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## **Masterji's Resistance in Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*: An Embodiment of the Struggle of the Marginalized Class**

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### **Abstract**

Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, published in 2011, is a trenchant critique on the effects of globalization, urbanization, privatization and capitalism in the post-colonial era in India. All these changes in the contemporary society have effectively bifurcated the entire country into two groups—the rich and the poor, the centre and the margin, the privileged upper class and the underprivileged lower class. In the novel Dharmen Shah, a real estate mogul represents the first group of people who are socio-politically and economically highly influential, whereas Yogesh A. Murthy, aka Masterji, is the embodiment of the marginalized class that are constantly dominated and exploited by the former group. My present paper aims to analyse in detail how far Masterji is able to resist the scabrous sufferings unleashed by the rich realtor Dharmen Shah, and how far Masterji's resistance becomes an incarnation of the resilience of marginalized people in the contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Globalization, Urbanization, Privatization, Capitalism, Marginalized

### **Introduction**

Like in his debut novel *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga's chief concern in his *Last Man in Tower* is the portrayal of the incompatibility between the highly privileged class and the underprivileged class people in society. The effects of globalization, urbanization, privatization and capitalism can be prominently felt in the lives of people in the post-colonial period in India. Mumbai, which is the hub of economic boom in the post-liberalized era, is the microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic changes in the whole country. In Mumbai, because of the rapid growth of capitalism in the globalized situation, some people

are becoming *nouveau riche* and some *nouveau pauvre*. As such the whole country is divided into two major spheres—the New India, which is the seeker of transformation and development, and the Old India, which clings to the past glory and heritage of the country being quite averse to change and transformation. The followers of New India are generally people either of rich class or the agents of the rich, whereas the votaries of the Old India are people who are without any socio-political or economic affluence. Dharmen Shah, the real estate mogul represents the former group of upper class people, and Yogesh A. Murthy, who is reverentially called ‘Masterji’ is the representative of the marginalized class in the novel. While the upholders of New India like Dharmen Shah are utilitarian and materialistic even at the cost of all human values and ethos, Masterji, however conservative may he be, is the true embodiment of the marginalized class and is full of humanitarianism, altruism and moral integrity.

*Last Man in Tower* revolves around the central theme of the contradistinction between the precepts and practices of two principal characters—Masterji and Dharmen Shah. Masterji, a retired teacher of 61 lives with self-respect in Vishram Society, Tower A in Vakola, Mumbai. His wife and daughter being dead, and his son living away, Masterji is alone in his family, and has no other relatives and companions except his neighbours in the tower. He has no objectives in life except teaching neighbouring boys free of cost and brooding over the memories left by his daughter Sandhya and wife Purnima in the apartment and in his life as well. Dharmen Shah on the other hand is a self-made entrepreneur, a real estate businessman, who had a struggling past but now is economically very affluent and socio-politically highly influential. He is not as ambitionless as Masterji: he is keen on exponentially growing his wealth and power through his real estate business. He knows that in the globalized situation Mumbai will develop and it will make him economically highly prosperous, which is why he wants to buy Vishram Society, and by demolishing this old tower he wants to build his skyscraper, his Shanghai in its place. The practical-minded Shah clearly declares his intention to his left-hand man Shanmugham:

Mumbai’s future is here in the east, Shanmugham. This is where the space is, and once the new roads and new metro lines come up, the east will grow. We’ll get 25,000, maybe 30,000 a square foot for the Shanghai. Even more for the next thing we

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build. Vishram is an old Society. But it is the most famous building in India. We'll take it and we'll break it – and everyone will know. Vakola is ours. (108).

