

The Decay of Community in Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* (2011) presents contemporary Mumbai as a rapidly transforming urban space in which economic ambition increasingly competes with older forms of social belonging. Set largely within Vishram Society, the novel examines how a residential community that once represented cooperation, familiarity and mutual dependence gradually disintegrates under the pressure of redevelopment and financial gain. This paper argues that the central conflict between Masterji and the residents of Tower A is not merely a dispute over property but a representation of the decay of community in a market-driven society. The proposed redevelopment transforms neighbours into competitors, friendships into negotiations and shared memories into economic calculations. Dharmen Shah's real-estate enterprise becomes a powerful symbol of a new urban order in which individual prosperity is valued above collective responsibility. Masterji's refusal to sell his home initially appears to be an act of personal stubbornness, but it gradually becomes a resistance to the destruction of communal identity. Through the fragmentation of Vishram Society, Adiga demonstrates how capitalism, urban redevelopment, materialism and fear can erode interpersonal relationships. The paper therefore reads *Last Man in Tower* as a critique of the weakening of community values in contemporary urban India.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, *Last Man in Tower*, community, decay, urbanisation, capitalism, redevelopment, materialism, Mumbai, social fragmentation.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian cities are characterised by rapid economic expansion, expanding real-estate markets and continuous redevelopment. Urban transformation can provide improved infrastructure and financial opportunities, but it can also disturb established communities and weaken long-standing relationships. Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* explores this contradiction through the residents of Vishram Society in Mumbai. The novel places an apparently ordinary housing society at the centre of a conflict between collective memory and economic ambition. The novel begins with Vishram Society functioning as a relatively stable middle-class community. Although the building is physically deteriorating, its residents possess a strong sense of identity and belonging. The building is described as an important marker of middle-class respectability despite its ageing condition and its location near the slums of Vakola. The arrival of Dharmen Shah's redevelopment proposal changes this social equilibrium. Shah wants the existing structures demolished and replaced by a more profitable development. His offer promises residents considerable financial benefits, but acceptance requires collective agreement. As the residents consider the proposal, the meaning of community begins to change. What was previously based on shared residence, familiarity and mutual obligations becomes increasingly governed by money. This paper examines this transformation as a decay of community. It argues that Adiga does not portray community as disappearing suddenly. Instead, community decays gradually through a series of compromises, suspicions, temptations and acts of self-interest. The tragedy of Vishram Society lies in the fact that the residents themselves become participants in the destruction of the relationships that once held them together.

The Arrival of Money and the Beginning of Fragmentation

Dharmen Shah's redevelopment proposal introduces money as the dominant language of social interaction. The residents are presented with the possibility of receiving substantial financial compensation. Consequently, their relationship with their homes begins to change. Before the offer, a flat represents shelter, security, memory and belonging. After the offer, it increasingly becomes an economic asset. The residents begin calculating what they can obtain from the proposed transaction. The emotional and social meanings attached

to their homes become secondary to their monetary value. This transformation is central to the novel's critique of materialism. The problem is not simply that the residents desire money. Their desire is understandable, especially in a city where property prices and economic insecurity are powerful forces. Adiga's criticism lies in showing what happens when economic calculation becomes powerful enough to replace social responsibility. The redevelopment proposal therefore acts as a catalyst. It does not create selfishness from nothing; rather, it reveals and intensifies existing vulnerabilities. Fear, desire, insecurity and ambition emerge as competing forces within the community.

From Neighbour's to Competitors

One of the clearest manifestations of community decay is the transformation of neighbours into competitors. Initially, residents share common interests because they share the same building. Once the redevelopment offer is introduced, however, individual interests begin to dominate. The collective nature of the decision makes the situation particularly significant. Everyone's future depends upon everyone else's decision. This should encourage solidarity, but instead it produces suspicion. Residents begin to question the motives of those who disagree with the majority. Masterji's refusal to sell becomes especially threatening because it prevents the others from obtaining the financial benefits promised by Shah. The disagreement therefore becomes personal. A difference of opinion about property gradually becomes a conflict between individuals. The novel demonstrates an important paradox: the community is destroyed not because people stop interacting, but because their interactions become increasingly governed by self-interest. Meetings, conversations and negotiations continue, yet the meaning of community disappears from them.

