow schemes and brought them out in a loud and clear tone.

Daniel Defoe's major novel *Robinson Crusoe* is a symbolic representation of this reality. It depicts how Robinson Crusoe, a white man, tries to impose on a native black man his own concept of divinity assuming the latter in darkness. The native idea of divinity seems irrational to him.

Joseph Conrad's influential work the *Heart of Darkness* was drawn on similar European African dichotomy. It criticized the European superiority and brought to light the hollow attempts made by the colonizers to enlighten the Africans. He stressed that main intention of enlightenment was to prove Europe as a symbol of light and Africa a symbol of darkness. In truth, there was no genuine concern for the natives. It is aptly remarked that, "What may be initially superficially considered or expected to be 'light is dark' and vice versa". Thus, the works of Defoe and Conrad showed there was no honest desire of reform on the part of the imperialists. What they revealed 'was in conflict with the commonly perceived wisdom, of the time that Africa was being enlightened by the colonizing forces within Europe.' The assessment can be exemplified by the following lines:

Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay- cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death- death sulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. . . . They were men enough to face the darkness. . . . They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force . . . It was just rubbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale men going at it blind- as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. (Conrad 18-19)

Also, T.S Eliot presented a deep insight into the moral and spiritual darkness of the early 20th century. In his classic poem *The Wasteland*, he drew on numerous mythical and spiritual sources pointing to the dark state of the modern society. He believed that the ill effects of mechanization have robbed humanity of its real worth which has resulted into moral and spiritual barrenness. He portrayed this era as devoid of illumination. His main focus was on the disillusionment brought about by the World War I.

Among novelists, Thomas Hardy is a prominent name in the field of dark literature. His works are invariably pessimistic. They describe miserable characters suffering at the cruel hands of an unseen fate. This inexplicable nature of life is essentially tragic in Hardy's view. For him all the pains and troubles of human life come from the ignorance of this unknown force, which controls our destinies. The world is uncertain and insecure; therefore, it is bound to be tragic. His *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a symbolic representation of this somber reality.

Likewise, Nathaniel Hawthorne also shares this vision of life. He portrays vividly the version distorted morality that empowers society against the individual who is not free to enjoy their own liberty. Absence of illumination throws the innocent in isolation and forces them to submit to the strong. His *The Scarlet Letter* reflects the ugly side of this dark morality. The novel is a pathetic account of how custodians of society care more for their rigid code of conduct than precious human dignity. The statement has direct and appropriate words in its support from the novel as

“This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the scripture and the statue-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray!” . . . That is the hardest word yet! Hush, now, gossips! For the lock is turning in the prison door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself.” (Hawthorne 44)

The world views of Hardy and Hawthorne can be appropriately described in the words of Jean Anouilh who said, “Tragedy is restful because you know that there is no more hope, dirty shrieking hope that you are caught at last like a rat in a trap.”

Further, since Adiga's *The White Tiger* has been written in Indian context its theme can be discussed more clearly through the works of some Indian writers. They can present a concrete overview of the native life that helps to study Adiga's treatment of the same (life). Considering it, we have included in this paper a brief short discussion on two Indian novels, i.e. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Both are separated by six decades – the former one was written in (1930) and the later one (1998). Yet, their shared concern for the backward and underprivileged sections of the Indian Society relates them to *The White Tiger*.

Like Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Mulk Raj Anand explores the evils of Indian society in his work of genius *Untouchable*. Mainly it focuses attention on a number of customs, traditions, social evils and so on. It was published in 1935. It attacked the ills of the caste system which has compelled major portion of Hindu people to live sub-human life. The novel provides a biting criticism on caste system and exposes the callousness and hypocrisy of the upper caste Hindus. The religious people who are considered God's chosen lot but in practicality they are wolves in lamb's clothes. According to Mulk Raj Anand, when these religious people are sexually attracted and caught in society, they blame the innocent people to whom they are attracted. Nobody can oppose them because traditionally they have

dominated common masses. This is wretchedness on the part of the upper class. Not only these untouchables are not even allowed to draw water from their wells, to climb even the steps of their temples and the very shadow is supposed to pollute them (caste Hindus). Untouchables who are supposed to work for high caste Hindus are not allowed to enter their houses. The most disgusting thing is that the temples whose doors are closed for those who keep its grounds clean. Really appearance is deception. If an untouchable, even brushes against the clothes of High Caste Hindu, they must wash themselves and purify themselves with water. But they do not hesitate to molest a sweeper girl if they like her. The same has been put forth as by the author:

‘Tell me, tell me, that he didn’t do anything to you!’

