

Innovations

Problem of Social Conformity in the Novels of Aravind Adiga

Barun Kumar Jha

Professor, Dept. of English, FOH, BMU, Rohtak, India

Abstract

Conformity is one of the sub themes of Strain Theory propounded by Robert K. Merton delineating various causes and effects of strain in a society. There are different forms of strain in the social structure of the society. It is a universally accepted theory by most of the thinkers and men of literature. Aravind Adiga has also taken up the social problem of strain in his novels. He has depicted several facets of social strain in Indian society. He discusses the theme of conformity and non-conformity in his celebrated novels. He points out that the causes of strain are interwoven in the structure of the society itself. In a society there are different social structures based on caste, gender, religion, poverty, etc. All these structures create situations for strain in the society and compel human beings to conform to them. Sometimes, people conform to the established norms, traditions and conventions of society; however, if they differ from them, they are bound to commit crimes and anti-social activities. Arvind Adiga has highlighted these aspects of social strain especially depicting the conformity in his novels.

Key Words: Social, Strain, Structure, Facets, Cause, Effect, Conformity, Norms, Conventions, Crimes, Anti- Social Activity.

Problem: This paper presents the problem of Social Conformity with reference to the novels of Aravind Adiga.

Approach: Analytical and critical approach have been followed in completing this article.

Findings: The paper presents possible solutions of the causes of strain in human society by depicting the issue of conformity explained by Aravind Adiga.

Conclusion: To conclude this article on social conformity, it can be said conformity can take us a long way in many areas of our life. That is why we all participate knowingly or unknowingly. Even if we take pride in our uniqueness, it is nearly difficult to avoid being a conformist in many areas of our life.

Introduction

Conformity is one of the dimensions of Strain Theory propounded by Robert King Merton in 1938. It is a socio-criminal theory because society puts a man into crime. Sometimes, the structure and traditions of society compel individuals to commit crime. The pre-set-up mind of society pushes a person in the illegal direction. Usually, the illegal way to arrive at any destination compels a man towards strain. Owing to this, individuals are enforced to commit crimes like selling drugs and prostitution as the means of their livelihood. Sometimes it can be very dangerous that it also turns into the murder of someone. This strain can be structural and individual. Structural strain means it can be on a social level. This is a fixed or pre-set up level that maintains its rules on how the people of a particular society can achieve their goals. This inherent social

structure changes people's attitudes as to means and goals. Secondly, individual strain means the pains and difficulties which are experienced by an individual to gain his or her goal. In fact, gaining the goals of society becomes more important for a person than its way. The contribution of Richard Cloward, Albert K. Cohen, Lloyd Ohlin, Neil Smelser, Robert Agnew, Steven Messner, and Richard Rosenfeld are also notable in strain theory. When some new idea or thought comes and it works, it brings out some other new ideas or ideology related to the same idea or something like that particular thought.

Discussion

Strain theory is a universal theory. It applies to every society on this planet. India is also not far away from it. Many writers talk about strain theory on different levels in their works and research. Various stories by various writers on various levels deal with strain theory. This present research article also deals with strain theory concerning the selected novels of Aravind Adiga. He has given a new tendency to Indian fiction and depicted the sub theme of conformity in some of his novels to emphasize the causes and effects of Strain Theory.

One must conform to succeed in a social group to act in harmony under the prevailing standards of a society. To become similar in form or nature is called conformity. In simple words, conformity is a sort of civilized impact demanding a change in faith orderly to fit with a set. Classification may take separate forms, for example mock and condemnation. Matching, Harmony, Co-incidence likeness, and similitude are the synonyms of conformity. Usually, conformity is related to youth culture, but strongly influences human beings of all ages.

Illegally achieving one's desired goal with hard work can be seen as beneficial conformity. People conform for various reasons such as lack of self-confidence, dependency on others, fear, and lack of positivity and motivation. These factors can limit anyone's progress and growth and prevent him or her from going above and beyond strict necessity.