Masterji and the Idea of Communal Responsibility

Yogesh A. Murthy, popularly known as Masterji, occupies a crucial position in the novel. As a retired schoolteacher and long-standing resident, he represents memory, continuity and moral resistance. His refusal to accept Shah's proposal places him against the majority. Masterji's resistance should not be understood merely as opposition to modernization. His position is connected to his emotional relationship with the

building and the people who inhabit it. His home contains the history of his life, and the community provides a connection to that history. His resistance also reveals the moral cost of collective decisions. The majority believes that its economic interests justify redevelopment, while Masterji asks whether the wishes of the majority should automatically override the attachment of an individual. This conflict gives the novel its ethical complexity. Masterji is neither an uncomplicated hero nor simply an obstinate old man. His resistance exposes the uncomfortable relationship between individual rights and collective economic interests. A scholarly study of the novel similarly interprets Masterji's resistance within the larger struggles generated by globalization, urbanisation, privatization and capitalism. However, the present study extends this discussion by concentrating specifically on what happens inside the community itself when collective values are subordinated to economic interests.

The Transformation of Friendship

Community depends heavily upon trust. In Vishram Society, residents have known one another for years. Their relationships are built through repeated encounters and shared experiences. The redevelopment proposal destabilizes this trust. Friends begin to see one another through the question of whether they support or oppose the sale. Personal relationships become politically charged. A neighbour is no longer simply a neighbour; he or she becomes a supporter, opponent or obstacle. This transformation demonstrates that the decay of community occurs psychologically before it becomes physically visible. The building may remain standing, but the social structure within it has already begun to collapse. Adiga's treatment of friendship is particularly significant because the residents are not initially enemies. They become antagonistic because an external economic opportunity changes the terms of their relationship. Money creates a hierarchy of interests, and this hierarchy undermines the equality that once characterised their communal life.

Urban Redevelopment and the Erasure of Memory

Redevelopment is presented as both physical and cultural transformation. The new project promises modernity, prosperity and urban improvement. Yet it also requires the destruction of an existing social environment. This creates an important tension in the novel. The old building is imperfect and deteriorating,

while the proposed development represents wealth and modernity. Nevertheless, the old building contains memories that cannot be purchased. The destruction of Vishram Society therefore becomes symbolic of the destruction of urban memory. When older neighbourhoods disappear, the relationships and histories associated with them may also disappear. Recent scholarship on the novel has examined redevelopment and globalization as central concerns, arguing that Adiga connects Mumbai's real-estate transformation with wider changes in its social and cultural environment. The present paper emphasizes that the most significant casualty of this transformation is not simply architecture but community memory.

The Majority and the Failure of Collective Ethics

The residents' majority decision raises an important ethical question: does numerical majority necessarily represent justice? In democratic societies, majority decisions are generally regarded as legitimate. Yet Adiga complicates this principle by presenting a situation in which the majority's economic interests threaten the rights and dignity of an individual. The residents increasingly use the language of collective benefit to justify their treatment of Masterji. Their argument appears rational: if almost everyone wants to sell, why should one person prevent the transaction? However, the novel reveals the danger of reducing community to numerical agreement. A genuine community must also protect difference, disagreement and individual dignity. Thus, the decay of Vishram Society can be understood as the collapse of ethical collectivism. The residents continue to act together, but they no longer act for one another.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* offers a powerful examination of the decay of community in contemporary urban India. Through the transformation of Vishram Society, Adiga demonstrates how economic ambition can gradually weaken relationships that appear stable and permanent. The redevelopment proposal functions as the central catalyst for this transformation. It converts homes into commodities, neighbours into competitors and friendships into negotiations. The residents' pursuit of financial security gradually erodes their willingness to protect one another. Masterji's resistance exposes the moral consequences of this transformation. The novel's central tragedy is therefore not simply the possible

destruction of an old apartment building. It is the destruction of a social world. Vishram Society represents a community founded on memory, familiarity and shared experience, while Dharmen Shah's redevelopment project represents a new urban order governed by capital and individual advancement. Adiga ultimately suggests that modernisation becomes dangerous when material progress is separated from moral responsibility. The decay of community occurs when individuals cease to understand their prosperity as connected to the well-being of others.

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