

LAST MAN IN THE TOWER

Aravind Adiga

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.

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.'

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.

SHAH (Ambitious)

Character Shah arrived in Bombay with ten rupees in his pocket and rose to become a property tycoon wearing gold jewellery. He is ruthless in his pursuit of acquiring more and more property, building taller and taller buildings and amassing more and more money. He wages a campaign of dirty tricks against residents who hold out against his offer to purchase a specific building, with a tower (hence the title of the novel). He wants to demolish it and build a high-rise that he will call Shanghai because he admires the Chinese energy in property development. 'China,' he says, 'has roads as far as the eye can see, skyscrapers, everything clean, beautiful...those Chinese have all the will power in the world. And here we haven't had ten minutes of will power since Independence.' This is Mr Shah, the rapacious, corrupt property mogul. On the other hand, Adiga is too good a novelist to create one-dimensional characters. Shah, for example, pays his employees well, spends a lot of time beside them on the building sites and makes generous offers when acquiring a property. (Of course, that generosity is a self-serving, shrewd tactic to facilitate his acquisition.) We also feel some sympathy for a man who suffers from a lung disease and whose respiratory machine has been destroyed by the dust from his own building sites. With his wife long dead, he has a Bollywood wannabe lover, but he is only too aware that she is attracted to him for money only. When his son gets into trouble with the police, he wants to censure him but accepts with regret that, given his own record of corruption and crime, he cannot.

Activities Shah is devoted to his business. He spends most of his time acquiring property, demolishing it and erecting new, luxury flats. In the novel, we see him meeting with investors at expensive restaurants and plotting with his henchmen to carry out his campaign designed to get the residents to accept his offer to buy their flats. He lives a split life, spending some time in the 'family' home with his only son and the rest in a seafront flat where he has installed his lover.

Illustrative Moments

Ambition Shah is driven by personal ambition, a determination that becomes a philosophy and call for a new India to shake off the torpor of its Gandhian abstinence and lethargy. His vision of the new Bombay is revealed during an argument with his moral opposite, the self-denying Masterji, the 'last man in the tower.' When Masterji refuses, yet again, to accept his generous offer to sell up and move, Shah is puzzled. 'What do you want?' he asks. 'A man who does not want: who has no secret spaces in his heart into which a little more cash can be stuffed, what kind of man is that?' Masterji tries to

Generous Shah's wealth enables him to play the role of philanthropist, on a small scale. The corrupt property developer is not without his humanity and this is illustrated in a scene toward the end of the novel. Shah and his associate are walking along the beach in front of the building they are trying to buy. They encounter a poor boy with a lovely horse, used to take people on rides for a few rupees. The boy seems to be talking to his horse. Shah speaks to him, asks him how long he has been in Bombay (a few months) and where he's come from (central India). Contemplating the boy, Shah offers him a 100-rupee note, which the boy doesn't take and asks what it is for. 'Because I feel like it,' Shah says. 'Take it for your horse. I like looking at beautiful things.' Then he advises the boy not to talk to his horse all the time. 'You should look around you, at people. Rich people. Successful people. You should ask yourself, what does he have that I don't have? That way you go up in life.'

Appetite Unlike his enemy, the abstemious Masterji, Shah is a creature of insatiable appetite. He gobbles up buildings, he gorges on wealth and he eats large, expensive meals. A good illustration of this characteristic occurs in chapter 5, when Shah is waiting in a restaurant for his glitzy girlfriend to join him. Adiga combines Shah's gastronomic and financial greed in a wonderful description: 'The ceiling of the restaurant was vaulted, an allusion to the caves of Ajanta; the wall opposite the aquarium was covered with a bas-relief of the great monuments of Paris...A waiter brought a whole lobster...More food came: crab, fish curry, a prawn biryani...Maybe she isn't going to come, Shah thought, as he tore apart the bread...She had quoted God's name, after all. 'By the Lord Jesus Christ, I will.' He wondered which of the four cream spreads to dip his bread in. Remember, Shah told himself, a person who quotes Jesus is not, in real-estate terms, a Christian. No. A person who quotes Jesus is looking for a higher price to sell.'

MASTERJI (Resilient)

Character Masterji (Jogesh Murthy) is a retired teacher (hence 'master-ji, or 'sir') who lives in a building in Bombay that is the target of a property developer. In many ways, Masterji is the polar opposite of the rapacious property developer, Mr Shah. Masterji is a decent man, polite, quiet and considerate of others. He has no interest in financial gain and wishes only to live with the glow of memories of his deceased wife.

And yet, Adiga skilfully paints a more ambivalent portrait of this 'hero,' the last man in the tower' who, until the very end, at least, prevents the 'villain' Shah from acquiring the building. His late conversion to Hindu ritual and philosophy, although understandable given his age and bereavement, is tainted by a sense of self-importance. And his refusal to give in to Shah, while at first admirable in its opposition to unbridled profit-seeking, begins to look a little suspect by the end. After all, his proclamations about 'not taking the devil's money' look a little self-righteous when it means that everyone else is denied such a generous offer (400 times the average annual income in Bombay). Can the exercise of individual virtue sometimes work against the common good?

Activities Masterji spends most of his time inside his flat, doing yoga exercises and reading Hindu religious texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita. He often goes to visit his son and daughter-in-law, who live in a different part of Bombay. In the evening, he eats dinner with a Roman Catholic neighbour and his wife; after his wife's death, he learned to eat meat and seafood from them. Usually, he brings a 'fistful of coriander or ginger, which he deposits on their table.'

