

Reflections of Iconoclasm and Resistance in The Railway Station from Between the Assassinations by Aravind Adiga

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Abstract

Iconoclasm is defined as a cultural practice of destroying religious images, monuments and other symbolic interpretations to satisfy the political and religious reasons. Indirectly it is used to describe someone who is challenging establish beliefs and social conventions. *The Railway Station* is a short story from Adiga's Collection of Short Stories in the book *Between the Assassinations*. The book is an influential voice of a prolific writer Adiga who depicts India of 21st century and at the same time juxtaposes the Indian mentality still nestled in orthodoxy though claiming itself to be a part of the newer modernized progressive era. The story is an account of a Muslim boy Ziauddin who is a victim of poverty, hunger and exploitation placed in a fictitious town of Kittur where Adiga uses iconoclasm to portray his self identity amidst socio political hegemony. The paper thoroughly analyzes the aspects of resistance and iconoclasm in the story through the character and actions of Ziauddin.

Keywords : iconoclasm, resistance, identity crisis, post colonial perspective.

In the literary field the term Iconoclasm points to the idea of rejecting and challenging the established social, cultural and religious norms as well as some of the established ideologies, beliefs and value systems that have been continuing since ages. The approach is manifested through characters, themes and narrative style that portray questions as rhetorical questions based on traditional norms, conventions, societal expectations or a critique of dominant institutions which provides a base for the iconoclastic ideas to manifest and come in play.

In the field of literature the idea of questioning existing and prevailing norms has been an old practice as large number of social changes have taken place due to literary movements whether be it feminism or Civil Rights , literature has away acted as a critique for the set norms in the society and has prevented its stagnation through constant flow of changes. Writers and thinkers like Voltaire, Shaw, Aristotle have been the agents of great changes in the society as

what one sees today. In the literary works often the characters act as mouthpieces for the possible iconoclastic manifestations which they exhibit through their action. They are shown as the proponents of new innovative ideas with fresh outlook and perspectives who defy the societal expectations and live outside the conventional social roles. Holden Caulfield, a character in *The Catcher in The Rye* by J D Salinger is a true representative of iconoclasm when he rejects the phoniness of adult society and reflects his desire to remain in a childlike untainted world. His idea of living in an innocent world of simplicity was challenging the conformist expectations of Post war America.

Iconoclasm is often connected an closely relevant with religious and societal orthodoxy in particular when it comes to gender roles. In this context the function of Iconoclasm is to question the set religious and societal beliefs that mismatch and become irrational with changing times in order to expose the contradictions within religion. Ivan Karamazov (*The Brothers Karamazov*) embodies the aspect of Iconoclasm with his critique on existence of God , the suffering of innocent people and the problems of evil which challenges the traditional religious beliefs of God. As a rebellion against the political authority Iconoclasm raises its voice against socio- political structures, systems and ideologies that are unjust and oppressive. George Orwell's 1984 can be successfully placed in this category as it critiques the manipulation of truth, control of information and such an existing political system that hampers the individual rights and freedom to live in a civilized society.

In Aravind Adiga's collection Between the Assassination, The Railway Station is a short story that encompasses the theme of Iconoclasm with respect to a Subaltern character , Ziauddin , a Muslim boy who in search of odd jobs reaches Kittur railway station locality, where the shopkeepers restricted themselves to hire Muslims for work :

NONE OF THE other shopkeepers near the railway station would hire a Muslim, but Ramanna Shetty, who ran the Ideal Store, a tea-and-samosa place, had told Ziauddin it was okay for him to stay. Provided he promised to work hard. And keep away from all hanky-panky. The little dust-covered creature let its bag drop to the ground; a hand went up to its heart. "I'm a Muslim, sir. We don't do hanky-panky." (Adiga, 3)

Ziauddin is a complex character who is in search of self and his character embodies the features of identity crisis, struggle, resistance, disillusionment and a search for hi own identity

when facing the threat of being a subaltern. He is a middle aged person who previously worked as a station master at railway station which was a prestigious job while he was caught in the mundane daily survival. He is a confused character who is dissatisfied with his life and this is quite evident throughout the story as very frequently he shifts his job from one occupation to another. He is less knowing about what he is actually searching in his life but surely he has not been able to achieve those things that he ever wished in his life and so he is frustrated to some extent which is evident through his inner monologues. In this context one can detect the iconoclast of the alienation of Ziauddin who rejected the social norms on account of his poverty and subaltern status and so he was isolated and misunderstood.

