

Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower: a Postcolonial Reading of New India

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Abstract: This paper endeavours to show that colonialism and imperialism are not at all defunct even after their formal termination and how Globalization has affected the social as well as cultural values. It analyses how globalization as a form of neocolonialism in the postcolonial period influences the English literature with special reference to Aravind Adiga's novel *Last Man in Tower*. Aravind Adiga was born in Madras in 1974. A former India correspondent for *Time* magazine, his articles have also appeared in publications including the *Financial Times*, *Independent* and the *Sunday times*. 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). In *Last Man in Tower* Adiga has depicted Mumbai as a commercial and financial hub which has emerged as place of assorted opportunities. To have a pucca house in Mumbai is a distant dream of middle class because of the corrupt politicians and their intimate relations with the developers. The inhabitants of Tower A represent the middle class psyche of Mumbai trying to share the rapid economic expansion, sudden fortune and unimaginable riches on account of globalization. The novel revolves around two antithetical forces: the retired school teacher who signifies a postcolonial resistance and the greedy developer who stands for neo-colonial paradigm. The dignified old man is made to confront certain conflict with an impatient and impetuous younger generation that has successfully acclimatized itself to face the opportunities, challenges and threats of an emerging new world.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, New India, Imperialism, Neocolonialism, Globalization, *Last Man in Tower*

I. Introduction

Aravind Adiga was born in Madras in 1974. A former India correspondent for *Time* magazine, his articles have also appeared in publications including the *Financial Times*, *Independent* and the *Sunday Times*. 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 place of assorted opportunities. To have a pucca house in Mumbai is a day dream of middle class because of the corrupt politicians and their intimate nexus with the developers.

Contemporary research on the Indian middle class points out that there are two opposing camps, reflecting contradictory viewpoints, regarding this class. First, the middle class is seen as having grown in terms of its sheer numerical strength and having established itself as a prominent consuming class that can be used as a case to prove the success of the liberalization of the Indian economy even to the extent of the coming of a "New India". Secondly, such claims have been attended with a moral anxiety concerning the changing nature of this class: whether the rise of this class, as a marker of increasing consumerism in India, can be seen as an acceptable change and whether it has wider implications. The question of critical importance is the impact these policies have had on most members of a class which for quite some time have quite demonstrably surrendered all pretence of idealism or morality or social sensitivity on the twin altars of self-interest and material well-being. The policy of economic liberalization provided the Indian middle class with an excuse for separating its world even more blatantly from the vast masses of the destitute and deprived in India. Ashutosh Kumar addresses the question of the "new" middle class and its significance in India. He refers to the expansion of the middle class with the emergence of the new categories of the middle class in late postcolonial India experiencing economic and democratic transition. He suggests that these emergent categories of the "new" middle class and its economic, cultural, and political choices are increasingly influencing the way politics and economies are assuming shape in India. He refers to the middle class as "cultural entrepreneurs" who easily lap up authoritarian leadership and alternative forms of politics.

II. Colonialism vs. Neocolonialism

The term imperialism is often used in connection with colonialism; however imperialism is theoretical governance in comparison with the practical settlement of colonial rulers in the non-European spaces. Imperialism authorizes the colonial culture of domination by the ideology of expansion of state power. Imperialism controls non-European region mostly through economic measures, economic needs of the European nation. Political independence- a process often described as 'decolonization'- for non-European nations made them postcolonial in the temporal sense. Decolonization seeks freedom from colonial forms of thinking, a freedom to revive and rejuvenate native forms of knowledge. It involves a process of close examination of historical processes- European forms of thought, nationalist thinking and forms of resistance. Postcolonial writers aren't just interested in decolonizing the political structures. They're interested in decolonizing the mind, to use a phrase made famous by the postcolonial Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Decolonizing the mind means different things for different writers, but the paramount idea is always to obtain mental and cultural liberation from the structures and philosophies of colonialism. Political control may have moved from the Europeans to the natives. Economically, however, the native population is still controlled by the European power. That is nominally free nation states continue to suffer from economic exploitation by European powers. The form of control has been called 'neocolonialism', used especially to describe the American control over the rest of the world. Neocolonialism is the existing economic exploitation of Asian and African nation-states by European and American powers. What is significant is that the former colonial masters are still in economic command and control over so-called 'free' former colonies.

During the latter half of the 19th century and increasingly in the first half of the 20th, the colonized states engaged in active resistance to the political governance, economic exploitation and cultural domination of the colonizers. By the mid-twentieth century, these struggles which had erupted throughout the colonies resulted in political independence for many states in Asia and Africa. In temporal terms, they were 'postcolonial'. Postcoloniality in trying to secure freedom from the cultural, political and economic control of the former European masters is closely tied up with decolonization. 'Postcoloniality' captures the strategies of resistance, negotiation and cultural assertion that India adopts to deal with increasing neocolonial interference and control exerted by the developed First World nations. 'Postcoloniality', therefore is the set of practices that seek to negotiate a history of colonialism, the present state of political independence and the always imminent threat of neocolonialism in the economic, cultural and social fields.

