11

Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*: The Locus of Ambivalence in Modern India

Mr. Vipul C Dabhi

A Research Scholar,

Department of English, MKBU, Bhavnagar, Gujarat.

ORCHID - https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0182-446X

Research Gate - https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Vipul-Dabhi-3

Web of Science - https://www.webofscience.com/wos/author/record/JPA-4667-2023

Abstract

The social institutions are dying from the morbid nature of capitalism. Capitalism proliferates the surreptitious credo and consumes the pillar of the whole nation. Furthermore, at present, many institutions are used to perpetuate capitalist ideology among the youth of a nation. The rise of the neoliberal agenda keeps propagating the belief that it is not that hard to find success if one works hard enough, normalizing the notion that the youth should blame themselves for their failures. However, the consequences are totally opposite and cruel. This leads to an ambivalent state of mind. In addition, academic institutions attempt to resist such a juggernaut. But it seems to be losing credibility by succumbing to the individualized rise. Similarly, *Last Man In Tower* by Aravind Adiga documents the rivalry of two men who are interested in owning the same flat in Mumbai. The novel sees neighbour turn against neighbour as their determination to secure the flat, each for his own purposes, causes them to

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 91

participate in increasingly dastardly schemes. The novel revolves around the theme of greed and how it has the power to drive us to do things of which we never dreamed we were capable.

The core essence of this paper is to focus upon the factors that led to the ambiguous state of mind among the people of the "Vishram Society" and what types of solutions have been offered to the so-called "Vishramites" by the capitalist and ambiguous Dharmen Shah. Not only that, Masterji, the representative of academia, persists in the socialistic norms but gets murdered by his own society members. Things become more horrible when all the members get what they were willing to give but yet everyone is suffering from guilt. It exposes the sense of self in a globalised world that either forces assassination, murder, or suicide. Although slower economic growth, widening inequality, societal divisions, amending laws, "individual happiness" raise disturbing questions about contemporary ideas of national development, Maybe this is an era of indiscriminate capitalism. Here Adiga leaves us with an ambiguous question. "Who is right—the champions of idealism or the practical developers of glittering cities that promise to take India out of centuries of backwardness?"

Key Words: Ambiguity, Capitalism, Suicide, Academia, Equity.

I. Introduction

Aravind Adiga is an Indian-Australian author born on October 23, 1974, in Chennai, India. He gained international acclaim with his debut novel, "The White Tiger," which won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2008. Adiga's writing often explores the complexities of modern India, addressing themes such as social inequality, economic disparity, and cultural shifts. His works provide a critical examination of contemporary Indian society, and he is recognized for his incisive and thought-provoking narratives. Apart from "The White Tiger," his other notable works include "Last Man in Tower" and "Between the Assassinations." Adiga's writing style is characterized by its sharp social commentary and a keen observation of the human condition in the context of India's rapid transformation.

"Last Man in Tower" is a novel written by Aravind Adiga, published in 2011. The story is set in Mumbai, India, and revolves around the residents of a once-close-knit apartment complex

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 92

called Vishram Society. The narrative unfolds as the residents are offered generous buyout deals to vacate their homes to make way for a new, luxurious building project. The central character, Yogesh Murthy, also known as Masterji, becomes the symbolic "last man in the tower" who resists the buyout, challenging the forces of change and modernization. The novel explores themes of ambition, greed, morality, and the impact of socioeconomic shifts on personal relationships. Through a cast of diverse characters, Adiga delves into the complexities of contemporary Indian society, offering a nuanced portrayal of the tensions between tradition and progress. "Last Man in Tower" is both a character-driven exploration and a social commentary, providing a compelling narrative that reflects on the dynamics of power, morality, and the human experience in the face of urban development and societal change. In Adiga's works, including "Last Man in Tower," the locus of ambivalence in the context of modern India often revolves around the intersection of tradition and rapid societal changes. Adiga skilfully portrays characters grappling with conflicting values, aspirations, and moral dilemmas in the evolving landscape of contemporary India.

The ambivalence is evident in the characters who navigate the complexities of traditional expectations and the lure of modern opportunities. Themes of social disparity, corruption, and the impact of globalization contribute to this ambivalence, creating a rich tapestry that reflects the diverse and contradictory facets of modern Indian society. Ambivalence in Indian literature often reflects the complexities of identity, culture, and societal norms. Writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have explored these themes in their works, examining the multifaceted nature of Indian society. Through nuanced characterizations and intricate plot dynamics, Adiga captures the tensions arising from the collision of tradition and progress. The characters often find themselves torn between the familiar past and the uncertain future, embodying the ambivalence inherent in a nation undergoing profound transformations.