Ramanna shouted to the drunk, "Don't leave him tips! He's become a thief!" The boy had been caught stealing samosas meant for a client, Ramanna said. Thimma asked the shopkeeper if he was joking. "I wouldn't have believed it myself," Ramanna mumbled. "But I saw it with my own eyes. He was taking a samosa from the kitchen, and..." Ramanna bit into an imaginary samosa. Gritting his teeth, Ziauddin had begun pushing the icebox into the shop with the back of his legs. "But...he used to be an honest little fellow..." the drunk recalled. "Maybe he had been stealing all along, and we just never knew it. You can't trust anyone these days." The bottles in the icebox rattled. Ziauddin had stopped his work. "I'm a Pathan!" He slapped his chest. "From the land of the Pathans, far up north, where there are mountains full of snow! I'm not a Hindu! I don't do hanky-panky!" (*Adiga, 5*)

The perspective of Ramanna in the above is highlighted as he seems to be biased on account of the reason that no others shopkeepers hired Muslims to work in their shops and is obsessed with the idea that Zia is basically dishonest and might have been stealing since long which he failed to observe. Zia shows his resistance by saying that he is a Pathan, people who do not have reputation to steal but are known for their loyalty and hard work therefore Ramanna should not be sceptical about him. Zia has to prove his loyalty and trust every time by speaking that he is a Pathan and is not expected to behave in manner as assumed by Ramanna who warned him about any hankie- pankie.

The condition of Ziauddin is critical and quite sensitive as he is caught in existential crisis which leads him to develop a feeling of dissatisfaction from his job and every time it is perpetual and so very frequently he leaves the job and quickly switches from one job to another, something which can be regarded as a question which almost every reader seeks an answer. Mujib

Mashal and Hari Kumar New York Times, May 20, 2024 in an article on the existential crisis of Muslims talk about Zia us Salaam, associate editor of The Hindu who being a Muslim feels as a stranger in India. Salaam was a film critic for one of India's main newspapers and filled his time with cinema, art and music and his wife is also a fellow journalist who writes on food and fashion, however the creeping Islamophobia has become the dominant theme of Salam's writings and in one book he has discussed about the mob lynching of Muslim men and in a recent follow up he described how India's Muslims feel :

"If I don't pick up issues of import and limit my energies to cinema and literature, then I won't be able to look at myself in the mirror," he said. "What would I tell my kids tomorrow — when my grandchildren ask me what were you doing when there was an existential crisis?"
(Salaam)

In the story also Zia's character is the one trapped in existential crisis that every time is questioning the purpose of his life and the choices that he made in his life leading him to his present condition. The kind of routine life he was leading at the station had completely drained vitality out of him and all the excitement of his life was gone doing a repetitive routine job at a younger age. He was completely left with a feeling of his identity to be insignificant as compared to other people around him.

Zia's personal struggles were too much on account of his Muslim identity and it clearly reflected the broader themes of alienation and the search of identity and purpose. Zia is very well aware of his grim reality and the past events of his life strongly connected to his identity as a Muslim and often when he switches the job and repeatedly speaks of his boastful identity of a Pathan he tries to reflect his desire for escape and his dreams of the past.

There was once a time when he had aspired for a much better job in order to make his existence more meaningful and significant but the dream did not turn out to be true and slowly with time faded away in the past. The railway station in the story is symbolic of movement and transition of life and at the same time it mirrors Zia's stagnation because through the trains come and go whole day in the station , he is the one who remain firm in his place without transition, movement, growth or any change , it is same always , his routine and his self.

Zia is an interactive personality in the story and his interactions with other people in the story reflects and reveal his outlook, thinking, and the kind of expectations he has from people

around him. At times one can observe that how much disconnected he is from other people around him and his personality looks very diminished amidst the crowd. He is unable to connect with people around in a meaningful manner and those who pass through the station which further reflects and amplifies his sense of isolation, but still there are moments when his vulnerability is obvious and a reader can very well make out that he is a man who is longing for and is in search of deeper connections with people around him so that they can understand him and he should also become a part of their culture. However he tries but his level best but he is not sure and confident to achieve it.

