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Research Article



Globalization and Redevelopment: The Crux of Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

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Abstract

The metro cities of India are under the influence of the real estate business. Mumbai, the center of India's commerce, is not exempt from the gentrification process. Mumbai is a city of new money and rising real estate in the twenty-first century. The novel *Last Man in Tower* raises the issues of globalization and redevelopment in Mumbai in the last few years. Further, Globalization has widely affected the morals of the social and cultural arena too. The novel also examines how English literature is affected by the ever-evolving current trends in the

postcolonial age by globalisation, which is a sort of neo-colonialism. Like his debut novel *The White Tiger*, this novel also, Adiga has become the voice of the marginalized section by exposing the pitfall of urban development. This propulsive, explosive, insightful story coming out of the signature wit and magic of Adiga presents several interlinked issues of the teeming city of Mumbai. With great courage, Aravind Adiga explores the theme of lawlessness as the protagonist, Master Yogesh Murthy fails to receive justice and support from law, order, and even from the media. The crux of the novel revolves around the duality of human existence in the modern world and raises the question of whose rights should be preserved in case of a conflict between an individual and society. There are grave consequences of the redevelopment of societies which include not the only issue of compensation but also the larger issue of the acquisition of land, resettlement, rehabilitation, and participation in negotiation which can mitigate the darker side of redevelopment. The novel may be acclaimed as an example of post-modernist ethos seeking to explore the modern way of life. The present paper attempts to throw light on redevelopment and its social, economic, and political impact on society.

Keywords: Redevelopment, Globalization, Societies, Modernity, Masterji, Tower, Political impact, Developer, Sign, Agreement, Rehabilitation

Published in 2011, Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* deals with this process of gentrification and its effects on people. *Last Man in Tower* has made a momentous impact in English Literature dealing with not only one truth but several blatant truths. The novel focuses on the ongoing real estate issues in Mumbai, the redevelopment of societies, and its hazardous effects on the common mass. It presents a shrewd glimpse of the depressing picture of Mumbai as "slurping of the sea, edging towards another end of the way like a snake's tongue, hissing through salt water, there's more land here, more land".

The protagonist of the novel, retired school teacher Master Yogesh Murthy affectionately known as Masterji is a teacher of Physics and lives alone in a decaying coop apartment building in the Vishram society because his wife, Purnima, and daughter have recently passed away and his son Gaurav lives in some other flat with his wife and son. The conflict in the book is between two opposing forces: the retired teacher, who represents postcolonial resistance, and the rapacious developer, who represents the neo-colonial paradigm. An impatient and impulsive younger generation that has effectively adapted to handle the chances, difficulties, and risks of a new rising modern world is forced to engage in conflict with the dignified man of strong convictions.

The dwelling tower, Vishram Society was erected as an experience in gentrification with the hope of 'Good Housing For Good Indians' (*Last Man in Tower* 04) to serve as a model but the intention with which the tower was erected remains in the initial stage only and gets absent in progress of the course of developing India. It reflects the worried and concerned citizens striving for a better future. The location of the tower is a symbolic example of developing India amid miserable slums presenting a sarcasm of a utopian dream of 'Developed India'. The following lines will reflect the condition of the tower: "The face of this tower, once

pink, is now a rainwater-stained, fungus-licked grey, although veins of the primordial pink show wherever the roofing has protected the walls from the monsoon rains” (*Last Man in Tower*, 5).

The novel, *Last Man in Tower* reflects the condition of the present time the redevelopment of housing societies is advancing rapidly in metro cities like Mumbai and the redevelopers have become so potent and persuasive that they and their goons feel no hesitation in acquiring the lands of the people whichever they like to turn into luxury malls, shopping complexes or celebrities' houses by hook or by crook. Dharmen Shah, the property developer and antagonist of the novel is “a proud tax-paying resident of Mumbai” To fulfill his dream project, he does not hesitate in threatening, beating up, or even murdering people. Sometimes he also uses sweeteners i.e. he makes some extra inducement to some influential person of society for his benefit. Shahmugham his “left hand man” wishes to fulfill his dream vision by destroying the building and put up luxury apartments with a desire to astound the people with his project, the Shanghai. Under the influence of constructors and redevelopment, Mumbai has undergone sweeping vicissitudes and Mrs. Rego is a witness of it:

