

Insights into Aravind Adiga's Atypical Representation of Family as a Space of Individual Struggle in Select Works

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ABSTRACT

Family is a universally acknowledged archetypal social institution. Regardless of being a recognized and authorized unit of society, Aravind Adiga's atypical representation of family as a dysfunctional unit questions our unquestioned acceptance of its function as a role model. His denunciation of family debunks our conventional notion about it as a reservoir of love, warmth, comfort and security. It is seen as one of the major hegemonic units in society as it covertly wields power relations and nurtures the notion of inequality among the family members. The socializing process under families and its intent of perfecting individuals as compliant members of society are labelled as ideological ventures. In Adiga's novels, family is not shown to have a therapeutic or medicinal effect on individuals, rather it works as a ceaseless constraint for them. This paper attempts to explore the intricacies of family dynamics with special references to Marxist theories. It analyses how family exerts a shackling and burdensome influence in life, how it possessively entails the right to draw the line around every action of individuals. This study also scrutinizes the way Adiga's picturization of family units beautifully captures the unremitting delicate dance between societal expectations and individuals' pursuit of personal fulfilment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Family functions as a cardinal mediator between society and the individual. It develops according to the change of socio-cultural context. With the flux of change, people's attitude towards life, their outlook, priorities go through a radical transformation. It is not that every family in an entire society can adapt to such societal currents. So, this institution eventually becomes entangled in a hierarchical structure in a society. Henry Morgan opines, "The family represents an active principle. It is never stationary, but advances from lower to higher form as society advances from a lower to higher condition" (Morgan, 1871, p. 444). The rise of class division starts from this point because of the inelasticity of some families. Upper Social classes create their own culture, common values and practices for all to undermine and regulate the lower classes. When society works as a suppressive mechanism, family being an inseparable part of it has to be its instrumental unit not only to carry out

its operation but also to follow the strictures of social values and norms.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The particular areas of this paper are viewed through the lens of theories such as Marxism and Psychoanalysis. This study also follows the perspective of Cultural Studies. The core method is based on close textual exegesis and intensive analysis of the primary sources. Aravind Adiga's three novels, *The White Tiger*, *The Last Man in Tower* and *Selection Day* - are used as primary texts, while books on literary theories, criticisms, journal papers, and articles have been used as secondary sources and major interpretative tools.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The protagonist of *The White Tiger*, Balram, belongs to a poverty-stricken family where money is the only necessity,

and love is mere superfluity. His family is not shown as a shield to protect its members from every unseen danger. It is not even a haven of safety and security. This kind of traditional family expects unconditional loyalty and blind support from individuals, particularly from the male members. Raymond Williams thinks “tradition in practice [is] the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits. It is always more than an inert historicized segment; indeed it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation” (Williams, 1977, p. 115). Family’s expectation of blind loyalty incarcerates individuals in an isolated world where they can think of nothing but the maintaining financial stability of the family. So, it is mainly counterproductive to a potential individual like Balram who aspires to be a prospective man in future. Louis Althusser thinks that family also functions as an “Ideological State Apparatus” which indirectly nurses the ideologies of ruling classes. Here, individuals cannot achieve material or emotional independence. Human autonomy or assertion of individuality is seen as an existential threat to family. Indirectly, family disseminates the dogmas of the people in power. Their thought process is shaped in a way that they are forced to think and act according to the prescribed norms of capitalist society. They are compelled to live with an identity which is imposed on them. When Balram wants to learn driving, he is asked by an old driver-

“What caste are you?”

“Halwai.”

“Sweet makers,” the old driver said, shaking his head. “That’s what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?” (Adiga, 2008, p. 56).