The character of Ziauddin in the story is symbolic of a common man whose life to a great extent is shaped by external factors, social and cultural influences and though born free in the world still he is not free as he has to tailor his actions and behaviour as per the social and cultural expectations, in fact every common man is chained by the social and cultural norms that restrict his idea of self expression. In such moments one feels the need of self analysis, evaluation and actualization to know the purpose of one's own life and it is meant for what. As a Muslim character he can be regarded as a microcosm of the Muslim community and to a great extent he reflects the plight of his people.

The larger social and economic structures are restricting his individual freedom and growth as the social expectations are prejudiced and presumed for him. While he is working at the railway station his stagnation and firmness is in sharp contrasts with the movements and transition at the railway station. At this time his character encapsulates his feelings of being trapped in routine life where silently he is watching other people move around and grow but he remains stuck at one place only.

Being helpless and unsure of his social and cultural amalgamation Zia is finally accepting and coming to the terms with his isolated and stagnant life but his acceptance and resignation is not peaceful, it is infused with bitterness and discontent. His solitude and inability to develop meaningful relationships with others is the key point of his struggle as a human who wishes to survive as a social animal in the world. However with times things are changing and a news article of The Indian Express May 11, 2024 states on the policy change on population control or legislation on the issue in the wake of changing demography the government has shown the population figures in public domain which reflects that the Muslim population in India has increased by 45 to 47 percent over 65 years

“What do these figures indicate. On one side the population of Hindus declined by 7.8 per cent and on the other hand the population of Muslims increased by 45-47 per cent. One has to ponder over the reasons behind this.

In Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, the population of Hindus was 23 per cent in 1947, now they are only 2 per cent left. And still, some people in India say Muslims are insecure. Their population has increased by 45 per cent, still they say they are insecure.”

Ziauddin is a man of the unchanged time and represents the tragedy of the Muslim minority and their inner conflict when they were caught in a web of certain routine jobs along with alienation and were deeply longing for a change. His character is not only the reflection of his personal failure as an individual but also he represents his community at the broader level and the societal systems that constrain their individual potentials, therefore through the character of Zia, Adiga is exploring the complexities of human existence, identity, aspiration and inevitability of fate. Typically an iconoclast is someone who is challenging the established social norms, traditions and rituals or institutions and in case of Zia it is quite evident that he outright challenge the social norms in a bold and rebellious manner and also possesses at the same time certain qualities that might align with an iconoclast reading.

The iconoclast characters are most of the times portrayed as the individuals who are revolutionary against the set norms of the society. Some of the characteristic features of their characters are that they are sceptical about the widely held beliefs and try actively to deconstruct them by looking into its flaws and inconsistencies in traditional thinking. The iconoclasts are the people of independent thoughts and so they are giving more priority to their rational thoughts and ideas and they firmly believe in their own analysis and conclusions as they refuse to blindly follow the crowd or authority figures. They are the people of bold personality willingly ready to challenge the set norms and in this process they are not even hesitating to express their independent opinions even when facing opposition or criticism.

In conclusion, Ziauddin is a tragic figure who represents the inner conflict of many individuals caught in the web of routine, alienation, and a longing for change. His character is both a reflection of personal failure and a broader commentary on the societal systems that constrain individual potential. Through Ziauddin, Adiga explores the complexities of human existence, highlighting themes of identity, aspiration, and the inevitability of fate.

The character of Ziauddin in Aravind Adiga's *The Railway Station* can be viewed as an iconoclast, though this interpretation requires a nuanced understanding of the term "*iconoclast*." Typically, an iconoclast is someone who challenges or rejects established societal norms, traditions, or institutions. In Ziauddin's case, his character doesn't outright challenge societal norms in a bold, rebellious manner, but he does possess certain qualities that might align with an iconoclastic reading. While Ziauddin might not fit the traditional definition of an iconoclast, especially in the sense of **actively challenging societal institutions or norms**, his rejection of the conventional life and his **internal sense of rebellion** against his situation can still place him in a loosely iconoclastic category. He is, in his own way, an **unconventional figure** who quietly resists the structures of society through his detachment, frustration, and desire for something beyond the prescribed life of mediocrity. However, his rebellion is more a form of **resignation** than an active, outward challenge to established norms, making him a **passive iconoclast**, if one at all.

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