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Everyday Assassinations: Structural Violence, Social Death and the Politics of the “In-Between” in Aravind Adiga’s *Between the Assassinations*

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Abstract: Aravind Adiga’s *Between the Assassinations* (2008) presents the fictional coastal town of Kittur through a series of interconnected narratives situated between two historically significant political assassinations in India: the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and that of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. Although the title apparently directs attention towards political violence, Adiga’s narrative reveals a more pervasive and less spectacular form of violence operating within everyday life. Poverty, caste hierarchy, religious suspicion, corrupt institutions, exploitative labour, gendered vulnerability and social exclusion repeatedly destroy the dignity and aspirations of ordinary individuals. This article proposes the concept of “Everyday Assassinations” to describe these slow, structural acts of social destruction. Drawing upon Johan Galtung’s theory of structural violence, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, Michel Foucault’s understanding of disciplinary power, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of subalternity, the paper argues that Adiga transforms the conventional meaning of assassination from a single political act into a continuing social process. Through selected narratives- “The Railway Station,” “St. Alfonso’s Boys’ High School and Junior College,” “The Sultan’s Battery,” “The Cool Water Well Junction,” and “Umbrella Street,” the article demonstrates how Kittur functions as a social laboratory in which individuals are not necessarily killed physically but are progressively deprived of identity, mobility, dignity and voice. The paper further argues that the temporal space “between” the two assassinations becomes an important narrative and political space: history appears not only through spectacular national events but through the ordinary lives that official histories frequently overlook. Adiga’s fragmented narrative therefore constitutes an alternative archive of postcolonial India in which the lives of marginalised people become evidence of the nation’s unfinished promises.

Keywords: *Violence, Everyday Assassinations, Subalternity, Caste, Poverty, Communalism, Kittur, Postcolonial India*

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly turned away from the monumental representation of the nation and towards the ordinary spaces in which the consequences of political and economic transformation become visible. Aravind Adiga occupies an important position within this literary movement. His fiction repeatedly investigates the contradictions produced by economic liberalisation, class mobility, corruption, poverty and the uneven distribution of opportunity. While *The White Tiger* famously presents the violent aspirations of an individual attempting to escape poverty, *Between the Assassinations* offers a substantially different narrative structure. Rather than following one protagonist, the work constructs an entire town through a sequence of connected stories.

Published in 2008, *Between the Assassinations* is located in the fictional town of Kittur between two historically significant moments: the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The collection therefore establishes a peculiar historical interval. The title seems initially to refer to the political history of India, but its deeper significance emerges when the reader examines the lives of Kittur's ordinary inhabitants. The "assassinations" occurring in the background are spectacular political events; the violence experienced by the characters, however, is generally ordinary, repetitive and institutional. This distinction provides the central premise of the present study.

The paper proposes the term "Everyday Assassinations" to describe the various forms of social and structural violence through which individuals are deprived of dignity, agency, identity and hope without necessarily being physically killed. A poor child is reduced to cheap labour; a member of a socially disadvantaged caste is reminded of his position; a Muslim boy becomes vulnerable to communal suspicion; an industrialist becomes trapped within a corrupt economic system; a poor woman is forced to negotiate public space through begging; and a labouring man remains socially invisible despite performing essential work. Existing studies of *Between the Assassinations* have already identified poverty, exploitation, caste, religion, politics and social inequality as major concerns. A 2024 study, for instance, foregrounds poverty and the suffering of marginalised communities, while another recent study examines the text as a representation of contemporary Indian society. However, the present article shifts the critical emphasis from the themes represented by Adiga to the process through which social structures gradually destroy human possibilities.

The paper therefore asks three principal questions:

1. How does Adiga transform political assassination into a metaphor for everyday social destruction?
2. How do caste, class, religion, gender and institutional corruption operate as forms of structural and symbolic violence?
3. How does the narrative space “between” the two historical assassinations provide an alternative history of ordinary Indian lives?

The argument is that *Between the Assassinations* should not merely be read as a collection of stories about poverty or corruption. It can be understood as an archive of interrupted lives. Kittur contains people who exist physically but remain socially unheard, economically trapped or symbolically erased. Their experiences reveal that violence in postcolonial society is not restricted to moments of physical death. It is embedded in everyday structures.

