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## Greed, Corruption and Murder: *Last Man in Tower*

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### **Abstract:**

Adiga became a familiar name after he won the Booker Prize for *The White Tiger*. He is known for projecting the dark India rather than talking about 'India Shinning'. Adiga's second novel, *Last Man In Tower*, is an open statement about the diminishing values and loss of principles in India. While *The White Tiger* dealt with the darker world of Delhi, *Last Man in Tower* has exposed the power game in Mumbai. Under the name of globalization and development, the contractors in Mumbai are seizing land from the common men. Adiga has revealed the nexus between the contractors and the police. The politicians too are involved in a big way. Masterji is an old man of sixty-one who refuses to give in to the pressure of the contractors. Mr. Shah, the contractor, wants to demolish the Vishram Society and construct his dream project Shanghai. The only obstacle is Masterji, and Mr. Shah at first threatens him and later plots his murder. He, however, comes up with a better idea and he puts all the neighbours of Masterji against him. The novel holds suspense and mystery. The murder of Masterji is echo of the modern-day-sentiments where materialism overtakes humanism.

**Key words: Diminishing, disheveled, pseudo-humanism, Down's-syndrome.**

Adiga's characterization stands unparallel amongst the modern writers. His first novel *The White Tiger* stands testimony to this fact. He presents the man next door with such aplomb one almost identifies with the character. In all his works Adiga has not ventured into presenting the international characters. He has portrayed Indian life with Indian characters. His first novel dealt with the common man in Delhi. *The White Tiger* was a treat for the readers. Nothing was unfamiliar in the novel and yet everything seemed so unique. Adiga makes the readers smile at the eccentricities of his characters and weep with the poverty stricken multitude. Nothing seems out of canvas. Delhi almost came alive in the novel. His second novel *Last Man in Tower* has Mumbai-the heart-beat of India as a canvas. Once again Adiga has captured the essence of common-man's life and forced the readers to ponder on the diminishing values and principles of the modern civilized men

The novel *Last Man In Tower* deals with the alienation of a man who fights a world where values are distorted and relationships slowly diminishing. It is a story of fall of old values and coming up of new standards of living. Masterji is a metaphor for the old. He resists the change; cherishing the old. Adiga's protagonist has a choice- either to become a part of the corrupt system or stand-up in arms against the system. He chooses to fight a lonely battle where even his son deserts him. Very brilliantly Adiga has unmasked the phony world and its hypocrisy. He beings to face the stark reality that money has become the most deciding factor in every relationship and nothing else matters. The pseudo-humanism talks last only till personal

greed does not crop in. *Last Man In Tower* has consequently exposed Mumbai and its materialistic values.

Vishram Society was built in 1950s. The Vishram Society has two towers –Tower A and Tower B. The residents of the A-Tower are all middle-class people making several compromises to deal with the injustices of life. They live together not exactly with love but civil enough to tolerate each other's flaws. Once upon a time, it was a dream building for the residents but now the ravages of time is very much evident in the building. Mumbai, where to owe a roof is one of the hardest thing, the Vishram Society people are happy to have a place of their own. After peacefully co-existing for fifteen years, suddenly one fine day, they find their lives totally disheveled by a constructor who offers a dream in exchange of their flats. His only condition is that each and everyone should agree to the terms together. He would not deal with the individuals, it has to be total acceptance within the given deadline. The building secretary Mr. Kothari takes the responsibility to convince the dwellers of the unbelievable good offer. And here begins the real drama. The otherwise loving-caring- sympathetic people are suddenly transformed into greedy-selfish-insensitive people. Adiga has brilliantly captured this nuance of human-nature. He has ripped off the mask from the faces and bared the ugliness which forms the core of human-nature. A slight temptation; a distant dream of luxury is enough to turn man into beast.

