

Last Man in the Tower (2011)

Story *Last man in the Tower* is Aravind Adiga's second novel, following his debut and Booker Prize-winner *The White Tiger* (2008). Like that first book, *Last Man* is a savagely comic exploration of modern Indian society and politics. Unlike the first book, however, the story begins in Bombay, where Dharmen Shah, a property developer has his eye on a two-building site belonging to the Vishram Society. Shah wants to acquire it, tear it down and build a high-rise of luxury flats called 'Shanghai.' Shah makes an offer of \$330,000 to each flat-owner, which is attractive, and most of the residents are eager to take the money and leave. But not everyone. One older woman is blind and fears she won't be able to find her way around a new building. Another, having been cheated in the past, is skeptical of 'deals.' Shah is determined and ruthless to achieve his goal, but because the buildings are a cooperative, everyone must agree to the sale. Just one holdout means no deal. Shah and his cronies get to work on the three holdouts, and two eventually cave in. The 'last man in the tower' is Yogesh Murthy, known as Masterji, a retired teacher who disdains money and wishes to retain the flat as part of the memory of his deceased wife and daughter. Things get nasty, with Shah employing strong-arm tactics and neighbours turning on Masterji, who was once their friend. In desperation, the other residents in the building attack Masterji, kill him and throw him off a roof. The death is ruled an 'accident', the residents get their cash and Shah has his property. In the final chapter, we learn about the residents, who are now living happily in new accommodation, benefitting from Shah's generous offer. Two of them, however, have realised that what they did was wrong and devote their lives to helping others less fortunate.

Adiga manages this stand-off well. There's a darkly comic streak to the neighbours' avaricious machinations. This recalls the gleeful vengeance of Balram, whose rise from wily son of a rural rickshaw-puller to outlaw entrepreneur in Bangalore's boom won the Man Booker Prize for Adiga's debut, *The White Tiger*. The righteous energy of the underdog galvanises Adiga's fiction, from the injustice and corruption that framed Balram's origins to the richly textured short stories of a fictional Goan town in his excellent *Between the Assassinations*. Underpinning Adiga's seemingly genial vignettes was the casual brutality of indigent life, which boiled into outrage against the suffocating injustice of poverty and discrimination.

Characters

Dharmen Shah Dharmen Shah is the villain of the piece, a rapacious property developer in rapidly developing Bombay. He is self-indulgent and brooks no opposition to his desires. Although he is generous to his own employees and to those whom he decides to 'buy out,' that largesse is only a means to an end, and he has no scruples about the methods used to acquire property. He is a widower, who maintains two homes. In one he lives with his son, Satish; in the other he has installed his lover. Shah has large appetites, both financial and physical, and is in poor health.

Yogesh Murthy Yogesh Murthy is known as Masterji ('sir') because he is a retired teacher. Like Shah, he is widowed, but his only son has migrated to around part of the city, leaving him all alone, in a flat in the property Shah wants to buy. Masterji, who (unlike Shah) has controlled his appetites, won't sell because he cherishes his memories of the past. He is well liked by his neighbours because he has dignity, until, that is, he stands in the way of them getting \$330,000. While he appears to be the victim, we sense a whiff of self-righteousness in his refusal to sell and perhaps a lack of generosity in his standing in the way of others benefiting from the sale.

Mr Pinto Mr Pinto, a retired accountant, is one of the three holdouts, who refuse Shah's offer. He and his wife, also retired, are 'good' middle-class people, who worked hard and saved for their old age. When Shah comes with his offer, however, they are torn between their loyalty to their long-standing friend, Masterji, and their desire to send some dollars to their children, who are struggling in the US.

Themes

Moral dilemma This complex novel is not a morality play or a satire with a definite message. Rather, it poses a number of difficult dilemmas that ordinary people may face in their lives. Greed, we all agree, is not a good thing, but when does normal self-interest end and greed begin? This is the

question that Adiga asks us in telling the story of the sale of a cooperatively-owned property in Bombay. Many of the residents have problems that the money offered by the developer would solve: one couple have a child with Downs syndrome; another have children in the US who find it difficult to survive there; another man needs around-the-clock medical care. Should one man, however virtuous, stand in the way of others in need?

Sham respectability The novel begins with a description of the property that Shah wants to buy, describing it and its residents as 'respectable.' Adiga writes, 'If the residents of Tower A, Vishram Society, pride themselves on anything, it is their respectability – their "*pucca*" way of life in their "unimpeachably *pucca*" apartment building.' The building may now be in a slum, on the flight path to the noisy airport, its water and electricity supplies intermittent, its façade 'rainwater-stained and fungus-licked,' but it is a building of middle-class virtue. It started out as a residence for Roman Catholics, but it soon admitted Hindus and 'the better kind of Muslim'. It is an example of cooperative living, of social cohesion and neighbourliness. All of this, however, is demolished by the author when the property developer makes his offer and divisions come to the surface. Shah knows that the residents will do his dirty work for him. They will smear faeces on Masterji's door; they will write angry anonymous letters to him; they will, in the end, with the singing of patriotic songs in the background, kill him.

Disparity The divisions within the cooperative society are only a microscopic example of those that render Indian society unequal. The gap between rich and poor in Bombay (and other cities) is vividly described in this passage on Versova Beach: '...half of the sand was reserved for the rich, who defecated in their towers, the other half for slum dwellers, who did so near the waves.' Adiga's fiction has been called 'Dickensian' in its socio-economic breadth, portraying people in all sorts of situations, with depth and insight. Dickens would certainly have nodded if he had heard Shah's statement that 'in a socialist economy, even the small businessman has to be a thief to prosper.'