Theoretical Framework

Johan Galtung and Structural Violence

The first theoretical foundation of this study is Johan Galtung’s concept of structural violence. In *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, Galtung distinguishes direct violence from forms of violence embedded within social structures. Structural violence occurs when social arrangements systematically prevent individuals from reaching their potential. This concept is particularly relevant to Adiga’s Kittur. No single villain is responsible for the suffering of every character. Instead, institutions, social hierarchies, economic arrangements and cultural assumptions work together. Thus, the question changes from: “Who is committing violence?” to “What social structure makes violence appear normal?” This distinction is crucial to understanding Adiga’s fiction. The poverty experienced by the characters is not merely an individual failure. Their social positions are produced by larger structures involving caste, education, employment, gender and wealth. Consequently, the suffering of an individual becomes evidence of a structural problem.

Pierre Bourdieu and Symbolic Violence

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence further expands the analysis. Symbolic violence operates when domination becomes so culturally normal that the dominated may internalise the very categories through which they are subordinated. Caste provides an important example. In the story involving Shankara, caste is not represented simply as a legal or institutional category. It becomes a psychological and social force. Shankara recognises the contradiction between caste status and economic status. His observation that a person may belong to a higher caste yet remain poor

destabilises the simplistic equation between caste and economic power: “He is of a higher caste than me, but he is poor.” The statement exposes a conflict between traditional hierarchy and modern economic mobility. Adiga therefore demonstrates that caste survives not only through explicit discrimination but also through inherited ways of interpreting identity.

Michel Foucault: Power and Everyday Discipline

Michel Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power is useful for understanding the institutional spaces of Kittur. Schools, workplaces, streets, religious spaces and administrative institutions regulate behaviour without necessarily employing direct physical force. Power in Adiga is therefore dispersed. The railway station, school, factory, street and public well become spaces in which individuals are classified, watched, restricted or controlled. This allows the paper to move beyond the idea that violence occurs only through physical aggression. A person can be controlled by: Economic dependence, social surveillance, caste expectations, religious classification, institutional rules, poverty, fear of authority or the internalisation of inferiority. Adiga’s Kittur becomes what may be called a micro-geography of power.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Subaltern

Spivak’s question concerning whether the subaltern can speak is particularly relevant to Adiga’s marginalised characters. The characters in *Between the Assassinations* frequently speak, but their speech does not necessarily produce social power. This distinction is important. Having a voice is not identical to being heard. The poor, the labourer, the beggar, the religious minority and the socially disadvantaged may speak, complain, dream or resist, but institutional structures often prevent their words from acquiring meaningful authority. Adiga’s narrative strategy attempts to counter this silencing by placing these marginal figures at the centre of literary attention.

Research Gap

A substantial portion of criticism on *Between the Assassinations* has concentrated on themes such as poverty, corruption, caste, religion, politics, aspiration and social inequality. Recent scholarship similarly identifies poverty and exploitation as major concerns, while research on contemporary Indian society reads the work through its representation of Kittur’s social realities. Although these approaches are valuable, a gap remains in examining the relationship between the title’s political assassinations and the ordinary forms of violence experienced by the characters. The present study addresses this gap by proposing Everyday Assassinations as a new interpretive concept. The concept makes three interventions. First, it expands the meaning of assassination beyond physical killing. Second, it

connects individual suffering to structural systems. Third, it interprets the word “between” as a political and narrative condition rather than merely a chronological marker.

The characters exist between opportunities and deprivation, between tradition and modernity, between caste identity and economic aspiration, between religious belonging and communal suspicion, and between visibility and invisibility. The “between” therefore becomes a condition of existence.

Kittur as a Laboratory of Everyday Violence

Adiga’s Kittur is not merely a geographical setting. It is a compressed representation of Indian society. The town contains: railway stations, schools, factories, streets, religious institutions, marketplaces, poor neighbourhoods, wealthy households, public spaces and historical monuments. Each location contains a different relationship between power and vulnerability. This geographical structure enables Adiga to move from the macro-history of India to the micro-history of ordinary people. The novel’s organisation is therefore significant. Instead of giving readers a single national narrative, Adiga produces multiple local narratives. The nation appears through fragments. The historical assassinations occur at the national level, while Kittur’s inhabitants experience their own smaller forms of destruction. We can also represent this relationship in a chain that runs from national violence and historical memory to local structures and individual suffering. This is the basic course along which the idea of the Everyday Assassination is to be built.

