



RESISTANCE TO CONTEMPORARY REALITIES IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *LAST MAN IN TOWER*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper endeavours to show that literature has been a mirror which reflects various issues of the society. It analyses how a common man resists the realities of contemporary changes in the society in particular and changes of world at large. It's main focus is on the issues related to human society, the interaction and reaction of an individual or of a group for the welfare of human beings in a society. Aravind Adiga's novels depict the pathetic condition of underdog and what compels a common man to commit murder, to rob people and to force the people to go on off beam path. He has explored the authenticity of the life and presented the intimate views of the social life of common masses. The characters of Aravind Adiga are too much real, his characters and situations are also real rather than supernatural. In *Last Man in Tower* Adiga explores Mumbai as a commercial and financial hub which has emerged as place of assorted opportunities. To have a pucca house in Mumbai is a distant dream of middle class because of the corrupt politicians and their intimate relations with the developers. The novel revolves around two antithetical forces: the retired school teacher who signifies a postcolonial resistance and the greedy developer who stands for neo-colonial paradigm. The dignified old man is made to confront certain conflict with an impatient and impetuous younger generation that has successfully acclimatized itself to face the opportunities, challenges and threats of an emerging new world.*

Keywords: Postmodernism, New India, Resistance, Hegemony, Complexities.

Since the 1980s, the Indian novel in English has become highly experimental both in form and themes. Many writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry and Aravind Adiga employed radical narrative innovations in their writings. They not only subverted the dominant conventions of writing but also explicitly represented the anguish of man through their experimental strategies. Aravind Adiga's writings stand as good examples of experimentation in form and theme. Adiga was born in Madras in 1974. A former Indian correspondent for Time magazine, his articles have also appeared in publications including the Financial Times, Independent and the Sunday times. He is the author of three critically acclaimed works of fiction: The Man Booker Prize-winning Novel *The White Tiger* (2008), the short-story collection *Between the Assassinations* (2009) and the novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011).

Aravind Adiga is a keen observer of life around him, its social evils, corruption and growing difference between the rich and poor. The three novels are the glimpse of contemporary India. His views on the growing gap between the rich and poor and the failure of the police in tracking the criminals are clearly shown in his novels. His novels also deal with other serious topics like corruption, poverty, terrorism, political turmoil caste and class discrimination etc. Adiga presents a critique of the individual vices such as deceit, hypocrisy, avarice and false pride in one's social status based on caste, religion and wealth and rotten religious, social and political systems which are working together for disintegration of human



values and society as a whole. Adiga seems to implicitly suggest us to get rid of the individual vices, social evils and rotten systems through revolutionary social, economic, bureaucratic and political reforms. The issues raised by Adiga hold perpetual relevance for Indian society.

In his writings, Adiga implodes the boundaries between high and low art, fiction and fact, fantasy and reality. He adopts black comedy and satire in picturing the realities of contemporary India. He often uses self-reflexive and ironic techniques to emphasize the complexities of the present age. The postmodern writing is an open form assembled from different genres and styles. It has become a popular mode to represent the intricacies of the real world. An important concern of Adiga is the establishment of self against authority and power. According to Morley, postmodernism is:

a rejection of the sovereign autonomous individual with an emphasis upon anarchic collective, anonymous experience. Collage, diversity, the mystically unrepresentable, Dionysian passion are the foci of attention. Most importantly we see the dissolution of distinctions, the merging of subject and object, self and other. This is a sarcastic playful parody of western modernity and the "John Wayne" individual and a radical, anarchist rejection of all attempts to define, reify or re-present the human subject. (qtd. in Keep)

In a similar way, Adiga in his novel *Last Man in Tower* creates a character that stands in rebellion to the imposed perspectives of the society. This establishing of an independent self involves the interrogation and destruction of the very notion of authority and hegemonic control. Adiga clearly portrays the sixty-one year old science teacher's resistance to the lucrative business in the city. It consists of identification and demolition of old buildings. The business tycoons purchase the apartments by influencing the residents with money power or muscle power. Majority of the inmates silently accept the proposals without any revolt. In this story Adiga makes an attempt to bring the silenced individual to the centre. The individual's voice is in conflict with that of the dominant.

The present paper is an attempt to show that literature acts as a mirror to reflect the various issues of the society. It analyses how a common man resists the realities of contemporary changes in the society in particular and changes of world at large. The issues are related to human society, the interaction and reaction of an individual or of a group for the welfare of human beings in a society.