Conformity causes differences in behavior so that the individuals in the group act in the same way. Undoubtedly, conformity has a positive impact on our personality, however, its negative aspect cannot be totally ignored. Many people do not feel like others in this world, but they observe the norms of society. Conformity is both good and bad but the chance of falling in the trap of conformity is not rare if one is not conscious of its bad impact.

Self-response and behavioral inspections are the simple ways to assess conformity. Internationalization, compliance, and identification are the major types of conformity:

Smoking *before* the age of twenty will arrest your development as a normal human being, Mr. Lasrado Gulpi had shouted. *If your partner* were here, not in the *Gulpi* he would do exactly what I am doing now. (Adiga 55)

The second day (Afternoon) narrates the story of Shankara Kinni. Shankara Kinni is a student at Mr. Lasrado. He is a chemistry teacher in the school, a conformist person. One day he sees Shankara smoking a cigarette in the sugarcane juice stand outside the college. He delivers a lecture to him highlighting the harmful and side effects of smoking. He scolds him badly and says that it is injurious to health and for the morals of a person as well. The relationship between Shankara Kinni and Mr. Lasrado as student and teacher is good and cordial because Shankara smokes cigarettes. Mr. Lasrado dislikes Shankara and he also does not attend chemistry class regularly. Shankara's teacher seems to be a strict conformist. People like Lasrado perceive that good habits decided by society should be observed. It is lacking in Shankara. It keeps a person attached to the social atmosphere otherwise he has to live alone like Shankara.

The change in belief system according to a group is a result of conformity. If someone desires to be correct, it will be called informational conformity:

A Hoyka mistress near the theatre and another beautiful Hoyka woman for a wife. Now he was leading a life of ease and luxury in the Gulf, Fixing the noses and lips of rich Arab women. Another mistress there, for ensure. Fellows like his father belong to no caste or religion or race; they lived for themselves. They were the only real men in this world. (Adiga 54)

Shankara has to face humiliation because of his caste. It makes him think that his father lives a better life. He does not care for any social norms and caste structure. He lives a real life. His father is a non-conformist and ever listens to what others say. He does what he likes. He marries a Hoyka girl hailing from a low caste society while he is Brahmin by caste. He has no respect for norms and cultural values and is completely an ignorant fellow living away from his wife with a mistress in the Gulf. He is a surgeon quite unaware of the situation of his son. He lives a life fraught with stress and is ready to commit anything else good or bad for his mental peace.

When we are new in a specific group, sometimes we become non-conformist due to strain. Sometimes we become non-conformist due to our personal choice, for our happiness. Some good habits which are in trend by chance can also become a part of conformity. For example, most people do not understand how COVID-19 spreads without touch but they know they should cover their mouths when they go in contact with others. The common concept of conformity is the change in behavior brought by others. Somehow this change is limited not complete:

I have burst a bomb to end the 5000-year-old castes system that still operates in our country. I have burst a bomb to show that no man should be judged, as I have been merely by the accident of his birth. (Adiga 50)

Everyone knows the harms and side effects of the caste system. There are many ill effects of the caste system in our country. The effects of the caste system can be seen in the form of corruption during elections in India. People do not give importance to the real person but elect a person or leader who belongs to their caste. It is a very normal thing in local-level elections. The caste system works against the soul of democracy. Democracy stands for equality, on the other hand the caste system is completely based on inequality. Due to conformity, the suppression of low caste by the upper is an example of caste conformity. The incident of the bomb blasts in the school is because of the exploitation of the caste system. Shankara is mentally exploited by the students as well as teachers. Once he thinks that he blasts the bomb to take revenge on his teachers. However, he realizes that it is not an easy matter. He wants to take revenge on the entire caste system. He decides to inform the press about the bomb blasting but he changes his mind. He decides that he will disclose it to the police after his arrest. He will clarify to them that he has not blasted the bomb against an individual but given a threat to demolish the entire caste system of society. The worst aspect of the caste system is mental exploitation through inhuman manners. When Shankara thinks about telling the truth to the police then he feels some better. He thinks that he fights for his whole caste. He thinks that the Hoyka caste will organize marches for him. He is in the feeling of a martyr of some kind.