III. Independent India under ideology of imperialism

Independent India emerges with the termination of colonial rule and the transfer of political power to the hands of cultured Indian elite who mostly were educated in Britain. Naturally what they endeavoured through their political action was to initiate cultural imperialism. What is ironical is that inspite of acquiring freedom from British imperial forces, India is not free from the ideology of imperialism; foreign domination prevails but with difference. The monolithic structure of the nation-state is imagined to assimilate the linguistic diversity and the multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious forces in India. The traditions of cultural hegemony, racial discrimination, ethnic hatred and religious fanaticism question the validity of the monolith. The methods of racial discrimination, cultural marginalization, political oppression and economic exploitation become the hallmark of New India. Gayatri Spivak's well-known article called "Can the Subaltern Speak," poses a question which is: how do people who are in that predicament of subalternity actually become self-conscious subjects? In the post colonial dialectics 'subaltern' or 'underclass' occupies prominent place which incorporates the entire people that is subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office. It is the subject position that defines subalternity. Even when it operates in terms of class, age and gender, it is more psychological than physical. The lack and deprivation, loneliness and alienation, subjugation and subordination, the resignation and silence, the resilience and neglect mark the lives of subaltern, even when they resist and rise up, they feel bounded and defeated by their subject positions. They have no representatives or spokesperson in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer and get marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture.

IV. Globalization as neocolonial paradigm

Moreover, in post-colonial studies, the term neo-colonialism describes the domination-praxis (social, economic, cultural) of countries from the developed world in the respective internal affairs of the countries of the developing world; that, despite the decolonization that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War, the (former) colonial powers continue to apply existing and past international economic arrangements with their former colony-countries, and so maintain colonial control. Though in the broad sense Neo-colonialism became the standard term, describing a type of foreign intervention, it can be restricted to the concept of the domination of corrupted native politicians who support business tycoons, capitalists or entrepreneurs to carry on corruption and exploitation. Again, Globalization is the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture. Advances in transportation and telecommunications infrastructure favour the most powerful nation to exert influence on the less developed and developing

countries. Aravind Adiga's novels which are about the New India discuss the postcolonial themes of Neo-Colonialism and globalization. The process of globalization in India started with the introduction of New Economic Policy in 1991 after pursuing the import substitution for nearly 40 years. The globalization and liberalization and privatization are interconnected. Thus, it is typically defined as a period in which the sovereignty of nation states has declined, and modes of exchange – of money, technology, products, and people – operate with increasing ease and speed across national boundaries. Globalization though is regarded a stepping stone for the third world countries like India towards massive developments, has its darker sides as the system enables and empowers native micro-agents of neocolonialism like Dharmen Shah in *Last Man in Tower*. As globalization dissolves the border into borderlessness, a person feels mental affinity with the culture and manners of a distant foreign land as Pinky Madam in *The White Tiger* hates India and misses New York.

V. New India in Last Man in Tower

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 middle-class respectability, ready to fire on anyone who might impugn the pucca quality of its inhabitants. For years it was the only good building- which is to say, the only registered co-operative society-in the neighbourhood.....the building was originally meant for Roman Catholics. Hindus were admitted in the late 1960s and in the 1980s the better kind of Muslim- Bohra, Ismaili, college-educated. Vishram is now entirely 'cosmopolitan' (i.e. ethnically and religiously mixed)." The door of flat 3B gives testimony to this cosmopolitan residency: "An eczema of blue-skinned gods, bearded godmen, and haloed Christs covered the metal door of 3B- a testament to generations of ecumenical tenants who had each added a few icons of their own faith without removing those of any other- so that it was impossible to know if the present tenant was Hindu, Christian, or a member of a hybrid cult practices only in this building." 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.'"