Sohini was sweeping. She shook her head in negation. She couldn’t speak.

‘Tell me Sohini’, he said, turning fiercely at his sister, ‘how far did he go?’

She sobbed and didn’t reply.

Tell me! Tell me! I will kill him if. . . .’ he shouted.

‘He-e-e just teased me’, she at last yielded. ‘And then when I was bending down to work, he came and held me by my breasts.’

‘Brahmin dog!’ Bakha exclaimed. I will go and kill him!’ (Anand 55)

The book asserts that in society, power is within high castes because the foundation of their power is so deep even the masses of untouchables are not able to shake it. The untouchables are made so passive and helpless, even that they cannot complain against their sister’s molestation. Servitude had completely paralyzed them, and they have lost their self-dignity.

Anand being a social novelist had felt the pulse of Indian nerve. *Untouchable* is a novel of the nineteen thirties when India was still a colony, when the evil of untouchability was prevalent through the country, and when Mahatma Gandhi was carrying on his crusade for the eradication of this evil and when the burning, torching and killing of untouchables was a daily event, when these oppressed or down-trodden people could not even complain or grumble.

Thus, lower castes were brought down to such pathetic conditions. Their ignorance was shamefully exploited for darkening their existence. With the passage of time, though these ills were moderated but they could not be tamed altogether. Infact, they thrive well in the rural climate of the country. Roy’s *The God of Small Things* tried to review the lot of the ignorant in the modern India.

Roy, in her novel *The God of Small Things*, portrays untouchability, gender discrimination, patriarchy, injustice faced by woman in the androcentric society. Indian society, as is well known, is a patriarchal, male dominated society. Man enjoys a prominent position in Indian families. Woman has to rest content with a secondary position. She remains subservient to man. She is meant for man’s recreation and procreation. She is overall considered man’s property. The birth of a baby girl is a matter of sorrow in most of the Indian homes. She is considered a burden for her parents. So, right from the birth; woman is looked down upon while a male issue is accorded a VIP treatment.

All these aspects of anti-woman, Indian society have been exposed in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu, the protagonist, starts experiencing this discrimination right from her childhood days. She is denied seek higher education while her brother Chako is sent to Oxford for higher education. Ammu is not sent to college even in her own country. Lack of education poses a hurdle for her later in the novel. She is not qualified enough to make her job secure to support her family. She is denied the part from her father's property. Here we have author's words "A married daughter had no position in her parent's home. As for a divorced daughter, she had no position anywhere at all. And as a divorced daughter from a love marriage" (Roy 46).

In the patriarchal society, the females are oppressed and prohibited while it is granted full recognition among males. Thus, when Chako plays amorous games with the women in the factory, a special back door entry is allowed into his bedroom. Mammachi, indulgently calls it "man's need". But at the same time when Ammu's clandestine affair with Velutha, an untouchable, is discovered, the whole family feels outraged. She (Ammu) is locked like a mad. Velutha is falsely charged and tortured to death.

So, untouchability is Arundhati Roy's main concern. The novel projects the plight of the untouchables through Velutha and to some extent his father. Untouchables are very efficient in every field but are offered a salary lesser than what they deserve. The untouchable (Velutha) suffers at the hands of the high-caste people for no fault of his. The poor untouchable's only fault lies in the fact that he is well built and catches the fancy of high-caste girl. Velutha is charged with kidnapping of children, drowning of a child and attempting a rape of a young woman.

Thus, *The God of Small Things* brings to light these dark horrors of Indian society that have supposedly ceased to exist but in reality they still haunt the ignorant masses.

Though, the issue of untouchability has, not been addressed directly in *The White Tiger* yet the novels like: *Untouchable* and *The God of Small Things* give an insight into the biased character of Indian Society. These eventually help us to study the cause and effect of master-servant relationship along with illiteracy and socio-economic disparity.

Furthermore, in view of *The White Tiger* the closest approach to the treatment of darkness can be gained from the writer himself. Adiga's first novel *Between the Assassinations* was drawn on similar theme. In a way, *The White Tiger* can be dubbed as sequel to *Between the Assassinations*. The latter discusses the lot of the poor section of the Indian society.