The only person who is an obstacle in his achievements is none other than Masterji. Shah's highly lucrative offer of 250% of the original market value of the plots in Vishram Society is embraced by each and every member of the society expect Masterji. Masterji cannot not be sold to the rich realtor because he has no ambitious desire for money and power. Rather he wants to spend the rest of his life in his old tower with the memories of his dead wife and daughter. Although initially Masterji's ideology is supported by some of the inmates of the tower, they also leave him one by one when they are manipulated by the greed as well as the expectations of becoming rich overnight inculcated in their minds by Shah. When left by all the members of society Masterji becomes the only single person to resist against the dominating Mr. Shah. In this regard he truly becomes a marginalized man under the threat of the upper class domination. When crushed under the power of the upper class Shah, Masterji becomes the spokesperson of the marginalized section, and his struggle also embodies the resistance of the marginalized. He represents the larger community of the poverty-ridden and the middle class people in society that are, though majority in number, pushed to the periphery. But paradoxically the privileged upper class people who are few in number in society become the centre to control and appropriate all the socio-economic positions in the country. As Oorja Rajan Sinha rightly points out:

...it looks somewhat paradoxical to talk of the larger population occupying the margin rather than the centre-space. However, the use of the term 'marginalized' brings out a very important meaning of the phrase: it says that what should be centrespread has been pushed to the margin. Such statement implies that the importance of the larger community has been undermined, that the community is denied social justice and, finally, that the community must shift from the periphery to the centre. (Sinha 107)

Masterji's position also becomes no better than those of the marginalized or peripheralized in society. But unlike his fellow members, Masterji fails to realize one truth about New India that Mumbai becomes a part of the globalized world that is rapidly being transformed technologically and commercially. As a result, many people are becoming rich and many poor. Mumbai's future lies in its continuous development. And those who oppose

this development only lag behind and become poor. Every practical-minded person in the city is aware of this truth:

New financial buildings were opening every month in the BKC – American Express, ICICI Bank, HSBC, Citibank, you name it – and the lucre in their vaults, 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 levelled, slum clearance projects were going ahead. As wealth came to some, and misery to others, stories of gold and tears reached Vishram Society like echoes from a distant battlefield. (38)

When the lucre of 250% of the market value for the houses of Vishram Society is offered by Shah, all the practical-minded members of the tower wholeheartedly accept it except Masterji. Among his neighbours Ibrahim Kudwa, Mrs. Rego and Mr. and Mrs. Pinto initially follow Masterji's ideology and refute the manna from heaven, but one by one they forsake Masterji for the sake of their material fulfilment. Ibrahim Kudwa is the first to declare his desire of becoming rich by renouncing his abject condition as a mere owner of a cyber café: 'Do you think I want to stay in this internet café business all my life? Do I want my children to grow up poor?' (131). Mrs Rego, who was also a stern devotee of Masterji's ideology finally succumbs to the rich realtor when the latter offers her a separate bribe. But most surprisingly Mr. and Mrs. Pinto, who were the constant companions and well-wishers of Masterji, also leave him when they grow their secret desire to send money to their children in foreign countries and make their own house elsewhere. As all these neighbours abandon Masterji, he becomes the sole person now to fight against the influential upper class Mr Shah.

It is noticed that in the post-colonial situation all the power systems have been transferred from the British to the upper class elites in India. These upper class people, by appropriating all the politico-economic and socio-cultural positions, have become the sole authoritarian force to manipulate and exploit the larger community of the marginalized. These upper class people, if they belong to the upper caste also, articulate their double-fold control over the lower class and lower caste people. As Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd writes:

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...in the context of the politico-economic and spiritual assimilation that was taking place among casteist social forces, a kind of all-India 'upper' caste supremacy had begun to emerge. By 1947 itself an all-India 'upper' caste elite—the new *bhadralok* (the 'upper' caste combine)—was ready to take over the whole range of post-colonial institutions. (Shepherd 48)

In Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, Dharmen Shah represents such elite *bhadralokor babu* who occupies all the higher positions in society and holds control over the rest of the people. In the neo-colonial situation he becomes the very colonizer and all the members in Vishram Society become the colonizer's agents against reactionary Masterji.

