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Vibes of Violence in Post-Colonial Indian English Literature

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Ever since its inception violence has been one of the most dominant theme in Indian English literature. Prominent Indian English writers have dealt with this theme in their own expressive style, some glorified the victims of violence and some its perpetrators.

The aim of the present research paper is to investigate the theme of violence in post-colonial texts and how it relates to the post-colonial thought and scenario.

I have selected two novels Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* to show how the contemporary Indian English literature captures the threat of violence and tries to trace its roots. For the present research paper the choice of these two novelists is arguable as the two are most significant Indian English novelists and their works wield huge influence over the development of the contemporary Indian literary scene.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in the northeast part of India where the borders of various Himalayan states like Bhutan and Sikkim meet. The Gorkhaland movement forms the backdrop of the story as it affects each and everything in the novel one way or the other.

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* is the story of Balram a driver turned entrepreneur by murdering his master and running away with his money. The novel has so far been read as a dark comedy in which the novelist demystifies the image of progressing India.

The aim of the present research paper will be to provide a deeper understanding of both the novels in relation to the main theme of the paper.

Violence; domestic, ethnic, religious or political, lead to the deterioration of national integration. It poses a major threat to the justice and order of a country hindering not only progress but even complicating its survival. As a result of its irrefutable effect on national harmony violence or threats of violence became an important theme of discourse in literature. Literature reflects life not only as it should be but also as it is therefore the representation of violence in it becomes inevitable. Writers explore the theme of violence to make sense of it, to understand its causes and to highlight its consequences.

In their endeavour to expose the forces that sponsor violence Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga focus on the complicated relationship between violence and the socio-political system and how the two create and influence each other. Both the novelists find it largely originating from marginalization and perpetrated by the ever expanding gulf between rich and the poor.

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in Kalimpong the northeast part of India where the borders of various Himalayan states like Bhutan and Sikkim meet. The Gorkhaland movement forms the background of the story as it affects each and everything in the novel one way or the other. With an outstanding artistic imagination and profound critical insight Desai intensely observes the socio-political issues and ideologies of contemporary India in the novel. The novel deeply explores the themes of exploitation, marginalization, inequality, insurgency and political violence.

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* is the story of a man who changes all equations to climb the ladder of success. The novel in its most unique epistolary form explores its protagonist's journey from an "India of darkness" to an "India of light". In this outstanding novel Arvind Adiga takes us into an anxious world of darkness and devastation. Adiga not

only bring out the hideous facets of class division, corruption and inequality but the consequence to which all these issues can lead an individual and a nation.

While *The Inheritance of Loss* deals with ethnic or political violence, *The White Tiger* describe the violent crime committed by a person for his private aspiration. However the similarity between the two stories arises out of the portrayal of a state of oppression which pushes people towards violence. The threat of violence in *The Inheritance of Loss* erupts as result of the frustration of the Nepali people as they feel that they are being pushed backwards and denied their basic rights. Violence symbolizes their resentment and frustration. Having suffered great hardships these people turn violent because their issues are not addressed. In *The White Tiger* the threat of violence emerges from the similar cause: being pushed backwards and denial of basic rights. The protagonist of the novel uses violence to break the coop of servitude, to escape the poverty he inherited from his father. His turn to violence also symbolizes human predicament where a man want the circle of suffering to end somewhere. Gorkha National Liberation Front in *The Inheritance of Loss* fight for an independent state where they won't be treated as slaves, Balram in *The White Tiger* too wants an end to his servitude, he too wants to be his own master. However the demand of Nepalese for a separate state is not fulfilled as the novel ends while Balram achieves his dream of freedom by becoming a successful entrepreneur.

Both the novelists grandly describe how in the post colonial societies the marginalized or the subjugated become renegades by perfectly examining the extent to which poverty, class division, inequality and injustice conduce in shaping the conscious of people and develop in them a sharp tendency towards violence.

