

Negotiating Subaltern Spaces in the Contemporary Society-

An overview of the Novels of Arvind Adiga

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Abstract

Adiga, as a novelist has used the power of his writings to revisit, redraft and deconstruct the ethics of representation of the subaltern who in the parlance of GayatriSpikak have no voice since their representation or their voices get muffled in the conduits of the politics of codification and culture in the main stream society and academia. Adiga has contrived to prise open the essentialist nature of the elitist ideology that holds its sway over the cultural ethos of the country. Adiga proclaims that the voice of the subaltern doesn't always remain muffled under the din of political agency, but do make their treble heard in ways that are conspicuous and revelatory of the power they hold (he toes the line of Foucault and Deleuze in his proclamation and belief) According to the writer, the subaltern of today is not completely cut off from the vantage position of accessing power- but elitist nationalism uses epistemic ideology and cultural hegemony to keep them trapped-these heterogeneous people are mutated into homogeneous classes and are given identities that uses the colour of fear to bracket them in into groups to be packed and processed as rural, slum dwellers, illiterates, backward, etc and which are in turn used as political bitcoins to market power and financial gain for the capitalist and imperialistic forces. Adiga in his characteristic wryness calls these packages the Rooster coop. However the question remains if these voices can be heard or do they remain mere whimpers in the wind? Another issue that crops up is –does the subaltern *want* speak from his threshold? Does he try to reach out to take the support of the elitist agencies to raise his voice-does he go the extra mile to transcend his identity so that he can qualify for a voice?

Key Words: Subaltern, Agency, Elitist, Power, Hegemony, Imperialism

Introduction

Indian society rests on the ideologies of subordination and domination which is fluid and appears different in different places (Ghosh. R, 2012). It is this fluidity that determines the positioning of the subaltern which according to Spivak and Gramsci are 'negative spaces', wherein representations and identity get muffled and negated in the politics of epistemic codification and culture of the main stream society. The space is a four dimensional one given the fact that the subaltern of today is a by-product of the capitalist economy and they are an essential component of the global capital. This leaves the space in an ever widening gyre making positions and positionalities highly relative and fluid.

....., I propose that we view the subaltern neither as a sovereign-subject that actively occupies a bounded place nor as a vassal-subject that results from the dispersed effects of multiple external determinations, but as an agent of identity construction that participates, under determinate conditions within a field of power relations, in the organization of its multiple positionality and subjectivity. In my view, subalternity is a relational and a relative concept: there are times and places where subjects appear on the social stage as subaltern actors, just as there are times or places in which they play dominant roles. Moreover, at any given time or place, an actor may be subaltern in relation to another, yet dominant in relation to a third. And, of course, there are contexts in which these categories may simply not be relevant. Dominance and subalternity are not inherent, but relational characterizations. Subalternity defines not the being of a subject, but a subjected state of being (Coronil * Listening to the Subaltern 649)

The Man

Like most people who live in India, I complain about corruption, but know that I can live with corrupt men. It is the honest ones I secretly worry about. Arvind Adiga,.

A Mangalorean by birth and an NRI by education and citizenship, Arvind Adiga is the son of a surgeon who had migrated to Australia. An assiduous and diligent scholar, Adiga who stood first in the state both at the 10th and the 12th grades went on to graduate in Literature from Columbia University after his family migrated to Australia following the death of his mother. Having found his calling in Journalism

and Reporting, he worked in prestigious periodicals like The Financial Times and The Time Magazine before quitting his job to be a freelancer and shifting base to India. His writings reflect and capture the reality of the Indian cultural and socio political milieu which he has lived in and observed in his capacity both as a journalist and as a citizen.

The recipient of the prestigious Booker Prize for his debut novel *The White Tiger*, he has authored three other books which in essence captures the binary oppositions at the level of caste, community, religion and other factional aspects which form the quintessence of the socio-political reality of the contemporary society.

