

Strategic Invisibility as part of Invisibility bargain: *A Study of the Invisibility dynamics in Aravind Adiga's Amnesty*

¹Rakes Sarkar

¹Assistant Professor of English, Kalna College, Burdwan, West Bengal

ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga's *Amnesty* records the struggle of an illegal immigrant Danny who overstays in Australia after the expiry of his student visa. The novel is replete with references to Danny's keen sensitivity to the gaze of others, his persistent endeavors to retain and reinforce invisibility and his earnest aspiration to achieve legal status and celebrate visibility. This paper seeks to present the coexistence of visibility and invisibility in this novel as a perfect narrative illustration of what Jeffrey D. Pugh has called the 'invisibility bargain'. Furthermore, this paper will try to unravel how the various strategies that Danny adopts to remain invisible and his cherished dream of being legally visible address the problematics of what is known as 'strategic invisibility'. The analysis seeks to reveal that while theoretically both these concepts emphasize successful integration, Danny's bargain ends in failure and his strategies prove to be insufficient.

Keywords: *visibility, invisibility, immigrant, strategic invisibility, invisibility-bargain*

INTRODUCTION

People from South-Asian countries like India and Sri Lanka have been for a long time migrating to Australia and the number has increased during post-war period, especially in the late 1980s. Lately, however, citizenship in Australia has been increasingly difficult to obtain. The official difficulties and cost to earn permanent residency in Australia have forced many South-Asian migrants to arrive on temporary visas with "hope to gain enough local education and employment experience in the right areas to qualify for permanent residency" (Pietsch 20). While South Asian migrants "have contributed enormously to the rich cultural life and diversity of Australia at both the local and national levels", their presence have also been

subject to increasing monitoring and control (Sarwal 41). In the words of Zappala and Castles, “There is no clear direction for Australian citizenship at present, which can only heighten the insecurity of immigrants, indigenous Australians, and other minorities” (77). Juliet Pietsch observes that such difficulties affect “the everyday mental and psychological state of temporary migrants” who suffer “under a permanent cloud of uncertainty” (23). As Louise Boon-Kuo observes, “The population of non-citizens living without a visa in Australia is largely invisible, atomized and socially isolated” (5). The concept of invisibility is thus particularly relevant to understand the predicament of illegal immigrants in Australia. According to Francoise Kral, “The concept of visibility is particularly relevant and timely in diasporic studies where expressions such as ‘the shadow class’ are part and parcel of the chronicle of migrations and where certain diasporic movements operate in a way which is as unobtrusive as possible, relegating the migrants to shadow lives lived on the margins of society” (3). The operation of invisibility in the lives of illegal immigrant like Danny is, however, not unidimensional. By discussing texts of writers like Fanon, Percival Everett and Ralph Ellison, Kral observes that the “precariousness of human visibility” is “entangled in a more complex power struggle which directly impacts on the individual to the point of posing a threat to his integrity as a human being” (22). In the words of Steiner and Veel, “When it comes to visibility, the process of seeing and being seen is not something that merely takes place between an observer and the observed. It is an exchange conditioned by a physical and social setting, one that creates certain possibilities for visibility and visibility, and excludes others” (xx). In the words of Mathilde Arrive, “For social invisibility is not an ontological condition or some essential attribute, but a constructed social situation and a dynamic process, underpinned by institutions and media, discourses and images, which can be revealed and reversed, but also disrupted, subverted, and rerouted through various strategies” (2). Aravind Adiga's *Amnesty* is a compelling narrative of a Sri Lankan immigrant in Australia whose arrival is legal but overstay becomes illegal. Hovering between these two extremes he desperately struggles to find the means to stay legally in Australia. Danny's travails, experiences and self-reflections are replete with his annoyance at being seen by others who are legal in Australia. This persistent anxiety and his efforts to overcome this by maintaining invisibility while simultaneously trying to gain legal visibility make his case a fertile ground to study what is critically known as the ‘invisibility bargain’ whereby multiple factors combine to generate a complex interplay of visibility and invisibility shaping the destiny of illegal immigrants like Danny. One of the key factors in the analysis of ‘invisibility

bargain' is voluntary invisibility which is otherwise known as 'strategic invisibility' in which the illegal immigrant devises various strategies to mitigate the temporary invisibility and gain legal rights. Danny in his own way also adopts multiple strategies to remain invisible and to be again legally visible.