Ziauddin and the Assassination of Identity

The story “The Railway Station” introduces Ziauddin, a young Muslim boy whose life is shaped by migration, poverty, labour and religious identity. The railway station becomes an appropriate symbolic location because it is a space of movement. People arrive, depart and cross boundaries. Yet Ziauddin’s movement does not necessarily produce freedom. He moves physically while remaining socially restricted. The character is particularly important because identity becomes unstable. He is associated with ideas about religious identity and communal conflict, while his economic vulnerability makes him susceptible to exploitation. The railway station therefore becomes a paradoxical space:

Movement Exists Without Mobility

Ziauddin can physically move from one place to another, but his social position remains precarious. The concept of Everyday Assassination becomes visible here as the destruction of a young person’s possibility of becoming more than the identity assigned to him. The character is not simply poor. He is economically vulnerable, religiously marked, socially suspicious and institutionally powerless. Adiga’s portrayal consequently reveals how poverty and communal identity can reinforce each other. The title’s

political violence is reflected in miniature within Ziauddin's life. National communal tensions do not remain abstract historical events; they enter the psychology of an ordinary individual. His experience demonstrates that communalism can assassinate belonging. The individual does not have to die physically. He can be made to feel that he does not completely belong. This is one of the most significant manifestations of Everyday Assassination in the collection.

Shankara: Caste and the Assassination of Social Mobility

The story concerning St. Alfonso's Boys' High School and Junior College offers an important exploration of caste, education and class. Shankara's observations expose the contradictions within caste society. He encounters the paradox of caste status and economic status: "He is of a higher caste than me, but he is poor." This short statement is analytically significant because it reveals a transition in Indian society. Traditional caste hierarchy is increasingly confronted by capitalist economics. Money can alter social power, but it cannot automatically erase inherited identity. Shankara therefore inhabits a contradictory social world. Education appears to offer mobility, but education itself operates within existing inequalities. The school is consequently not merely a place of learning. It becomes an institutional site where social identities are reproduced. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is especially useful here. The caste system survives partly because social distinctions become normalised. Individuals learn to read themselves and others through inherited categories.

The character's consciousness therefore becomes a site of conflict. In this way, the main character's reflection and judgment on the ways through which we define social class become more and more complex: Is the caste system stronger than money in training where we can sit in? Many questions also arouse: Can education break this self-excluding category we created? Can we conceptually and practically reach parity through financial stages? And the story leaves an answer ambiguous. Modernity may weaken certain traditional structures, but it does not automatically eliminate them. Shankara's crisis therefore represents the assassination of uncomplicated identity. He belongs to a generation caught between inherited hierarchy and modern aspiration.

Abbasi and the Assassination of Ethical Agency

If Shankara represents caste-based structural violence, Abbasi represents economic and institutional violence. His story exposes corruption as a system rather than an isolated moral defect. The industrial world in Kittur is governed by networks of bribery and institutional manipulation. A study of the text notes how Abbasi repeatedly confronts officials and bribery in attempting to keep his factory functioning. Adiga makes corruption appear simultaneously absurd and terrifying. The businessman is neither a completely innocent victim nor a straightforward villain. He is caught within the system. This

complexity is important because Adiga refuses a simple moral binary. The corrupt system forces individuals to participate in corruption to survive. Thus, corruption produces corruption.

The system gradually destroys ethical agency. This is another Everyday Assassination. The victim is not necessarily killed. Instead, the capacity to act morally becomes increasingly difficult. Bourdieu's theory can again be applied here because the dominant economic structure appears normal to those operating within it. Foucault's conception of dispersed power is equally relevant: authority is distributed across bureaucracies, economic institutions and social relationships. Abbasi's situation reveals an important paradox: The powerful are also imprisoned by the system that gives them power. His wealth provides privilege, but the corrupt system simultaneously limits his freedom. The factory therefore becomes a metaphor for a wider social mechanism.

Soumya and the Assassination of Public Space

The narrative concerning Soumya introduces gender, poverty and the politics of public space. For a poor woman, the street is not simply a neutral geographical location. It is regulated by social expectations. Certain places belong to certain people. Certain bodies are considered legitimate in public spaces, while others are treated as intrusive, undesirable or disposable. Soumya's experience illustrates how poverty becomes gendered. A poor man and a poor woman do not necessarily experience public space in identical ways. Women's bodies are more intensely subjected to surveillance, judgement and vulnerability. The restrictions placed upon Soumya therefore demonstrate the intersection of: gender, poverty, public space and social control.