At first Shah takes all the soft methods to make Masterji give his consent to demolish the old Tower and accept his offer. But Masterji is not a man to surrender before the utilitarian and Machiavellian Shah. When failed in all direct and indirect approaches to Masterji, Shah skilfully engages his agents—the members of the tower who are guided by sheer avarice and materialistic fulfilment—to force Masterji sign the agreement. In fact, Shah inculcates the greed of money in the minds of the members in such a way that they themselves become desperate for the expulsion of Masterji from the tower and from the earth as well. Masterji is mocked at, humiliated, jeered, pushed, threatened, boycotted and segregated by the rest of the inmates. Being quite marginalized, Masterji seeks assistance from law and order, police, advocate and media. But Masterji experiences that all such institutions are highly corrupt and are manipulated by the rich upper class people. Quite disillusioned of the whole corrupted system in the society Masterji realizes the very inconsequentiality of human beings: 'The earth, an infinite space. A point on it was the city of Mumbai. A point on that was Vishram Society. And that point was *his*' (275). With all his acerbity and disappointment, yet keeping his utmost sangfroid, Masterji realizes that the same neighbours who were so reverential to him suddenly turn into ferocious conspirators and malevolent force against him. Mrs. Puri, Ajwani, the real estate broker, Kothari, the secretary, Kudwa, Mrs. Rego, and even Mr. and Mrs. Pinto all are so blindly guided by materialistic avarice that they even do not recede to decide to put an end of the life of Masterji. They serve as the opportunistic agents of Shah to deliberately marginalize Masterji. Thus, the conflict between Masterji and the evil entente of Shah and his agents becomes the war between the

rich and the poor, the centre and the margin, the bourgeois and the proletariat. As Mrs. S. Monika makes her observation:

*Last Man in Tower* is a simple enough narrative which presents a simple theme of strongest people dominating the weakest people: one man stubbornly holds onto his crumbling apartment in a housing society that has had the good fortune of attracting a builder's eye, one who is willing to pay unimaginably vast sums of money to each resident in exchange for their apartments, only in order to pull them down and build a "shining and modern" luxury block in their place. The novel unfolds with single-minded briskness that emulates the ferocious pace with which the imperative of 'development' seeks to transform the fabric of a city desperately squeezed for space. Faced with the inevitable, headlong rush of this imperative, personified in the builder Dharmen Shah – a principle more than a person – the resident of the middle-class, 'absolutely, unimpeachably pucca' Vishram society Tower A turn, chillingly, into a many-headed monster that finds itself capable of forgery, harassment, blackmail, and when time comes, murder. (Monika 39)

Question often remains how far Masterji's ideology of conservativeness is trustworthy and supportable, specifically under the perspective of transformation and development in the globalized situation. If India has to transmogrify herself from the land of snake charmers and superstition, poverty and abjectness, she has to take initiative to assimilate herself to the economic and technological advancements around the globe. If Mr Shah and the inmates of Vishram Society welcome such transformations they are not wholly blameworthy. Similarly, if Masterji holds the old values rigidly quite hindering developments his unmalleability is not exculpable. Herein lies also the conflict between the individual independence and community welfare. When Masterji's private stubbornness is in clash with the public benefits, his conservativeness has also been much excoriated. As Alan White argues, "Masterji's grandstanding has removed any trace of empathy for the people around him. They are living in difficult circumstances and needn't any more. Is he any less selfish than Shah?" (White)

Masterji's adherence to old India is more emphatically questioned when his own son Gaurav expresses his long suppressed detestation against his father. Gaurav's encounter with his father provides a complex ramification in the apparent dichotomy between the evil Dharmen Shah and the honest Masterji. According to Gaurav, Masterji is not as simple as he

appears to be. Gaurav thinks his father's meaningless austerity and parsimoniousness have always been the hindrances in the economic fulfilment for them. He also alleges Masterji of appropriating the gold jewellery which was kept for Gaurav's wife by his dead mother. The most shocking allegation against his father comes when he claims that his father was responsible for the death of Sandhya, Gaurav's sister. Gaurav also does not approve of his father's impractical ideology of clinging to old India: 'It's people like you who are holding this country back, Father. Saying no to everything' (298). Gaurav's encounter with his father thus smears Masterji's character with a great deal of suspicion. As Marcela Valdes questions Masterji's character diversely by writing:

Vain, shrewd and stubborn, he [Masterji] is one of the most delightfully contradictory characters to appear in recent fiction. Is Masterji's refusal meant to protect a more vulnerable tenant? Is he holding out for more cash? Is he simply afraid of change? Does he relish the sensation of power? Is his refusal rooted in incorruptible principle or dictatorial ego? (Valdes)

