

**WANING HUMANITY: A STUDY OF THE MADDENING GREED FOR
MONEY AND GROWING COLD-HEARTEDNESS IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S
*LAST MAN IN TOWER***

Dr. P. Karkuzhali
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Chellammal Women's College
of the Pachaiyappa's Trust
Chennai-32

Abstract

The paper entitled “Waning Humanity: A Study of the Maddening Greed for Money and Growing Cold-Heartedness in Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*” attempts to explore how the impulse to become rich makes people act less compassionate and humane in the age of globalization. The Man Booker Prize winning writer Aravind Adiga’s second novel *Last Man in Tower* unfolds the crimes associated with real estate which is one of the booming industries in the age of globalization. It explores how the greed to become rich makes people more self-centered and provokes them to do dirty, unimaginable things to other fellow-beings. In reality, globalization, which seems to have contributed to the growth of developing nations, has widened the gap between the rich and the poor in developing nations. As a result, the insatiable desire for wealth drives the middle class and the under privileged to indulge in criminal activities. An attempt has been made to explore this reprehensible acquisitiveness of the people which makes them more self-centered and inhumane with reference to Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*.

Keywords: globalization, middle class, real estate, aspiration

The relationship between literature and society is reciprocatory. It influences and gets influenced by the society. It is not just an imaginative writing that imparts aesthetic sense, but a piece of work that reflects the socio-economic, cultural and political milieu of a particular society. Indian English novels are no exception to this phenomenon of literature. Earlier Indian fictions dealt with national, social and domestic issues such as post-partition problems, communal violence, social disparity, untouchability and man-woman relationships. After the advent of globalization, there has been a greater thematic shift from national and domestic issues to the issues pertaining to globalization in the recent Indian fictions. Although globalization has both positive and negative impacts on the developing nations, they become more vulnerable to

the negative consequences of globalization compared to developed nations. Hence, contemporary Indian writers mainly focus on the socio-economic, cultural, political and ecological impacts of globalization on developing nations.

The paper entitled “Waning Humanity: A Study of the Maddening Greed for Money and Growing Cold-Heartedness in Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*” attempts to explore how the impulse to become rich makes people act less compassionate and humane in the age of globalization. The Man Booker Prize winning writer Aravind Adiga’s debut novel *The White Tiger* throws light on the dark India which remains untouched by the rapid economic transformations of the 21st century. His second novel *Last Man in Tower* unfolds the crimes associated with real estate which is one of the booming industries in the age of globalization. It explores how the greed to become rich makes people more self-centered and provokes them to do dirty, unimaginable things to other fellow-beings. In reality, globalization, which seems to have contributed to the growth of developing nations, has widened the gap between the rich and the poor in developing nations. As a result, the insatiable desire for wealth drives the middle class and the under privileged to indulge in criminal activities. An attempt has been made to explore this reprehensible acquisitiveness of the people which makes them more self-centered and inhumane. The theoretical framework of this research paper will include explanations on ‘globalization’ and ‘Indian middleclass’ for the better understanding of the proposed argument.

In human history, the beginning of any new century represents a symbolic change in the lives of human beings. The 21st century is no exception to this phenomenon of change. The present century is experiencing tremendous changes in economic, social, cultural and political spheres which are often referred to as ‘globalization.’ It is a dynamic process of liberalization and international integration of markets and technology. Manfred B. Steger defines globalization as: “a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time flustering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant” (13). In essence, it refers to the processes of transnational interconnectedness and interrelatedness across all spheres such as the social, the cultural, the economical, the political and the ecological milieu.

In recent decades, the booming real estate industry which is one of the growth engines of the national economy turns out to be the richest and powerful agency in reordering social life of the middle class. It would be worthwhile to know the concept of middle class in the Indian context as the novel centres around the Indian middle class. Pavan K. Varma defines middle class in the Indian context as: “Anybody who has a home to live in and can afford three meals a day, and has access to basic health care, public transport and schooling, with some disposable income to buy such basics as a fan or watch or cycle, has already climbed on to the middle class bandwagon” (XVIII).

The formation of the new middle class involves two parallel processes such as “the politics of exclusion” and “the politics of aspiration.” In countries like India, China and Nepal, the new middle classes are viewed as aspirational as they believe “the privileged lifestyles” and “distinctive images” portrayed by advertising industry and mass media are attainable. As a result, the aspiring middle classes are victimized by exploitative property developers who make profit out of such popular dreaming. Although the urban middle classes are the beneficiaries of economic globalization, often they become vulnerable to economic crisis. As Li Zhang explicates:

Although the national economy has been growing at a fast pace, there is a profound sense of uncertainty about how long the economic miracle will last and

where one can put his or her newfound wealth in safekeeping. Yet, this fear can also drive individuals to take bigger risks, such as venturing into the “gray” economy, in order to accumulate more wealth and secure their privileged position” (n. pag).

Thus, the fear of falling induces people to do inhumane and illegal activities. It is this maddening greed for money and the loss of empathy in the age of globalization is fore grounded in this paper.

Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* is the story of Yogesh Murthy, the retired science teacher affectionately known as Masterji who turns down the generous offer of Dharmen Shah, the ruthless real estate mogul of Mumbai. Ceri Radford remarks: “Last Man in Tower tells the story of a struggle for a slice of shining Mumbai real estate, bringing all of Adiga’s gifts for sharp social observation and mordant wit to the fore” (*Telegraph* June 17, 2011). The tale revolves around the Indian middle class residents of Tower A of Vishram co-operative housing society in Vakola, Mumbai. Adiga describes Vakola as, “On a map of Mumbai, Vakola is a cluster of ambiguous dots that cling polyp-like to the under-side of the domestic airport; on the ground, the polyps turn out to be slums, and spread out on every side of Vishram Society” (*Last Man in Tower* 3). Although Tower A and Tower B are erected within the same compound wall, often Tower A is referred to as ‘Vishram society.’ Its residents are proud of the fact that Vishram is “pucca absolutely, unimpeachably pucca” (3) compared to its crumbling neighborhood.

The colour of Tower A “once pink, is now a rainwater-stained, fungus-licked grey. . . Luxuriant ferns, green and reddish green, blur the corners of some windows, making them look like entrances to small caves” (5). Tower A is in the precarious state after more than four decades of monsoons, air pollution and erosion. Although it has possible chance to collapse in the next monsoon, “no one, either in Vishram Society or in the neighbourhood at large, really believes that it will fall” (9). Tower A of Vishram society was built in late 1950s. The three-foot-tall polished black-stone cross indicates that “the building was 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)” (5).

Adiga elaborates the problems and struggles faced by the residents of Vishram society as:

like most buildings in Vakola, does not receive a 24-hour supply of running water. Since it is on the poorer, eastern side of the train tracks, Vakola is blessed only twice a day by the Municipality. The residents have fitted storage tanks above their bathrooms, but these can only hold so much (larger tanks threaten the stability of a building this ancient). (7)

They may be in the midst of the slums of Vakola or have their own personal problems, but the members of Tower A are well-known for their Good-neighbourliness and middle class virtue.

An old retired science teacher, a real estate broker, a social worker, a retired accountant and a cyber café owner are the respectable occupants of Vishram society. Sixty-one year old Yogesh Murthy, the protagonist of the novel is affectionately referred to as Masterji. He lives alone in his apartment in the memory of his deceased wife Purnima and daughter Sandhya. He feels his wife’s presence through “the vapours of mothballs.” “old newspaper.” and “silk sari.” His only surviving son Gaurav, a banker, is living in South Mumbai Marine Lines. In his spare time, he offers top-up classes to the children of the residents and plays with his rubik’s cube. Mr. and Mrs. Puri, a Hindu middle-aged couple living with their 18-year-old son Ramu who has

down syndrome. Ramesh Ajwani, a real estate broker, has lost his investments not only in stock market, but also in real estate business. Someone or other has always deceived him: “In the movie of his own life, he had to admit, he was just a comedian” (134). Mrs. Georgina Rego, the battleship always tries to trump her well-off sister. Mr. and Mrs. Pintos share a good relationship with all their neighbours. As Deirdre Donahue remarks: “Over the years, the residents have formed a village. There is love, there is dislike, there is bickering, there is resentment. Most of all, there are genuine human connections” (USA Today Sept 25, 2011). For decades they have been living together as a community in harmony. Though the inhabitants are kind and affectionate towards each other, Adiga elucidates the thin line of envy that prevails among the typical middle class people as:

She envied Kudwa his happy family life - just as she knew he in secret envied Ajwani for owning a Toyota Qualis; just as Ajwani probably envied someone else; and this chain of envy linked them, showing each what was lacking in life, but offering also the consolation that happiness was present right next door, in the life of a neighbour, an element of the same Society. (74)

The charming genuine relationship of the residents has started chipping away when Mr. Dharmen Shah, the ruthless property developer decides to build his luxury skyscraper named Shanghai in the place of Vishram society. He generously offers a huge sum nearly twice the market value to the residents of Vishram society to make their way for his magnificent new project. Starting with smuggling and slum clearance, Shah has now become the managing director of the Confidence Group, one of Mumbai’s real estate. Shah offers such a huge amount not out of his generosity, but because of the expanding financial center:

You have Santa Cruz airport there, you have the Bandra-Kurla Complex there and you have the Dharavi slums there. Why is this line golden? Air travel is booming. More planes, more visitors. Then’ - he moved his finger – ‘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’ - he dotted his golden line in the centre – ‘here. Vakola. (54-55)

The process of globalization has not produced unprecedented growth to all that it promised to bring. Instead, it widens the gap between the haves and have-nots in developing nations. As Joseph E. Stiglitz points out: “To many in the developing world, globalization has not brought the promised economic benefits. A growing divide between the haves and the have-nots has left increasing numbers in the Third World in dire poverty, living on less than a dollar a day” (5).

