

**DESPONDENCY OF ‘SHINING INDIA’ IN ADIGA’S  
“LAST MAN IN TOWER”**

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Aravind Adiga’s first novel, “The White Tiger,” reveled in the darker consequences of a world turned flat. The story described a servant seduced by visions of wealth who murders his way out of poverty. It was as popular as it was controversial in India, and in Britain it captured the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Adiga told National Public Radio that he wanted “The White Tiger” to “both entertain and disturb” so that readers would think long and hard about how the economic growth brought to India by globalization is transforming the country’s culture. Clearly, he’s gunning for the same effect in “Last Man in Tower.” But this time the topic is real estate and the conflicting interests of community and development. The plot revolves around an old and venerated Mumbai apartment complex, the ‘Vishram Society’. Inaugurated in the late 1950s on the birthday of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and housing an affable mix of Catholics, Hindus and Muslims, the ‘Vishram’ is a monument to Independence-minded idealism. Its residents are like a large, cheery family, exuding middle-class respectability in the midst of a slummy Mumbai neighborhood.

It is a stunning novel of greed and murder in contemporary Mumbai. At the heart of this novel are two equally compelling men, poised for a showdown. Real estate developer Dharmen Shah rose from nothing to create an empire and hopes to seal his legacy with a luxury building named the Shanghai. Larger-than-life Shah is a dangerous man to refuse. But he meets his match in retired schoolteacher Masterji. Shah offers a generous buyout to Masterji and his neighbors in a once respectable, now crumbling apartment building on whose site Shah’s high-rise would be built. They can’t believe their good fortune. Except, that is, for Masterji, who refuses to abandon the building he has long called home. As the demolition deadline looms, desires mount; neighbors become enemies, and acquaintances turn into conspirators who risk losing their humanity to score their payday. Here is a richly told, suspense-fueled story of ordinary people pushed to their limits in a place that knows none: the new India as only Aravind Adiga could explore—and expose—it. The butter reaches the ‘Vishram’ in the form of Dharmen Shah, a charming, ruthless real estate mogul who offers its residents about \$330,000 per family to leave their crumbling six-story complex so that he can build a luxury skyscraper named ‘Shanghai’ in its place. Almost everyone in the ‘Vishram’ is thrilled by the deal: “Now all of us in this building, all of us good people, have been blessed by the Hand of God,” one happy mother declares.

But 61-year-old Yogesh “Masterji” Murthy rejects the proposal, and since all the residents must vacate the ‘Vishram’ for the Shanghai to rise, his opposition is enough to hold up

everybody's cash. Anyone who has ever had an important request categorically refused knows the kind of wretched, helpless fury that such opposition can provoke. "There is so much anguish in the building over your strange actions," one tenant tells Masterji. But the old science teacher, who is so attuned to the stars and the moon, to the ideas of history and political idealism, is deaf to such emotional pleas. And that's where Adiga's novel pushes beyond dollars and cents, because "Last Man in Tower" is also an existentialist drama. Like Jean-Paul Sartre's play "No Exit," it provides a kind of locked-room character study as the residents of the 'Vishram' try desperately, then viciously, to persuade Masterji to accept Mr. Shah's lucrative destruction.

Bit by bit, Adiga strips away the characters' faith in themselves as good people, revealing long-buried seams of pride, greed, hubris, envy and cowardice. Under pressure, they turn against each other, giving voice to grievances buried for decades, and then turn toward each other to form a fearsome mob. At one point, Masterji stares at three of his neighbors, women who had once pampered and flattered him but who now conspire his undoing, and wonders: "Am I looking at good people or bad?" The set-up is impressively simple. Shah and his "left-hand man", the sinuous Shanmugham, ride into town offering each resident a vast sum of money to quit their property: while a touch of resistance might produce a "sweetener", too much might result in a mysterious "accident". Tower B, filled with young executives, falls into line immediately, while Tower A proves a slightly tougher nut to crack. Its residents have their unofficial "parliament", but they also have complicated individual histories and sensibilities that Shah and his henchman must negotiate. Among them are the anxious Ibrahim Kudwa, proprietor of the Speed-tek Cyber Zone Cyber Cafe, whose mantra dictates that "a man with a bad stomach should never be asked to make decisions"; social worker Georgina Rego, staunch in her loathing of amoral redevelopers but tormented by the need to "trump" her well-to-do sister; and the retired Mr and Mrs Pinto, torn between the desire to send dollars to their children in America and their loyalty to "Masterji", the former school teacher who quickly becomes the linchpin of opposition to Shah's enticements.

