

Dynamics of Corruption and Power in Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower

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Abstract

Post-colonial India witnessed globalization and urbanization in full bloom, but, like all other aspects there were problems associated with this too. Globalizations and urbanization were directly in hands of businessmen. And often business and corruption go hand in hand. Therefore, the themes of corruption and power lie at the heart of contemporary Indian English literature, reflecting how globalization and urbanization gave birth to socio-economic challenges for common people. Aravind Adiga is a well-known novelist of the 21st century. And the Last Man in Tower is Adiga's 3rd standalone novel, published in the year 2011. The story unfolds in Mumbai and gives a vibrant picture of how corruption and power mould lives of individuals and communities. The story revolves around the residents of Vishram Cooperative Housing Society. The residents were living in harmony, they were close-knit just like a family, until the entry of Dharmen Shah, an ambitious real estate developer. Shah intends to buy tower A of the society and redevelop it into a high rise, luxury building named Shanghai. He offers a whopping amount of \$330,000 to each household. All the residents agreed because this was a huge amount of money, which many of them feared that they won't be able to see in their lifetime. But, Masterji a retired school teacher refuses to accept this offer because to him that

house holds the memories of his late wife and daughter. His refusal to the offer and constant resistance gives birth to a chain of conflicts. This paper explores the three levels of corruption in the novel: economic, social, and moral and throws light on complex power distribution system among the builder, the residents, and the protagonist - Masterji. This paper also includes an in-depth analysis of symbols and themes. It also demonstrates how power is exercised both institutionally and socially. Ultimately, we see how greed degrades morality and how corrupted power forces powerless people to follow blindly whatever is imposed on them.

I. INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga is an Indian-Australian author and journalist. He was born on 23rd October in the year 1974. He was born in the city of Madras (which is now Chennai), the capital of Tamil Nadu, India. His father K. Madhava Adiga was a banker and his mother Usha Adiga was a home-maker. The formative years of Adiga's life were spent in Mangalore. He began his schooling at the Canara High School. Later he studied at the St. Aloysius College where he completed his pre university studies, securing an all-India rank of one in the state. For further education he moved to Sydney with his family, where he got admission into the James Ruse Agricultural High School. After completing his degree in Sydney, Adiga moved to New York where he started studying English literature at the Columbia College, under the Columbia University and for his second degree in literature he took to Magdalen College under the Oxford University.

After completing his studies, Adiga began his career as a financial journalist at the Finance Times. Later he turned to fiction. His first novel – *The White Tiger* was published in the year 2008. Though the ideas and themes of the novel were very simple yet it won the Man Booker Prize in the same year, 2008. This brought him global recognition and fame. Adiga became the fourth India-born author to win the man booker prize after Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai.

Last Man in Tower is Adiga's third standalone novel. While *The White Tiger* is based on the story of a rural migrant, Balam Halwai, showing how he makes his way through the corrupt and exploitative social, political and economic structure in the high-end city of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) on the other hand *Last Man in Tower* is the story of middle-class lives in Mumbai.

The story unfolds in Mumbai's Vishram Housing Society and revolves around the tower A, an old apartment building in Santacruz and its residents. The building is very old, and is in terrible condition. Everything in the story seems normal just like other societies, but with entry of the antagonist – Dharmen Shah Things change drastically. Shah is an ambitious real estate developer. In his case, when money comes into picture everything else blurs out within his sight, be it social

relations, his own health. Shah intends to purchase the two-storey building – the tower A of Vishram Housing Society, demolish it and construct a tall and luxurious, skyscraper in its place, and name it as Shanghai. Shah is a ruthless businessman and he can do anything in his power to achieve what he intends. In order to buyout the building, Shah strategically sends his assistant to collect all necessary information about the property and its residents. After he gets all the information, he decides to offer each household a sum of \$330,000 (which is equivalent to INR 1,47,34,500 as of 2011, when the novel was published). Most of the residents eagerly accepted Shah's offer as they saw in it an opportunity for upward mobility in the society. But few residents denied the offer, each one having their own reason. Pintos denied the offer because Mrs. Pinto is blind and she has memorised the layout of the flat and they were not sure whether she would be able to cope up with the new living space. This made them unwilling to sell their flat. Next in the queue is Mrs. Rego who does not trust builders like Shah, as her uncle was scammed by builder wherein after acquiring the property the builder somehow escaped from paying him. She feared that the same might happen to her, so she refused the offer. Next, we have Yogesh A. Murthy lovingly known as Masterji. He is a retired school teacher. Masterji's house is not just a property for him, it is the memory of his late wife and daughter. He feels that selling that property and moving elsewhere would mean leaving them for good. Another man Mr. Kudwa denies the offer because he didn't want to appear greedy by accepting the offer right away. So, the final condition was that except for a few residents all others agreed to sell their portions. But the real issue is that until all the tenants sold their portions, Shah cannot proceed with the redevelopment process. Simultaneously those who were desperate to sell their portions won't be able to do so. The residents, willing to sell their portions started convincing other tenants who were hesitant, pleading them and filling their minds with ideas of materialistic goods and a promise of a better life. They called this as 'practicality', which may be genuine as everyone wishes for a financial security for themselves, better education and facilities for children and family. They were successful at convincing, everyone agreed except for Masterji and the Pintos. Later Mr. Pinto broke his foot, and they gave in and agreed to sell their portion too, leaving Masterji alone as the last man in tower. After this the greedy tenants started pressurizing Masterji, adopting all sorts of methods to force him. This made Masterji to seek external help. He asked support from his students, media, and police, in order to stop the project. But one by one everybody leaves Masterji's side as Shah lures them and they become corrupt too. Masterji starts feeling helpless against such a powerful man still he refrains from giving up. Now Masterji not only had to protect his flat and the memories of his wife and daughter from Shah but also from his neighbours, who once were good friends and well-wishers. When everyone realises that Masterji won't give up at any