This is the most subtle kind of interpellation that an individual remains unaware of throughout his lifetime and remains in a neutralized state. This is the ideology that prescribes them to lead a definite way of life and play a definite preordained role. The whole society and his family try to make him believe that this is unnatural for sweet-makers to be drivers or be in a lead role. These ruling class ideologies in this way eternalize stereotypes and inequalities. Kusum being the grandmother of Balram assumes the role of an ultimate authority. Everyone accepts her supremacy and never thinks to act independently outside their normative roles. Kusum represents that invisible power which a woman can wield with the progression of age and changing status. This portrayal draws attention to constrictive moral strictures within a conventional Indian family that can thwart the growth of potential individuals.

However, a norm is set by the society that the male members of a family must be the breadwinners. This kind of gender interpellation also makes a boundary of do’s and don’ts in a society. In Asian countries, non-linear and inflexible views of gender roles are seen to be fostered by traditional families. Nayar points out the ideology of heterosexual family which “represent[s] family and family roles as ideal, constructs us as individuals who play these roles because we believe in them. We believe that if males and females within a family play their ‘proper’ roles then the family would be happy” (Nayar,

2010, p. 134). Society does not offer individuals any freedom to choose their roles and it substantiates the differences between man and woman in social performances. It means the periphery of their activities has already been set and there is no way to step out of it as they are assigned to play the role. Moreover, society generated ideologies convince them to believe that the way they have chosen the roles is completely voluntary act on the part of them and it is they who are the deputies of their destiny. In this way, most individuals continue living a chimerical life till the end.

In some cases, individuals are compelled to carry out familial and culture-based values. Dowry system is inextricably embedded in Hindu culture. Ironically, the male members of a family are both the givers and takers of dowry. They are entangled in this strange cycle of taking and giving. Even they do not dare come out of this established age-old structure of society in fear of being ridiculed and cornered by the society. In Hinduism, this is also related to their karma and so they are bound to take dowries. In following this vicious custom they have actually become fanatics, not religious. So, they have literally sold themselves to perpetuate this system in the name of religion. Balram’s brother Kishan is forced by Kusum to get married so that they can extort five thousand rupees from the bride’s family. Kusum tries to exert arbitrary and overbearing control particularly on Balram and Kishan, and intends to tie them eternally to the family with the nuptial chain. As the family unit exists within the arena of capitalist domination, its survival depends on its procreative power. Marvin Sussman thinks, “Families have need to perpetuate themselves and the society of which they are part by ensuring the marriage of their children and thus the creation of families at constantly new generational levels” (Sussman, 1951, p. 1). But this sole reason does not justify Kusum’s immoderate insistence on them for marriage. Firstly, her intention is to extort a large sum of money from their earnings and assume the role of a financial stabilizer of the family. The second reason is more related to psychological complacency which the seniors of a family generally cherish because they “expect their children to conform to class norms regarding endogamous marriages” (Sussman, 1951, p. 11). On the other hand, Kishan and Balram are not only forced to marry according to the choice of their granny but they are also compelled to leave their schools to pay the dowries of their cousins. As they take a loan from a landlord for dowry, they are forced to work for the landlords. Though unconsciously, this is how the working class helps to keep the wealth of the bourgeois intact. As family is a part and parcel of a capitalist society’s superstructure, it sustains ideas and norms of the ruling class which appear natural for the working-class people.

Environment is an important factor in shaping the life and personality of individuals, but it would be a problematic diagnosis if we judge every individual alike. Some researchers have explored the relation between poverty and the influence of home environment on individuals, and they reason that specifying environmental equality between humans is extremely complex since individuals actively construct their environment and have an impact on it. Balram shows remarkable resilience in excruciating moments of his life whereas Kishan shows his inclination to help his family in distress as we widely observe this natural tendency of

human beings in the agrarian context. People from villages are generally seen to be in stronger familial bonds and tied with each other by traditional familial values. A chain of negative effects for growing up in constant poverty has been identified by Balram. He says, “[T]he desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood” (Adiga, 2008, p. 193). He is actually compelled to play the anticipated class-based role. In working class, people’s conformity and obedience get more acclamation. Individuals are not given much appreciation for their autonomy as if they are born to take the burden of the family.