In Desai's novel the agitation that snatches away the peace and prosperity of Kalimpong is created by a group of insurgents who demand an independent Nepali state where they could administer their own affairs. This urge for an independent state is basically a result of what they identify as a great injustice done to them first by the British and later by India. These Gorkha youth feel that the sacrifices made by their forefather as soldiers both in British as well as in Indian army have been undervalued. Desai writes that these people "are fed up with being treated like a minority in a place where they were the majority" (Desai, p 9). Therefore the Gorkhas consider it indispensable to fight for a separate state. This gives rise to an unstable political period fraught with violence and terror. The people living in Kalimpong are enthralled with fear as these insurgents start to terrorise all the outsiders whom they identify as the main cause for their suffering.

Caught in the crosshair between the insurgents and the police the common people of Kalimpong who have nothing at all to do with the dispute between the GNLFF and the government suffer tremendously. Through the different characters like the judge, Father Booty, the two Bengali sisters Lola and Noni and others Kiran Desai show how ordinary people get tramped in the political tussle. On one hand they have to face humiliation and terror at the hands of insurgents who apply pressure tactics on them and on the other hand they are even victimized by the police: an inevitable artefact of insurgency.

There is an incident in the novel where a great number of casualties occur as a result of police firing. As a mark of protest against government's negative attitude towards their demands the GNLFF arranges a procession to the police station where they set the documents on fire. However this March turn violent and the police open fire in which a number of people get killed.

This sectarian violence even disrupts personal relationships e.g. it shatters the love affair of Sai, Jemubhai's granddaughter and her Nepali tutor Gyan. Gyan is a sensitive young man who comes under the influence of GNLFF. He becomes more and more distant from Sai whose English language and lifestyle disgusts him. For him she becomes a symbol of that oppression and racism against which he feel an ineludible hatred. He constantly ridicules her

for adopting western culture “*You are like slave, that’s why you are running after the west, embarrassing yourself. It’s because of people like you we never get anywhere*” (Desai, p 163) Apart from torturing her with his bitter comments regarding her English lifestyle he even beats her when she accuses him of being involved with the boys who loot guns and other items from her grandfather mansion.

This hatred for western mannerism is a constant feature of GNLF. There is another incident in the novel when Lola, the spinster neighbour of the judge, is highly insulted by the head of GNLF on hearing the French name of her house. “*The humiliation Lola had to face was more painful than death and insurgency was at the root of her humiliation*” Desai writes. (p 93)

They loot the old judge’s mansion, embarrassing him before his cook and his granddaughter. Father Booty is forced to leave Kalimpong. Even poor Biju is robbed of all his possession by the insurgents on his return from America.

Throughout the novel Desai tries to examine the reasons that brew this violence and hatred. She has remarkably explored how an oppressed class or people who actually fight for their own basic rights unavoidably start oppressing others.

In Adiga’s novel the major violent act is the murder of a master at the hands of his driver. However the driver, Balram Halwai the protagonist of the novel all the way through justifies it as an act of achieving freedom.

Balram Halwai, the narrator of Adiga’s novel *The White Tiger* is a successful entrepreneur. Balram comes from what he calls in the novel as ‘darkness’ from a part of rural India which is drastically ridden by poverty. He escapes this darkness by becoming a driver to a landlord from his village. And there he slits his master’s throat and runs away with a huge amount of money. Like a conventional postmodern hero he questions his identity and challenges his fate.

Highly influenced by the philosophy of Franz Fanon, Arvind Adiga shows in his novel that there is an uncanny relationship between inequality and violence. As violence in the novel is seen emerging largely as a product of disparity and a reaction against discriminations.

Fanon sees revolutionary violence as a positive mean for the colonized people to achieve liberation and emancipation. He describes three stages that the postcolonial writers go through: the assimilation stage, the adaptation stage, and the fighting stage when “a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, a national literature” is produced by the writers. Adiga in his novel talks much of revolution and rebellion. His main character Balram throughout the story justifies his employer’s murder as an act of class conflict.

