

## DEVELOPMENT OR DEGENERATION – THE DENOUEMENT OF THE INDIAN URBAN MIDDLE-CLASS AMBITIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ARAVIND ADIGA'S LAST MAN IN TOWER

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### ABSTRACT

*Aravind Adiga with his debut novel, The White Tiger for which he won the Man Booker Prize in 2008, became a significant writer of contemporary fiction in the canon of Indian English Literature. His other works include Last Man in Tower, Selection Day, Amnesty, and a collection of short stories, Between the Assassinations. Adiga's fiction covers primarily the so-called progressive attitude of India as a postcolonial nation. The economic divide, the social margins, and the concept of the 'other' in its varied forms are the nuances around which Adiga builds his stories. The urban middle-class, as portrayed in Aravind Adiga's second novel Last Man in Tower, is a perfect archetype of cosmopolitan Indian society - the harbinger of the supposed development in the Indian economy. A common factor, that intertwines the multi-ethnic array of characters in the novel, is their ambition for social egalitarianism, economic amelioration, and overall well-being. Adiga attempts to portray Indian society with its raw ambitions and relentless aspirations and tries to critique these ambitions by adding narcissism to the list. He tries to convey the predicament of the common people who are torn between development and degeneration, the two extremes of a developing nation. The paper is based on the premise that in Indian society, in the wake of 'Development', Capitalism and Moralism are in a constant tussle with each other. It attempts to explore and critically analyse the denouement of the Urban Middle-Class ambitions as delineated in Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower.*

**KEYWORDS:** Contemporary Fiction, Capitalism, Moralism, Postcolonial, Indian Urban Middle-Class Ambitions

### Introduction

Adiga began his journalistic career as a financial journalist. He was subsequently hired by TIME, where he remained for three years before going freelance. During this freelance period, he wrote The White Tiger. In an interview with Stephen Mos, he asserts that he wanted to write about characters that are nothing like him. He writes about characters who are victims of various vices of a postcolonial developing nation. Winning 'The Man Booker' prize in 2008 for his debut novel, The White Tiger, Adiga enlisted himself as one of the significant writers of contemporary fiction in Indian English Literature. Last Man in Tower, Selection Day, Amnesty, and a collection of short stories namely Between the Assassinations are his other works for which he has received critical acclamations. His stories reflect the attitude of India as a postcolonial developing nation, providing a vantage point from where one can gauge the pulse of multifaceted India in its different settings - rural, semi-urban, urban, and metropolitan. A common theme in his works is the reflection of multiple shades of ambition in his characters. His stories have the nuances of the relentless aspirations of the different classes of society, and their eagerness to move forward in life to achieve social egalitarianism, economic amelioration, and overall well-being,

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reflecting a capitalistic mind-set. He tries to capture the predicament of these different classes of India who are torn between ambition for material gain and the cost of fulfilling such an ambition. They struggle perpetually in the dilemma involving the two extremes of a developing nation - development and degeneration.

In *Last Man in Tower* Adiga brings attention to the ambitions of middle-class people in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai. The story revolves around the residents of one Vishram Society and their peculiar ambitions complemented by the ambitions of a real estate builder Dharmen Shah who wants to graze the towers of this society down to build a new ultra-modern housing society. He offers a huge sum of money to the residents, almost double the actual value of the flats, luring them to vacate the building in order to materialise his dreams. All agree but one man, the eponymous character in this novel, Masterji, a retired school teacher who lives alone in his flat.

*Last Man in Tower* portrays the tussle between capitalism and moralism. In order to bring something new the old has to change but what is the cost of this development? Adiga attempts to bring the focus of his readers to that. It not only covers the dynamic nature of the middle-class ambitions but also its denouement.

### **The Urban Middle Class in Last Man in Tower:**

The said 'Tower' in this novel is the Tower 'A' of Vishram Society. It is old and stands in a dilapidated state. The pink paint has come off at multiple places exposing the motley of algae, fungus, old paint, and rain-washed spots. It has the issues of no 24-hour water supply, noise pollution from frequent flights due to its close proximity to the airport, perpetual repair works that the "grandmotherly" building demands, and water logging in the area during the monsoon. Notwithstanding these issues, Vishram Society is still a "pucca – absolutely, unimpeachably pucca" society (Adiga 3). It is "anchored like a dreadnought of middle-class respectability... erected as an experiment in gentrification back in the late 1950s, when Vakola was semi-swamp, a few bright mansions amidst mangroves and malarial clouds" (Adiga 3).

With an initial aim to be "good housing for good Indians" (Adiga 4), it tries hard to live up to its image. The residents hold "parliament" to resolve their daily issues, the neighbours are supposed friends reflecting basic friendliness and innate humanity. The Society has another tower, Tower B, but it is new with a little better-off and more amicable gentry. "Tower B is modern. Finance, high-tech, computers. Tower A is old. Teachers, accountants, brokers. Both are solid" (Adiga 57).