condition. They decided to take matters in their own hands. One day they murdered him, after knocking him unconscious they threw his body off the roof of the tower A, of the Vishram Housing Society, the same building he protested long to protect.

Keywords: Corruption, Power dynamics, Conscience, Guilt, Globalization, Urbanization, Greed, Morality.

Corruption

▪ **Social Corruption**

Within Vishram society, the members were closely bonded to each other. They shared traditions, festivals, and personal bonds. But as the \$330,000 offer was introduced everything changes drastically. This offer by the builder is the root cause of all conflicts, be it between Masterji and the builder or between Masterji and the residents.

Masterji, the protagonist of the story, is a retired school teacher who lives with the memories of his deceased wife and daughter. Unlike, his neighbors he does not want materialistic advancements. And he insists not to sell his flat because no amount of money can replace the home filled with memories of his loved ones. His resistance is not stubbornness, as it might appear, actually, it is a moral stand of conscience against corrupting influence of greed. But his neighbors didn't bother to understand his feelings instead they started persuading him to sell his flat. In this novel, social corruption is not about developer's greed rather it is about breakdown of trust within a community.

The tragedy of the novel does not lie in Shah being corrupt rather it is about how greed transformed the once-friendly faces into nightmares; into criminals who murdered one amongst them- Masterji, a man of values and conscience.

▪ **Moral Corruption**

Out of all forms of corruption in the novel, moral corruption upsets the readers the most. Masterji refuses to sell his flat because he values memory, principle, and integrity more than materialistic growth. When he is too much troubled by his neighbors and Shah, he decides to seek external help but, everyone leaves his side one by one as Shah corrupts them. He stands strong against both Shah and the residents. His neighbors see his resistance as stubbornness. And justify their betrayal by calling it practicality or responsibility towards their families.

This act of Masterji's neighbors, where ethical values are discarded when lured by materialistic benefits. Adiga highlights that corruption is not institutional rather it is psychological and is deeply rooted in a person's

weakness and self-interest.

▪ **Economic Corruption**

Shah's offer to the residents is central theme of the novel. Though it appears as a fair business deal, but the offer itself is corrupt. Shah cleverly calculates the amount of money that won't be too much but would be sufficient enough to lure the residents into selling their flats. He knows very clearly that the residents are middle-class people, most of them desperate for upward mobility and a better standard of living, and therefore they won't hesitate before accepting the offer. And so does happens, except for Masterji everyone was desperate to sell their portion for the buyout offer by Shah.

This reflects the reality of Indian urban developments. Builders and developers often bribe government officials and exploit legal loop holes in order to acquire land. Adiga mirrors this reality, showing how economic corruption is normalized and disguised as progress.

Power Dynamics

- The builder's power: Dharmen Shah can be visualised as the epitome of economic and institutional wealth and power. Though he does not hold a position in any governmental institution, still he manipulates the power structures with his wit and money. He discourages and corrupts everyone who dares to stand by Masterji's side.

Amit Chaudhari in his critical essay, "Mumbai and the Politics of Development" states that "Shah's skyscrapers symbolize not progress but erasure- the destruction of memory and morality in pursuit of ambition" (58).

- The collective power of the residents: Another important power dynamics is seen in collective power of the residents. At first all the individuals were powerless but they became powerful when they all united. While their united power should have been used against the builder, they united against an innocent man – Masterji. They were so desperate to acquire the money that they would get by selling out their flats to Shah, that they planned to kill Masterji. And they executed their plan by knocking the old man down by hitting his head with a rod, later they threw him off the terrace.

United authority of the residents became oppressive, silencing dissent and destroyed the individual conscience of a principled man.

- The power of resistance: Masterji represents the power of moral resistance. He refuses to be swayed by money and materialistic goods. Till the very end he does not agree on selling his flat. And since the property belongs to him, he has cent per cent right to decide whether he wants to

sell his property or not. But he is denied this basic right, just because others wanted to sell the property to Shah.

His downfall demonstrates the limitations of morality in a corrupt society. Adiga suggests that conscience, while powerful in principle, often collapses against collective greed and systemic pressure.