By contrasting the incorrigible narcissism and indomitable egocentrism in Masterji, Dharmen Shah even appears to be a saviour for the inmates of Vishram Society. It seems only Shah, like a true Messiah, can redeem the residents of Vishram Society from their abject economic plight. But the very character of Dharmen Shah is also full of ambivalence and ambiguity like that of Masterji. He may appear to be an upholder of New India but actually he is the most utilitarian and materialistic businessman whose main motive is to amass money by exploiting the marginalized people. Mr. Shah's 'wise sayings' (94) are full of pithy pragmatism and terse utilitarianism at the cost of humanity: '*When it comes to work – hurry, hurry, hurry. When it comes to payment – delay, delay, delay*' (94). The rich realtor is always keen on making money by brutally extracting the labour of the poverty-ridden people. In the battle between Shah and Masterji when Shah realises that he is unable to force Masterji surrender to him he even plans of murdering him by bribing the police:

The man was a teacher. If he died suddenly, there would be an immediate suspect. The police would come to Malabar Hill and press his doorbell the next morning.

On the other hand, the palms of the policemen had been well greased. He might get away with it if the job were done well: scientifically, no fingerprints left behind. (289-290)

Thus, 'Dharmen Shah's persona', observes Valiyamattam, 'is clearly the product of the massive, silent class war that is fought in India every single moment' (Valiyamattam). In this class struggle Masterji becomes a one man army to fight against not only the upper class Mr Shah but also his agents, who are surprisingly his old companions and neighbours. The humiliation, demoralization, alienation and even physical assaults which Masterji has undergone are intolerable, but he has shown the Gandhian non-violence and never yields before the authoritarian Mr Shah. He would have been all alone in his suffering and struggle, had it not been for his realisation that he is also a part of the whole marginalized exploited class in society. Remembering the faces of the daily labourers he met at Crawford market he perceives that all the power and struggle of the marginalized class have been unified and he has become a part of that unified force. Therefore, his suffering is highly symbolic as he becomes an embodiment of the marginalized people, who are always threatened, suppressed and exploited by the upper class centre:

Now a ray of sun enter the compartment and their varied faces glowed like a single human light refracted into colours. He searched for the face of the day-labourer from Crawford Market; he could not find him, but there were others like him. The vibrating green cushions and the green-painted walls of the carriage were luminous around them. 'Calm down, Masterji,' the radiant man in the white shirts said, 'for we are all with you.' He understood now that he had not struck the two boys down: *they* had done it for him. Beyond the grille, the faces in the yellow second-class compartment turned to him, and said, 'We are with you too.' Around him they stood thick and close; he felt hands come into his hand; and every murmur, every whisper, every jarring of the train said, "You were never born and you will never die: you cannot hurt and cannot be hurt: you are invincible, immortal, indestructible". (LMT 341-342)

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Masterji, in spite of having no support from his neighbours and family members possesses his unconquerable will power and the feeling of solidarity with the marginalized class. He shows his dauntless resistance in the clash between the rich and the poor, corruption



and integrity, privileged class greed and middle class morality, upper class exploitation and individual freedom. Commenting on Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* Ashish Gupta writes:

Adiga has drawn most authentically the contemporary picture of Mumbai –the grime, lawlessness, corruption, moral disintegration, greed, fabulous wealth and abject misery, a world in which predators always triumph, where people of integrity and good will are almost always gobbled up. (Gupta 90)

Upper class people like Dharmen Shah really prospers in society, whereas the men of integrity like Masterji are pushed to periphery, stunted and even inhumanly murdered. The war between the two can therefore be interpreted as the eternal class conflicts between the haves and have-nots, the privileged and the underprivileged, the centre and the margin. As Mrs S. Monika observes:

*Last Man in Tower* is the story of money and power, luxury and deprivation; the story of a small apartment building and its owner occupants tell how the rich and the poor are divided in India. The rich are supposed to be strong and the poor weak. The power of Dharmen Shah is the power of rich people in the society, whereas the sufferings of Masterji show the painful suffering of poor class and the weak people in India. (Monika 42)

In this war Masterji's life is terminated by the very inmates of the tower under the guileful manipulation of the rich mogul. But this does not imply that the voice of the marginalized and the freedom of the individual are suppressed forever. The resilience of the banyan tree at the end of the novel is symbolically suggestive of Masterji's resistance, which is an embodiment of the daily struggle of the marginalized section in contemporary society: 'Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free' (419).

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