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## **Images of Women in Arvind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower***

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### **Abstract:**

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Globalization has huge impact on the lives of women in India. It has led to economic changes that have raised more social and economical challenges for women, particularly for working-class and lower-caste women.

Modernization too has affected the younger generations in India, where girls are beginning to forgo the more traditional ways of Indian life and break gender stereotypes. This paper endeavours to show how women, middle-aged and young, have adjusted their lives and struggle for survival due to political and economic and social transformations that Globalization and Liberalisation has brought in metropolitan cities like Mumbai. Arvind Adiga has clearly depicted the changes in lives of women in Modern era post colonial, struggling and maintaining stability in the overall new situations, adapting to new ideas that was globally accepted.

**Keywords: Feminism, women's rights, struggle, stability.**

### **Introduction**

#### **Globalization**

Globalisation has huge impact on women in India. Some feminist argue that globalisation has led to economic changes that have raised more social and economical challenges for women, particularly for working-class and lower-caste women. Multinational companies in India have been seen to exploit the labour of 'young, underpaid and disadvantaged women' in free trade zones and sweat shops, and use 'Young lower middle class, educated women,' in call centres. These women have few effective labour rights, or rights to collective action.

## **Modernization**

Modern influences are affecting the younger girls where they are beginning to forgo the more traditional ways of Indian life and break gender stereotypes. In more developed areas, the idea of “dating,” or more specifically openly dating, has come into play, and the terms “girlfriend” and “boyfriend” are being used. Despite highly respectable careers, many women are unwelcomed in male-dominated country that go against sex and gender traditions in India.

## **Feminism in India**

Feminist class-consciousness came into focus in the 1970s, with feminist recognising the inequalities not just between men and women but also within power structures such as caste, tribe, language religion, class region etc. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the focus of the Indian feminist movement has gone beyond treating women as useful members of society and a right to parity, but also having the power to decide the course of their personal lives and right of self-determination. The patrilineal system and the ways of Indian life have been in effect so long that women accustomed to patriarchal system. They do not take full advantage of their constitutional rights because they are not properly aware or informed of them. Due to this, political parties do not invest much time in female candidates because there is a perception that they are a “wasted investment.” According to Heywood and Drake (as quoted in Bulbeck, 1999),

*“Third Wave feminism is for girls who want to be boys, boys who want to be girls....people who are white and black, gay and straight, masculine and feminine, or who are findings ways to be any and all of the above, successful individuals longing for success; tensions between striving for individual success and subordinating the individual to the cause; identifies formed within a relentlessly consumer-oriented culture but informed by a politics that has problems with consumption.”*

## **Arvind Adiga and his novel**

Arvind Adiga was born in Mangalore in 1974 and emigrated to Australia in his teens. He studied English literature at Columbia University, US and also studied at Oxford University, UK. Arvind Adiga states,

“When I was a boy in India, we lived in a closed-off, Socialist economy where just about everything was controlled by the government. It was a stagnant, largely corrupt system and this defined life. And in 1991 everything changed and the economy was opened up and what is called the New India began.”

Adiga’s views could be taken as representative of India’s large and growing middle and upper middle classes – especially those who grew up on the two sides of the “great divide”. He remembers the pre-liberalization era when he grew up in a “provincial town in a socialist country” before it became a “booming town with malls and call-centres”.

He is the author of three critically acclaimed works of fiction: the Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008), the short-story collection *Between the Assassinations* (2009) and the novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011). *The White Tiger* studies the contrast between India’s rise as a modern global economy and the crushing rural poverty as represented by Balram. Adiga’s second book *Between the Assassinations* features twelve interlinked short stories which revolve around different classes, castes and religions in India. His latest novel, *Last Man in Tower* depicts the story of a struggle for a slice of shining Mumbai real estate. In *Last Man in Tower* Adiga has depicted Mumbai as a commercial and financial hub which has emerged as a place of assorted opportunities.