II. Definition of "Ambivalence":

The following are the definitions associated with the term "Ambivalence."

Originally a psychological term borrowed from the German word Ambivalenz coined in 1910 by the Swiss Psychologist Eugen Bleuler.

The state of having two opposing feelings at the same time or being uncertain about how you feel. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings (such as attraction and repulsion) toward an object, person, or action. (Merriam Webster)

In post-colonial theory, 'the mixture of charm and revulsion in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized' (H. Bhabha 2004).

These definitions collectively describe the concept of ambivalence, which refers to the state of experiencing two conflicting or contradictory feelings simultaneously. Whether it's uncertainty about one's emotions, contradictory attitudes, or the complex relationship dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized in post-colonial theory, ambivalence captures the coexistence of opposing sentiments.

III. The locus of ambivalence in the context of modern India as portrayed in Aravind Adiga's works, particularly "Last Man in Tower."

1. Traditional Values vs. Modern Opportunities:

Many characters in Adiga's novels find themselves torn between adhering to traditional values deeply ingrained in Indian society and embracing the allure of modern opportunities. This creates a sense of ambivalence as individuals grapple with conflicting ideologies. In "Last Man in Tower," "Men of our generation, we have seen much trouble. Wars, emergencies, elections. We can survive" (Adiga 282). The residents of Vishram Society face a moral dilemma when offered lucrative buyouts for their homes. Some are tempted by the modern wealth and conveniences it promises, while others resist, holding onto the traditional significance of their homes.

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 94

2. Social Disparity and Economic Ambiguity:

Adiga explores the widening gap between social classes and the economic ambiguities that arise. The disparities between the affluent and the marginalized contribute to a sense of ambivalence as characters navigate their roles in this changing societal structure. The contrasting lives of characters in the same apartment complex highlight economic disparities. Some residents welcome the financial gains offered by the developer, while others grapple with the implications of displacing the less privileged for personal gain.

3. Corruption and Moral Dilemmas:

Adiga often portrays the prevalence of corruption in both public and private spheres. Characters face moral dilemmas as they navigate a society where ethical lines blur, leading to a pervasive sense of ambivalence. The bribes and unethical dealings within the narrative of "Last Man in Tower" force characters to confront their own moral compass. The choices they make in the face of corruption reveal the complexities of morality in a rapidly changing India.

4. Impact of Globalization on Identity:

Globalization brings new opportunities but also challenges traditional identities. Adiga explores how individuals grapple with their sense of self in the context of a globalized world, contributing to a complex web of ambivalence. Characters may feel a sense of displacement or loss of cultural identity as their communities transform due to global influences. This internal conflict adds layers to their struggles, creating a nuanced portrayal of the ambivalence surrounding identity.

IV. The Setting: Mumbai as a Microcosm

In "Last Man in Tower," Aravind Adiga intricately portrays Mumbai as a microcosm by focusing on the interactions and conflicts among the residents of the fictional Vishram Society, a dilapidated apartment complex. The novel delves into the lives of its diverse characters, each representing different socio-economic backgrounds, aspirations, and values. The microcosm of Vishram Society serves as a stage where Adiga examines the broader issues plaguing Mumbai and, by extension, contemporary urban India. Through the lens of

this community, the author explores the themes of greed, ambition, corruption, and the tension between tradition and progress. The characters in the novel grapple with the changing landscape of Mumbai, facing the looming threat of redevelopment. As they confront the allure of financial gain versus sentimental attachments to their homes, the narrative becomes a reflection of the city's larger struggles with rapid urbanization and the erosion of traditional values.

V. Character Analysis

For instance, the protagonist, Masterji, embodies both resilience and vulnerability as he grapples with societal changes. Ambivalence surfaces in his perspective, reflecting the complexity of human emotions and moral dilemmas. Other characters, such as the residents of the Vishram Society, showcase conflicting desires and loyalties. Their ambivalence mirrors broader societal tensions, highlighting the internal struggles faced when navigating moral choices in a changing world. The novel skilfully intertwines these individual character complexities, creating a rich tapestry that mirrors the multifaceted nature of society and explores the intricate interplay of personal and collective ambivalence.