When everyone in the A- Wing is excited with the offer the Confident Construction Company has given, there is this old man of sixty- one, Yogesh Murthy, a retired teacher fondly called Masterji, who is not comfortable with the idea of leaving his home and shifting to some new locality. He has emotional attachment with the flat. He has lived there with his wife, daughter and son. His nineteen year old daughter Sandhya, was killed in an accident when she was pushed out of the railway compartment. She lay bleeding on the tracks while no one bothered to take notice. This incident has left a mark on his heart and soul. His wife Purnima died one year back. Son Gaurav has left him alone and moved on with his wife and grand-son Ronak. Masterji has nothing to fall-back upon. His entire world is encompassed in the small flat which he is now forced to vacate.

*Last Man in Tower* is the story of Masterji and his crusade against the construction company. Initially, it is Masterji versus Mr. Dharmesh Shah, the constructor. However, slowly the battle turns Masterji against the other apartment owners. 'I am no longer fighting Mr. Shah, he thought. I am fighting my own neighbours.' ( 321) Mr. Pinto, one of Masterji's good friend is reluctant to accept the offer given by Mr. Shah for it sounds too good to be true. Shah's goons threaten Mr. Pinto with hockey-sticks and Mr. Pinto withdraws his support to Masterji.

Mrs. Puri, who stays on the same floor as Masterji is sympathetic towards Masterji. But now with the offer of a new home and some extra money she see Masterji's rejection as a big hurdle in her way. She has a son Ramesh, fondly called Ramu, who is eighteen years old and afflicted with Down's syndrome. She has visited every temple and mosque for her son. Now her only hope is the money she would receive against her flat.

Mr. Shah is a man with no morals. He lives a dirty life, visiting all sort of women, drinking, gambling and threatening people. He has a son, Satish, who is wasting his life in drugs and bad company. Somewhere in his mind Mr. Shah is well aware that his son is paying for his misdeeds. He calls it karma..the circle where the bad done comes around to settle score. He

blames himself for his son's life. "Shah touched the dark body on the disheveled bed. He felt the boy's future like a fever. Drugs, alcohol. Jail time. A spiral of trouble. All because of *his* karma."(290). Rosie is the mistress of Mr. Shah. He has no respect for her yet, he confides in her and shares his problems with her. "Every man wants to be remembered, Rosie. I'm no different. Once you fall ill, you think about these things. I began as a contractor, then did slum redevelopments because the big developers did not want to get their hands dirty. If I had to kiss this politician's arse, I did it; if I had to give that one bags of money for his elections, so be it. I climbed. Like a lizard I went up walls that were not mine to go up." (pg 87) Mr. Shah is painted as an unscrupulous man who would kill a retired old man for sake of his financial interest.

Mr. Shah is well versed in his business ethics (?). He sees bright prospects in the Vishram building, and is desperate to have it. The 'old man' as he calls masterji, is not a big issue for him. He can any time get him out of his way. He plots to kill masterji but is also thinking of other options. He is not worried about the Law and Order of the country. He is used to deal with the police and the court. As he states, "On the other hand, the palms of the policemen had been well greased. He might get away with it if the job were done well: scientifically, no fingerprints left behind. His reputation at Vakola would certainly improve: deep down everyone admires violence."(290) It is this violence that makes him sent goons to Masterji's flat to threaten him. He is provided with the duplicate keys by the friendly neighbours of Masterji. However, Masterji proves strong enough to deal with the goons and for ones his life has been saved.

The attack in his own flat makes Masterji aware of the kind of people he is dealing with. It breaks his heart to think of his own friends and neighbours turning against him. Does he not have the right to take his own decision? Why should he be forced? And will they all kill him because he is refusing to give up his own property? Masterji is now waking up to the reality of Mumbai. Money makes Mumbai move. No other relation matters. Friends, neighbours, relatives, and even his own son Gaurav disassociate themselves from Masterji. A little amount of money turns humans into vultures and Masterji begs the animals, "Come, all of you: protect me from human beings.( 346)

Gaurav thinks his father is losing his mind. He blames Masterji, calling his life a failure. He could have earned more, by any means. Masterji's good values have not done anything for the family. Gaurav feels that had his father made certain compromises, as other people do, his sister would have been alive "Maybe Sandhya would not have to take the train if you had made more money. Maybe she would have been in a taxi, safe, that day she was pushed out. She was my sister, I think of her too." 298.