### **Feminists in Last Man in Tower---A perspective**

The residents of Vishram Society (Tower A) being an essential part of Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* the novel begins with a plan of the tower and its various residents from the ground floor to the fifth floor. Vishram Society is a respectable, middle class housing Cooperative, built in 1959. Adiga writes : ...Vishram Society is anchored like a dreadnought of the middle-class respectability, ready to fire on anyone who might impugn the pucca quality of its inhabitants.” Adiga’s narrative is constructed around the “offer” which according to Mrs. Puri is a miracle; Mr. Puri however, attributes this miracle to the building’s steadfast middle-class lifestyle: “...and now all of us in this building, all of us good people, have been blessed by the Hand of God.”... “If this is really true,” she said, “it will be the first miracle of my life.” Arvind Adiga has depicted middle-aged women characters and their struggle for development and survival in domestic, socio-economic and political fields. Arvind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* explores the transitional phase in the lives of the people during post Nehruvian era due to the effect of Globalization, weak political system, vote bank politics and Liberalization. Traditional and moral values have

been replaced by modernity, materialistic gains in the name of growth and development in the society. Arvind Adiga's novel explores how people become alien to each other at times of need and much importance is given to materialism and consumerism.

Mrs. Puri is one such character in the novel who does not believe in live-in-relationship of grown-up girl and a boy, living together in a same flat in a city. She said to Kothari, Secretary of the building,

"Is it true, Kothari, what they say the early morning cat found in 3B's rubbish?" On which Kothari replied, "Among young people today, it is common thing for boy and girl to live without marriage. There is no sense of shame in the modern way of life, What do you expect me to do about it?" Dropping her voice she said, " I have a growing son. I don't want him living with the wrong kind of people. You should call Import-Export Hirandhani now." (pg no.22)

Mrs. Sangeeta Puri 52 year old has an 18 year old son Ramesh, afflicted with Down's Syndrome. Called as Secular by everyone, she keeps visiting various temples showcasing her faith in Gods, praying that her son's life be better and cured.

Mrs. Rego another character, is a Communist as called by everyone in the Society. Georgina Rego, 48 year old, is a social worker and has a son Sunil 14 year old and a daughter Sarah aged 11. As a social worker she runs an NGO nearby the society and helps many downtrodden people living in slum areas. She is well versed with many political views and socio-economic conditions, corruptions etc in the developing city like Mumbai. She understands every language of a politician and goons in the society. A staunch personality but Mrs. Rego is often tormented by the need to "trump" her well-to-do sister living in the same city. In reply to Mrs. Pinto about the offer of reclaiming the land, she says,

"Show people a little cash, and they will jump, dance, and run naked in the streets. That Muslim man is never going to see his money. These developers and builders are mafia. The other day they shot a member of the city corporation dead. It was in the papers."

As soon as she uttered these words, Mr. Puri and Mrs. Puri slipped away like doves before a thunderstorm. Further she says,

“Without migrants, this city would be dust. We are ruled by Fascists. Mrs. Puri, but everything is second-rate here, even our fascists. They don’t give us trains, don’t give us roads. All they do is beat up hard-working migrants.”

Ms. Meenakshi aged 25, single, is a Journalist, represents younger generation with modern views, shedding out cultural and traditional values. She is broad minded, agile, easy to adjust kind of personality. She occupies a rental flat in Vishram Society, often suspected having been involved in affairs because of incidents that she encounters with other members in the apartments. Following lines from the novels proves the incident with Masterji.

The door of 3B opened wide- light, laughter, music – a young man stepped out. Ms. Meenakshi, the journalist, loose-haired and wearing her nightie, had her hand on the young man’s shoulder as he took a big step into the hallway, which caused him to bump into the old school teacher. “Sorry,” the boy said. “I am sorry, sir.” He had bathed a few minutes ago, and Masterji smelled fresh soap. “Can’t you catch yourself?’ he shouted. (pg no.50)

Felicia Saldanha , a sober character aged 49, lives with her daughter Radhika, 20 year old in the ground floor of the Vishram Society. Her husband Mr. Saldhana, an Engineer, is said to work in Vizag. She too has dreams of sending her daughter abroad for education in Journalism. Mrs. Saldhana is a quiet retreating woman, her husband has not been seen in Vishram for years. She too is one of the middle class women who helplessly depend on other members in the apartment. Vishram Society members are well bonded with each other for peaceful existence and harmony. But she is also one of the neighbors who give in to the offer for reclaiming the Society land set forth by Mr. Shah, the builder. Mrs. Saldhana standing in a shapeless green gown; worry-lines cut her brow and strands of untidy silver coiled out of her hair, says,

“Masterji, my Radhika wants to study Journalism at Syracuse University. There was a Syracuse in the Roman empire. A place of learning. This one is in America. New York State. And they won’t give scholarships to Indians, so we have to pay for everything....”