From Catherine she heard about big changes in Bandra. One by one, the old mansions on Water field Road were melted down like ingots-even her own Uncle Coelho's. It was always the same builder, Karim Ali, who broke down the houses. When he wanted to snatch Uncle Coelho's house on Water field Road to put up his apartment block for Bollywood stars, he too had come with sweets and smiles- it was all, ‘Uncle and Auntie’ at first. Later on, the threatening graffiti on the walls and the late-night phone calls, and finally the day when four teenagers burst in when Uncle Coelho was having dinner, put a cheque on one side of the table, a knife on the other, and said: ‘Either the knife or the cheque. Decide before dinner is over.’ This Confidence Shah was the same kind of man as that Karim Ali- how could anyone believe those oily smiles, those greasy sweets? Behind the smiles were lies and knives. (*Last Man in Tower*, 168)

The condition of the residents of Tower. It resembles that of Indians. Just as the Indians have but to adapt themselves to the existing system of the country, the residents also feel compelled to do so because Kothari, the secretary of tower A is so slothful that he never solves the disputes of the residents of the building and the condition is: “People were forced to adjust; temporary compromises congealed. And life went on” (*Last Man in Tower*, 17).

To convert his dream project into reality, Shah offers an extraordinary sum of money which is 250% of market value. One by one human greed and personal reasons make all the residents surrender. They agreed before the mouthwatering offer of Shah. All the residents have their rip, sensibilities and individual reasons to accept the offer. The restless Ibrahim Kudwa, the owner of cyber café does not take time in getting agreed to vacate the building as “Instead of a man's soul, he had developed a cockroach's antennae inside him” (*Last Man in Tower*, 269). He is no better than a woman in his mood swings with his mantra “a man with a bad stomach should never be asked to make decisions. The social worker Georgina Rego does not have any liking for the amoral rebuilders but she accepts the offer just to trump her own sibling, Catherine who is much more prosperous than she is. Still, Masterji and Pinto couple are among

those for whom the old clattering-down building stands for more than land value. Retired Mr Pinto is the oldest friend of Masterji. He has been an accountant for the Britannia Biscuit Company and his friendship with Masterji is 32 years old. The Pinto couple keeps suppressing the desire of sending dollar to their children in America because of their friendship and faithfulness to Masterji until Mr Pinto is threatened with putting stick on his head and frightened of a knife next time. Mr Pinto tells Masterji the meaning of wanting nothing as how he falls into the gutter and his foot gets sprained: “He said he was going to hurt...my wife—at her age—old enough to be his grandmother. He... said he was going to come with a knife next time... he... and then I got frightened and fell into the gutter” (*Last Man in Tower*, 259)

After Mr and Mrs Pinto agree to sign the agreement, Masterji becomes ‘last man in tower’ to oppose the offer of Dharmen Shah. He repudiates selling his morals to the greedy developer because he adhered to his principles but also memories of his dear late wife and his daughter associated with this building also check him to sign the agreement. All are bent on persuading Masterji to sign the agreement by hook or by crook. When neither the arguments of his fellow residents nor the more threatening attempts of the developer, the crafty Mr. Shah and his ‘left hand man’, Shahmunham get triumph in convincing Masterji, all the crooked ways are applied on Masterji to get him to agree to evacuate the building because it is the rule of flats that if even one resident does not get ready to sell the building, it cannot be sold.

An undeniable fact of the present time is that in the present time, many builders offer to buy a flat of the existing owner in exchange for a handsome amount of money. Moreover, some additional money may be referred to as a sweetener is also paid to the owner to make him settle at a different place. Most of the time there is a win-win situation for the redeveloper but sometimes when the owner does not agree, it may lead to grave consequences like in the story of Masterji. The story of Masterji's murder may be difficult to believe but nothing is shocking in the climax of the story as it is a very common happening in the present scenario. This is what happens to a man whose ethics are not to be sold in a society where everyone else has his price. There are so many stories of men and women who refuse to be driven out to make way for a shining glass and steel building or a factory or a shopping mall.