He blames Masterji for all the misfortunes in their life. "You made my mother's life a living hell. Fighting with her over every five rupees she spent. Don't you remember what she said, on her deathbed, when I asked her if she had a good life? She said, I had a happy childhood, Gaurav. A happy childhood, Father-and nothing after that." (298.) Now he wants Masterji to give up the flat and make some money. Greed has turned him blind and he is unable to see the real cause of Masterji's refusal. Masterji is fighting a battle of principles, no one can threatened him and take away his possession by force. He sees this as a bad example for the coming generation. He questions Gaurav, 'Would you want Ronak to grow up in a city where he can be bullied or threatened in daylight? Gaurav: listen. Dhirubhai Ambani said he would salaam anyone to become the richest man in India. I've never salaamed anyone. This has been a city

where a free man could keep his dignity.’ (297). Finally realizing that his father is not relenting Gaurav puts up a notice in the building disowning his father.

Now Masterji realizes that he has to fight alone. It was not just a matter of his flat. It was now a fight for right values and principles. It was a war against the evil. ‘Until now he had only been conscious of fighting *against* someone: that builder. Now he sensed he was fighting *for* someone.’ (301)

Masterji is impervious to bribes and threats and Mr. Shah wants Masterji out of his way by all means. He knows it is not difficult. But now the newspapers are carrying the news of the crusade of one man against the builder. Now it will be pose a problem if something happens to Masterji. Fingers will be pointed at him, he will be the prime suspect. ‘Vishram was a middle-class building. The man was a teacher. If he died suddenly, there would be an immediate suspect. The police would come to the Malabar Hill and press his doorbell the next morning.( 290) He finally calls the secretary of the society and tell him that he won’t put his hands on Masterji. If anything has to be done they all have to do it. Kudwa sees the trap. He warns the apartment people of this. ‘ He pays, but he always delays his payments as long as possible. So why is he paying Tower B on time? Why is he paying them ahead of time? I was thinking about this all of today in my cyber-café. Now I see it. It’s so obvious. But some traps work like that: you have to see them to fall into them. When those people who are left behind see their neighbours getting the money, it will turn them mad with envy. I’m talking about *us*. He is turning good people into bad people. Changing our nature. Because he wants us to do it to Masterji ourselves,’ Kudwa said. (319.)

Adiga seems to have aimed at this in the novel. He has focused on the devil that dwells in every man. He has hit at the basic nature of man. Good people can be turned into bad people at the slightest of provocation. Relations die a sudden death, trust flies out of the window. Masks fall off and what remains is the naked ugly greed. We live in a society that thrives on violence and greed. No one cares for the retired old-man, not even his own son. His friends are plotting his murder. They want to throw him down the building. They want to prove that he committed suicide, that the tension and stress got Masterji to jump down from the terrace. Masterji is well aware of this. He knows his fate and yet he wants to fight for justice. The stark reality of life has hit him at a very wrong time of his life. He is old, without support and helpless. Every minute of the hour he waits for death. He wonders what death would look like. Would it have the face of Albert Pinto, his friend, or of Mr. Puri? Would it come disguised as Mr. Ajwani or as Mr. Kothari? He shuddered to think of it. ‘He covered his face in his blanket and breathed in. The game he played as a child: if you cannot see them, they cannot see you. You are safe in this darkness with your own breathing.’ (365.)

A lot of planning and plotting and conspiracy goes in as to who would push Masterji down the terrace. After a failed attempt they finally manage to complete the task in Masterji’s flat. They later carry the body to the terrace and throw it down. A suicide case is filed and it is stated that it was a ‘state of extreme depression’ that made Masterji take the drastic step. With the fall of Masterji also falls the building that had once stood on the foundation of brotherhood and humanity.

All the characters in the novel *Last Man In Tower* are well sketched. They seem to be man-next-door kind. The flaw is only that there are too many characters and the readers lose

track of them. Secondly certain questions remain unanswered. Why was Masterji so vehemently resisting the change? Is it his attachment to the building or simply his ego? Is it the sensation of power or urge to hold on to the old? Readers are left to find the answers.

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