Foucault's theory of disciplinary power is particularly productive here. Power operates not only through direct commands but through the regulation of where bodies may move and how they may behave. The street becomes a disciplinary space. The poor woman is visible, yet socially invisible. This paradox is central to the concept of Everyday Assassinations. Soumya's body is present in public space, but her humanity is frequently reduced to the economic function attached to her body. Her story therefore represents the assassination of social visibility. She is seen, but not recognised.

Chenayya and the Assassination of Labour

Chenayya's story provides perhaps one of the clearest examples of structural violence in the collection. The labouring body is treated as useful but replaceable. His physical work sustains the lives of others, yet his own life remains economically and socially insecure. This is a classic example of what Galtung's concept of structural violence allows us to see. The violence is not necessarily committed by one identifiable individual. Instead, the economic structure itself produces suffering. Chenayya's body becomes an economic instrument. His labour has value. His personhood has less value. This distinction

is devastating. Adiga's critique therefore extends beyond poverty to the commodification of the human body.

The labourer exists within a hierarchy in which his physical strength is consumed while his aspirations remain invisible. The concept of Everyday Assassination is particularly powerful here because the labourer is gradually destroyed through repetition: repetitive work, economic dependence, social invisibility, limited mobility and lack of institutional protection. This is not spectacular violence. It is slow violence. And because it is slow, it is easier for society to ignore.

The Politics of the “Between”

Perhaps the most crucial word in the title is not “assassinations”, but “between”. Between what, then? Historically, it locates itself between two assassinations of the prime minister Indira Gandhi, in 1984; and her son, Rajiv seven years later. But socially, the characters are positioned between a far wider array of betweens: there is a gross and intimate exclusion from tradition, modernity, caste, class, poverty, aspiration, rurality, urbanity, religious belonging, communal suspicion, visibility, invisibility, redemption, and economic dependence.

The “between,” then, functions as an existential circumstance rather than only a temporal one. Instead of the characters existing within or without the power structure's influence, they exist precariously in liminal spaces within them. This situation may be best understood as the betweenness of Kittur, a process in which a historical interval produces social chaos that exacerbates economic disparity that produces an identity conflict that manifests as everyday violence that produces an incomplete citizenship. Kittur therefore exists between historical events, but its inhabitants also exist between social possibilities. This is where the proposed concept becomes most significant. The assassinations in the title create a temporal frame. The everyday assassinations create the social content.

From Political Assassination to Social Assassination

A political assassination is usually understood as a violent act directed against an important public figure. It is sudden, spectacular, historically recorded, politically interpreted and publicly remembered. Everyday assassination, by contrast, is gradual, ordinary, repetitive, structurally produced and frequently forgotten. Adiga attempts to distinguish two regimes of violence by placing them in opposition to highlight their structural distinctions. Political assassination is violent by nature immediate and body-centered; public and conspicuous; the murder of specifically identified individuals whose deaths are recognized by history and generated as spectacles of politics. On the other hand, everyday assassination emerges in slow, social and structural processes that are rarely

transparent to the victims of violence, who are not defined by citizenship but collective and marginalized identities, and who don't die instantly but "expire gradually, like the longer-term effects of a slow poison." Unlike political assassination that is amped by power, every day assassination is nourished by social and economic power. Framing the essay as "a king's head" necessitated a new reading of the title away from the obvious, to "a sweet" of murder. The book is not merely between two assassinations. It is also filled with countless unnamed assassinations occurring every day. The death of hope, dignity, identity, mobility and voice becomes the hidden violence beneath the visible history of the nation.

Narrative Fragmentation as an Alternative Archive

Adiga's narrative form itself supports this argument. The collection does not offer a single continuous protagonist. Instead, it moves among different people and locations. This fragmentation is politically meaningful. Official history tends to remember major events. Literature can remember minor lives. The assassination of a prime minister becomes part of national memory. The humiliation of a labourer may disappear without a historical record. Adiga reverses this hierarchy of remembrance. The poor become narratively significant. The unnoticed becomes visible. The ordinary becomes historically meaningful. The form of the collection can therefore be understood as an alternative archive. Instead of asking, 'what happened to India?' between 1984 and 1991, Adiga is doing something more subtle, more difficult asking, every year, 'what happened to the Indian every day, while history was happening. It is this question that can make the book politically charged.