The novel brings to light this blatant truth of metro city Mumbai that an apartment building in Mumbai is a harmonious shelter until or unless the cunning builders have their avaricious eyes on it. The builder is called a dream merchant who is much more significant and influential than a film star. A film star may be a small dream merchant but the builder is a big dream merchant because “When they come out of a film, people throw away the tickets but the builder's name is always on the building. It becomes part of the family name” (*Last Man in Tower*, 111).

Redevelopment of housing societies is usually burdened with bitterness and complaint of high-handedness and correlation against the managing committee. This redevelopment has the potential to move and cause displacement of long-time residents and businesses. The poor and middle-class people are being forced out of their homes in the name of redevelopment. When Mary, the maid of Pintos is thrown out of her hut, Masterji poses the question: “How could they throw a poor woman like this out of her hut? How many were being forced out of

their homes— what was being done to this city in the name of progress?” (*Last Man in Tower*, 292)

Redevelopment is a business in which the redevelopers have to indulge themselves in the wrongdoing: “A dirty business, construction, and he had come up through its dirtiest part. Redevelopment. If you enjoy fish, you have to swallow a few bones.” (LMIT288)

Such construction annihilates the lives of innocent, downtrodden residents. Whenever some habitant of the building denies putting the signature and vacates the building, he/she is threatened by the builder or his assistant. Shahmungham, the left-hand Shah explains Ajwani, how one old man has to sign on the spot when he is threatened with a knife:

So, in a bolt of rage and calculation, six-foot-two-inch-tall Shahmungham ran up the stairs of the building, kicked open a door, grabbed something that was playing backgammon with its grandson, shoved its head out of a window, saying: Sign, motherfucker. (*Last Man in Tower*, 238)

Redevelopment has become the wonderland of dreams of common people whereas the redeveloper, their dream merchant. They never let any opportunity of making money go as can be reflected in the words of Shah to Kothari: “The builder is the one man in Bombay who never loses a fight” (*Last Man in Tower* 115).

Even Masterji's lawyer Mr Parekh whom he trusts the most and expects the proper guidance tries to threaten him of the power of real-estate men because he better knows the futile law of India:

SIR: these real-estate men pick on us senior citizens. Politicians and police are in their pay, you must know that. They shot an elected member of the city corporation dead the other day. In broad daylight. Didn't you see it in the papers? Old men must stick together in this new world. (*Last Man in Tower*, 284)

Even after so much pressure on him, Masterji does not move an inch from his decision. He decides to go to the police station: “This builder thinks she can frighten me? In my own home?” (*Last Man in Tower*, 260)

In the present time, the people think it a wise act not to go against potent redeveloper. Even Masterji's old student Noronha who is now editor of the Times of India also does not support him on the plea that ‘Last Man in Tower Fights Builder’ does not sound like a story to him. Gaurav is also conscious of the consequences of his father's attitude and therefore tries to persuade his father for signing the agreement and tries to teach his teacher's father by making him aware of the feasible cost of his stand:

Worry about knives, father: not the ocean. Haven't you seen those big posters near the construction sites? “Your own swimming pool, gym, TV, wedding hall, air-conditioning.” When you sell dreams like that you can murder anyone you want. The deadline is just a few days away. Keep saying no to Mr Shah and we'll find you one morning in a gutter. You. Are. All. Alone. (*Last Man in Tower*, 298-99)

The novel presents the bitter truth of changing society and how the perspective of money has the potential to corrupt a community. Like in the real life, the Vishram Society also contains a very potent combination of loyalty and class resentment. The residents of Vishram

Society are representative of the middle-class psyche of Mumbai attempting to share the rapid economic growth, sudden affluence and astonishingly glorious riches on account of neo-globalization. The neighbours of Masterji begin to grow violent to more violent towards him. They blame that Masterji wishes to stay in the building because of the next-door girl who has made him crazy. The novel throws light on the grotesque face of the city of Mumbai where politicians, gangsters, developers, and impostors of every kind oppress civilized citizens, forcing them into callous decisions. The novel portrays a persuasive but bleak glimpse of human nature as these upstanding residents then turn on one another 'like stoats in a sack'.