Through the character of Shankara Kinni, Adiga describes the causes and results of conformity. It leads to strain and strain most of the time gives birth to crime. He is a boy so he does it on a small level. If he were a young person, he could make it happen at a large level. So, here we can see the effects of strain theory in the story of the second day of the book *Between the Assassinations*.

It can be seen that there is a huge relation between strain theory and conformity. Both are available in our society. When we are different from a special group or society and we try to follow the norms of society, it is not easy. During the process of change, we have to face various types of strain. Sometimes we become nonconformist due to strain. If we are new to a specific group, the members of that group do not

accept us easily. We have to change our behavior. Even we have to change our personal opinions. Nepotism is also a crap of conformity. If we are not a part of a special group, we will not be allowed to do anything like them. Many characters of Adiga's novel deal with conformity, however, some are non-conformist. Both parts depend on the situation. *The White Tiger*, Adiga's first novel, and his masterpiece, also deals with various themes such as the theme of poverty, religion, and democratic values. One more thing which we can see in this novel is conformity. This conformity is related to all these themes. A person has to conform because of the situation. If he is poor, he will try his best to earn wealth because he also wants to become rich like other men around him. For this, he will change his desire and behavior:

I don't think she had ever had such a fine thing to wear in her life. Her death was so grand that I knew, all at once, that her life must have been miserable. (Adiga 15).

Balam, the protagonist of *The White Tiger*, talks about his family. His aunt, Kusum, is the head of his family. In Indian Society, there is always a rule that all the members remain under the head of the family. They cannot do anything without the head's permission. It is traditional, all obey this tradition. By doing so we are proven conformists. We follow the tradition because it is popular in our society. On the other hand, the protagonist describes his mother's funeral process. He says that his mother was well dressed at the time of her funeral. He says that throughout her life she remains in misery, she never wears good clothes. But on her death day, she was in her best clothes. It is also a gesture of conformity. It is also a tradition that when someone dies, he or she will be covered in good clothes. We know it very well that the dead body will be burnt to ashes, but we decorate it with flowers because it is a tradition and every person who is connected to such a group has to follow this:

When he caught his breath, he said, my whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that at least one son of mine should live like a man. (Adiga 30)

Balam belongs to a poor family. His father is not an educated person. He is a rickshaw puller. He earns money by working hard. He gives all his money to his aunt Kusum. He never asks for anything and interferes in her decisions. He is a strict conformist. He obeys all the rules of a joint family. But when his aunt Kusum, the head of their family refuses to send Balam to school then Balam's father becomes angry. He says he works hard like an animal, but he has never objected to anything. He speaks after the death of Balam's mother, Balam is his only son who is close to his heart. He says at least my son will live a life like men after becoming educated. Before that, he remains a conformist all his life:

You're really from Laxmangarh?

Yes, sir. I used to work in the tea shop – the one with the big photo of Gandhi in it. I used to break coal there. You came once to have tea. (Adiga 61)

The White Tiger is the story of Balam Halwai. He is a poor man belonging to scheduled caste and a son of a rickshaw puller. He is the one who tries to escape from all that. But before this, he remains a conformist because he is a brilliant student. Balam cannot continue his study. His family had already taken debt from the landlord at the time of his cousin's marriage. Later on, they have to pay off the debt. Therefore, to help the family financially, he is made to do some menial jobs. He works at a tea shop then he learns driving and works as a personal car driver. This keeps him away from school and studies. Here Balam represents many such poor, rustic children who live miserable lives in India. Consequently, they remain 'half baked'. To solve the financial problem of families, many children leave school earlier and are kept away from education. They have to fulfill their social duties:

It is one of the good marriages. We have the boy and we screw the girl's family hard. I remember exactly what we have got in dowry from the girl's side and thinking about it even more makes my mouth fill up with water. Five Thousand Rupees Cash, all crisp new unsoiled notes fresh from the bank, plus a hero bicycle and a heavy gold necklace for Kishan. (Adiga 51)