INVISIBILITY IN AMNESTY

As already discussed, invisibility as related to diaspora is a complex network involving various factors. Arvind Adiga's *Amnesty* portrays how invisibility is part and parcel of immigrants like Danny. They are made invisible by the very truth of their unauthorized stay. Leo R. Chavez has discussed how enforced invisibility results in "shadowed lives" for such migrants. But the fear of being tracked compel such illegals to maintain and heighten their own invisibility, an issue that is theoretically termed as "strategic invisibility", which, in turn, is part of the "invisibility bargain" whereby constant negotiation and interplay take place between visibility and invisibility.

The volatility surrounding citizenship in Australia causes psychological vacillation in persons like Danny. In this novel, Cousin Kannan who illegally took help of the smugglers and was arrested by the Coast Guard of Canada finally achieved legal status. But Danny's "story" fails to satisfy the Australian government (56). Danny faces problem for the very fact that he has come to Australia legally and was admitted to Mackenzie College. He intended to claim refugee status to Australian Immigration Department but his prayer was instantly rejected. He was categorically told that his arrival in legal ways actually barred him from obtaining refugee status. Now he fears deportation which is akin to death for him. Danny therefore is persistently disturbed by the news of suicides of illegal immigrants in Australia.

Danny in Adiga's novel is always intent on maintaining invisibility. Danny is constantly disturbed by the idea of being seen by others. Once an Australian woman questions about Danny's nationality as he appears to be a "perfectionist" which she does not consider to be an Australian characteristic (3). Instantly Danny realizes that he has become "visible" by his conscientiousness (4). He feels that the Australian woman is bothered by his way of having his breakfast. While travelling by the train to St. Peters Station Danny once notices that he is being watched by an Asian man. He immediately mulls over his competitors in the field of cleaning. On another day Danny discovers that he is being watched by the child of a woman who is reading a newspaper. Danny feels that the child has identified his illegitimacy: "Little legal policeman. I am never going back home" (38). Danny is thus threatened even by the

innocent gaze of a little child. On his way to William Street, he hears a mother singing to her child, and he is disturbed by the baby's glance: "Danny wished the baby would look elsewhere" (126). Ever since he has been living as an illegal in Australia, he has grown increasingly alert to the gaze of others. During the first year as an illegal Danny feels that he is "caught" by a Tamil woman from Sri Lanka, whom Danny thinks to be a legal citizen (38). Later he is watched by a Bangladeshi and Danny instantly understands that the person is "extremely legal" from his way of watching Danny (48). Once, while cleaning the flat of Daryl the lawyer Danny suddenly comes across a policeman investigating the murder. Danny immediately feels distraught and is relieved when the policeman lets him go. "At least they have not come for me. At least I am safe for now", he says to himself (21). Sometimes he feels shaky and sometimes confident: "They can't even see you" (21). When the officers come straight towards him on the pavements, he petrifies in fear and thinks that they have "seen" him (33). His condition is similar to how Francisco J. Villegas puts it, "It is the threat of deportation and detention that affects migrants, the possibility of being caught in a raid, of being stopped by the police at a random stop, or for many racialized migrants, of experiencing racial profiling" (153). Danny suffers from similar anxieties and he is always nervous and desperately willing to increase his invisibility. Danny's intention is exactly what Villegas says about that of the undocumented migrants, "to alleviate suspicions regarding their immigration status" (159).

INVISIBILITY BARGAIN

Even though Danny is aware of his invisibility, his final ambition is to erase this status and claim himself as an insider. This simultaneous awareness of invisibility and dream of legal visibility are the two important factors in what Jeffrey D. Pugh has theoretically called the 'invisibility bargain'. In Pugh's formulation, the 'invisibility bargain' is an informal understanding "of a set of unwritten expectations" (32). In the invisibility bargain "the host community accepts, or at least tolerates without active persecution, the presence of migrants to the extent that they are perceived as contributing value to the host country and they remain socially and politically invisible" (1-2). The institutional dynamics of privileges as well as exploitation makes the 'invisibility bargain' all the knottier for Danny. For example, Mackenzie College, where he takes admission, charges arbitrarily from foreign students yet finally exposes them "to tar roads, install windows, and wok-fry noodles around Australia" (173). Danny is denied several rights during his stay in Australia but he also enjoys several

opportunities: “Though it denied him medical care, a driver’s license, and police protection, the Australian state offered Danny unlimited and unmonitored access to its public reading rooms and information centers” (19). Danny is even able to find his beloved Sonja through a dating site.