In this era of globalization, it does not come as surprise at all that Masterji is deceived by his neighbours, clergy, friends, lawyer, journalists and even his own son. Humanity cries when Masterji is murdered by his own neighbours whom he always regarded as the sharers of his cares. The novel is an example of how even decent people, under certain circumstances, can commit such a terrible massacre. After his murder, it is proved that because of his wife's death one year ago and his diabetes, Masterji has committed suicide. Thus, Masterji becomes the principal suspect in his own murder. Finally, the inspector decides that it must have been a suicide. Then what happens is not beyond expectations that gradually he is forgotten with the upcoming other scandals and scams: "For two months after his death, Masterji was the residue of dark glamour on the Vakola market, a layer of ash over the produce. The other scandals and other mysteries came. The vendors forgot him; Ajwani had become just another customer." (*Last Man in Tower*, 400-401)

Though *Last Man in Tower* belongs to the genre of fiction yet presents the facts of this postcolonial era. According to Adiga the novel is not the mere outcome of imagination but is an expression of what he himself has seen or felt. In an interview with Srijana Mitra Das, Adiga says:

The novel usually evolves out of something I've seen or read. *Last Man in Tower* began when I read an article in the Times of India in early 2007, describing a redevelopment offer by a builder, opposed by one old man in the building and spoke to some of the residents—so it evolved out of real life. I was looking for an exciting plot that would let me tell a story about Mumbai. (Interview with Das. Web. 26th June 2011.)

Though redevelopment is a big business yet destructive emotions of competition, jealousy or rivalry find room in it also. Why Mr. Shah wants to buy Vishram Society is the desire to beat his business competitor and rival Mr. Chaco:

Mr J. J. Chaco, the boss of the Ultimax Group, had made an offer of 81 lakh rupees (81,00,000) to that Muslim man for his one-room hut. It was just down the road from Vishram. Had they seen where the two new buildings were coming up? That was the Confidence Group. J.J. Chacko was their big rival. So, he was buying all the land right opposite the two new buildings. He already owned everything around the one-room hut; this one stubborn old Muslim kept saying No, No, No, so Mr Chacko bludgeoned him with this astronomical offer, calculated on God alone knows what basis. (*Last Man in Tower*, 37)

It is not so that Shah is unaware of the dirt of the redevelopment business yet he has no

compunction for it:

A dirty business, construction, and he had come up through its dirtiest part. Redevelopment. If you enjoy fish, you have to swallow a few bones. He made no apology for what he had had to do to get there. But this was not how the Shanghai was meant to happen: not after he had offered 19,000 rupees a square foot for an old, old building. (*Last Man in Tower*, 288)

In a socialist economy, the small businessman has to be a thief to prosper. Before he was twenty, he was smuggling goods from Dubai and Pakistan. Yes, what compunction did he have about dealt with the enemy, when he was treated as a bastard in his own country? The privateering felt natural; on the back of trucks marked as 'emergency wheat supplies', he shipped in cartons of foreign-made watches, and alarm clocks into Gujarat and Bombay. (*Last Man in Tower* 88)

The acute shortage of housing in the metro city Mumbai has made the business of Redevelopment of societies flourish day by day. Increasing numbers of slums are also the consequence of the want of housing. The novel highlights that the builders could cross any limit to see their dream project come true in the 1980's and 90's. Adiga writes about the lawlessness of 80's and 90's as follows: In the old days, if a builder had a problem, that problem would end up in pieces in the wet concrete: it became part of the building it had tried to obstruct. A bit of calcium was good for the foundations. (*Last Man in Tower*, 289)

Last Man in Tower very aptly depicts the causes as well as consequences of the redevelopment of societies having a different impact on different people. The reconstruction has given delight to few but tears to many:

Bombay, like a practitioner of yoga, was folding in on itself, as its center moved from the south, where there was no room to grow, to this swamp land near the airport. 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 hot plate, 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 leveled; 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.” (*Last Man in Tower* 37-38)

Thus, *Last Man in Tower* is an exhilarating, suspenseful, and exuberant novel presenting a well-crafted, riveting, enthralling tale of the murder of ethics-loving Masterji as a consequence of wanting nothing in this global world of materialism. By depicting the struggle of an individual against his society and system, Adiga has shown the dread reality behind the tall buildings and the compromise between the omnipotence of haves and the helplessness of have not's.

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