Politics

The novel is set in Mumbai in a time when the city was witnessing a real estate boom and therefore, it covers the politics in acquiring land and redeveloping it. At heart of the novel is clash between moral conscience and the will of the majority. Novel shows us how the builder – Dharmen Shah forms a link between business and politics. Though Shah himself is not a politician, but he manipulates political structures and local authorities. Also, within the society, it is seen that shah cleverly manipulates the residents. The novel presents a vibrant picture of the difference between the ambitions of the builder and susceptibility of the middle-class.

Moral and Ethical Dilemmas

The novel raises questions about morality in a modern capitalist society. Is it wrong for the residents to accept shah's offer when it offers better living conditions and upward mobility. Is Masterji a hero upholding moral principle or a stubborn old man obstructing progress? Adiga intentionally avoids clear answers forcing readers to confront the uncomfortable truth.

Symbolism

1. Mumbai: in the novel Mumbai itself plays a symbolic role. As a high-end city it traps in itself the stories aspirations and inequality.
2. Masterji: Masterji, the retired school teacher represents conscience, dignity and an unyielding commitment to values, he is the symbolism of individual conscience that refuses to surrender to collective corruption.
3. Dharmen Shah: He embodies the manipulative face of economic power. He did not had to use violence, he uses charm, persuasive, and calculated promises to sway the residents.
4. Residents: their betrayal symbolizes the ease with which social bonds are corroded with money.

Relevance to Contemporary Society

Though it has been more than a decade now since *Last Man in Tower* was published but the issues addressed in the novel still find their relevance in the contemporary society. The issues such as urbanization, corruption, moral compromise, class struggle, and the erosion of community values are very common in a developing nation like India. And development is often measured by the number of skyscrapers. So, urban India is very much prone to displacement, corruption, and inequality. Everyday news covers some or other kind of scandals involving builders, politicians, and bureaucrats. In present day India, corruption in politics, business and everyday life is normalized. Masterji's downfall demonstrates how moral voices are crushed under dominant power structures. Initially, the members of Vishram Society are united but, their unity collapses under greed and pressure. Similarly, in contemporary urban societies, economic benefits often break communities weakening social bonds and letting go collective responsibilities. In today's world economic disparity remains one of the most pressing issues where the middle-class is squeezed between rising costs and ambitions of the rich. The residents' dream of better lives in modern apartments with better facilities, this depicts how consumer desires manipulate everyday decisions. In contemporary society, consumerism continues to shape values often at the cost of ethics and tradition.

As Adiga spent years abroad, where he studied western English literature, it is often assumed that his works cater western audience. But this is not true, as he himself also clarifies in many of his interviews. Though *Last Man in Tower* is set in Mumbai, but the themes addressed in his novels resonates in cities worldwide- from New York to Nairobi, urban renewal, displacement and class conflict are part of everyday life.

Critical Discussion

Adiga portrays Mumbai not merely as a city but as a place where there are conflicts in ideas and values. Arundhati Mehrotra in her critical essay, "Urban Spaces in Contemporary Indian Fictions", argues "Mumbai in Adiga's fiction is a battlefield of tradition and ambition, where skyscrapers rise from the ruins of morality" (118). Similarly, Neeraj Singh's "Greed and Morality in Aravind Adiga's Works" emphasizes that "Masterji's isolation is symbolic of the intellectual's irrelevance in a society governed by profit" (52).

II. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* provides true picture of how corruption and power dynamics operate in everyday contemporary India. Through this novel, we see how corruption degrades the social relations with neighbours, friends, and family and how it manipulates moral choices. It also shows how corruption seeps into everyday transactions.

Though at the end Masterji is defeated, his resilience throughout the story teaches us the importance of one's conscience. The way he meets his end shows us the power of greed. How the once friendly faces, for materialistic benefits murdered him. At the end the tragedy of the novel does not lie in Shah being corrupt rather, it is how corruption engulfs the relations made over years and at last the neighbours who once were friends and well-wishers become murderers for materialistic benefits. The novel draws curtains from the general idea that corruption exists only around politics or higher offices, it penetrates through every layer of society. Therefore, Adiga's novel not only criticises the social-evils but also provides moral guidance by reminding readers about ethical costs of modernization without values. In short, this novel is a commentary on aspirations, compromises and brutal silencing of resistance.

Dharmen Shah's authority does not solely rely on his wealth but also on his ability to manipulate collective aspirations

What Adiga exposes here is that corruption thrives not simply because of those in power, but also because of the complicity of ordinary individuals who succumb to temptation when offered personal gain.

The novel asks an uncomfortable question: what is the true cost of development and who pays the price?

The most haunting element of the novel is that corruption is portrayed as ordinary, it is not shocking here. The residents rationalize their choices with practical arguments- better housing, financial security for children, and escape from decay. These justifications make corruption appear normal, even logical. Adiga forces readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that corruption thrives not because of extraordinary villains but because of ordinary people who choose convenience and profit over principle.

Last Man in Tower is not only story of one man's defiance but also a mirror to contemporary society, urging readers to reflect on moral costs of progress and the fragile nature of justice in a world driven by profit and power.

III. REFERENCES

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