

Cycles of Suffering: Exploring Pain and Resilience in Aravind Adiga's

*Between the Assassinations* - "Day One (Morning): The Railway Station"

S. Austin Sweety

Research Scholar in English Reg. No. 19123154012018,

Research Centre: Department of English, S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

Email: austinsweety.1@gmail.com

Dr. V. S. Shiny

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor of English,

Department of English and Research Centre, S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

## ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations* discusses the struggles faced by the people who are marginalized by caste, religion, socio-political norms and cultural conflict in postcolonial India. This paper analyses the sufferings caused by caste and religious ideologies and experienced by marginalized children in a fictitious city named Kittur. Through the life of Ziauddin, the protagonist, Adiga portrays societal issues such as poverty and exploitation. He also highlights the cycles of suffering that emerge from starvation and child labour. The protagonist serves as a milk supplier, works in a restaurant, and a porter, showing the

inequalities and discriminations which shake his existence. Life portrayed in the railway station reflects the current scenario of social life. Here, the attempts taken by the marginalized are not to succeed but to survive. The protagonist suffers to establish an identity and dignity in a society that often devalues him. He endures everything and tries to justify everything, showing the psychological agony of marginalization. This clearly reveals that violence operates through physical suffering and social exclusion. The paper delineates both individual and collective trauma of the oppressed and the brutal injustices based on structural norms.

Key words: Marginalization, Existence, Violence, Poverty, Resilience, Identity

The novels of Aravind Adiga are well-known for depicting the experiences of the marginalized individuals and their anguish in contemporary India. *Between the Assassinations* (2008), is a collection of twelve short stories set in the backdrop of an imaginary town of Kittur, situated between Goa and Calicut. It narrates the events that have taken place over the seven years between the assassinations of Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. The first story "Day One (Morning): The Railway Station," focusses on Ziauddin, a young Muslim boy who struggles to assert his identity and uphold dignity even while living under dehumanizing conditions. He is alienated from society due to the poverty of his family. His experiences reveal the repeated nature of suffering where every attempt at survival is nullified with oppression. His story stands as a representation of the struggles endured by the marginalized communities, especially children, in India.

The town of Kittur in the novel is deeply embedded in religious and caste-based divisions. These divisions enforce rigid societal norms that determine access to employment, education and self-respect. Oppong in "Religion and Identity" states, "Religion is the feeling of man's absolute dependency" (11). Muslims like Ziauddin face religious discrimination that drastically reduces economic opportunities. The

shopkeeper refuses to hire him because of his religious identity. It shows the injustice caused by communal biases that in turn leads to economic marginalization. Even though there are many differences, Ramanna Shetty, the tea shop owner, accepts Ziauddin only for a short period. Ziauddin's claim as a Pathan becomes a source of both internal and external hostility from others. By repeatedly proclaiming, "I'm a Pathan!" he attempts to emphasize his cultural identity as a defense mechanism to preserve his self-esteem. The affirmation of his ethnic lineage and the description of "From the land of the Pathans, far up north, where there are mountains full of snow!" shows a longing for dignity and belonging (Adiga 6).

The preprogrammed societal norms which strengthen humiliation and exclusion are portrayed through the sufferings of Ziauddin. His marginalization is narrated through an incident in which he is falsely accused of stealing at the Ideal Store. He expresses his innocence by screaming, "I am telling the truth, I didn't touch even one of the samosas." He suffers physical and verbal abuse from Ramanna Shetty, his employer. He pushes Ziauddin, out of the tea shop and calls him "son of a bald woman" (Adiga 7). This situation worsens further when Ziauddin bites Ramanna's finger to safeguard himself. Ramanna screams bitterly and reproaches Ziauddin in brutalizing terms as, "He bit me - the animal!" (Adiga 7). Ziauddin attempts to resist the preconditioned societal norms against the existing societal norms which often try to humiliate him. Ramanna's words of dehumanization show how the marginalized victims are degraded to inhuman objects by the oppressors. Mandalla notes in "Representation of Social Problems in Arvind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*" as, "Left to fend for himself, he has to struggle for survival like an adult" (65). Through the sufferings of Ziauddin, Adiga represents how the children develop fear and anxiety at a tender age.

Adiga discusses various factors which decide identity. Ziauddin's longing to identify himself as a Pathan is an act of resistance and an attempt to come out of his trauma of humiliation and degradation.

He always feels proud to declare, "I have the blood of a Pathan in me" (Adiga 8). However, these assertions do not help him to break the chains of oppression. This ill feeling sows communal hatred in his psyche and he decides, never to work for a Hindu again. Ziauddin undergoes painful state of alienation due to the continuous societal rejection and job losses. The dark shadow of fate follows him wherever he goes. He undergoes the same kind of painful experience at the Muslim restaurant. Again, he is charged with theft and pushed out of the shop. Finally, he goes back to the railway station to take up a job as a luggage carrier. There too his attempts fail to establish his identity as a Pathan. He must fight bitterly with the passengers for his rightful wages. He shouts about his identity in the railway station to attract others. He claims, "I'm the son of a Pathan, You hear; I'm no cheat!" (Adiga 8). His efforts to establish his identity leads to internal clashes with other labourers. Ultimately, he is expelled from the railway station. This cycle of marginalization marks Ziauddin's resilience as a constant struggle for survival.