The Indian Society

India with its pluralistic society provides a wide canvas for the interrelations and confluence of multicultural elements to clash, reshape and reinvent themselves in various dimensions and relations while keeping the traditional feudal and the class structures intact. The growth of the middle class and consequently an economy that more or less follows an upward trajectory given its neo-liberal flavour. India stands slated to become the next economic superpower by 2030. However, the ground reality with its a sharp divide between the middle class and the poor portends a rather grim picture-India is home to 21% of the world's poor. With cities becoming economic hubs having a large number of people from the villages flocking in search of jobs and a better standard of living, the urban landscape stands testimony to the neo liberal and modern India, The city provides for a realistic glimpse of the society-wherein skyscrapers, malls and rich commercial spaces juxtapose with the growing slums, unhygienic and inhuman living spaces and abject poverty. Arvind in his books has tried to analyse and dissect the cityscape and its eccentricities to draw a realistic picture of country and its people, the beliefs and biases that it internalises and the socio political ethos and abstract codes that it draws its lifeline from.

The novels are mostly set in the city not only because the Adiga lives in the Metropolis of Mumbai which gives him the vantage point of first person observation and knowledge, but also because the city today represents the financial capital of the country with most of the superstructures of the society like

Educational Institutions, Financial hubs , Industries , Administrative centres and other centres of power located within the Urban limits and thus making it a prototype and the microcosm of the global India.

Structuralist Nature of the Indian Society

Indian society by itself stands radically different its contemporaries given the fragmentary and episodic nature of its social structure –it is basically a caste and class based entity divided into geo-political and communal structures. Individualism in such a society is almost a nondescript entity even though theoretically the state and the law provides for individual liberalism and rights. However at the practical and the realistic levels, the collective identity of the group exerts its hegemony and ideology over the individual and he develops an identity that is in sync with that of the dominant thought of his class or community. Therefore any individual who tries to exert or proclaim his individuality in terms of decisions pertaining to life or thought is seen as a delinquent and in many extreme cases even ostracized from the community. Emotions run high in the Indian social milieu and even when coming in terms with a contemporary and modern outlook, practices of exploitation and discrimination hold their sway even amongst the ‘educated elites’.

There is, however, an important problem connected with the process of individuation that refers to the moral dimension of the emergent individuals. In their prior existence with collective identity, they were integrated in moral communities as morally responsible persons. When they are dislocated from such communities, they come out as atomised individuals bereft of moral responsibility giving rise to the need for their reintegration as morally responsible individuals in their new setting (Individuation in Indian Society: From Collective Identity to Individual Identity-Victor S. D'Souza)

Adiga and the Individual

It is this very notion of individual and collective identities that Adiga has tried to explore through his novels .His debut novel *The White Tiger* that went on to win rare reviews debates this fundamental dogma . He argues that the question of representation becomes all the more disenchanting when it comes to the oppressed and the downtrodden.The novel within its social, economic and historical context makes

one understand how the evils of economic exploitation and the plight of working class relate to the ideals and values circulated in the society-it is a place where valuesystems are determined by the hegemonic ideals of money and muscle power.His protagonist BalramHalwai emerges from a nondescript slum to become a powerful businessman after murdering his employer and then ghosting his master Ashok, taking on his name , identity and status quo.and in this way transcending his sweet-maker caste and becoming a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In his transition, he has promoted himself to the “elite”by taking the nemesis of the upper class landlord whom he had murdered .Thus it is a question remains if his power comes from imitating an American Life by starting anew and shifting base to another metropolis,Bangalore or by distancing himself from his subaltern past and taking on the identity of his elite master.

"Today it's the *modernist* suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls—each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her"(*The White Tiger*, p-122).

Another novel *Selection Day* highlights the obsession with cricket in India although there are many games and sports that are endemic to the subcontinent .Hockey is the National Sport but Indians seem despairingly besotted with the gentlemen's game that is a direct import of the colonial legacy from the England. Cricket in India is no more just a sport-it has become the passport to untold wealth and fame with cricket players holding celebrity status and having access to power and fame. Indian parents especially from the middle class and the lower strata of the society vie to make their children cricketers,thereby putting untold misery and pressure on the young minds even to the extent of robbing them of their childhood and prone to be exploited in the hands of bookies and unscrupulous sponsors. Growing up in an atmosphere wherein they are expected to only win and thereby emerge strong, these kids have no knowledge of themselves and become incapable of facing the reality of the world. In the shadow of the elitist hegemony,they transform into mere caricatures.Adiga also highlights the fact that any deviant behaviour including homosexuality is also frowned upon in this purist society creating subaltern spaces in the society with lack of access to agency and a support system, leaving the individual fearful of making his

voice heard. That is why the handsome and extremely talented Radha turns into a mental wreck, unemployed and dependent on his brother, and the younger brother Manju who had aspired to be a forensic scientist and continuing with his relationship with Javed, bows out of active cricket and Javed's life after being fired and takes up the job of a talent scout and coach- an act of rebellion against the elitist and conformist ideals of the society.

