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Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*: Study in Globalized Culture

Abstract

*Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga is a novel on the cultural situation of India in the globalized context. The novel presents a conflict between an old man with traditional principles and a Mumbai builder with hawk-like avarice. The temporal setting is the dawn of the twenty first century, that has considerably changed the culture of the nation. The spatial setting is Mumbai, a city with very little space for horizontal development and a lot of opportunities for those who can manipulate the law-enforcing agencies. The social setting of the novel is mostly the middle and upper-middle class people with their own unrealized dreams and ambitions. The plot of the novel is unearthed by an omniscient narrator. The protagonist of the novel, Yogesh Murthy alias Masterji, picked up the gauntlet against an antagonist with gradually increasing force and violence. Dharmen Shah, the antagonist, enticed and almost bought all the inhabitants of the Tower A of the Vishram Society of Vakola in Mumbai with the sole intention of converting a structure under decline into a state-of-the-art apartment. The division of the inhabitants of the Vishram Society resembles the partition of India. The strategies adopted by Dharmen Shah sound an imitation of 'divide and rule policy' of the British government. The single-handed battle for values launched by

Masterji reminds us of the non-violent struggle for independence. Besides, the story in the novel presents a society trapped by the forces of globalization, where age-old values of fraternity and fellow-feeling are devastated by temptations of wealth and power. Dharmen Shah can be considered as the successor to the protagonist of Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger*. The two novels of Adiga portray an India where ends are realized by employing foul means, values are surrendered in favour of self-advancing action and power is achieved by abusing both the powerless and the powerful. Adiga, thus, comprehensively brings out the awful socio-cultural shift and the degradation of human values in the Indian society in another of his fictional work.

Key Words: Globalization, Collective Antagonist, Social and Cultural Values

#### Introduction

Aravind Adiga is one of the well-known Indian writers in English in the twenty first century. He is known for his debut fictional work *The White Tiger*, with the Booker Prize going its way in the year 2008. *Last Man in Tower*, which was published in the year 2011, happens to be the second novel of Adiga. This novel presents the pathetic struggle between an old man with staunch principles against the collective antagonist enforced by cut-throat materialism. Adiga has also written a collection stories titled *Between the Assassinations* (2008). His forte is the depiction of the globalizing India with its fast-changing social and cultural values. The creations of Adiga do justice to all the fictional elements and certainly contribute to the process of further development of Indian fiction in English.

#### *Last Man in Tower*: Initiation

*Last Man in Tower* presents a story set in the metro-city, Mumbai. The book is divided into ten chapters and the title is quite suitable, as it shows a tragic conflict between a pensioner and a set of people antagonized by a business tycoon of Mumbai. Yogesh Murthy is the protagonist of the novel. He is shown as a retired teacher living on the third floor of Tower A of the Vishram Society in Vakola falling in East Santa Cruz of Mumbai. Murthy was known as Masterji to all the inhabitants of Tower A of the Vishram Society. The omniscient narrator of the novel relates that Masterji recently lost his wife; he had also lost his only daughter in an accident. The other fact about Masterji is that his only son used to live elsewhere with his wife and a son, since there was no love lost between the old father and the young son. The death of his connubial partner had made him overwhelmingly helpless, as his wife, Purnima, used to take all the decisions on his behalf. It's a fact that as a teacher Masterji had done a splendid job. He was known for his values at the school. Despite his successful career as a teacher, Masterji had to depend upon his wife for the day-to-day transactions. It was Purnima who would take all the vital decisions regarding the family and the future of the next generation. Yogesh Murthy i.e. Masterji was a teacher to his back-bone. He staunchly believed in his vocation and he was a man of character too. However, we are told by the novelist that in spite of a commendable job as a teacher, Masterji was not able to do justice to his own family members. His behaviour with his wife and children was too atrocious to pass him for a loveable parent. Nevertheless, when the plot of the novel opens, we come to know that Masterji found himself sadly all alone, in the permanent absence of Purnima and his daughter, Sandhya and the separation from his son viz. Gaurav; daughter-in-law, Sonal & grandson, Ronak. The life in the absence of his near and dear ones was made livable by Masterji by virtue of conducting free-of-charge coaching of the children from the apartment and becoming almost an adopted member of the Pintos, an old couple living down-floor.

The Tower A of the Vishram Society was completed in the year 1959. The plot of the novel begins four decades after the establishment of this building, which means in the year 1999-2000. After the four decades, the Tower A of the Vishram Society had started to show the signs of decay and decline. In spite of the efforts undertaken by the Society and its members, there were hardly any signs of improvement or rejuvenation. There was another building of the Vishram Society called Tower B, which was in good condition, since it came up later. A tangible difference between Tower A and Tower B was that the former was inhabited mostly by old and orthodox people, whereas the latter was possessed mostly by young and liberal people. Like any traditional fictional plot, this novel too has an antagonist, he is Dharmen Shah, a builder and developer. He was an incarnation of unrestrained ambition. Having come down to Mumbai from a financially backward family, Dharmen Shah held money more precious than God. Adiga is stickler for symbols, the initial part of the novel gives rise to several symbols, one key symbol that illuminates the mindset of Dharmen Shah is 'hawk flying in the sky'. Shah is a veritable hawk looking for its prey day in and day out. An unattended piece of land or a structure on the verge of extinction was always at Shah's target. Though it was quite difficult to grab a piece of land in a city which got erected on the reclaimed land, builders like Dharmen Shah would be waiting for the right opportunity to *reconstruct* the old & sterile buildings into *modern* & fertile structures.