The three components of invisibility bargain discussed by Pugh are valued contribution, social invisibility and political invisibility. When migrants are considered to be making valued contribution, especially economic one, to the host society, they are less considered as economic threat. In such situations their presence is tolerated. In *Earned Citizenship*, Michael J. Sullivan discusses why “long-term un-authorized immigrants” should be granted citizenship “based on their contributions to citizens in their adopted communities” (1). In Adiga’s novel Danny wants to make valued contribution by revealing the secret of the murder of Radha Thomas to the police. From the moment Danny comes to know about Radha Thomas’ murder, he experiences quandary over his interference in the mystery. Danny frequently tries to call the police hotline but backs down without disclosing the truth. Ultimately, when he is able to blurt out the truth, he himself is eventually deported.

STRATEGIC INVISIBILITY

The second component of social invisibility in Pugh’s analysis denotes that the presence and practices of migrants “should be minimized or hidden in public” (35). Pugh notes that the culturally different migrant may avoid arousing fear on the part of the host society by “assimilating” the cultural traits of the host society and by “making invisible the markers of their previous (or true) cultural identity” (36-37). Herein lies the idea of strategic invisibility in which the illegal immigrant tries his best to maintain invisibility and exploit it as a tool. Karen Lollar categorically distinguishes between two types of invisibility. The first is the neglect “to see and acknowledge people outside of a familiar perspective or conscious awareness, rendering them invisible” (301). The second one is “strategic invisibility” which is a “deliberate response and resistance” (301). It is characterized by “conscious decision to be emotionally, verbally, and/or physically in the background, silent or, unseen” (305). Lollar also observes that these two types of invisibility “are not mutually exclusive because one might be invisible in one context and highly visible in another” (301). Lollar identifies strategic invisibility as “an act of agency, albeit small and with limited scope, but possibly the first step toward a stronger act of resistance” (313). Semhar Haile also points out two ideas of invisibility. The first one is “enforced by society and institutions” while the second one is “a

strategic choice to be invisible in the realms of refugee discourses and representations” (32). He discusses how “refugees may choose invisibility to renegotiate their label of refugeehood and to exercise agency” (33). Haile finds invisibility “as a form of resistance”, reflecting “a strategic decision to remain silent or invisible in circumstances that forcibly render individuals (and their voices) visible” (33).

In the study of Italian refugee problem, Raffaella Puggioni notes that the “strategy of invisibility” is what the “refugees adopt in order to conceal their identities and/or economic activities generally not accessible to them” (331). Gaim Kibreab mentions how the Eritrean refugees in Sudan “adopted a strategy of invisibility in pursuit of economic activities which were not otherwise accessible to them as refugees” (398). Kibreab reads invisibility as a strategic “act of defiance and resistance rather than being a manifestation of submissive behavior or a lost identity” (394). In discussing economic invisibility Kral refers to the “illegal migrants” who “do not wish to be seen and who would rather run the risk of being employed illegally... than be sent home” (25). The lives of economic migrants are “undocumented and lived without any form of official existence are characterized by legal precariousness” (25). According to Kral, political invisibility combined with social invisibility “is part and parcel of the fate of migrants” (28). This is most prominent in the case of illegal migrants who use “invisibility (to the authorities) as a short-term strategy” (28). Kral’s objective is to explore “the process of ‘invisibilization’ of the other” (51). However, he also mentions the issue of voluntary invisibility where the “migrant chooses to be invisible for his/her own convenience...” (53). He, however, notes that such “deliberate invisibility” often “triggers a long-term unwanted invisibility as the migrant finds himself/herself caught in a vicious circle of marginalized second-class citizenship, doomed to exist on the outskirts of society, without a right to health care or any form of social welfare” (53). Danny later realizes that he has been involved “in a game” involving both visibility and invisibility (182). Danny once posts his enquiry regarding immigration on the internet but the responses there intimidate him with the possibility of increasing his visibility and he agonizingly realizes that he is “a man without rights in the world” (41).

Danny has the habit of taking notes on the methods of remaining invisible. He also broods over the various possible explanations to defend himself. Danny carries on imaginary conversations with the authorities of immigration and others and always wishes to explain his predicament reliably. Danny believes that the Australians are “optimistic and methodical

people” who are “governed by law” (11). Therefore, he also tries to be logical and abide by law but this method ultimately causes his visibility. He adopts various strategies to heighten invisibility.

By making his hair gold-highlighted he feels that people will not be able to consider him as an outsider in Australia. He comes to believe that other South-Asian migrants will look at him “with envy” (49). He realizes that it is easier for him to remain invisible to white people but extremely difficult to avoid brown persons. Danny tries to surpass that difficulty by maintaining his golden hair, his demeanor and by his look of “insolent indifference” (49).

