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Class, Labour and Survival: A Marxist Reading of Aravind Adiga's "The Elephant"

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ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga's short story "The Elephant" portrays the financial struggles, labour exploitation, and social marginalization experienced by Chenayya, an impoverished cycle-cart driver in Kittur. His daily struggle for survival reveals the unequal relationship between employers and workers, in which physical labour provides little financial security while economic power remains with the privileged. Through a Marxist perspective, this paper examines class inequality, poverty, economic dependence, exploitation, and the struggle for dignity. Louis Althusser's ideas about ideology and social institutions further explain how established power structures maintain unequal relationships. The story ultimately reveals that poverty is not merely an individual problem but a consequence of wider social and economic inequalities that restrict freedom and opportunity.

Keywords: Marxism, Labour, Poverty, Exploitation, Survival

INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga is a contemporary Indian English writer known for exploring poverty, corruption, class divisions, and the struggles of marginalized people. His important works include The White Tiger, Between the Assassinations, Last Man in Tower, Selection Day, and Amnesty. His writings often examine the contradictions of contemporary Indian society, particularly the gap between economic privilege and struggles of people who depend on daily labour.

In "The Elephant," Adiga depicts Chenayya, a poor cycle-cart driver who transports furniture and other goods for Mr. Ganesh Pai, a furniture-store owner in Kittur. Chenayya performs physically demanding work but receives little financial benefit. His livelihood depends on the availability of work and the decisions of his employer. Through Chenayya's experiences, Adiga exposes the unequal social and economic conditions that restrict working-class people.

A Marxist reading of the story focuses on the relationship between labour, economic power, and class inequality. Chenayya's difficulties demonstrate that hard work does not necessarily lead to financial independence when workers have limited control over wages, employment, and opportunities

Marxist literary criticism examines how economic conditions and class relationships influence human experiences. It focuses on the unequal distribution of wealth, the exploitation of labour, and the conflict between those who possess economic resources and those who depend on wages for survival. From this perspective, Chenayya's suffering reflects not only the personal difficulties but also the wider conditions experienced by the working class.

Chenayya provides the physical labour required by the furniture business, yet he has little authority over his working conditions. His employer controls the distribution of work and the money he receives. This unequal relationship demonstrates the difference between the person who controls economic resources and the person whose survival depends on employment

Chenayya's working-class identity is shaped by economic dependence. He must wait for assignments and accepts the available work because he cannot easily find another source of income. Although his labour is essential, it does not provide him with security or social recognition. Adiga thereby questions a social system in which workers contribute through physical effort but remain economically vulnerable

The relationship between Chenayya and Mr. Ganesh Pai is a central example of labour exploitation. After completing deliveries, Chenayya must hand over the money collected from customers to Mr. Ganesh Pai. Mr. Pai deducts two rupees, including a charge for dinner and for work.That was the sum he was expected to give Mr. Pai at the end of every trip: one for the dinner he would be given at around nine o'clock, one rupee for the privilege of having been picked to work for Mr. Ganesh Pai. It would be some time before Chenayya's number was called again, so he walked down the road to a spot where a man was sitting at a desk on the pavement, selling bundles of small rectangular tickets that were as colorful as pieces of candy. He smiled at Chenayya; his fingers began flipping through one of the bundles. "Yellow?" "First tell me if my number won last time," Chenayya said. (4)The word 'privilege' is significant because employment, which should provide income to the worker, is presented as something for which Chenayya must pay. This incident reveals the employer's control over a worker who has few alternatives. Although Chenayya performs the physical labour, he cannot independently determine the value of his work or challenge the deductions without risking his livelihood.Another incident occurs when Chenayya delivers a TV table to Mrs. Engineer. After completing the difficult task, he requests extra payment because of the distance and his physical discomfort. She refuses and threatens to contact the police, calling him a 'thug' Mrs. Engineer had not been watching; she had retreated into an inner room. She returned and counted off seven hundred and forty-two rupees. Hesitating a moment, she added three one-rupee notes to it. "Give me something more, Madam?" Chenayya blurted. "Give me three more rupees?" "Six rupees? Nothing doing," she said. "It's a long way, Madam." He picked up his saw and pointed to his neck. "I had to haul it all that way, Madam, on my cycle-cart. It hurts my neck very much." "Nothing doing. Get out, or I'll call the police, you thug. Get out, and take your big knife!" (2-3)This interaction reveals how a poor worker's demand for fair compensation can be turned against him. Mrs. Engineer possesses social authority, while Chenayya has little power to defend his position. These incidents show that exploitation extends beyond physical labour. It also involves financial control, humiliation, and the unequal ability to negotiate. Adiga illustrates how economic privilege allows some individuals to determine the conditions under which others must work.Poverty is one of the most important themes in "The Elephant." Chenayya's earnings are insufficient to ensure financial stability or provide a clear path towards independence. His daily income is reduced by expenses, leaving little opportunity to save money. Although he and other cart pullers dream of buying an autorickshaw or opening a small business, the cost of these ambitions remains beyond their reach Mr. Ganesh Pai allowed them two rupees for each trip, meaning that, at the rate of three trips a day, they were making six rupees. Once you deducted for lotteries, and liquor, you were lucky to save two rupees. Sundays were off, as were Hindu holidays, so by the month's end you had saved only forty or forty five rupees. A trip to the village, an evening with a whore, an extra-long drinking binge, and your whole month's savings would be dust. Assuming you saved everything you could, you'd be lucky to earn four hundred a year. An autorickshaw would cost twelve, fourteen thousand to buy, a small tea shop four times as much. (9)This situation demonstrates the gap between aspiration and economic reality. Chenayya works hard, but his income cannot easily provide the resources necessary to change his circumstances. His labour helps him survive from day to day without guaranteeing a better future. The story therefore challenges the belief that individual effort alone is not sufficient to overcome poverty.Financial insecurity also makes Chenayya vulnerable to unexpected difficulties. If he becomes unable to work, his livelihood will disappear. Without savings or reliable alternatives, he must continue to accept the difficult conditions. Poverty consequently becomes a cycle: low income prevents savings, the absence of savings increases insecurity, and insecurity forces workers to remain dependent on employers.Chenayya's purchase of lottery tickets and drinking reflect his attempt to find temporary relief from an unsatisfactory life. These choices do not solve his economic problems, but they reveal the emotional pressures associated with a future that appears difficult to change. Adiga presents his circumstances within a wider structure of inequality rather than treating his personal decisions as the sole cause of his suffering.Chenayya experiences not only financial hardship but also social exclusion. His labour benefits others, yet he receives little respect or recognition. When he seeks alternative employment, he is told, "We don't need a coolie right now." (12). This rejection demonstrates that leaving an exploitative workplace does not guarantee freedom when other employment opportunities are equally limited.His participation in political activities also fails to provide the improvement he expects. Although political organizations promise opportunity and representation, Chenayya continues to experience exclusion and humiliations. His experience reveals the gap between political promises and the realities of working-class life.