Resilience is a difficult psychological phenomenon in a challenging society where a particular group of people are expelled from the centre. Initially the victims fight against injustice for their identity and later make up their mind to endure to survive. Ziauddin attempts many times but bitterly fails due to the oppression by the perpetrators. He wanders aimlessly in the following days by, "cursing Hindus and Muslims alike" (Adiga 9). His act of resilience serves as a means of survival techniques amidst all unfavourable environments. He does not fight to hold his victory but to survive. His anger is the outpour of all his stagnated psychological agony which he carries.

The deep- rooted social prejudices destroy an individual's search for belonging and identity. Ziauddin's suffering reaches another turning point when he meets a stranger at the railway station who claims to be a Pathan. Initially, this relationship offers him a momentary sense of harmony. The well-dressed man, projecting wealth and power, tells Ziauddin, "My dear fellow: I am a Muslim", and further asserts, "Not just any Muslim. I'm a Pathan" (Adiga 11). This moment temporarily fulfills Ziauddin's desire

for belonging. The stranger's refined personality, his costumes, well-groomed looks and fragrant perfume suggest both vanity and a prideful mentality. Both Ziauddin and the stranger go to Hotel Darul-Islam, where former's longing for recognition is shattered by the hotel owner's action who brutally rejects Ziauddin due to his filthy appearance. Adiga says, "The proprietor, a fat man with a clean-shaven lip and a full, fluffy white beard like a crescent moon" looks at Ziauddin disapprovingly as he sits at the table (Adiga 12). On seeing his marginalization, Ziauddin informs the stranger, "For Muslims like us, it's bad. The Hindus don't give us jobs; they don't give us respect. I speak from experience, sir" (Adiga 12). However, what appears to be an act of solidarity in the beginning for Ziauddin soon finds itself as another way of exploitation. The stranger's real intention emerges out and Ziauddin realizes that he has a hidden agenda of terrorism. He attempts to exploit Ziauddin in collecting intelligence on the Indian army movements. He claims, "The Indian army is setting up a base somewhere between Kittur and Calicut...to do to the Muslims of South India what they are doing to Muslims in Kashmir" (Adiga 17). The recruitment attempt of the Pathan vividly portrays how the marginalized individuals fall as easy targets for communal violence and disharmony. Raj and Shibila in "Social and Cultural Conflict in Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*" rightly state, "The novel through Ziauddin's story tries to probe into the causes of terrorism and how innocent people are used as pawns by the real perpetrators of terrorism" (698). Ziauddin quickly realizes that he is being manipulated by a self-centred extremist.

Rejection is not a form of resistance, but a result of deep exhaustion and the burden of continuous hardship. Many people fall into the trap of ideological manipulation. On realizing the danger behind the manipulation planned by the Pathan, Ziauddin boldly refuses to associate himself with the stranger, "I'm not well. I can't do it tomorrow" (Adiga 17). Frustrated, the stranger reinforces his marginalization, insisting, "There are fifty thousand Muslims in this town... Every one of them is ready for action. I was only offering this job to you out of pity. Otherwise, I would have offered the job to any of

these other fifty thousand fellows” (Adiga 17). At this moment, the identity of Ziauddin is reduced to just a tool for political exploitation. His rejection of the religious extremist’s offer is not an exhibition of superiority but an act of self-defense. Thus, he has endured so much suffering that even manipulation cannot hold power on him. Eventually, Ziauddin returns to Ramanna Shetty’s shop. The boys warn him as, “You can’t stay here, you know Shetty will throw you out”. They shelter him that night, but he soon leaves and moves ahead to the railway station. There, filled with frustration, he shouts bitterly at his customers, “Don’t do hanky-panky!” (Adiga 18). This distressed expression represents exhaustion and disillusionment and reveals the limits of his resilience. The pain he has endured through exploitation, betrayal and dehumanization has left him trapped in a cycle of suffering from which he cannot escape.

Ziauddin’s story in “Day One (Morning): The Railway Station” depicts the broader themes of *Between the Assassinations*: cycles of pain, the quest for identity and the inescapability of manipulation. Adiga observes marginalization as a harsh reality. In this world, resilience is not a way of redemption but a means of existence. It ultimately results in higher disillusionment. The protagonist Ziauddin represents the attempts of the marginalized to assert his identity and reach stability, which are continuously nullified, and that which snares him into a merciless cycle of suffering. Through Ziauddin’s experiences, Adiga unfolds inequality and societal indifference. It shows how pre-programmed discrimination and poverty make the vulnerable trapped in suffering.

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