Narrating Kusum’s paramount influence and predominance in the house, Balram says, “she had grinned her way into control of the house, every son, daughter-in-law lived in fear of her” (Adiga, 2008, p. 16). She controls everyone’s life there and compels them to work relentlessly to keep up the family expenses. Finally, she consumes both their money and their untiring labor. To a great extent, she is playing the role of a capitalist in the family. Simone de Beauvoir says, “The oppressor would not be so strong if he did not have accomplices among the oppressed” (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 96). So, Kusum is the ‘accomplice’ here who is solidifying the rule of the oppressors and making their reign more fortified. The members seem to have no other way but to submit to her despotic rule. Balram describes the utmost manipulation of his father and mother at home. Seeing his mother in a saffron sari at the cremation, he thinks “she never had such a fine thing to wear in her life. Her death was so grand that her life must have been miserable. My family was guilty about something” (Adiga, 2008, p. 16). This is an unforgettable moment for him as he feels the deadly influence of his family that holds him back to this darkness. It is very much evident that Balram is emotionally injured and Eleanor tries to explain this injury of individuals applying Jungian Psychology. He says, “When the mother archetype is experienced consciously as a psychological content, its effects are obvious in both extroverted and introverted aspects of life” (Bertine, 1992, p. 28). A lingering absence of his mother produces a certain level of discontentment in his psyche and his granny has not been able to fill the gap. As a result of his inability to free himself from his grandmother’s dominance, he has instead constructed a wall of resistance against her oppression.

Balram’s every effort is centered on liberating himself from the squalor of the family environment. He has seen how his father after coming home from Dhanbad “got peeled and skinned every time” (Adiga, 2008, p. 26). Family responsibilities make him “a human beast of burden” (Adiga, 2008, p. 27). His father’s unbearable suffering ignites his hidden desire for justice and equality. So, he tries to break the tie of solidarity with his family members and starts craving for an unfettered state more than ever as he sees family as a tool of entrapment. On this point, Balram seems very similar to Stephen Daedalus of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. These two characters are seen to be perturbed by their guilty conscience as they show unusual indifference towards their family members in spite of their acute awareness of their family’s destitute condition. At the same time, like Daedalus, he too wants to nullify this web of shackling force around him and tries to

emerge as a new man, a liberator. So, family is deemed as a constraining force towards the way in forging a new identity.

Balram describes family as a major and effective instrument to immortalize “Rooster Coop”— this ‘coop’ symbolically suggests a form of subjugation and suppression in a capitalist society. The family members are compared to “pale hens” who are “stuffed tightly into wire mesh cages” and struggle for “a breathing space” (Adiga, 2008, p. 173). It is not mere the physical bondage rather Adiga here voices his concern for the psychological barrier that they have created within themselves. This kind of self-imprisonment immortalizes the long-established norms and customs of a society. Balram says that ‘*the Indian family*’ which is regarded as the repository of love and sacrifice is the reason that “we are trapped and tied to the coop.” He repeatedly says, “a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed –hunted, beaten, and burnt alive by the maters –can break out of the coop” (Adiga, 2008, pp. 176-77). So, it is evident how family works as a limiting factor for those individuals who do not want to lead a caged life. Even Balram’s master, Ashok, in spite of being a landlord’s son is seen as a weak, helpless, absent-minded person and completely “unprotected by the usual instincts that run in the blood of a landlord” (Adiga, 2008, p. 142). While staying in America, Ashok goes through a different socialization process. He is caught in between two worlds – the world of America and India. Growing up in America, he has subsumed American values and culture. But he is forced both by his father and brother to incorporate the traditional practices and values of India –

“Any process of socialization of course includes things that all human beings have to learn, but any specific process ties this necessary learning to a selected range of meanings, values, practices which, in the very closeness of their association with necessary learning, constitute the real foundation of the hegemonic” (Williams, 1977, p. 117).