Initially Danny feels that he is able to understand the techniques of obtaining permanent residentship in Australia and even wishes to offer advice to other Indian students whom he finds in George Street. His confidence is boosted by his awareness that he, in spite of being an illegal immigrant, knows the secret of the affair of Radha and Prakash. So many times, he wishes to tell the police about the murder by Dr. Prakash but he knows that he has to confess the truth about his own delinquency.

Danny in his own way jots down the criteria in “Us and Them” equation, the extrinsic traits typical of the Australians (17). Sometimes he feels confident that he has been able to remain invisible for years as he has successfully developed “the tongue of an Australian” (36). Later he realizes that he also needs the “bowels of an Australian” to remain invisible (37). From his interactions with various immigrants in Australia Danny tries to configure his own methods of looking like an “Australian-born” (49). Pugh observes that the illegal migrants may alternatively continue to display their difference and boldly confront the risk of visibility. Danny is aware of the hierarchies of migrants, expressed in the various modes of celebrating their lives. While he witnesses that an African gets himself tattooed, Danny tries to increase invisibility by letting his hair grow. Once he encounters a masculine man who prays in public. Danny interprets his formidable presence as a blatant declaration of his presence in Australia. Danny, on the other hand, is not able to buy a new phone though the company repeatedly informs him about their upgradation from 2G to 3G as he is afraid of the demand of tax file number and passport and of becoming visible. In the platform of the central station the crowd of diverse races boosts Danny’s confidence that the mass “would envelop and conceal” him (45).

According to Pugh, selective invisibility is adopted by migrants by “reducing contacts with elements of the host society (such as police, or in some cases members of the dominant

group) that might be likely to enforce social sanctions, or remaining hidden in informal spaces” which do not demand any disclosure of their questionable identities (37). The third component of political invisibility signifies the migrants’ dissociation from the politics of the host society. However, by making ‘valued contribution’ the migrants may earn “greater legitimacy as political participants” (45). In Pugh’s observation, the paradox of greater demands leading to greater visibility makes the migrants confront a choice. They can either “embrace invisibility and live in the shadows; minimizing interactions with law enforcement and other agents of the state and even informal social relationships in order to reduce the risk of backlash and potential harm or deportation” or “build coalitions with a diverse set of nonstate actors and other allies who can act as brokers, articulating the interests and grievances expressed by migrants to state decision-makers...” or “make visible demands on the state” (2). Very often, argues Pugh, the migrants “satisfies the interests of some constituencies within the host population—most likely, businesses that benefit from low-cost labour...” (31). Danny’s struggle in this novel is paralleled by the struggle of Abe as another illegal immigrant. He works illegally in the countryside and changes his jobs frequently. Danny once accompanies Abe to work as a cherry-picker. There he comes to know about an understanding between the farmer and the workers as per “a prearranged code” to avoid the raids of immigration officers (223). The exploitation, however, is obvious here as the corrupt immigration officers raid only on the days of the payment of the workers. Abe, however, fails to maintain his invisibility and he is finally arrested and deported.

According to Pugh, one of the responses that migrants may develop is to use “informal networks and nonstate actors in the host society who ally with them to broker access to protection rather than risk violating the invisibility bargain by directly demanding rights from the government themselves” (46). Engbersen and Broeders discuss the evolving strategies of illegal migrants in terms of three major shifts—first, a change of job from formal to informal sectors, second, resort to criminal behaviour, and the third, a transformation “from being identifiable to being unidentifiable” (867). Danny’s changing jobs and his attempts to remain invisible while trying his best to gain citizenship are perfect examples of these. Bommes and Sciortonio proposes the idea of “foggy social structures” pervading the lives of illegal immigrants reflecting “the emergence of a mosaic of irregular populations who are able to adapt to local conditions by devising specific survival strategies and relying on informal structures” (222). The “social fog” is generated by irregular migrants in their attempts to “evade control and identification by hiding from the state in their modes of working and

living” (222). There is a constant interplay between visibility and invisibility, the dynamics of which is captured by the metaphor of ‘fog’. In Adiga’s novel, there is a secret agreement among fellow illegals to ensure their own safety. Therefore, they do not possess much information regarding one another. That people like Danny cannot nurture healthy and meaningful relationship with fellow illegals as well as with Australians validates this argument. The field studies of Boon-Kuo reveal that many illegal migrants “kept away from communities with whom they shared ethnic or spiritual bonds because of their deep fear that social intimacy would result in them being reported to immigration” (6). In spite of this, observes Boon-Kuo, there are cases of frequent betrayal. In this novel, Lin, the Chinese immigrant from Malaysia, has been cheated by a European upon whom Lin once took pity and helped. Lin, however, has eventually been helped by a university girl. Danny trusts Radha Thomas but later he discovers that she has disclosed all information regarding Danny to her lover Prakash who starts exploiting Danny. The networks of persons like Tommo allow Danny to get jobs like cactus tending at a low pay. There again Danny discovers that the owner Sam, who is now legally residing in Australia is actually from Zimbabwe and was denied green card in America.