VI. Socioeconomic Ambivalence

In "Last Man in Tower," economic disparities are exemplified by the divergent financial statuses of the residents. For instance, the affluent businessman Mr. Shah represents the upper echelon, while the struggling teacher Masterji symbolizes the lower economic strata. The modernization depicted in the novel is evident through the tempting offers made to the residents to vacate their homes for a redevelopment project, showcasing how economic forces drive social change.

"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 dealing with the enemy, when he was treated as a bastard in his own country" (Adiga 88).

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 96

Masterji's ambivalence toward the buyout offer reflects the intricate interplay of economic factors. On the one hand, the promise of financial gain tempts him, reflecting the allure of modernization. On the other hand, he grapples with the emotional ties to his home and the community, highlighting the ethical dilemmas arising from economic decisions. These examples underscore how economic disparities, modernization, and their consequences intricately weave through the narrative, shaping the characters' lives and contributing to the novel's exploration of societal complexities.

VII. Cultural and Moral Ambivalence

As the narrative unfolds, the clash between the old-world values represented by the residents of the Vishram Society and the relentless forces of urban development in contemporary Mumbai becomes evident. The protagonist, Masterji, exemplifies the struggle as he faces the moral dilemma of whether to adhere to traditional values, symbolized by his attachment to his apartment, or succumb to the allure of modernity, represented by the lucrative redevelopment offer. This clash is not only personal but also reflects broader societal conflicts.

VIII. Political Ambivalence

The characters in the story grapple with the consequences of political decisions, showcasing the inherent tensions within political systems. Political ambivalence is skilfully portrayed, illustrating the moral gray areas that characters navigate. The novel doesn't offer clear-cut heroes or villains, allowing readers to explore the ambiguous nature of political choices. This ambivalence adds depth to the narrative, encouraging readers to question the morality of political actions and their consequences.

IX. Impact on Identity

In "Last Man in Tower" by Aravind Adiga, ambivalence plays a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective identities. The characters grapple with conflicting emotions and perspectives, mirroring the societal changes occurring around them. The protagonist, Masterji, faces ambivalence as he navigates his personal principles against the allure of

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 97

material gain presented by a property developer. This struggle mirrors broader societal shifts, where traditional values clash with modern ambitions, contributing to a complex tapestry of individual and collective identities in flux. But three pages later the same man prays to his dead wife Purnima, "swoop down and lift me from the land of the living" (Adiga 285).

X. What prompts the ambivalence?

The ambivalence is prompted by various factors, encompassing decelerated economic growth, expanding socioeconomic disparities, societal fractures, legislative modifications, individual well-being, amalgamated ruling classes, and political ideological initiatives.

XI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the deleterious impact of capitalism on social institutions is evident, as it fosters a clandestine creed and erodes the foundational elements of the entire nation. Presently, numerous institutions are instrumentalized to propagate capitalist ideologies, despite efforts by academic institutions to resist this pervasive influence, ultimately succumbing to individualized ascent. This phenomenon raises profound questions regarding contemporary notions of national development, prompting consideration of whether this marks an era of indiscriminate capitalism. As posited by The National, the dichotomy between champions of idealism and practical developers constructing gleaming cities for progress fuels a critical discourse. The consequences, including assassinations, murder, or suicide, underscore the urgency of addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by the intersection of capitalism and societal institutions.

"Last Man in Tower" delves into the intricacies of modern India, emphasizing the theme of ambivalence. Key findings reveal a nuanced exploration of societal conflicts and individual dilemmas. The novel contributes significantly to understanding the complex nature of ambivalence in the Indian context. It unravels layers of conflicting emotions and perspectives, offering a rich tapestry of societal dynamics. Future research could explore the novel's impact on contemporary Indian literature, societal attitudes, and its relevance to broader themes of globalization and cultural identity.

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 98

XII. References

Adiga, Aravind. Last Man in Tower. Noida: Fourth Estate, 2011. Book.

Valiyamattam, Rositta Joseph. "Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower: Survival Strategies in a Morally Ambivalent India." 1 Sepetember 2017. World Literature Today. Article. 3 March 2023. <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2017/september/aravind-adigas-last-man-tower-survival-strategies-morally-ambivalent-india-rositta>.

Volume 9, Special Issue 1, December 2023
National Seminar on Research Prospects in English Studies
Organized by the Department of English, Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University

Page No. 99