One of the best examples of conformity is dowry. It is not only a stigma of our society, but it is the other name of stress and misery for many people. For social reputation people give dowry to their daughters. But it causes more stress for the family. Violence, abuse and female infanticide are the result of dowry system. The Dowry system is the instance that causes stress because of conformity. These examples are the best display of conformity among people:

Yogesh Murthy, known as Masterji, is one of the first Hindus allowed into Vishram on account of his noble profession and dignified bearing. He was lean, mustached and of medium height; in physical terms, a typical representative of the earlier generation. Good with languages. (Adiga 30)

The members of Vishram society have accepted Masterji many years ago. He seems like an honest and good person. All members of society find him like them, so the matching nature becomes an act of conformity. Like other members of society, he is a man of rule and regulation. He is a humble and respected person. He never interferes in others' lives and never disturbs any member of society. He does not want a lot of money, rather he wants to live a simple and peaceful life. When a person does not accept by the present condition then he rejects all things on individual level:

What is the definition of a dying city, Mrs. Puri? I will tell you, as you do not know: A city that ceases to surprise you. And that is what this Bombay has become. Show people a little cash, and they will jump, dance, run naked in streets, these developers and builders are mafia (Adiga 39)

This situation develops when the person is not like the whole group. If he cannot behave like that group, if he cannot follow their traditions, he is abandoned by the group. All are the symptoms of a non-conformist. Mrs. Rego says to Mrs. Puri that Bombay is a dying city, because it loses its charm. It does not give surprises of new happenings. It means the characteristics of a city are going against it. The citizens want conformity even in joy. She says all are not good people as they are. They cannot trust these builders. They are robbers in the name of developers. Dharmen Shah, who wants to buy the tower of Vishram society, also plays the game of trust with the members of society. He tells it to the members of society. He tells about his achievement so that people can trust him and give him their apartments. As a businessperson, it is compulsory for him to be trusted by the members of society. No one does business or deals with an untrustworthy person. Without trust, we cannot break deals, close deals or come out on top. To show his position and power, it is also a part of being conformist. It is necessary of conformity in society:

In a socialist economy, the small businessman has to be a thief to prosper. Before he was twenty, he was smuggling goods from Dubai and Pakistan. (Adiga 88)

It is a commonly known fact that every person wants to live a life of prosperity and comfort. He wants a reputable lifestyle. All comforts and reputation can be obtained from money. Many people gain money by illegal means. To become fit in a special society one has to adopt all the beliefs and regulations of the society. If one has no proper resources for it, it becomes the reason for stress. To remove this strain, he

performs every type of work. Under this social pressure, many times a person does such a type of business that is not good even for humanity. Next, we can see the conformity on the basis of religion also. Between Hindu and Muslim, it can be seen clearly. In fact, both things can be seen on that base, attachment as well as hatred. Ziauddin is a little boy. He is Muslim so it is difficult for him to find a job in a shop, because the majority of shopkeepers belong to Hindu religion. The customers who come to shop are also Hindu. "Honor Thy NEIGHBOR, THY GOD.....No it means, God is close to you if you really believe in him; I am a Muslim, I can't go in." (Adiga 27). A little boy who is not even fifteen years old refuses to enter a temple because he is a Muslim. This is the thing which he has learnt from his family, community and the group of people who live around him. Islam is based on the concept of 'Tawheed'! 'Tawheed' means the oneness and uniqueness of Allah. Muslims think that the basic element of their religion is monotheism and anything which even slightly means associating partners with one God is an act of shirks. All are conformed to this faith. The association of partners with Allah will not be forgiven. So, Muslims are conformists in this matter, according to him, they believe in one God, who is the creator of all things and they do not worship anything from the creator. Therefore, they do not visit places or eat food that has anything to do with associating partners to God. They understand that Muslims, those who visit other worship places are ignorant or contradict their own beliefs. "A Pathan takes care of other Pathans." (Adiga 17) The significance of caste reputation for the economic and social status of the same religion and attitude makes it a highly contested domain. The criterion of belonging discussed here is religious conformity with the value by which a special group is identified. People of the same religion can be seen sitting together. They can be seen collecting money for their temples and other religious and local domestic festivals. Ziauddin is a Muslim, and he is helped by a rich man because he also belongs to Islam. Zia also helps him so gently because he knows that he is a Pathan. "I am a Muslim. The son of a Muslim too." (Adiga 17)