Between the Assassinations was written in 2005; its focus is on the poverty and misery of Indian society. Religio-socio-political conflicts are revealed in humour and irony. The poor people struggle very hard to make both ends meet. But they fail because the structure of the society is so brutal they have to live in utter destitute. Because of their poverty they are employed in very tough jobs, where they lose even their eye sight. Here we have an account "He didn't want their eyes on him: those eyes that were being damaged, while their fingers

created golden shirts that he could sell to American ballroom dancers” (Adiga 40).

More to the point, the poor people are put behind the bars for very small matters, at the same time criminals belonging to upper strata of the society move freely. It can be exemplified by a Dalit bookseller named Xerox, who lands in prison for selling a copy of *The Satanic Verses* and a poor employee of the rich Mr. Engineer is forced to own up the accidental killing by his boss. Similarly in *The White Tiger*, Balram is blackmailed to own upon accidental killing to protect his master Ashok’s wife. According to the same novel one more darkening constituent of Indian society is pollution. It seriously affects every living thing including humans. It is a serious problem because of rapid deforestation, industrialization, unplanned urbanization etc. Environmental pollution disturbs the ecology of the country. Here Adiga questions the traditional notion of the truth and salvation. He wonders how a polluted river can purify soul! It cannot even cure physical impurities. It is plain to see this reality. But ignorance has totally blinded the people. Adiga says: “Why I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows that area is the Darkness.” (Adiga *TWT* 15)

Advancement in Science and technology has brought luxurious things like automobiles and so on. Further, establishment of industries and factories were done everywhere. Consequently it gave rise to air pollution, which chokes people. Capital of every country is considered its face. It should be very clean and free from pollution. In this case Delhi or we can say capital of India gives us dark picture:

Rush hour in delhi cars, scooters, motorbikes, auto-rickshaws, black taxis, jostling for space on the road. The pollution is so bad that the men on the motorbikes and scooters have a handkerchief wrapped around their faces – each time you stop at a red light, you see a row of men with black glasses and marks on their faces, as if the whole city were out on a bank heist that morning.

There was a good reason for the face masks; they say the air is so bad in Delhi that it takes ten years off a man’s life.” (Adiga *TWT* 133)

Further, *Between the Assassinations* explores the darkness both among the upper and lower classes of the society. In it, we find the smack addict Ramachandran forces his little daughter Soumya to do the filthy errand for him.

The dreams of the poor people are crushed by the leading class. They (poor) are crushed because they want resources. Even the people are judged by the caste but not by the content of their character that is a main problem rife in Indian society. This caste struggle gives rise to conflicts among the society. Here author says “I have burst a bomb to end the 5,000-year old caste system that still operates in our country. I have burst a bomb to show that a man should not be judged, as I have been, merely by the accident of his birth.” (Adiga 59)

Consequently, in the conflict of caste-system, poor people adopt extreme means like Marxism and Maoism. These so-called revolutionary means do not illumine their way, but simply

exploit their ignorance. Thus, so far we have discussed the major works in national and international dark literature.

Moreover, a detailed analysis of the Indian social structure is necessary for a more comprehensive study of the concept of darkness in literature.

Nowadays untouchability is a serious crime. The very idea of caste system still prevails in the minds of many Hindus. Still inter caste marriage are not allowed in many traditional and rural families of India. Associations and organizations based on caste still exist in India and are playing crucial role in perpetuating the idea of caste system. Sometimes caste remains responsible for violence and bloodshed in colleges and in the rural Indian society. In educational institutions students often form group on the caste basis. A part from this, caste plays an important role in politics, the temple administration which are run by government officials. Still lower castes are employed by higher castes to perform menial and degrading jobs. So, according to the words of Professor Colonel K. Prabhakar Rao “Hindu Society is plagued by the ills of caste system and late, this problem has taken the proportions of goliath and is threatening the very integrity of the nation. The society in India is rather divided on the basis of caste and not a single day passes without an incident where caste becomes the focal point” (Rao 1).

Therefore, it seems that the problem of untouchability vanished outwardly but the incidents like: train burning and looting of the shops reminds us that the caste system has deep roots and it is hard to abolish it. Practice of untouchability lowers the image of Hinduism in the eyes of the world. Although the practice of untouchability has been banned but is being practiced for selfish motives still.

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