A similar saga of subaltern resistance to the prevailing bourgeois hegemony is seen in the narrative of *Last Man in Tower* wherein Adiga takes on the real estate mafia and their machinations to convert a lower middle class area to a new Mumbai suburb replete with glitzy skyscrapers and commercial establishments in his narrative. Despite resistance from an old teacher who fastidiously refuses to succumb to the lure of money and prefers to hold on to old value systems and older memories (he doesn't want to relinquish the house that is filled with the memories of his wife and daughter who had passed away), the developer has his way. In spite of living in a free country, Masterji finds no ally in his struggle in the social space and from his immediate neighbours since all the occupants of his colony see him as a villain who is standing in the way to a better life- this despite the teacher warning them that the developer has only promised them money and by giving up their life's savings they could be staring at a very uncertain future if he goes back on his promise. Coerced on all sides, the teacher finds that he can find no help from any of the institutions that proffer to protect the citizen's rights – the police, the media, and the law- not even from his neighbours whom he had helped or whose children he had taught. He is finally murdered by his own neighbours and the people whom he considered his own and also disowned by his only son .

Between the Assassinations showcases the most puissant aspects of Adiga's writing brilliantly : the class struggle rendered personal; the fury of the underdog and the fire of the iconoclast; (Goodreads Review) The novel foregrounds the struggles and the injustices, pathos and the ironies that are an integral part of the Indian society by stringing together short stories set in the fictitious coastal town of Kittur in the period between 1984 and 1991 –that is, the period between the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi. The collection brilliantly captures the sonorous voices of the subaltern which is brutally muffled and silenced by the institutions of the society. It takes the reader through a journey of the real India

–complete with the vices that is inherent and a quintessential part of the modern and neo liberal Indian ethos.

In all the novels, even though the subalterns have tried to generate spaces and identities of their own, and are brutally killed, maimed or thwarted in their struggles- all of them have shown disinterest and disenchantment with the hegemonic ideals of the society and have rebelled in one way or the other -by changing identities, putting up nonchalant and defying attitudes or by distancing himself from the controlling centres of power .Another interesting feature is that Adiga has completely silenced the voices of the strong women although he does indicate that they have a determining influence on the life of his characters-another act of defiance and disregard?

Conclusion

Foucault is correct in suggesting that ‘to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level - addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value.’ It is the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering the individual, both avoiding ‘any kind of analysis of [the subject] whether psychological, psychoanalytical or linguistic,’ that is consistently troublesome (Foucault 1980: 49-50).

It is through this problematic negative space that Adiga offers to take the reader on a voyage of discovery of the Indian subaltern who is disempowered, without political or social agency and who is without identity, marginalized and ostracized by the dominant power structures and rebellious in his own quiet way in a situation that is complicated further by the emerging neo-colonial consciousness that has eroded the socio political practices and spaces –a trend which gets accelerated by globalization and neo liberalization of the economy.

Adiga’s novel is a postcolonial treatise which draws heavily on the tenets of GayatriSpivak and her idea of subalternity and yet creates a niche that is silent and yet at the same time sonorous in its power and potency..Adiga ‘s novels which are post liberalist in nature and dwells on the novelist’s idea of

situating it in the 80s wherein India was trying to consolidate her socio economic status as a post liberalist socio economic precept. It highlights the macroeconomics that form the core of the Indian system and Adiga explores the effect of this system not only on the people who are affected by it but also those who are a part of it. By locating the texts within the various financescapes, Adiga portrays literature that can be read against the globalised grain. (Aravind Adiga: The white elephant? Postliberalization, the politics of reception and the globalization of literary prizes-J Masterson)

Even though enfranchised by law, strengthened by access to education and protected by rights, the subaltern of the modern India finds himself crowded and threatened by the elitist cultural hegemony of the dominant discourse of mainstream politics and ideology in all the superstructures – be it political, religious, educational or economical. But he does rebel – and the question remains – is this rebellion consciously silent or a silently conscious one?

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