The networks of informal workers in Adiga’s novel are thus also means of exploitation. Tommo extracts one third of Danny’s income as a cleaner as a “middleman’s commission” (70). When Danny informs Tommy about the realization of his being seen by the Tamil woman, Tommy threatens to oust him: “He knew Tommo would betray him in a second” (39). When Danny comes to know about the murder of Radha Thomas, he first makes a call to Tommo (Mr. Tsavdaridis, the owner of the Sunburst Grocery Store) but the latter instantly disconnects the call without properly listening to him. The informal networks or “foggy structures” that illegals like Danny develop in Adiga’s novel are thus not convincingly stable and assuring.

CONCLUSION:

Danny’s prolonged predicament during his stay in Australia with all its legal and illegal episodes and the interplay of visibility and strategic amplification of invisibility is thus a perfect narrative illustration of ‘invisibility bargain’, albeit a failed one. Pugh formulated the concept of the ‘invisibility bargain’ to study the areas of “host-migrant human security provision and peacebuilding” in six Ecuadorian provinces but the avenues of the ‘invisibility bargain’ that Danny seeks to exploit in Adiga’s novel are fraught with inherent limitations

(50). Similarly, the studies of ‘strategic invisibility’ have mostly interpreted it as act of resistance. But the strategies that Danny adopts are tricky eschewal rather than overtly assertive of his identity and aspiration. Danny ultimately fails in his bargain but his story does not fail to show that the ways to succeed in this bargain are absolutely arbitrary and uncertain.

REFERENCES

1. Adiga, Aravind. *Amnesty*. Picador India, 2020.
2. Arrive, Mathilde. “Visibilizing Invisibility. An Introduction”. *InMedia, The French Journal of Media Studies*, vol.8, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-11.
3. Bommes, Michael, and Giuseppe Sciortiono, editors. *Foggy Social Structures: Irregular Migration, European Labour Markets and the Welfare State*. Routledge, 2011.
4. Boon-Kuo, Louise. *Policing Undocumented Migrants: Law, Violence and Responsibility*. Routledge, 2018.
5. Chavez, Leo R. *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society, Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1992.
6. Engbersen, Godfried and Dennis Broeders. “The State versus the Alien: Immigration Control and Strategies of Irregular Immigrants”. *West European Politics*, vol. 32, no. 5, September 2009, pp. 867-885.
7. Haile, Semhar. “Voices to be heard? Reflections on refugees, strategic invisibility and the politics of voice”. *Refugee in a Moving World: Tracing refugee and migrant journeys across disciplines*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, UCL Press, 2020, pp. 32-40.
8. Kibreab, Gaim. “Revisiting the Debate on People, Place, Identity and Displacement”. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1999, pp. 384-410.
9. Kral, Francoise. *Social Invisibility and Diasporas in Anglophone Literature and Culture: The Fractal Gaze*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
10. Lollar, Karen. “Strategic Invisibility: Resisting the Inhospitable Dwelling Place”. *Review of Communication*, vol. 15, no.4, October 2015, pp. 298-315.
11. Pietsch, Juliet. *Temporary Migrants from Southeast Asia in Australia: Lost Opportunities*. CUP, 2022.
12. Puggioni, Raffaella. “Refugees, Institutional Invisibility, and Self-Help Strategies: Evaluating Kurdish Experience in Rome”. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2005, pp. 319-339.
13. Pugh, Jeffrey D. *The Invisibility Bargain: Governance, Networks and Migrant Human Security*, OUP, 2021.
14. Sarwal, Amit. *South Asian Diaspora: Roots and Routes*. Springer, 2017.
15. Steiner, Henriette and Kristin Veel, editors. *Invisibility Studies: Surveillance, Transparency and the Hidden in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
16. Sullivan, Michael J. *Earned Citizenship*. OUP, 2019.

18. Villegas, Francisco J. "Strategic In/Visibility and Undocumented Migrants". *Counterpoints*, vol. 368, 2010, pp. 147-170.
19. Zappala, Gianni and Stephen Castles. "Citizenship and Immigration in Australia". *From Migrants to Citizens: Membership in a Changing World*, edited by T. Alexander Aleinikoff & Douglas Klusmeyer, Carnegie Endowment, 2000, pp. 32-81.