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Moral Ambiguity in Aravind Adiga's Novels

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Abstract

A remarkable aspect of postmodern novel has been the preoccupation with issues like deterioration of human values and erosion of moral ethics in the society. They occupy a key position in Aravind Adiga's novels. His novels deal with two contrasting eras, one that still clings to the old decaying moral values and another that is anxious to accept the fast-emerging new moral values. He writes about the miserable plight of his protagonists' as they are refused by the society, friends and family. Most of his characters have to feel detached as they turn reactionaries. Balram Halwai, Ashok, Masterji and Dharmen Shah are the examples of his characters experiencing disconnection with their families. Adiga focuses on moral values like honesty, loyalty, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness that cease to have any meaning in the postmodern society.

Keywords

Morality, Religion, Human Relations, Postmodern, Materialism

The society in late twentieth-century underwent a dramatic transformation. The progress in scientific field resulted in materialistic gain at the cost of religious sphere. Materialistic growth led to loss of faith, skepticism and decline of morals. An unbridgeable gap between man and nature is created. The concept of morality has become controversial. It is difficult to label what is moral and what is immoral and it is equally difficult to put them in watertight compartments. A moral ambiguity being faced in the society is out of undesirable, materialistic and hypocritical attitude of people. This condition is illustrated as a remarkable feature of postmodern novel. Aravind Adiga reflects them in his novels. His novels portray two contrasting eras: one that clings to the old decaying moral values and another that anxiously accepts the fast-emerging new values. Adiga focuses on moral values like honesty, loyalty, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness which cease to hold any meaning in the postmodern society.

The present article analyses the moral ambiguity in Adiga's novels *The White Tiger* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011). It highlights how a degradation of morals in the society led to conflicts in relationships. The present generation's desire to pursue wealth makes them neglect moral values and human relations.

The White Tiger is acclaimed for its attack on the notion of morality in modern society. Adiga in it reveals the contemporary society in its true colours. He brings to light the ugliness and inhumanity behind modernization and globalization. To put in Nagpal's words:

Step by step, Adiga bares the startling reality of a nation where unplanned, haphazard urbanization and colonization is suffocating the already overburdened infrastructure, where the social fabric is

being stretched to a breaking point, where poverty, corruption, disease, moral degeneration still rule the day and where every known tradition is being put to test. (152)

The novel offers a trenchant critique of the social injustices harboured by the neoliberal policies. The unbridgeable gap between rich and poor, village and city, and prevailing economic and social injustices that allow a handful of wealthy to be fortunate enough at the cost of the voiceless poor masses is what Adiga highlights. The contrast between the living standards of poor and rich is witnessed as Balram Halwai, the protagonist of *The White Tiger*, watches the realities in Delhi. He hails from a small village, Laxmangarh. He comes to Delhi as a driver. He observes huge apartments, shopping malls, call centers and traffic jams of the metro-city. Delhi is not a shift of locality, but a shift from native cultural roots to high-tech commercial society that reorients his behaviour, mind and sensibility. The city life becomes a metaphor of transformational matrix. His transformation from morally conscious sensibility to violence and conspiracy and from innocence to criminality happens as he imbibes the amoral culture and ways of deceiving from other drivers. He breaks the established rules of trust and social obligations to attain his personal ambition. He deceives his master and becomes a disloyal servant as he says: “that trustworthiness of servants which is the basis of the entire Indian economy” (175).

In the beginning, Balram behaves like a faithful servant. He even compares himself to Hanuman. Like a dedicated servant he wishes to serve his master and mistress. He thinks he would drive “them wherever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant-god Hanuman carried, Ram and Sita” (46). But as Lily Want analyses: “the great danger of Balram is that he pretends to follow the ideals of loyalty and trust only to break them for the sake of making his own way in the world” (74). Balram himself is a feigner which is revealed through his inner feelings:

You should have seen me that day – what a performance of wails and kisses and tears! You'd think I'd been born into a caste of performing actors! And all the time, while clutching the Stork's feet, I was staring at his huge, dirty, uncut toenails, and thinking, *What is he doing in Dhanbad? Why isn't he back home, screwing poor fisher-men of their money...* (61)

Gradually he confesses all his heinous acts of cheating his master. Born and brought up in utter poverty and oppression, Balram fails to maintain his loyalty and trustworthiness towards his master. He learns quickly that he has to work with total dishonesty and insincerity if he has to rise in life. Hence he kills his master and runs away with the money to become a successful entrepreneur.