But "Tower A is what the neighbours think of as 'Vishram Society'" (Adiga4). The story revolves around the residents of this tower who, like the city they live in, are a typical example of cosmopolitan, "originally meant for Roman Catholics. Hindus were admitted in the late 1960s, and in the 1980s the better kind of Muslim – Bohra, Ismaili, college-educated. Vishram is now entirely 'cosmopolitan' i.e. ethnically and religiously mixed" (Adiga 5).

With their own peculiar middle-class predicament, the residents of the society try to live harmoniously with each other. Kothari, the secretary of the building has come from Africa in his childhood. He draws no salary for the job, runs a mysterious business, and every year, "ingratiating at each annual meeting" pleads for the job "with his palms folded in a namaste" (Adiga17). Mr. and Mrs. Puri have one son, eighteen-year-old Ramu, afflicted with Down syndrome. Mr. Pinto is a retired accountant and his wife has almost lost her eyesight. Ajwani is a real estate broker and the owner of the only big car in the compound. Ibrahim Kudwa is the owner of a cyber café. Mrs. Rego is a single mother and a social worker.

The eponymous last man in the tower is the Masterji, a sixty-one years old, retired teacher who is one of the first residents of the Vishram Society, and has only person to call a family, a son "having migrated to the golden citadel of inner-city Bombay" (Adiga 30).

The residents are a mix of middle-class milieu who struggle on a daily basis about the inadequacy of the building they live in. Although the society was the first "pucca" society to come in the area and inspired many other such middle-class buildings, yet "Vishram's residents are the first to point out that this Society is nothing like paradise. You know a community by the luxuries it can live without. Those in Vishram dispense with the most basic: self-deception. To any inquiring outsider, they will freely admit the humiliations of life in their society – in their honest frustration, indeed, they may exaggerate these problems" (Adiga 7).

### **The Urban Middle-Class Ambitions in Last Man in Tower:**

Each member of the Vishram Society has a unique ambition which they later in the novel take extreme measures for. These ambitions lay dormant and have been conveniently ignored for most of their lives. Having lived most of their lives in the Vishram Society and accepted their fate in it, the residents force these ambitions to the darkest pits of their hearts. For the residents of Vishram Society, "aspirations were limited to a patient rise in life earned through universities and interviews in grey suit and tie. It was not in their karma to know either gold or tears; they were respectable" (Adiga 38).

But when they hear the news of a slum man getting rewarded handsomely for a small piece of his land, their dormant ambitions begin to stir, "lucky hut-owners were becoming millionaires, as a bank or developer made an extraordinary offer for their little plot of land; others were being crushed – bulldozers were on the move, shanties were being levelled... As wealth came to some, and misery to the others, stories of gold and tears reached Vishram Society like echoes from a distant battlefield" (Adiga 38).

When a rich builder Dharmen Shah, sends his 'left-hand man', Shanmugam to the building to meet the secretary and presents, through him, his offer to buy their flats for a sum almost double their value, the ambitions now start to soar. Most of them begin to want the money that the builder offers and they start to dream of a future that miraculously appears to be possible.

Kothari, the secretary wants to settle in Sewri, to watch Flamingos, like he used to do in his childhood in Africa. Ibrahim Kudwa, the cyber café owner, wants to become economically better like his brother. Looking at a brand new Toyota Innova, Ajwani, a real estate broker, tells him, "ten years of slogging, skimping, and sacrificing, before you can buy something like this" (Adiga 133). With the new money, Kudwa could easily indulge in luxuries like that. In fact, he buys a new scooter, just in anticipation of such a quick fortune.

Ajwani, the only person to own a big car in the society, too had bought the car from his cousin "so he could feel rich". He wants to convince the hesitant group as he did with Ibrahim Kudwa for a fee from the builder. Beaming on his confidence, he knew that "his eyes were the brightest things for sale in Vakola market" (Adiga 134).

Puris want to live in a better neighbourhood, go to the Taj sometimes and give qualms to the beggars. Mrs. Puri, frustrated with cleaning her child's bottom every day, wants to hire a nurse. She wants the money for her Ramu.

Mrs. Rego, the 'Battlefield' has the ambition to move to the gilded Bandra. Her father was one of the richest men in Bandra. She has always desired to "Trump" her sister who has a PlayStation in her flat. Like her, the residents of the Vishram Society had to take "other lives" (Adiga 183).