Ashok’s life becomes harder after coming to India as it seems difficult for him to adapt to such a corrupt way of life in India and he finds himself entangled in a cobweb of power relations. He does not like feeding ministers with money to avoid income tax charge or greasing the bureaucrats, above all, running this darker course. Even his father, the landlord, tries to infuse in his brain that being a landlord he cannot be vegetarian like Bramhin and cannot adopt American cultures as it seems a disgrace to their bloodline. Finally, this kind of toxic influence of his family corrupts him thoroughly. In this manner, family is presented as a malfunctioned and socially impaired institution which limits individuals through coercive influence.

In *Last Man in Tower* Adiga has sketched a picture of postmodern families with a sarcastic view. He dilutes the positive ideas regarding postmodern families like their belief in individual choice and freedom, their acceptance of cultural diversities and being tolerant of others’ opinions and decisions. In this novel, Adiga shows how the artificial need of family members works as a destructive factor in splitting human relationships and brings a radical transformation in their attitude towards life. Their prioritization of worldly comfort and financial security over moral values indicates

their great concern for materialistic progress in life. In Vishram society, a couple of families are seen to live with amity and harmony. They have built an unbreakable bond among themselves. But how this congeniality and togetherness of families transform into hostility because of the monomania of self-prosperity.

Though the families of Vishram society belong to the middle class, their sense of respectability and social standing indicate their financial stability. It is true that they live with certain challenges in tower B, face malfunctioning of municipality and other technical problems but initially they never think of the abolishment of their society. Moreover, Masterji is seen as the common thread in their bonding. Their unbending and unwavering reverence for him brings them together constantly. He is "an adornment to his society" (Adiga, 2011, p. 30). Suddenly, the developer Dharmen Shah's monetary offer splits them apart. This offer not only becomes the bone of contention but also triggers the murderous instincts of the inhabitants of Vishram society. They become so lethal to Masterji that he questions, "Am I the only human being in this building?" (Adiga, 2011, p. 344). The narrator describes them as 'long black snakes' slithering over Masterji's body. This metaphor highlights the bestiality, selfishness and greed of humans. Adiga skilfully uses animal imagery to illustrate how negative feeling and experiences can obfuscate the natural attribute of human beings and transform meek, modest and compassionate members into murderers. Adiga here presents the urban reality and consumerist culture which help gear up a psychological hunger in people. They have many things; despite that they are unsatisfied with what they have. This is the evil and disease of this modern era. Unhappiness comes first, then comes boredom. To wipe out this boredom, there comes the declaration of willingness to sell oneself as per the demand of the market. The principal characteristic of modern people is that they are dreaming beings. But they do not try to realize that their dream is conditioned by the modern reality.

Every individual certainly has freedom but family members can exert a considerable amount of influence in their decision-making process. From the very beginning, a character named Mrs. Rego tries to be very much individualistic by not succumbing to Shah's offer and calls the developers 'mafia, criminals, liars'. Even she mocks Mrs. Puri's quick approbation to the offer and criticizes her by saying "show people a little cash and they will jump, dance, run naked in streets" (Adiga, 2011, p. 39). Ironically, when she has been given a blank check by Shah, she tries to justify this offer as a show of empathy. It proves that money can actually make people speak and think differently. Though it cannot buy happiness, it can buy lifetime of security. Man always chooses comfort over happiness and prioritizes future gains over idealistic principles. All through her life, she has been claiming herself a good Christian who is meant to serve the poor but now a kind of unusual dissatisfaction is boiling in her mind for not being rich as her father, for not living in luxury like her sister in Bandra. All of a sudden, she feels so poor, so downtrodden as if Shah being a savior has brought this stark reality before her. Now for the first time in her life, she is having this epiphany. Even her little son and daughter

express their discontentment towards their mother's initial rejection of the offer. They expel her dilemma, affect her decision and make her more determined to succumb to this offer. In this way, capitalists are making profits from the propensity of consumption of family members.