Balram's outlook for his economic improvement in a globalized neo-liberal world is twofold. The primary one is a breach of family duty. He breaks off with all the meaningful relationships, family bonds and moral codes. The neo-liberal world makes everything commercialized wherein the relationships are kept for sale. The materialistic goals supersede the familial bonds and religious values. Ethics like honesty, sincerity and loyalty in master-servant relationship cease to have any value to Balram. His philosophy of social mobility rests on premises of disloyalty where money and material things are privileged over the laws of obligation. In this regard Sheikh remarks:

The overall outlook of Balram, the narrator of the novel, is materialistic. He judges almost everything on material grounds. His attitude towards the world in general has turned materialistic. He analyses every situation on the causality of material. In his opinion, all the social and political systems of the country like the justice, the political bodies and controlling agencies could be controlled by money. The politics and the police agencies, in the novel, have been in the pockets of business firms. (107)

Realizing the burden of family responsibilities, Balram slowly tries to distance himself from his grand-mother, brother and other relatives of the village. To fulfil his personal ambition, Balram slaughters his master and even contributing to the probable murder of his entire family. Moreover he never confesses his actions: “Oh, I could go on and on about myself, sir. I could gloat that I am not just any murderer, but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father), and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer” (45). Nevertheless, he tries to justify his act of murder by blaming the social structure, by talking distastefully of Laxmangarh, his birthplace, by despising the holy river Ganga and by showing his disrespect to leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. Even he declares that the murder was an act of social justice and class warfare.

The second aspect of Balram is revealed in his attitude to religion. The religious beliefs, moral values and ethics do not hold any meaning to him. He adopts a derogatory and dismissive approach towards the religious system. Through this novel Adiga explores the decline of religious values, rituals and sacredness attached to the religion in the country. With a sarcastic tone, Adiga mocks at the conventional rituals of welcoming a guest and praying the God in the beginning of a story or narration. Adiga challenges these rituals and customs, logically questions the foundations of the religious performances. He sardonically hits at the venerated custom of starting a film:

Now, I no longer watch Hindi films – on principle but back in the days, just before the movie got started, either the number 786 would flash against the black screen –the Muslims think this is magic number that represents their god – or else you would see the picture of woman in white sari with gold sovereigns dripping down to her feet, which is goddess *Lakshami* of the Hindus. (8)

Adiga sketches the character of Balram Halwai as a postmodern self who has little or no faith in the powers of divine intervention. He blames religion for

the oppression of the poor and lack of social progress. Gods become targets of mockery and as the powers of material prosperity. They are correlated with the selfish, worthless politicians: “all these gods seem to do awfully little work—much like our politicians—and yet keep winning re-election to their golden thrones in heaven, year after year” (8). Balram’s derision and contempt of gods clearly shows his lack of faith in religion. This is starkly exhibited in the rage and revolt of the small black man resisting the power of Almighty. When God asks:

Isn’t it all wonderful? Isn’t it all grand? Aren’t you grateful to be my servant?

And then...this small black man in the wet khaki uniform start to shake, as if he has gone mad with anger...*spitting* at God again and again... (87)

The postmodern world developed irreverence, hypocritical attitude and disloyalty in Balram. He assigns more value to existence and material growth than ethics and moral codes. He defies all the spiritual and moral laws of the society. There is only one unspoken law for him—never to become weak. The emotional exploitation of the family or sense of loyalty and gratitude for the employer or religion and society become instruments of exploitation in his view. He is obsessed by his entrepreneurial success rather the loss he created to the humanity. He never feels he had committed a mistake, rather gloats at what he had made of himself.

Adiga’s second novel *Last Man in Tower* is a faithful description of Masterji’s struggle to cope in the practical world of contemporary age. The story deals with the deterioration of human relations. Adiga describes how the relationships between friends, father and son, husband and wife are strained. He also shows how values are discarded in pursuit of material joys.

The entire plot focuses on the complex relationships among the residents of Vishram Society. Originally built for the Catholics, it gradually admitted

people from various sects and thus became a model for cosmopolitan life. The inhabitants of the building pride in their hospitality and live like an extended family. Ram Khare, the security guard, Masterji, Pintos couple, Puris family—all of them live in harmony helping each other. Ramesh Ajwani, Mrs. Rego, Kothari and Kudwa respect Masterji and send their children to his science classes. But this tranquillity is shaken with the entry of Dharmen Shah with his proposal for dismantling the Vishram Society apartments

The money offered by Shah is a boon to many but brings doom to Masterji. As soon as his co-habitants know about the redevelopment deal, their real nature surfaces and their greed comes out. Ethical values like respect, fear, affection and friendship take a back seat. The serene atmosphere of Vishram Society changes completely. The morals in people decline and the building comes to a dilapidated state. Heathcote rightly points out:

Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* ...sees the decaying Mumbai apartment block as a cipher for a civilized middle class community within the chaos of the city and demonstrates how quickly that veneer of civilization breaks down through the desire for the money a developer offers to its residents to leave so he can redevelop the site. (18)

The inhabitants of the building feel unrest with Masterji's refusal. The tension begins when the resident of Tower B, Mr. Ashish buys a new Toyota Innova. Kudwa, Pintos and Mrs. Rego who opposed the offer in the beginning become slowly enticed to the fortune. The greed for money reverses relations, where supporters become opponents and friends become foes. Rivals congregate to fulfil their ends. The only family that Masterji depends on, Mr. Pintos, turn their face away. Masterji had thirty two years of friendship with Mr. Pinto. The 'No-Argument book'—a notebook in which every financial transaction between them was recorded—was a foundation for their friendship.

