

## The Final Verdict in Arvind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

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### Abstract

**Arvind Adiga's *Last Man In Tower*** is founded on the outline of a violent move, where the survival of the fittest is the ultimate aim in the multi-ethnic merciless town of Mumbai, and my paper tries to bring out this ambiguity and inhumanity in the most pertinent manner. The pathos and the pain that keeps lingering in the minds of those who suffer are undoubtedly beyond understanding and acceptance. This is exactly the Mumbai real estate situation – where life looks enriched with problems and accommodation seems engulfed in anguish. Forgetting the memories attached, circumventing the contacts made, encumbering the dreams perceived in those long years of happy and peaceful living, the residents cherish different prospects and acknowledge sundry attitude. To a citizen of Mumbai especially, feelings, emotions and considerations have been overpowered by egotism, antagonism and materialism. These pragmatic experiences at times turn so offensive that a sense of fear and shame creep in and this is what Adiga has tried to express and my paper tries to register.

**KEYWORDS:** Middleclass, Co-operative society, Accommodation, Materialism

### Introduction

Very emphatically has Arvind Adiga drawn the two compelling characters – Dharmen Shah, the real estate developer who ascended from nonentity to create an empire of his own and even hopes to seal his legacy with a luxury building which he decides to name 'Shanghai'; and on the other hand is Yogesh A. Murthy, a retired schoolteacher who is affectionately known as Masterji. Without Masterji, Shah is nonexistent; without Shah, Masterji doesn't fit it – the two complement each other so well that the plot, the theme, the concept, everything seems so factual and so personal. It is as if the story next door that Adiga nurtures and ascertains in this highly demanding world of the real estate. To Masterji, Vishram Society has a personal emotional attachment – it is here he has engraved the memories of his young daughter whom he lost years back and his wife who left him forever the year before. The story is based on this clash between the builder and the common man, the high aspiring on the one side and the ground clutching on the other; where suddenly everything goes wrong and greed conquers humanity.

***Last Man In Tower***, the anecdote of a struggle and the story of the survival of the fittest in the cosmopolitan unrelenting town of Mumbai, is a wonderful representation of that vicinity of livelihood which, for some, is a necessity and, for some others, is the key to the lock of progress, power and currency. Very emphatically has Arvind Adiga drawn the two compelling characters – Dharmen Shah, the real estate developer who ascended from nonentity to create an empire of his own and even hopes to seal his legacy with a luxury building which he decides to name 'Shanghai'; and on the other hand is Yogesh A. Murthy, a retired schoolteacher who is affectionately known as Masterji. In his first novel, ***The White Tiger***, that won him

the Man Booker Prize in , Adiga had tried to capture the contradictions that reign the new India, whereas in his third book, *Last Man In Tower*, he goes further and acknowledges the importance of such characters without whose existence there can be neither confrontation nor ambiguity, neither contempt nor sovereignty. Without Masterji, Shah is nonexistent; without Shah, Masterji doesn't fit it – the two complement each other so well that the plot, the theme, the concept, everything seems so factual and so personal. It is as if the story next door that Adiga nurtures and ascertains in this highly demanding world of the real estate.

The man referred to in *Last Man In Tower* is the retired teacher acknowledged affectionately as 'Masterji', who lives in a decrepit cooperative society apartment in Santa Cruz, near the city's colossal international airport. Redevelopment is on the go and advancing quickly into this district, and when their cooperative society receives gargantuan offers to sell out so a developer who can scratch the buildings down and bring up luxury apartments, one by one all of the society's residents start accepting the offer, until Masterji is the only holdout, insisting that he wants 'nothing'. His refusal to sign is not because of any monetary loss or gain, but, it is about principles, where he wants to hold back the gesture of corruption and gentrification that is destroying the old and traditional India and expanding the fissure between the country's wealthy and the poor.

Property in Mumbai is undoubtedly very expensive and property development has naturally become a very serious business, at times deadly even. It seems as if a good land in a prime location is more expensive than human life and Adiga has caught that impulse and ascertained this inhumanity with anguish and vehemence. The world today is under speculation – no importance is given to personal affection and emotional attachment; wealth and authority rule the horizon. Vishram Society, the towers in demand, led calm and serene life, till capital and corruption intruded their way and they all lost their senses. The main aim of Dharmen Shah is to buy Vishram Society – a middle-class housing co-operative with two towers in the eastern part of the city. An intensely desirable area during the recent times has attracted the property developer with the hope of replacing the old and dilapidated towers with luxury apartments –

*..... Vishram Society is anchored like a dreadnought of middle-class respectability, ready to fire on anyone who might impugn the pucca quality of its inhabitants. For years it was the only good building – which is to say, the only registered co-operative society – in the neighbourhood ..... [p. 3]*