Many things make us conform to our caste or community. Eating non-veg is against a true Brahmin or Hindu but it is a common thing for a Muslim. Like that every person relates his honesty to his religion. Every person thinks that he is honest because his religion is pure and superior. So, he is tied to the rules of his religion. When outlawed favor is used within a particular workgroup involving business dispensing job opportunities and advantages to friends and supporters associated with favoritism, it is associated with conformity. If one person is doing wrong work, his near and dear is supporting him because he is related to his group, community and family:

Balam gets out. we're leaving you to spend the night with your Buddha. The Maharaja and the Buddha together for the night. (Adiga 160)

Pinky Madam talks of going back to America and asks Mr. Ashok to see the traffic jam in Delhi. Mr. Ashok is a good husband. Once, on her birthday, he asks Mr. Balam to be decorated like a king with a red cap and dark cooling specs and serve them dinner in this dress. He mispronounces the word Pizza while Mr. Ashok and Pinky madam ask him to correct it. They ask him to take them to C.P. He remains in the car while watching the illumination of Connaught Place. Inside the car, he does different activities to see various things. He looks at the picture of goddess Kali and sleeps. Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam wake him up by banging on the window. He opens the door of the car for them and finds that both of them have taken a drink. Pinky calls Balam an intelligent person and lays hold of the con from him. She leaves him to spend the night with the statue of Buddha in his Maharaja Dress. The car takes the U-turn and stops half a foot in front of him. Pinky madam opens the door and asks him if he is angry. "Thought I had left you behind, Mr. Maharaja? No Madam, you're not angry, are you? not at all" (Adiga 162). Balam sits in the backseat. Then she drives the car at full speed crossing one red light after the other. Balam watches the show from the back seat when the car strikes a thing and pushes over it. He realizes the fate of the thing hit by the car. Ashok says that it may be a dog, then Balam nods. But Pinky says it is not a dog. Then, Mr. Ashok pulls her out of the front seat. Balam drives the car at high speed to Gurgaon. Pinky madam cries again and again to

see the thing. But Mr. Ashok impels her with his palm. Balram washes the car and wipes it down thoroughly. He shows Mr. Ashok the cheap green cloth stuck to the wheel of the car and concludes that it must be a child. He puts a finger on his lips and asks Mr. Ashok to sleep well because it is a very strainful night for them. He changes his special dress and then goes to sleep. The next morning, he wipes the seat as usual and washes the wheels once more to ensure that there is no spot of blood. Mr. Ashok tells Mukesh all about the accident. He comes at once to Gurgaon. In the evening Mukesh comes and speaks to him in a very polite tone. He calls Balram a part of their family. Then Balram sees a man in a black coat with paper. He is given a piece of paper to sign it. The man in the black coat is a lawyer. Mukesh asks Balram for the signature on the confession paper and admits that he is responsible for that accident. He says that his family does not object to this decision. It is not a new thing with a poor driver. It has become a tradition for the rich to kill anyone by their car and blame the poor drivers. Many drivers are put behind the bars without any crime. The family members do not protest but go about bragging. The judges are in these rackets and so ignore the discrepancies in the case. Hence life goes on for everyone but not for drivers. It is an example of illicit favoritism. Mr. Mukesh wants to save Pinkey madam from her crime. These types of supporters come under favoritism conformity.