For the past three decades, the residents of Vishram Society 3A(Murthy) and 2A(Pinto) had been four people with one set of sleeping habits. If one couple went to bed early the other couple turned off their television and went to bed. If one couple chose to sing along to Lata Mangeshkar late into the night the other couple also sang along to Lata Mangeshkar late into the night. (75)

Not only does Masterji feel a special attachment with Pintos, but he also depends on them for his food after his wife's death. It is their affectionate support that healed the bereavement of his wife and daughter. Thirty two years of friendship fades before money. Like other residents, Mr. Pinto also stoops down with greed, betraying his friend for US dollars. Mrs. Rego and Mrs. Puri, who always quarrel, become friends after the offer is made. Mrs. Rego understands from her sister that the property developers never give the money committed by them. So she feels the offer an "illusion." However, Mrs. Puri convinces Mrs. Rego.

The property developer Shah is a tricky man. He plays his tricks with the help of Shanmugham. He gives the money in instalments to the families of Tower B ahead of scheduled date. He arranges private meetings with the residents of Vishram Society to make them change Masterji's mind. They are offered a small 'sweetener.' Meanwhile Masterji approaches police, law and social media to protect his rights on the apartment. But all his efforts end vainly. Even Masterji's son Gaurav develops a rage against his father and declares him insane and cuts off his relationship.

As a final ploy, Shah does not send Shanmugam to collect the agreement papers from the families of Tower-A even after the due date. He plays a psychological game with the residents. Ajwani, Mr. and Mrs. Puri, Kudwa and Kothari are trapped in the gimmicks of Shah. The growing tension makes them kill Masterji by pushing him down the terrace. The final push is given by Mrs.

Puri who “pressed her back and buttocks against the stone that had blocked her happiness for so long” (391). Mukherjee remarks:

Arvind Adiga has tried to bring out the pathos and the pain that lingers behind and is beyond understanding and acceptance. In this complicated life where friends fall out and relatives give way, Masterji stands as an enigma of compassion and tolerance, commitment and assurance. Never can he believe that the people, who have lived as a family, sharing all their joys and sorrows, could suddenly become so distant, so anonymous. And finally everything is lost – love is hated, respect ridiculed. Trust loses its significance and humanity hides in shame. Masterji loses his fight – not just a psychological or emotional detachment from others, but a physical disconnection forever. The residents do not hesitate to kill him for the sake of their own betterment. Masterji is thrown off from the terrace of the house he passionately loved and by the people he whole-heartedly regarded his own. (289)

Adiga’s novel offers a caustic denunciation of the human relations in the postmodern society. The relations between a son and father become complex. Love, affection and emotional bonds are ruined. The novel presents fragmented relationships of son and father; and wife and husband. Masterji’s son Gaurav shows no affection towards his father. Moreover he hates his father. He says, “...my father is treating me like a servant. Not like his only living child” (297). Another broken father-son relationship is between Shah and Satish who continues to rebel against his father. Satish thinks about his father:

The bastard works in construction, Satish thought, and he has the guts to tell me I am the bad one in the family.

...He thought about the way that man chewed gutka like a villager. The way he wore so many gold rings. The way he

pronounced English, no better than Giri did. 'Cho-chyal Enimalz. Cho-chyal.'(99)

Adiga also explores the ruptured relationship of a wife and husband. He poignantly narrates the story of Mrs. Rego. She marries a man picked by her father. Her life becomes miserable as her husband betrays her. Mr. Rego finds another Catholic woman when working in Manila for a British merchant bank. Mrs. Rego's entire dowry: her father's shares certificates and two heavy silverware articles are taken away forcibly by him. She remained a helpless single mother with two children.

Through his novels Adiga explores how the human values are discarded by the people in their pursuit of wealth. *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* depict moral ambiguity in a postmodern globalized nation. Human values, moral and ethical system seem to be on decline and set for a downward spiral towards nothing but clamor. The appalling conditions of contemporary age: violence, lawlessness and violation of human rights portray a dismal picture of the society. The vices like cruelty, greed, threat and scepticism rule the world. As Theime points out, Adiga's novels "take(s) a sardonic look at the human consequences of the materialism that has fuelled India's economic boom".

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