And if the residents of Tower A of Vishram Society, pride themselves on anything it is their uncompromising respectability – their 'pucca' way of life in their unbending 'pucca' apartment building. Though it has lost the initial impressive pink and has now turned into a 'rainwater-stained, fungus-licked grey', the egotism still remained among its residents. Undoubtedly they no longer boasted about the uninterrupted supply of running water and they knew that they are amidst the greatest slum of Vakola in the flight path of Mumbai's domestic airport, still neither the pride nor the prejudice lose their grip on the occupants. Vishram society's virtues overshadow its weaknesses – unquestionably a model of neighbourliness and hospitality with middle class merit and consideration. It was this society that brought together people from different backgrounds; originally built for a Catholic population, it admitted Hindus in the 1960s and the so called 'better kind of Muslims' in the 1980s – in tune with

testimony to the possibility of cooperative living. No queries for the ‘pucca’ atmosphere everywhere; no distrust for the ‘cooperative’ ambience all over –

*Vishram is a building like the people living in it, middle class to its core. Improvement or failure, it is incapable of either extremity. The men have modest paunches, wear checked polyester shirts over white banyans, and keep their hair oiled and short. The older women wear saris, salwar kameez, or skirts, and the younger ones wear jeans. All of them pay taxes, support charities, and vote in local and general elections.*

*Just one glance at Vishram in the evening, as its residents sit in white plastic chairs in the compound, chit-chatting, fanning themselves with the Times of India, and you know that this Society is – what else? – pucca. [p. 9]*

But this serenity is lost forever with the intrusion of Shanmugham, the ‘left hand man’ of Dharmen Shah, who comes with a proposal addressed to the Secretary, Mr. Kothari. The treacherous Shah and supple Shanmugam carry out their plan of vacating the residents by offering them vast sum of money and also a touch of ‘sweetener’ if they resisted. But if the resistance was too much and beyond control they did not guarantee if that might result in a mysterious ‘accident’. Prosperous and influential developer Dharmen Shah is determined to bring down Vishram Society to build a new block of luxury apartments and tries his best to buy the residents with his generous offers. None of the inhabitants of the Society are rich and so when Shah offers them life-changing amount of money, they fail to resist the call. Very emphatically has Adiga expressed the modern concept of real estate in Mumbai – where a builder is desperate enough to possess the old, dilapidated buildings in order to create modern luxurious apartment for the affluent population and thus add a great amount to their bank deposit and, on the other hand, the deprived and unfortunate middle class who have no other option but to vacate on monetary terms. The rising price of the recent housing projects in Mumbai is, undoubtedly, a very serious predicament and Adiga projects this dilemma with sincere expression and understanding –

*One BHK (Bedroom Hall Kitchen)*

*Two BHK (Two Bedroom Hall Kitchen)*

*Three BHK (Three Bedroom Hall Kitchen)*

*Deposit: Multiple of rent – up to six months*

*‘Token’ Money – must be paid*

*NOC (No Objection Certificate, from Secretary of Society) – must be given*

*Police Clearance Certificate (from local station) – broker will obtain.*

*Passport-size photo (x2) – needed. Proof of Employment – a must.*

*Carpet area; Built-up area; Super built-up area – know the difference*

*Leave-and-Licence Agreement: who pays for stamp paper?*

*Decide first*

*Types of renters: Family, Single Bachelor, Company Bachelor, NRI, Foreign*

*Passport – who are you? [p. 72]*

This is exactly the Mumbai real estate situation – where life looks enriched with problems and accommodation seems engulfed in anguish. Forgetting the memories attached, circumventing the contacts made, encumbering the dreams perceived in those long years of happy and peaceful living, the residents cherish different prospects

and acknowledge sundry attitude. To a citizen of Mumbai especially, feelings, emotions and considerations have been overpowered by egotism, antagonism and materialism. This is what happens in Vishram Society as well – the carefree and blissful life of the occupants suddenly crumble down with the proposal of Shah and everyone except the four families accept the suggestion without any hitch. And because the tower is a co-operative, the offer cannot be accepted unless the residents are unanimous in their decision. The opposition from four families act as a blotch and the other residents slowly start building up pressure on the resisters to accept. The society is divided; on the one hand all those who have decided to accept the proposal of Mr. Shah and on the other hand those four families who feel that the builders are no more than cheaters who don't even bother to pay the actual promised amount.