Satire and the Exposure of Normalised Violence

Adiga's satire plays an important role in exposing the absurdity of social systems. For example, one character observes of India: "black marketing, counterfeiting and corruption" and sarcastically imagines India winning all three medals if they were included in the Olympics. The humour is deliberately excessive. Yet the joke reveals a serious political reality. Satire allows Adiga to show that corruption has become ordinary enough to generate comedy. This is important because normalised violence is difficult to recognise. When corruption becomes routine, it stops appearing extraordinary. When caste becomes habitual, it stops appearing violent. When poverty becomes familiar, society stops seeing it as an emergency. When exploitation becomes economically necessary, it becomes morally invisible. Satire therefore becomes a form of literary resistance. Adiga makes readers laugh at systems that should actually disturb them. The laughter becomes uncomfortable because the reader recognises the normality of the abnormal.

Intersections of Caste, Class, Religion and Gender

A major strength of *Between the Assassinations* is that its characters cannot always be explained through one category. Poverty intersects with religion. Caste intersects with education. Gender intersects with economic vulnerability. Labour intersects with class. Religion intersects with political suspicion. This intersectional structure prevents a simplistic interpretation of the text. For example, Ziauddin cannot be understood only as a poor child. His religious identity changes the social meaning of his poverty. Similarly, Shankara cannot be understood only through caste. His experience also involves education and economic mobility. Soumya cannot be understood only through gender. Her gender is experienced through poverty and public-space regulation. Chenayya cannot be understood simply as a labourer. His labouring identity is connected to class and social invisibility. Thus, the violence experienced by the characters is cumulative. One disadvantage reinforces another. This produces what can be called compound vulnerability.

Resistance: Are the Characters Completely Powerless?

It is a real danger in reading the characters on the margins of the novel to see them as not just victims, but the latter are not entirely passive. They negotiate, dream, steal, manipulate, work, resist, and adapt, often reproducing the oppressor's system of oppression themselves. Such characters make the novel resistant to the humanitarian pity it might lean towards. Adiga refuses to separate the good victims from the bad oppressors; instead, he demonstrates how even within systems of inequality, those individuals still make morally complicated decisions. This is particularly clear when it comes to Abbasi and Ziauddin, both of whom exemplify the way the social structure is responsible for shaping individual morality. The poor commit wrong-doing out of necessity while the powerful become addicted to it because the system makes that a necessity. So the question of who is guilty asked by Adiga, is not really a question about guilt but about what kind of social system makes such choices possible. So what is crucial about this reading is this transition from a focus on individual morality to one on structure.

The Concept of Everyday Assassination

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Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's *Between the Assassinations* is a work deeply concerned with the ordinary consequences of extraordinary history. Situated between the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, the collection uses the historical interval to reveal another history: the history of ordinary people living through poverty, caste, communal tension, economic exploitation and institutional corruption. The present study has proposed the concept of Everyday Assassinations to reinterpret this relationship between national history and individual experience. Through Ziauddin, Adiga demonstrates how communal identity and poverty can threaten belonging. Through Shankara, he reveals the continuing psychological and social force of caste. Through Abbasi, he exposes corruption as a system capable of destroying ethical agency. Through Soumya, he demonstrates how gender and poverty regulate access to public space. Through Chenayya, he reveals the slow destruction of the labouring body under class inequality. The political assassinations named by the title are therefore only the visible points of violence. Beneath them exists another network of invisible violence. People are not always killed. Sometimes their opportunities are killed. Sometimes their dignity is killed. Sometimes their identities are reduced. Sometimes their voices are ignored. Sometimes their aspirations are slowly extinguished. This is the significance of Everyday Assassination.

The word "between" also acquires a deeper meaning. Kittur is situated between two historical assassinations, but its inhabitants are themselves situated between competing structures: tradition and modernity, caste and class, poverty and aspiration, religious belonging and communal suspicion, visibility and invisibility. Adiga's achievement lies in making this unstable middle space visible. His fictional town becomes an alternative archive of India in which the marginalised are not merely background figures to national history. They become the history. Consequently, *Between the Assassinations* should not be read simply as a collection of stories about poverty, corruption or social inequality. It can be understood as a literary investigation into the slow violence of everyday life. Its most important assassinations may not be the ones recorded in history books, but those that occur silently in streets, schools, factories, workplaces and homes. Adiga ultimately demonstrates that a nation cannot be understood only through the deaths of its political leaders. It must also be understood

through the lives that are slowly deprived of the possibility of becoming fully visible, fully free and fully human.

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