

Masterji (in Adiga's novel *The Last Man in the Tower*) 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.'