Family induces individuals to live in a world of 'false consciousness'. In *Selection Day*, Adiga portrays family as a disseminating agent of the ruling class. It tries to incorporate certain values and norms into its members that help increase the number of conformists in capitalist society. Mohan Kumar, the father of Radha and Manju, is portrayed as a totalitarian figure in the family. From the very beginning of their childhood, Mohan tries to inculcate in his sons the 'mad theories' of success. They are expected to abide by their father's peculiar rules such as 'cricket rules', 'food rules,' 'Golden proverbs.' The only proverb that he implants in their mind is "Big thief walks free, small thief gets caught" (Adiga, 2016, p. 33). As capitalist society is boiling up with competition, it is always better to be big thieves and become a part of the big game—this is the philosophy of Mohan. Like a blacksmith, he shapes Radha and Manju by restricting their natural growth. He hammers a specific dream into their brain. Consequently, this skulduggery does them more harm than good. As their natural upbringing has been cut short very early, they fail to go beyond the prescribed path of their father. Their entanglement in this specific circumstance makes their thought processes manacled. So, their father's fictitious world pushes them into a more alienated arena.

Adiga deftly delineates the inner workings of Mohan's mind and unveils the reason of his becoming a torturous father. The omniscient narrator mentions a memorable event from Mohan's early years in which he was enthralled by a sorcerer using black magic to control a massive elephant. That event left a deep mark in his mind and he somehow internalized that picture of suppression and also the magician's art of hypnotism. In this respect, Adiga is very close to Dickensian style of narration. He is often called the 'Dickens of Mumbai'. By adopting the flashback technique, Adiga paints his characters with profound emotional complexity. It allows the readers to have an intimate understanding of the motivations behind a character's action within the current storyline. Through the portrayal of this overbearing parent with distorted psychology, Adiga demonstrates the widespread social and moral crime committed by parents who manipulate and influence their young children to pursue the dream they find undesirable. As a result, the beauty of childhood is lost, and the adulthood filled with resentment, bitterness and frustration awaits.

A fragmented view of family life is presented in *Selection Day*. The disastrous effect of globalization and upward social mobility upon individuals is portrayed with accuracy. Researchers consider it as a common phenomenon of this modern era and they also think – "Families are made up of people who are increasingly individuated and as a result, family life is made up of the unscripted choices, negotiated by family members between one another" (Charles et al., 2008, p. 130). Because of this reason, families are rapidly becoming de-institutionalized, and its traditional structure is

being transformed. Chris Phillipson opines, "From its previous position as a haven of security, family life is more often viewed in dystopian terms" (Phillipson, 2008, p. 130). People are more prone to remodeling their lifestyles, breaking family values, modifying their dwellings, and distancing themselves from parental care.

Mohan treats his two sons the worst way possible and it also reminds a famous character from *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman. Like Mohan, Willy sets a standard of success for his two sons, Happy and Biff, and tries to instill illimitable expectations in them. He makes them believe in luck and charisma rather than hard-work and diligence. But this implantation of false hope collapses when reality comes into play and the schism between dream and reality becomes evident. Actually, successful figures are presented only as specimens; no formula of success is provided with that. One's key to success may not be the right key for others. All these success stories are actually stories of accidents, and the story of success may not be the story of happiness. Both Willy and Mohan try to extract the formula of success which builds up a world of illusion for themselves and for their sons alike. The growth of capitalistic nature is visible in Willy as he adopts a wrong approach towards achieving success. He considers someone as successful by estimating the number of men attending a funeral. Mohan counts success based on how many sponsors Manju gets and how much media coverage he receives. Against the backdrop of a materialistic society, success is shown as something very deceptive, illusive and magical. Both Biff and Radha have all the skills, capabilities, energy and youth to organize everything, but their father's instilling of false ideals makes them delusional and shatters the bond of their family. The family fails to operate in the material reality of this modern world. The ideological agenda of the American dream makes them believe that self-worth can only be earned by economic success. They fail to recognize the exploitative potential of the system, and eventually the good souls are lost in a world of rampant consumerism.