To Masterji, Vishram Society has a personal emotional attachment – it is here he has engraved the memories of his young daughter whom he lost years back and his wife who left him forever the year before. His daughter had died in a freak train accident but she was still alive in his heart through her paintings, her cycle and her cherished reminiscences. It is in this building he nurtures the affectionate recollection of his loving wife. These recollections act as an essence for him to carry on in a world where he has not many people to rely upon. Undoubtedly his son's family is there but Masterji knows very well the whims and intentions of his son. He knows that to Gaurav money matters more than the life of his father; currency is more precious than sentiments and emotions – 'It must be Gaurav again. The moment he smells money on me, my son calls.' (p. 98) Masterji's attachment to his building is a karmic one, which, he knows will never be understood by anyone. His strange sense of loneliness and his desperate dependence on the moments of the past is a cosmic realization for him which is beyond the calculation of the outer world. It is his personal attachment to the past, his individual surveillance of the present and his delicate forbearance for the future. No one can tread between him and his emotions; no one dare interfere between him and his tribute.

The only family that Masterji finds a connection to are the Pinto's – the aged Mr. and Mrs. Pinto who serve as an extended family to Masterji. It is not just external conveniences that Masterji depend on them for; he feels a special attachment, a sense of oneness and harmony. It is only in the company of the Pinto's that Masterji had tried to overcome his heartfelt grief – the pain of his wife and daughter's loss. To be alone is a curse and when someone very close moves away accidentally, the pain stays fresh throughout, the nostalgia is overpowering and the distress keeps haunting with striking force every time one wants to keep away from it. The bereavement and wretchedness of Masterji is beyond explanation, afar justification –

*She had been on her way to college, when someone had pushed her out of the train. A packed compartment in the women's first class in the morning – someone had elbowed her out. She had fallen head first on to the tracks, and lain there like that. Not one of her fellow passengers stopped the train. They didn't want to be late for their work. All of them women, good women. Secretaries. Bank clerks. Sales managers. She had bled to death. This child that he had made, the tracks had unmade. Her brains, oozing from her broken head, because the passengers did not want to be late. Surely in the men's compartment someone would have pulled the emergency chain, jumped out, surely someone would have ...*

*For three months he could no take the train. He used to take one bus after the other, and walk when there was no bus around. His revolt had to end eventually. He was helpless before Necessity. But he could never look again at a women's compartment. Who said this world would be a better place run by women? At least men were honest about themselves, he thought. [p. 103-104]*

Masterji's pain is genuine – the ache that is difficult for others to understand. And this is the reason he feels so attached to his apartment – the house where he has spent his earlier years happily with his family. No one is there by his side now, wife and daughter have left him permanently and son has created a physical estrangement. But he feels happy and secure with their memories, which he fears might be evaporated if he leaves the place. That sense of longing and oneness is so engrossing and rejuvenating that it applies a balm to all torments and distresses and be contented under the quilt of the past. To Masterji it is his daughter's sketches that serve as an ointment to his soaring heart and this gives him the power as well to stand alone and fight for his own rights. With the pain by his side, he finds that the families that had been so close earlier not just fall apart from him but also considers him as an adamant revolutionary and so while away from him. Masterji stands alone – without a family, without friends.

Arvind Adiga has tried to bring out the pathos and the pain that lingers behind and is beyond understanding and acceptance. In this complicated life where friends fall out and relatives give way, Masterji stands as an enigma of compassion and tolerance, commitment and assurance. Never can he believe that the people, who have lived as a family, sharing all their joys and sorrows, could suddenly become so distant, so anonymous. And finally everything is lost – love is hated, respect ridiculed. Trust loses its significance and humanity hides in shame. Masterji loses his fight – not just a psychological or emotional detachment from others, but a physical disconnection forever. The residents do not hesitate to kill him for the sake of their own betterment. Masterji is thrown off from the terrace of the house he passionately loved and by the people he whole-heartedly regarded his own. The incident takes place on the first death anniversary of Masterji's wife and the inhabitants audaciously and shamelessly project it as a suicide instigated through loneliness and distress. The Mumbai Sun newspaper reports his death, confirming and reassuring 'the symptoms of his mental deterioration' and 'passive-aggressive developments and even schizophrenia' – intrepidly corroborating with what actually was not. Only Masterji and the Vishram society residents knew the truth; but sad enough Masterji had no one to stand beside and the residents knew how to hide. Is life so inexpensive? Is the essence of humanity lost forever? Are monetary benefits considered so superior that one does not even repent in taking a life for it? Life that was once cherished has lost its direction and the erroneous way that it has taken is filled with thorns and spikes. But the ignorant and unrealistic soul does not understand the gravity for the errors that it commits, thinking that the power of riches is far more than commanding than any other persuasion. Adiga brings about this bitterness and irony with an open-ended approach and wonderfully balances between storytelling and satire and triggers the dark humour that sets the world aside.

### **Reference**

Adiga Aravind, *Last Man In Tower*, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers India, 2011.