#### Complication and Cultural Degradation:

There are multiple developments which bring about the complication in the plot of this novel, one of them is Dharmen Shah getting the hint of the inherent restlessness among the inhabitants of Tower A of the Vishram Society and his initiation of a mission consisting in tempting the inhabitants into selling their flats at gorgeous prices. It all began when there got spread the news of a poor man living in the slums of Vakola having got lakhs of rupees

for his small dwelling place. The news spread faster than conflagration and some of the inhabitants of the Vishram Society who had larger-than-life-allowed-them dreams started to entertain the bait offered by the builder and became ready to compromise the fraternal relations wrought during a period of four decades in the apartment. The very enticing and controversial proposal introduced by Dharmen Shah through his right hand, Shanmugham, into the life of the flat-owners of Vishram Society divided its people into two bickering groups. The Tower A of the Vishram Society had Ashvin Kothari as its secretary. Kothari, although he looked after the Society and somehow contributed to the maintenance with the flat owner members, in the heart of his hearts always entertained his childhood ambition of rolling in money and riches. Adiga has employed the symbol of a stray dog entering into Tower A in the beginning of the novel. The intruding dog stands for the future calamity that this building was going to witness and the helplessness of those who were going to oppose the onslaught. Kothari was supported by Ramesh Ajwani, the real-estate broker and Mrs Sangeeta Puri, the mother of Ramesh, her son who suffered from Down's syndrome. However, Masterji didn't like the plan of selling the flats, as he couldn't put up with the very thought of getting separated from the house where he found the reviving memories of his dead wife and daughter, and separated son. Masterji was, at least initially, supported by his best friends in the building Mr and Mrs Pinto. However, the old couple was brought under pressure by those who were in favour of selling the apartment to Dharmen Shah. Nevertheless, one man stood against this debacle and it was Masterji. Masterji, who had been living in the apartment for forty years, couldn't convince himself into entertaining the idea of selling his flat. He couldn't imagine life without the memories of his near and dear ones. And obviously if any place in the whole world accommodated these memories fondly, it was the flat in Tower A of the Vishram Society. The complication is made further intense as Masterji

almost vowed that he wouldn't allow the Tower A to be gulped down by the land shark called Dharmen Shah.

Shanmugham was a henchman for Dharmen Shah. We see a simultaneous entry of the stray dog and Shanmugham into the Tower A of the Vishram Society. Calamity is introduced in the otherwise peaceful life of the inhabitants of this 40 year-old building; which was more than merely a building. It was a network of human relations and fraternal ties. Mr Kothari, Mrs Puri and Mr Ajwani were the first to fall victims to the temptation shown by Dharmen Shah. Gradually, the rest of the flat owners surrendered themselves to the bludgeoning approaches of the builder. Georgiana Rego, Ibrahim Kudwa and surprisingly Albert Pinto and his wife willy-nilly followed suit. The only man who stood his ground against the domineering strategies of Dharmen Shah was Yogesh Murthy alias Masterji. Masterji found himself to be lonely in his fight for the maintenance of the traditional values and against the globalized inhuman business practices. What was initially a conflict between a builder and an old building soon became a conflict between one flat owner versus rest of the flat owners. In other words, the novel begins to reach its climax with a heart-rending tussle between the flat owners in favour of Dharmen Shah and peace-loving opponent of this so-called reconstruction viz. Masterji. It was via Shanmugham that Dharmen Shah actualized his plans of enticing and threatening one inhabitant of Vishram Society after another. The crafty builder employed all means, fair & foul to get the flat owners at his feet. The only exception was Masterji, who began his mission 'save Tower A', by means of seeking legal intervention and police force. However, his lawful attempts at getting Dharmen Shah's ambition destroyed were baffled by his hostile fellow inhabitants and divisive tactics of the builder. Adiga poignantly depicts the materialistic inclinations, disintegrating families, disappearing human relations, loss of the sanctity of means aimed at parochial ends, collective acceptance of violence and heartless business strategies witnessed in the city of Mumbai under a huge

impact of globalized culture. It is a fact that each flat owner of this apartment had a dream to realize and all such ignited members of this building were dead set to get rid of every hurdle that would threaten their goals. This quest for further comfort and luxury along with individual desires made these people abuse Masterji and make attempts at his life. In order to defeat Masterji the collective antagonists press his son Gaurav, the legal practitioner, the editor of a newspaper and to make the matters worse the memories of his dead wife and daughter against the old man. As this novel happens to be a tragedy, it shows a heart-rending death of the protagonist.

### Conclusion

The division of the inhabitants of the Vishram Society resembles the partition of India. The strategies adopted by Dharmen Shah sound an imitation of ‘divide and rule policy’ of the British government. The single-handed battle for values launched by Masterji reminds us of the non-violent struggle for independence. Besides, the story in the novel presents a society trapped by the forces of globalization, where age-old values of fraternity and fellow-feeling are devastated by temptations of wealth and power. Dharmen Shah can be considered as the successor to the protagonist of Adiga’s debut novel *The White Tiger*. *The White Tiger* depicts a hero who rises from rags to reaches by using cultural norms of a globalized nation, where ends are realized by employing foul means, values are surrendered in favour of self-advancing action and power is achieved by abusing both the powerless and the powerful. Masterji is a tragic hero and his rebellion against the forces enjoying power brings his catastrophe. Adiga, thus, comprehensively brings out the awful socio-cultural shift and the degradation of human values in the Indian society in another of his fictional work.

### Works Cited

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