Family members sometimes unconsciously help in generating inequalities among its members. In this post-modern era, families keep failing to produce a sense of solidarity in individuals. Mohan Kumar prioritizes Radha's success as the best cricketer over Manju's career. He determines the aims of his two sons and molds them accordingly. His plan to make Radha the best cricketer and Manju the second best seems more like propaganda than a mere dream of a father for his sons. Their mind has been programmed in such a way that they cannot accept the otherwise. When Manju unexpectedly outshines his brother's success, Radha becomes flustered and distracted at the same time. This younger brother's success frustrates his father as Mohan Kumar expected this position for his elder son. So, this iniquitous treatment towards his sons creates a big schism between two brothers who were once soul mates. Even the successful Manju becomes more resentful and loses his sympathy, attachment towards his family. His closest friend Javed asks him, "Did you think of your family when you were over in England?" Manju says, "Not once" (Adiga, 2016, p. 183). He thinks that he is now powerful with all his popularity and media coverage and he

can kill his father any time he wants. But he shows his contempt saying, "In which case my only regret would be wasting the rest of my life in jail over a man like my father" (Adiga, 2016, p. 271). Manju becomes simultaneously distasteful towards his family and the world around him; like Masterji of *Last Man in Tower*, he takes shelter in his mother's memories. Finally, he tries to find himself not by progressing towards success, but by withdrawing from the world.

Though Adiga has depicted the character of Masterji with much impeccability, this sensitive and ideal teacher fails badly as a father. He could not establish a warm filial bond with his only living son, Gaurav. He shows the illimitable reverence and boundless love only for his deceased wife and daughter but it is very unlikely to have no bonding with the one and only living member of his family. Masterji wanted his son to be a scientist or a lawyer as he himself is a renowned physics teacher of the locality. But failing to meet his father's expectation, Gaurav begins to grow an unusual contempt, and eventually becomes desensitized and compassionless. The intellectual gap becomes the cause of emotional gap between them. Masterji never receives any warm welcome from his son and daughter-in-law. It is not really about the generation gap or clash of personalities; it is the differing interests. The younger ones always long for affluence while the elders crave for reverence. In *Last Man in Tower* almost all the characters except Masterji show an obsession with possessing a luxurious apartment. The deterioration of the family bonding results in the proliferation of nuclear families in this post-modern era. This mystical capitalism is "coercing people into the nuclear family from just long enough to not only obtain a new generation of workers, but to instill ideologies of homophobia and heterosexism that ensnares the maintenance of the system" (Agostinone-Wilson, 2010, p. 86). To a great extent, it accelerates the revenue index of the capitals and propels families to have amenities simultaneously. The greater the rise of nuclear families, the greater the consumption. Hence, the family as a superstructure of the society helps bolster the structure of a capitalist society.

4. CONCLUSION

Family functions as a catalyst for constraining factors rather than emancipatory ones. It confines particular individuals in a clogged boundary and forces them to perform their normative roles in a family. This limitation mars their individual freedom. The constant emotional exploitation that they go through their lives creates a lacuna in their hearts. It makes them apathetic and distrustful towards family members and consequently they want to come out of this crippling structure as it burdens them with complex and strained relationships. Other than being a domestic space of comfort and security, it becomes a custodial structure to them, the environment of which is not conducive to the flourishing of the individuals. However, Adiga highlights the dichotomy between subjectivity of truth and the danger of suppression through the portrayal of individuals' struggle for agency. For all individuals, the family not only becomes

a space of struggle but also a morass that entangles them in cultural nuances.

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