Louis Althusser's Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, provides a useful perspective for interpreting these events. Althusser explains how ideology and social institutions help in reproducing the existing social relationships. In Adiga's story, economic authority, social expectations, and institutional power contribute to the continuation of class inequality.

Chenayya's situation is shaped not only by low wages but also by his limited ability to challenge those who possess greater authority. The story suggests that unequal relationships can continue because marginalized workers lack the resources and power needed to change their circumstances. Althusser's ideas thus help to explain how social structures maintain inequality beyond the workplace itself.

Despite repeated humiliation, Chenayya continues to struggle for survival and attempts to preserve his dignity. His reflection, "Because we acquiesce. Because we do not dare leave with that wad of fifty thousand rupees—because we know other poor people will catch us and drag us before the rich man. Because we dare not kill the rich, out of fear of their police. We poor have built the prison around ourselves" (20) expresses his awareness of the restrictions created by poverty and dependence. The image of a prison suggests that limited resources and opportunities can make escape from hardship difficult. His

reflections should not be interpreted as blaming poor people for their own suffering. Rather, it expresses Chenayya's recognition of how economic insecurity restricts choices and creates a sense of entrapment. His circumstances reveal that individual determination alone cannot overcome structural inequality.

The elephant also plays an important role in the story. Chenayya gradually recognises the suffering shared by himself and the animal, both of whom are subject to the demands of others. "Chenayya kept looking at the elephant, its sad wet eyes. "I am sorry I ever cursed you, brother," he said aloud as he rubbed its trunk. The mahout stood near the wall he had just pissed on, watching Chenayya talking to the elephant, a sense of apprehension growing within him" (22). His apology expresses compassion and an awareness of their shared vulnerability. The word 'brother' connects their experiences and emphasises the need for empathy towards those who suffer. Through this relationship, Adiga extends the story's concern beyond financial hardship to questions of dignity, compassion, and freedom. Chenayya's struggle is not merely to earn money but also to retain his humanity in circumstances that repeatedly deny him respect.

Aravind Adiga's "The Elephant" presents the suffering of the working class through Chenayya's experiences of poverty, exploitation, financial insecurity, and social marginalisation. His relationship with Mr. Pai exposes the unequal distribution of economic power, while his unsuccessful search for alternative employment reveals the limited opportunities available to poor workers. A Marxist perspective highlights the structural causes of Chenayya's hardship, and Althusser's ideas help to explain how social institutions and everyday practices can maintain unequal relationships. Chenayya's compassion towards the elephant further emphasises their shared vulnerability. Ultimately, Adiga portrays survival as both an economic struggle and an effort to preserve dignity and freedom in an unequal society.

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