Adiga comments on the uneven growth and development of globalization as:

... like butter on a hotplate, was melting and trickling into the slums, enriching some and scorching others among the slum-dwellers. A few lucky hut-owners were becoming millionaires, as a bank or a developer made an extraordinary offer for their little plot of land; others were being crushed - bulldozers were on the move, shanties were being leveled... (37-38)

Though the butter in the form of generous offer has reached Vishram society, it comes with a strict deadline: “Important: The last date for the acceptance of the offer is the day after

Gandhi Jayanti: 3 October. (Non-negotiable.) The offer will not be extended one minute beyond this date” (80). Since it is a co-operative society, the proposal must be accepted unanimously. Otherwise, everyone will lose the fortune: “if one person says no, you can’t tear down the Society. That’s the whole idea of a Cooperative Housing Society. One for all, all for one” (95). In the beginning four occupants refuse the proposal. Ibrahim Kudwa has delayed his acceptance just because he worries, “How would his neighbours interpret his character if he rushed to take Mr Shah’s money” (132)? Mrs. Rego declines Shah’s offer because she distrusts the property redevelopers who often fail to keep up their promise. Mr. Pinto rejects the proposal for the sake of his blind wife who may find it difficult to move around in a strange new building. Adiga vividly depicts Mrs. Pintos emotional trauma: “What if the others overpowered them and carried her off to a building with strange walls and neither ‘the Diamond’ nor ‘the Bad Tooth’ nor her million other eyes? Her heart beat faster” (96). As Adiga points out: “A man’s past keeps growing, even when his future has come to a full stop” (150). Masterji, the protagonist of the novel resists the generous offer for the memories of his deceased wife and daughter. Adiga narrates:

Though the men and women around him dreamed of bigger homes and cars, 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. . . Sometimes he felt as if Sandhya and Purnima were watching the rain with him, and there was a sense of feminine fullness inside the dim flat. (150)

Shah always prefers “to entice a recalcitrant tenant out of a building with a cheque rather than with a knife” (88). Subsequently, first the opponents are provided with sweeteners. If they continue to resist, they are forced to accept the proposal by threats. Mrs. Rego accepts the offer to trump her well-off sister. The Pintos are threatened to accept the offer. James Purdon comments: “Slowly, under the pressure of intimidation and the lure of hard cash, the opposition breaks down, until the retired teacher Yogesh Murthy remains “Last Man In Tower.” a lone holdout against encroaching gentrification and slum clearance” (*Observer* June 26, 2011). Masterji is the last man in tower who holds out till the end. As Alex Clark remarks: “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” (*The Guardian* June 15, 2011). He values the memories of his deceased wife and daughter more than monetary gains. He firmly declares:

Vishram Society Tower A is my home, and it
Will not be sold
Will not be leased or rented
Will not be redeveloped. (262)

The maddening greed for money and the dream of better life scathe the relations built over years. As Deirdre Donahue remarks: “Life-long friends turn on each other, new alliances are forged between old enemies, upstanding matrons turn into scheming Borgias. Money — even the possibility of it — changes everything” (USA Today Sept 25, 2011). His neighbours, friends and even his son expose their resentment by boycotting Masterji: “in the early days of the ‘boycott,’ there was an apologetic smile on the Secretary’s lips when he evaded Masterji’s attempts to make small talk, now there were neither smiles nor apologies” (217). His neighbours

who once treated him with respect and called him “an English gentleman” now begin to treat him with increasing contempt and ferociousness. He is expelled from the society for the false charges that “he has not paid his dues with regularity, and has engaged on questionable, and immoral, activities within his premises” (274). Being enticed by Shah’s generous offer and his sweeteners, the residents fail to empathize Masterji’s sentimental attachments to his home. Shah who always employs brutal ways to eliminate the opponents from his path remains pernicious. He manipulates the inhabitants to do the brutal thing to get away with Masterji by building up pressures. Their frantic desire for monetary gains and material benefits induce them to stoop as low as possible. Since all their efforts fail to convince Masterji to accept the proposal before the deadline, they decide to do that simple thing, a simple thing to take away someone’s life. Adiga vibrantly elucidates the life-death struggle of Masterji:

Now, when he opened his eyes, he could not tell if he were dead or alive; these men seemed to be demons, though kindly, who were forcing his body to budge from some place between life and death where it was stuck. And this was because he was neither good nor bad enough; and neither strong nor weak enough. He had lost his hands; he had lost his legs; he could not speak. Yet everything he had to do was right here, in his head. He thought of Gaurav, his son, his living flesh. ‘Help me,’ he said. (391)

The contemporary materialistic society where people value money and material benefits above all, is indicated through the words of Shah: “you have to respect human greed” (107). The slogan of the contemporary globalized world where people strive to elevate their status is exemplified through Shah’s words: “You should look around you, at people. Rich people. Successful people. You should always be thinking, what does he have that I don’t have? That way you go up in life” (230).

Thus, in *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga vividly depicts the pressures of progress, lessening humanity and the growing inequalities in the globalized India. The novel discloses how the frenzied desire for money and material benefits turn the life-long friends into nemesis and force them to kill their friend. Hence, it is evident that the impulse to become rich in the contemporary globalized India makes people act more selfish and less humane.

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