

Shah (in Adiga's novel *The Last Man in the Tower*) 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 than I don't have? That way you go up in life.'

Appetite Unlike the 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.'