Masterji is the eponymous last man, entrenched in his commitment to resistance, secure in his belief in the power of cooperative living, impervious to bribes and threats alike. With the Pintos, he imagines forming a "Vakola Triumvirate", the trio's strength of purpose rivaling that of Caesar, Crassus and Pompey. But if his secret and apparently inviolable weapon is a lack of material desire that means he cannot be bought, it also comes to seem like a weakness, indicating an inability to empathize with his fellow residents. Is Mrs Puri so wrong to wish for better surroundings in which to bring up her 18-year-old son Ramu, whose Down's syndrome she poignantly describes to her neighbours as a small developmental delay? Would it be so awful if Secretary Kothari could live in sight of the flamingos of his youth, so that "all the wasted decades in between fell away"? And do the convictions of one man cancel out the desires of the rest of the civic body?

"*Last Man in Tower*" can tend slightly towards the schematic – as each resident falls inexorably under Shah's spell, the novel risks concentrating its power in the suspense of whether Masterji will triumph or eventually be subsumed by peer pressure, external threat, or both. But Adiga also manages to thicken his narrative with a subtle and nuanced examination of the nature of personal corruption – more subtle, in fact, than in his powerfully scathing first novel, "*The White Tiger*", which won the Man Booker prize in 2008. His targets here are similar: the web-like social structures that surround citizens, creating a stasis that defies attempts at progress; the vacuum created by misgovernance that allows greed and envy to flourish; the bureaucracy – represented here by a double-talking lawyer straight from the pages of Dickens – that creates the

illusion of order and justice while perpetuating the opposite. "You and I were trapped," the real-estate broker Mr Ajwani, one of the novel's most ambiguous figures, tells Mrs Rego, "but we *wanted* to be trapped," and the novel goes the distance in exploring the attraction of collusion.

Adiga skilfully poses these problems and equally skilfully frustrates our attempts to answer them. For much of the time, our sympathy is almost entirely with Masterji, particularly as his neighbours – whose bad behaviour has hitherto been largely confined to gossiping, eavesdropping and nosing around in one another's rubbish bins – begin to treat him with increasing disdain and viciousness. Similarly, Adiga's portrait of Shah as a rapacious, bullying parasite seems, at first sight, to preclude very much in the way of tenderness or respect. And yet both men have unexpected hinterlands: Masterji's unyielding austerity is also a form of narcissism, while Shah's ambition can be interpreted as embodying the kind of explosive energy needed to change people's circumstances. "Like a lizard I went up walls that were not mine to go up," he reflects on his early career, spent clearing slums with which other developers didn't want to be associated.

"*Last Man in Tower*" has a broader and more forgiving feel than "*The White Tiger*", incorporating a gentler comic tone that finds affection as well as despair in poking fun at its characters' pretensions and frailties. But Adiga's anger at the India, he describes – cities in which rapid economic expansion comes at an impossible price for a vast swath of their inhabitants, and in which the slow fading of the caste system has not been accompanied by a rise in social egalitarianism – remains undimmed. Describing his childhood reading in Mangalore, Adiga once professed his early enthusiasm for the works of Golding, Orwell and Shaw, three writers with a keen appreciation of the muddy intersections between individual and political will. In this complex and multi-layered novel, he continues his project of shining a light on the changing face of India, bringing us a picture that is as compelling as it is complex to decipher.

#### **Work Cited-**

Adiga Aravind, *Last Man In Tower*, Harper Collins, New Delhi, India, 2011

All subsequent references in parentheses are from this edition of the novel.