Illustrative moments

Hopeful Amid the despicable characters in Bombay's business sphere, including petty loan sharks, small-time con-men and mega property developers, Masterji and his values shine like a beacon of hope. As he fights against Shah, Masterji gains a measure of optimism. One evening, as he looks out of his window and over the big city, he has an inspiration: 'In the dark dirty valley under the concrete overpass half-naked labourers pushed and slogged, with such little hope that things might improve for them. Yet they pushed: they fought . . . the straining coolies looked like symbols: hieroglyphs of a future, a future that was colossal. Masterji gazed at the light behind the dirty buildings. It looked like another Bombay waiting to be born. . . . Each one of the solitary, lost, broken men around him had a place in it. But for now their common duty was to fight. . . . Masterji . . . felt for the first time since his wife had died—that he was not alone in the world.'

Resilient While Masterji has minor character flaws, he is clearly an admirable figure for his persistence in refusing to 'give in' to the property developer's offer to buy the building. Even when his neighbours in the building, eager to take the enormous cash on offer for selling their flats, turn against him, he refuses to budge. His erstwhile friends smear faeces on his door, send him nasty letters and argue angrily with him, but he remains resilient. The best example of his persistence comes in the form of a symbol on the final page: a banyan tree that grows in the garden of the building. The building itself has been bought by the developer and demolished to make way for luxury flats. But the tree, like Masterji's spirit, survives amid the rubble, barbed wire and broken glass. The banyan tree, associated with ancient Indian wisdom and compassion, still lives. As the final sentence declares, 'Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free.'

Dignified Masterji is an old man who suffers with dignity. An illuminating and slightly humorous example comes early on in the novel, when he is enduring a long train ride from his son's flat back to his own flat. He is jostled by crowds, no one gives him a seat, he holds onto a pole and is nearly thrown off his feet. People smell bad, they cough, they shout and they step on his feet. Adiga describes his reaction to all this physical suffering like this: 'He remembered a line from his college *Hamlet*. 'The *thousand* natural shocks that flesh is heir to.' Shakespeare, he thought, had underestimated the trauma of life in Mumbai by a big margin.'

Mr PINTO (Troubled)

Character Mr Pinto is a retired accountant who lives with his wife in the titular (and doomed) tower and becomes one of the few who refuse a property developer's offer to purchase their flat. His pension from the Britannica Biscuit company is meagre and refusing the 'generous' offer from Mr Shah is not easy. In particular, Mr Pinto and his wife want to send money to their children who now live in the US, where they find life very expensive. Mr Pinto is a kind man, who invites Masterji, who has just lost his wife, to eat with him and his wife every evening in their apartment. Mr Pinto is also very scrupulous in all his financial transactions, especially with his friend, Masterji. For the thirty two years of their friendship, Mr Pinto has kept a 'No Argument Book,' in which he has recorded every detail of any cash that passes between them. Although Mr Pinto is principled about his transactions with individuals, he does sometimes bend the rules with governments and property developers. Once, before he took a trip to the USA, he converted a large sum of rupees into dollars on the black market. When he was leaving, he didn't need the dollars and converted them into two gold bars, which he concealed in his baggage. He is troubled by Mr Shah's offer, which he hates in principle but which would also solve all his financial difficulties.

Activities Although retired, Mr Pinto maintains a healthy interest in world financial news and is often glued to the television to catch the latest ups and downs on stock markets. He also frequently goes out to lunch with his long-term friend, Masterji. He sometimes takes walks with his wife, Shelley, out on the Bombay seafront. He likes to go to the residents' association meetings for his apartment block because he is the 'treasurer' and has all the facts and figures at his fingertips.

Illustrative moments

Eccentric Mr Pinto's eccentricity is best illustrated by his 'No Argument Book', which he maintains in order to make sure that he and Masterji do not disagree about who owes what to whom. One day, when he and Masterji are eating in a restaurant, Mr Pinto pulls out this heavy ledger and begins to fill

in the date. Masterji tells him to put it away, saying that it was embarrassing. Mr Pinto agrees but not before adding, 'You still owe me two and a half rupees.' Masterji expresses surprise and asks for details. 'Sure,' says Mr Pinto, leafing back through the pages of the ledger, 'the money I gave you for that newspaper you bought last week.' But it turns out that Masterji did not give him any money. As the author explains, 'being an accountant, Masterji often deflected his worries into money talk.'

Principled However eccentric, Mr Pinto is a deeply principled man who will not give in to the strong-arm tactics of Shah, who is determined to acquire his and everyone else's flat. Despite threatening phone calls and letters, Mr Pinto holds firm against the developer's pressure. He senses, without being able to articulate it, that the developer represents the entrepreneurial greed that is transforming Bombay. His anger at this man, and what he represents, explodes in one scene, when he picks up the telephone and is told that 'something will happen to your wife, if you don't sign the agreement.' Mr Pinto is old and has few resources, but he possesses an inner moral compass that points him in the right direction.

Troubled Despite his uncompromising moral rejection of Shah's offer, Mr Pinto cannot completely erase it from his mind. It is a large amount of money and would solve all their financial problems. Part of the drama that builds toward the end of the novel, which concludes in spectacular fashion, is this unresolved issue in Mr Pinto's conscience. A good illustration of his anxiety occurs in a scene that takes place in his flat. His wife, Shelley, has just awoken from a nap and finds her husband scribbling away on the dining table, just like he used to when he was an accountant. When she asks him if anything is worrying him, he replies, 'No, but I'm thinking. How big is our place?' She gives him the square footage and he scribbles again. His wife asks what he is doing and he takes time to answer. 'I'm just calculating. I was an accountant. It's in my blood.' Then he tells her that he is considering Shah's offer and is trying to decide how much it would be (the offer is based on square feet of a flat). 'But you can't be thinking that!' she says. 'I'm just cal-cu-la-ting', he says. 'Just thinking it over.' But those thoughts refuse to go away and haunt him until the end.