The story of *Last Man in Tower* is set against the backdrop of Mumbai, a bustling financial capital city of India. The novel reveals the perplexing tension between traditional values and modern living, between ideas of development and disorder. Adiga explores the loopholes in administration, disastrous vices, evil of corruption and bribery similar to his first novel. The narrative is built on the themes of power and resistance behind the lopsided development. It is a story about the residents of Vishram society, an old apartment building. Vishram is the only registered co-operative society at Vakola near Santa Cruz airport in Mumbai. It was built in late 1950's as experimentation in gentrification.



The novel begins with the description of Vishram Society Tower-A's building plan and its residents. It provides a brief overview of the society as "unimpeachably pucca," however, the "rainwater-stained, fungus-licked grey" face of the tower caused by "more than four decades of monsoons, erosion, wind-weathering, air pollution, and the gentle but continual vibration caused by low-flying planes" indicates a state of complete collapse in the next monsoon (*Last Man in Tower* 9). The first and second sections "How the Offer was Made" and "Mr. Shah Explains His Proposal" introduce the main characters Yogesh Murthy and Dharmen Shah and all other minor characters of the story. Dharmen Shah, a property developer makes a generous offer to the inmates of Vishram Society for redevelopment. The next three sections explain the resistance of a few families to vacate the building and how Shah with his left hand man Shanmugham offers bribe to those who oppose. Eventually except Murthy known as Masterji, all the other people accept the proposal. The sixth section "Fear" depicts how Masterji was threatened and boycotted by the people of the Society for not accepting the deal. The remaining sections of the novel depict the efforts of Masterji to fight against the real estate developer. In his struggle Masterji is rejected by his son and neighbours and is mercilessly killed in the end by those in pursuit of wealth.

After completion of the present high-rise apartments like Fountainhead and Excelsior, Shah wants to take up his dream project Confidence Shanghai in Vakola. This place is considered as the golden line of the city: a line that makes the people rich. Shah says:

Why is this line golden? Air travel is booming. More planes, more visitors....the financial centre at Bandra-Kurla is expanding by the hour. Then the government is starting redevelopment in Dharavi. Asia's biggest slum will become Asia's richest slum. This area is boiling with money. People arrive daily and have nowhere to live. Except...here. Vakola. (54-55)

Vishram Society apartment buildings become the target for fulfilling Shah's dreams. Shah finds no problem in making the residents of Tower B, filled with young executives and IT professionals, accept his proposal. However, a few of the residents in Tower A become the troubling party, by refusing to agree for the redevelopment. Initially Ibrahim Kudwa, Mrs. Rego and the Pintos family, in addition to Masterji resist the offer. But slowly one by one fall under the spell of Shah. Masterji remains to be the last man in the tower. Prasannarajan comments:

With a rare deftness that avoids sentimental forays into psychology, Adiga turns Vishram into a tower of beastly passions, and the walls of decency break down in the ferocity of promised freedom. There is only one man, abandoned and defenceless, clinging to his memories and his idea of social morality, to absorb the extraordinary brutality of very ordinary people. *Last Man in Tower* is more than a suburban morality tale with a big social message written by an angry novelist.



In Mumbai city, everyone has desires; everyone wishes the dreams to come true. But the only man who wants nothing and who refuses to compromise is Masterji. He wants to spend “the cigarette stub of years left to a man already in his sixties” (30) by teaching bi-weekly science ‘top up’ classes to the children of the society; by playing with rubik’s cube; by reading *The Soul’s Passageway after Death* or by lending Agatha Christies’ murder mysteries to his neighbours. He refuses to leave the building as it carries the memories of his late wife and daughter in it. For Shah, Masterji’s resistance becomes a big block. Masterji’s behaviour is strange in a society where everyone craves for money and eventually his refusal leads to a catastrophe. The property developer shows his contempt:

In my experience, some older people oppose a redevelopment project because they are frightened of any kind of change. Some just want more money. And then there is one kind of person, the most dangerous, who says no because he is full of negative will power: because he does not enjoy life and does not want others to enjoy life. (114)

With his uncompromising behaviour Masterji ruins the hopes of his neighbours for better homes and happy life. He becomes a nightmare to Shah. However, from Masterji’s point of view the pain and distress, bereavement and misery caused is inexplicable. His daughter’s untimely death and his wife Purnima’s recent demise have thrown him into a miserable condition. He lives with the memories of his earlier happy days in that old apartment building. An old calendar against the kitchen wall, a portrait of his wife’s favourite deity, the Lord Balaji and her wedding sari recall the happy moments of his past.