### **Mrs. Shelley Pinto**

On the second floor, in 2A apartment in Vishram Society, resides Mrs. Shelley Pinto, aged 64 along with her husband Mr. Albert Pinto 67, retired accountant for the Britannia Biscuit Company. Mrs. Pinto was almost blind in her old age, walks with her hand on her husband’s shoulder, although she knew the compound well enough to navigate

it without her husband's help. In evenings they walked as a pair, she with her blind eyes, and her husband, with open mouth, as if sucking sight and breath from the other. Masterji has good relationship with this family. Mrs. Pinto serves him food and takes care of him since the death of Masterji's wife and daughter. They have very close friendly relation despite cultural differences which indicates peaceful harmonious environment in Vishram Society.

Mrs. Pinto though blind and submissive gathered courage to blame her husband when she received her daughter's letter Deepa in America. She was left all alone for a long time. On her husband's arrival she asked him about his whereabouts. He said, "The deadline has almost passed, Shelley. I really thought he would say yes in the end. Shelley, I really did." She spoke softly. "What will that Confidence Man do to him now, Mr. Pinto?" He said, "Anything could happen. These are not Christian men. These builders." She said, "Then you must save Masterji, Mr. Pinto. You owe it to him." "What do you mean?". She told, "The number of times you cheated him, Mr., Pinto. You owe him." "In the No-Argument book. When you were an accountant at the Britannia Company you cheated people at work. I think you cheated Masterji too." She further said she had been her wife for thirty –six years. She knows her husband very well. And whenever he was in happy mood, she thought he had cheated Masterji once again.

### **Rosie**

Another character is young and beautiful girl Rosie, who migrated to Mumbai as an aspiring model. She came in contact with Mr. Shah, builder at Versova through his mistress Nannu. Unfortunately she was arrested in Oshiwara gym, accused of stealing from women's locker. Mr. Shah immediately settled the matter and brought her to his house. Rosie visited film industries expecting for a role in films but was unsuccessful. With help of Mr. Shah she could set up a hair dressing studio of her own. She is one of those characters who migrate to big cities in search of fortune, to make their future. She was allowed to stay at Mr. Shah's house but on one condition that if she made eyes at anyone else, she would fly head-first into the Indian Ocean. Compromising with life she settled with Mr. Shah. There are hundreds of women, girls and young ladies who fall into such traps like prostitution etc. And Corrupt and powerful people like Mr. Shah whose only aim is to rise ahead in life, shedding out moral values and principles and dream about becoming one of the richest man in the city.

“Why don’t you introduce me to Satish, Uncle? I am in his age group, I can talk to him if he’s in trouble,” She asked, when he emerged, still rubbing his hair. He said, “I will bring you model of the Shanghai, Rosie. It’s so beautiful, you should see it.” On receiving no response, she said, “I am not your prostitute! I am not your property! I don’t give a shit about your fucking property”(pg no.91)

She was angry as there was no response from Mr. Shah, yet couldn’t be firm in her words. She realised that she was brought by Mr. Shah, given comfortable life, hence had to be submissive. She realised that her job was to prepare toast and entertain rich powerful people like Mr. Shah. She realised that she was appointed as an Assistant to him and not to interfere in his private matters like family.

### **Conclusion**

Arvind Adiga ‘s novel Last Man in Tower explores the lives of people to the very core, depicting their life style, their transformation adapting to new culture which is mostly unwelcomed by middle aged people. His novel explores the struggle and survival of each and every man in various levels. Mary, who works as a servant in Vishram Society, too struggles for a comfortable living along with her children in slum areas. His novel depicts women of different strata, working and domestic, their struggle, their wish to lead a high standard of living, accepting immoral ways even if they had to shed down their principles and cultural values, and deep affection of their neighbours. Arvind Adiga’s novel prove to be a mirror of the modern society in post Nehruvian era, Vishram society which promised to serve as an example of ‘Good Housing for Good Indians’ registered in 1959, just remained on papers.

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