Then there is the antagonist in the novel, the supposedly self-made rich developer, Dharmen Shah, who holds a unique ambition in his heart – to reform the area and claim it to his name. "Now everyone believed India was going to be a rich country. He had known it ten years ago. He planned for the future. Skip out of slum redevelopment. Start building glossy skyscrapers, shopping malls, maybe even one day an entire suburb, like the Hiranandanis in Powai. Leave something behind, a new name, the Confidence group, founder Dharmen Vrijesh Shah, a first wife's son from Krishnapur" (Adiga 289). He indulges in self-imposed competition with other builders in the area and desires to win this race by putting name tags on the pieces of Mumbai. He looks at Mumbai and all he could see is an opportunity in the vast slum area – "fully legal slums, semi-legal slums and pockets of huts in Vakola" (Adiga 143). He strongly believes that Mumbai was created through the "desire of junk and landfill, on which the reclaimed city sits, to become something better" (Adiga 146), and hopes for Dharavi – "Asia's biggest slum to become Asia's richest slum" (Adiga 55). In his vision, he sees Mumbai as "Roads as far as the eyes can see, skyscrapers, everything clean, beautiful" (Adiga 56). When he realizes that his dream of building an ultra-modern 'Shanghai' is slipping away due to resistance by the last man in the tower and his own deceptive health, he prays vehemently, "Let me build, one more time" (Adiga 146). Even the workers of the builder are subjugated by their ambition for a little extra. When Dharmen Shah offers more money to the workers they accept unwillingly, "And though none of the other men in banians and dhotis looked happy, they seemed powerless to resist" (Adiga 63), and are zeroed down as nothing more than "social animals" in the eyes of their employer. Adiga in an interview on Goodreads calls Dharmen Shah "an ambiguous figure". The author shows him as an example of "a lot of what is going wrong

with the city”, uncontrolled construction breaking of laws, and according to Adiga “they seem to be the only ones getting anything done in Mumbai” (Adiga).

At the other extreme end of this road of ambition stands Masterji, the retired school teacher who takes pride in the vast network of his students and comfort in his reminiscences of the deceased members of his family, his wife, and young daughter. He takes Vishram Society as the abode of his memories of the happy days that he had spent with his family members. Initially, the resistance to refuse the builder's offer stems from his comfort in the old home but later on, it transforms into a rigid obstinacy. His principles, which he regards highly, do not allow him to believe that the Tower A of Vishram Society is actually weak and on the verge of collapse. He stays delusional that his neighbours are “solid people” (Adiga 184), and strongly refuses the idea of what his neighbours call a “compromise.” He portrays the ideology of adamant principles, to fight for his rights till the very end, even if it means hurting the sentiments of his neighbours of years, his close friends, even his own son and crushing their dreams of development and growth.

### **The Denouement of Urban Middle-Class Ambitions - Development or Degeneration:**

Adiga, a clever writer that he is, does not portray his characters and their ambitions in absolute black and white. It is the ambiguous, grey area where we find the residents and their actions to step closer to their ambitions in life. The almost unbelievable offer that Dharmen Shah makes to the residents of Vishram Society, makes them sway in their moral character. They try every tactic to convince all those who fight the idea which ultimately shrinks down to the “Triumvirate” – The Pintos, husband and wife, and their close friend Masterji.

In *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga does commendable work in probing how the desire for wealth and material success leads people to act selfishly and engage in unethical and unlawful behaviour. The long-established human relations have been ruined by the insatiable quest for wealth and power. In the contemporary India of Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, rationality has given way to selfishness, individualism has come to represent unrestrained greed, and development has manifested as glaring inequity (Babu and Caroline). Alan White in his analysis of *Last Man in Tower* asks rhetorically, “In a world of rapid progress - economic, industrial, and arguably social - what are we leaving behind?” And the explanation we find in the actions of the residents of Vishram Society to realize their ambition.

Mrs. Puri, an instrument of convenience, claims that the ‘compromise’ she and other members, who agree to accept the builder's offer, make is actually in favour of the world. In her attempt to convince Masterji, she proclaims that “When small people like us compromise, it is the same as when big people refuse to compromise. The world becomes a better place” (Adiga183).

Money does succeed in changing the “good people into bad people” and transforming their “nature” (Adiga 319). They resolve to extreme measures in order to convince the resistant group. First the “boycott” happens, and then comes petty threatening, to which the Pintos succumb. And that leaves Masterji as the ‘last man’ in Tower A. “They treat me like they would treat an untouchable in the old days” laments Masterji (Adiga 217).

The once neighbours and old friends try all kinds of tactics on him – boycott him, putting derogatory anonymous notes, applying human excreta on his door, he is perpetually tortured, emotionally more than physically, even his only son abandons him for money and jewels – and when nothing works they even stoop down to perform abhorring “simple thing” on him that eventually cost him his life.

An exploration of the reasons for the resident's appalling act brings forth the “chain of envy” that they are intertwined with and the “intentions within intentions” of this urban middle-class. When Mr. Hiranandani, a previous resident, moved to a “better neighborhood... all of them dreamed of doing the same thing” (Adiga 22).