The novel is based on the third stage i.e. a fighting literature, a story in which a man shakes the very foundation of the system to escape the grim grasp of poverty.

Like Desai, Adiga too examines the causes that lead the protagonist of his novel to such a violent crime.

Balram born in a poverty ridden lower class goes through all the harrowing experiences of exploitation both as a child as well as a grown up man. Despite his great interest in studies he is taken out of the school and made to work in a tea shop as a coal breaker because his family has to pay back the loan taken from a landlord. His father, a rickshaw puller like many others dies due to the absence of proper medical facility in the village. Later as a driver he is used like robot by his masters apart from driving them here and there he has to massage their feet, play with their children, wash their pets, sweep the lawn and do all other chores left in the list. This exploitation reaches its zenith when his master’s wife Pinky accidentally hits someone on the road in drunken driving and Balram is forced to accept full responsibility for the accident and is made to sign a statement. However the incident goes unreported in the police as Balram had earlier told his master “you know how those people in the darkness are: they have eight, nine, ten children. Her parents-if they’re even here in Delhi, if they even know where she is tonight- won’t go to the police” (Adiga, p 165)

What really awakens in Balram after this forced confession is a sense of his identity. He realises that even after so much loyalty he is nothing but a trump card in the hands of his master which his master could use anytime for his own convenience.

However Balram is not the only one who bears the burden of his master's action Adiga writes that "the jails of Delhi are full of Drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters...doesn't the driver's family protest? Far from it. They would actually go about bragging...the judge? Wouldn't they see through this obviously forced confession? But they are in the racket too. They take their bribe, they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And life goes on." (Adiga, p 170)

From Balram perspective we realise that the servant becomes the property of his master as soon as he is appointed. Later the master transforms him into a mere application that makes his life easier. Apart from working day and night the servant has to conceal the filthy secrets of his master, tolerate his frustration and when needed take the blame of his crimes.

Adiga throughout the novel constantly stresses the fact that there is not just an unequal distribution of wealth but even of human rights in the society as a result of which the poor find themselves at the mercy of the rules set by the rich.

In his narrative Balram mentions an incident where a landlord's son from his village is kidnapped by the naxals. Unable to reach to kidnappers the landlord lashes out all his frustration and anger at the servant who was the caretaker of his son. The servant is tortured and later shot dead, not only this even his entire family is brutally killed and his house is set on fire. (p 66)

All these experiences one after the other stimulate in him an irrepressible desire for freedom from servitude and poverty. The humiliations and discriminations he had suffered silently culminate in his most shocking action of murdering his master. Even after slitting his master so viciously he never regrets over his crime instead goes on justifying it to the end of story "even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose- I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute what it means not to be a servant." (321)

In the end Adiga leaves it to the reader to decide as to who is the really criminal in the story the man or the system.

Both the novelists won the prestigious Booker prize for their country however they were by some critics blamed of having presented a very grim picture of India for their depiction of characters who challenge the very idea of national integrity and development, as the two novels portray an India plagued with political tension, class division, poverty and barbarity, a complete antithesis to the dazzling, shining India. Especially Adiga's depiction of his country was considered as offensive and disgraceful but Adiga made his intension clear

"At a time when India is going through great changes and, with china, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do- it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self- examination"

In this process of self examination these two novelists raise questions that need immediate answers, questions that can change the algebra of perspectives and ideologies. Both of them expose the wider repercussions of a system in which inequality and oppression strangle a person's faith in honesty, justices and goodness. Be it the Gorkha youth of *The Inheritance of Loss* or Balram Halwai of *The White Tiger* what actually provoked them to commit acts of violence is the level of suppression and inequality they have experienced. Both the novelists

leave the reader with the impression that it is actually oppression that generates the basic threat of violence in shape of crime and insurgency in the society by brewing an anger that slowly grows within and explodes abruptly entrapping even the most innocent in its detrimental sphere.

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