He closed his eyes and brought his hands near the gold border of the sari. He breathed in the camphor-tinted air from the shelf. He thought of the time he had not defended her from her brothers in Suratkal. The old calendar began to hit the wall faster, *tap-tap-tap*, and now he was sure that Purnima was speaking to him. *Tap-tap-tap*. She did not want to know the past. (77)

Masterji is attached to the fond memories of his daughter Sandhya. She bled to death as she accidentally falls from the train on her way to college. His daughter was still alive in his life through her drawing book and rocking-horse. He feels a void with the absence of his wife and daughter. Unlike his co-habitants who dream of luxurious homes and cars, Masterji finds his joy in the nostalgic moments around the apartment.

...his joys were those of the expanding square footage of his inner life. The more he looked at his daughter’s sketches, the more certain places within Vishram—the stairwell where she ran up, the garden that she walked around, the gate that she liked to swing on—became more beautiful and intimate. Sounds were richer. A scraping of feet somewhere in the building reminded him of his daughter wiping her tennis shoes on the coir mat before coming in. Sometimes he felt as if Sandhya and Purnima were watching the rain with him... (150-51).



If these reminiscences bring him life afresh, his only son Gaurav's unsentimental connection creates a physical estrangement. The old man knows well that his son is more concerned for his property and his mother's jewellery than fulfilling his father's emotional needs. The only person in the family who enhances his simple pleasures and with whom Masterji finds enjoyment is his grandson Ronak. He takes his grandson to Byculla zoo where both roam among the cages of lioness, black bears, alligator, elephants, hippos, cobras and pythons. Answering the questions of the boy and feeding him peanuts, Masterji thinks, "*I must tell this boy all that we have been through. His grandmother and I. Life in Bombay in the olden days. War in 1965 with Pakistan. War in 1971. The day they killed Indira Gandhi...*" (43). But his happiness is short lived as his daughter-in-law returns the book *The Illustrated History of Science*, given as a gift to his grandson. She says that the boy does not like reading. Disappointed not with her answer but for the return of the gift, Masterji grieves over the narrow mentality of his daughter-in-law in accommodating the gift in their flat.

The pain caused by his own family on one side; and the betrayal of the Pintos, who were so close as to imagine themselves as "Vakola Triumvirate," on the other side throw Masterji into a state of despair. The torments and sufferings of Masterji are not noticed. Masterji's close friends, son and old students consider him as an adamant revolutionary. Finally, he stands alone and rebels against the property redevelopment business of Mumbai city.

Last Man in Tower displays the complexities of city life with subtle descriptions of super luxury apartments, traffic roads, trains, restaurants, stalls of Linking Road, temples and subways. Adiga exposes the realities of a changing city. He brings to light the repercussions of countless millions of people being stuffed into the commuter trains every day. According to a review, Adiga "reflects the daily humiliations of living in Mumbai. Whether it is through the fight for water or the battle to board the commuter trains, Mr Adiga captures with heartbreaking authenticity the real struggle in Indian cities" (*The Economist*). The atrocities and brutal realities of the redevelopment field in the mighty city are ruthlessly unveiled in the novel. Adiga explores the violent and cruel methods adopted by of the developers to grab the land. To convince the land owners they approach with sweets and smiles. But "behind the smiles were lies and knives" (168). From her sister Catherine, Mrs. Rego heard about the big changes in Bandra. She came to know that,

One by one, the old mansions on Waterfield Road were melted down like ingots—even her own uncle Coelho's. It was always the same builder, Karim Ali, who broke down the houses. When he wanted to snatch Uncle Coelho's house on Waterfield Road to put up his apartment block for Bollywood stars, he too had come with sweets and smiles—it was all 'Uncle and Aunty' at first. Later on, the threatening graffiti on the walls and late-night phone calls, and finally the day when four teenagers burst in when Uncle Coelho was having dinner, put a cheque on one side of the table, a knife on the other, and said: 'Either the knife or the cheque. Decide before dinner is over.' (168)



This is the everyday reality of the property business in Mumbai city where land price is more than gold price. *Last Man in Tower* focuses on the grim realities of the restless city. It is a trenchant critique on the idea of progress that fuels the rise of materialism and greed. Vexed with the city, Mr. Puri says, “Let’s go to a civilized place like Pune. Some place where ten thousand beggars don’t come every morning by train. I’m sick of this city, I’m sick of its rat race” (157).

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