Dharmen Shah's “sweetener” act as fuel to the fire. He has “respect for human greed” (Adiga 107) and his aide, Shanmugam, tries every trick to make all the residents of Vishram Society fall according to their plan. He makes “them aware of their own inner intentions” (Adiga 238). They want to move forward in life to someplace better than their current one. To those stuck in Tower A, “The real distinction was leaving the society” (Adiga 22).

The novel highlights the ambitions of the urban middle class and proves them as the “prisoners of necessity” (Adiga 366). It explores the latent causes underlying the moral ambivalence in Indian society while bringing forth the humungous burden on ordinary Indian to improve their economic status

(Valiyamattam). This ordinary man, belonging to the middle-class, has now unashamedly dropped all pretence of idealism or morality or social sensitivity in the wake of self-interest and material security (Mukherjee). "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free" (Adiga 419). Perhaps the people are trapped by their ambitions or as Ajwani, the real estate broker in the story calls it, they "wanted to be trapped."

In an interview on Goodreads, Adiga asserts that the idea of the novel sprung from his own experience of living in Mumbai. Vishram Society resembles in structure the one that he has lived in. He asserts that the "milieu of Last Man in Tower is that of the middle to lower class in Mumbai, because Mumbai has a very strong middle-class component" (Adiga).

In the last pages, as Last Man in Tower swings in tone to become a darker and more depressing novel about the corruption spawned by greed in otherwise healthy and strongly connected communities, the attempt to impose meaning starts to look a little inconsistent (Purdon).

Apart from greed, another aspect of this ambition is seen in the narcissism of Masterji. An old man who despite knowing his neighbour's predicament holds against them for his own selfish reasons. To his conviction, he has his right to the flat he owns and the right to say no to the builder's offer. He endures all kinds of bullying that his neighbours or the builder implicitly impose on him. He is strong-willed and determined. Another grey area, where Adiga puts his protagonist. "Vishram is a building like the people living in it, middle class to its core. Improvement or failure, it is capable of either extremity" (Adiga 9).

In the novel, the denouement of the ambitions of its urban middle-class is shown in the form of structural irony. No one actually achieves in the end what they struggle for. Mrs. Puri wants the money for her eighteen-year-old son with Down syndrome, but in the end, it is revealed that the son's health is degenerating. Ajwani, the real estate broker, who from the very beginning vehemently tries to convince everyone to take Dharmen Shah's offer, leaves the mission of convincing Masterji and even refuses the builder's offer by the end. Ibrahim Kudwa, the insecure cyber café owner, who keeps trying to put sense into his neighbours' minds, not to act extreme in convincing Masterji, is the first one to make a blow at him. Kothari, the secretary, who proclaims himself to be an "honest" person, ensures that the 'hindrance' in their path of receiving riches is finally removed. Mrs. Rego, the socialist, does not participate directly but is aware of the "simple thing" happening to Masterji. She and Ajwani even unashamedly hold a speech eulogizing Masterji and his grit, after his death, in the end. The Pintos lose their age-old friend, Masterji, in their change of heart that gradually tilts more towards the dollars they could send to their son in the US, but again the irony plays and the said son returns to India when his work fails in the US. Dharmen Shah, the notorious builder, goes extreme in chasing his ambition to mark large chunks of Mumbai with his name, and ready to pay the cost with his life. And for Masterji the denouement of his ambition to stay in his old flat with memories of his wife and daughter is the loss of both his flat and his life.

### **Conclusion:**

The milieu in Last Man in Tower is an archetype of the urban middle-class milieu of India. Each one of the residents is a victim of their own ambition. Some like Mrs. Puri, Mrs. Rego, Kothari want riches more than anything in life whereas some like Ibrahim Kudwa, just an acceptance in the cosmopolitan society and come out of the 'other' tag. People like Ajwani, stay in a perpetual moral dilemma but they might too succumb to their ambition eventually. Then there are greed mongers like the rich builder Dharmen Shah, who lure this middle-class to dream of a new shiny developed world, where development would only be in terms of capitalism. It is this dream, this ambition which leads to the downfall of their moral character. They, directly or indirectly, get involved in taking extreme measures to rid of anything or anyone coming between them and their ambition. However, there are men of principles as well like Masterji who resist any kind of temptation and bullying and stick to their moral rights. But from another angle, they too appear selfish and a bit narcissistic.

Thus the denouement of this middle-class ambition as portrayed in Last Man in Tower borders on ambiguity. It is difficult to put it under the clear categories of development or degeneration. However the development does take place with people moving on to a better society or improvement in their economic status but this development, sometimes, does scuff with itself the degeneration of the moral character and values of this urban middle-class society in India (White).

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