Many social repercussions result from making conformity the main aim of schools. Conformity brings order that is needed for learning. The rules and regulations of a school also play a confirmation role. The access to control in a particular group also leads to fake conformity. The members of such groups do not follow conformity in the actual way:

If we don't take the boys to Angel talkies, they'll see it as a sign of weakness. We'll only have more trouble with them. The headmaster bit his lips. But.....the dangersone hears of terrible postersof evil that cannot be put into words.....(Adiga 79)

The story opens with the Morning Prayer in St. Alfonso's boys' high school and junior college. It is not a normal morning, but it is the morning of martyrs, the thirty-seventh anniversary of the day Mahatma Gandhi had sacrificed his life for the sake of our nation. There is a little description of the structure of the school's building in the opening of the story. All students come to the ground for mourning.

Prayer and tribute are paid to the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi. Mr. D'Mello, assistant headmaster comes at last with his folded newspaper in his hands. All the six hundred and twenty-three boys merge into long lines. It takes almost ten minutes to form them in a pattern into the assembly square. Mr. D'Mello starts the Morning Prayer process drawing the morning air into his lungs and shouted: " a ten Shannon! After this, all look at the national tricolour and salute it." There is a Jesuit speech for the students. He tells them the blood of Bhagat Singh and Indira Gandhi fertilized the earth on which they stand. All students brim with pride. Mr. D'Mello fixes his eyes on the discipline of the students. He knows the nature of every student. It is not an easy task to keep them for so long. All the tension is created at the end of the speech when the headmaster announces the free film day tickets for the next Sunday. All the boys feel an exit inside their hearts. But after a little, the headmaster says that the government has made a mistake: The Government has made a terrible mistake.....the headmaster said, trying to explain. A terrible mistake..... they have asked you to go to a House of Sin.... (Adiga 74)

Every year the Government Issues a free film ticket on Martyrs' Day for every school in the state. But this time the name of their school comes under 'Angel Talkies' a porn movie theater. All the students want to go to watch the movie in Angel Talkies. But Mr. D'Mello and the headmaster consider it a sin to watch things like porn movies. They know the school is the place where a student learns the basic lessons for their whole life. In the morning they tell a lot about the freedom fighter. So, they can raise the love for the nation in the students. According to them, all these things affect the brain of students. Things like Angel Talkies vanish the moral values of any person. But now they are in confusion and tension about how to manage everything. Mr. D'Mello gets more worried about his favorite student Girish. He does not want

Girish to become ready to go to that place. At last, it is decided that all the boys with their teacher will go to watch a movie in Angel Talkies the following Sunday. Mr. D'Mello gets strained so much when he finds his favorite student in the crowd of boys:

You know what the biggest difference is, between being rich and being like us? The rich can make mistakes, again and again, we make only one mistake and that's it for us. (Adiga 231)

Conclusion:

To conclude this article on social conformity, it can be said conformity can take us a long way in many areas of our life. That is why we all participate knowingly or unknowingly. Even if we take pride in our uniqueness, it is nearly difficult to avoid being a conformist in many areas of our life.

References:

1. Singh, Anita (2004). *Indian English Novels in Nineties and after; A study of the text and its context.* Delhi: Achyayan Publisher and Distributors.
2. Weineich P., Saunderson W. (2003). *Analysing Identity: Cross Cultural societal and clinical context.* London Routledge.
3. Braithwaite, J. (1981). *The Myth of Social Class and Criminality Reconsidered.* American Sociological Review, Vol. 46: 36-58.
4. Asch, S.E. (1991). *Effects of group pressure on the modification and distortion of judgement.* Groups, leadership and men Pittsburgh:177-190.
5. Asch, S.E. (1956). *Studies of independence and conformity. A minority of one against a unanimous majority.* Psychological Monographs:1-70.
6. Mendes, Cristina (2020). *Urban re development, the new logics of expulsion, and individual precarity in Kleber Mendonca Filho's Aquarius and Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower.*
7. Pandit Nirzari (2017). *Countering Global Metaphors of the India Growth Story through Local ones in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger and Last Man in Tower.* Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary research Journal, Vol. 8.