The Booker Prize win catapulted Aravind to international fame. He gave several high profile interviews to leading media outlets around the world. He was also greeted with widespread admiration in India. In these interviews, Aravind often says that his book throws light on the lives of the poor in India which are being ignored by current development stories. The interviews also inevitably broached real world topics which gave occasion for Aravind to publicly state his political views. Aravind makes prominent references to what he calls the great divide in modern Indian history – the year 1991. He 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." 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-centers". Gurcharan Das' *India Unbound* which gives a historical perspective of the economy eulogizes the dawn of a new era in India, brought about by its closer integration with the world economy. Nandan Nilekani's *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century* reveals how globalization and rapid urbanization are transforming social, economic and political life. His book, a guidebook to India's globalization, is reassuring about the country's future. 'Even as the world is acknowledging India's new promise,' Nandan Nilekani observes in *Imagining India*, 'the opportunity of the global economy has highlighted our internal differences – between the educated and the illiterate, the public and private sectors, between the well and the poorly governed, and between those who have access and those who have not'. In *Last Man in Tower*, the urban middle-class residents of Vishram Tower A are all overwhelmed by a stupendous offer from a builder who wants to buy their dilapidated flat to make way for his magnum opus, an ultra modern skyscraper. *Last Man in Tower* is a very engaging novel which is astonishingly rich in detail and which has the reliable reflection of everyday life. It is a social novel which desperately scrutinizes issues of social and individual morality. It is a postcolonial novel dramatizing the neocolonial inevitability of exploitation and the marginalization of the colonized by the colonizer. The native old man is representative of the marginalized class attempting to defend the tradition. The set-up is impressively simple. Shah and his "left-hand man", the sinuous Shanmugham, ride into town offering each resident a vast sum of money to quit their property: while a touch of resistance might produce a "sweetener", too much might result in a mysterious "accident". For his crowning achievement, The Shanghai, he is eager to tear down the Vishram Co-operative Society, a once-pristine two building compound that has deteriorated and replace it with luxury apartment. To materialize his overzealous determination Shah offers each family more than 1.50 crore rupees around \$ 330,000.

Almost everyone in the 'Vishram' is thrilled by the deal. Tower B, filled with young executives, falls into line immediately, while Tower A proves a slightly tougher nut to crack. Its residents have their unofficial "parliament", but they also have complicated individual histories and sensibilities that Shah and his henchman must negotiate. Among them are the anxious Ibrahim Kudwa, proprietor of the Speed-Tek Cyber Cafe, whose mantra dictates that "a man with a bad stomach should never be asked to make decisions"; social worker Georgina Rego, staunch in her loathing of amoral redevelopers but tormented by the need to "trump" her well-to-do sister; and the retired Mr. and Mrs. Pinto, torn between the desire to send dollars to their children in America and their loyalty to "Masterji", the former schoolteacher who quickly becomes the linchpin of opposition to Shah's enticements. Though at the beginning the residents show their unity in not surrendering their home, most of them collapse under polite threat. Opposition centres around Yogesh Anantha Murthy, a retired Physics teacher, nicknamed 'Masterji' who clings to the memories of his deceased wife and daughter that pervade the building. He becomes the arch enemy not only of the opportunistic residents who once admired him but also of the new master of the real estate development. One by one all the avenues of resource i.e. law, police, media are blocked up; Masterji is essentially alone, hated and suspected of lunacy. Even the close associates Pintos capitulate. His son Gaurav who describes his father as cruel and stubborn is the last to abandon him. Masterji whose stand is prompted by sympathy for Shelley Pinto is the last person left in the derelict structure. Masterji's neighbours and acquaintances who have become enemies and conspirators plot and execute the murder of Masterji- "Down on the ground it lay, sprawled, in perfect imitation of suicide's corpse".

The novel can be studied as representing neo-colonialism in which Dharmen Shah represents the neo-colonizer who is going to set up a colony in Vishram Cooperative society by means of implicit pressure and explicit temptation and the residents at the end become colonizing agents who murder the innocent Masterji to score their payday. *Last Man in Tower* which is the story of a struggle for a slice of shining Mumbai real estate combines Adiga's gift for social observation, and pungent, impish wit. The novel explores middle class ethics, the vacuum created by misgovernance that allows greed and envy to flourish, the bureaucracy that creates the illusion of order and justice while perpetuating the opposite. Adiga has drawn most authentically the contemporary picture of Mumbai - the grime, lawlessness, corruption, moral disintegration, greed, fabulous wealth and abject misery, a world in which predators always triumph, where people of integrity and good will are almost always gobbled up. At one point Masterji wonders, "What is being done to this city in the name of progress?" The brutal criticism of Adiga's 'The White Tiger' has been tempered here by an ambivalent acknowledgement of the benefits which India's rise is bringing to its growing middle class. The middle class is almost non-existent; successful enough to live in high rises but susceptible to an aristocratic and authoritative salesman offering a choice between signatures on the line or knife in the back. The novel is satirical constantly mocking how self important every resident of the Vishram Society seems, and just how desperately they wish to throw their homes away for the uncertain promises of a real estate developer. Adiga paints a moving but unsentimental portrait of Mumbai, from its overcrowded trains and arcade of gothic buildings to its teeming slums and seedy red light district where "the pounding of steel and sex combined in the same postcode". In 2004, Suketu Mehta wrote an extraordinary document of Mumbai, *Maximum City*, in which he castigated the avarice of the middle class and their disregard for the breakdown of civil order. He wrote of the slums, racial divisions, capitalism, corruption, gangsters, threats, bribes and extortion. *Last Man in Tower* gives vent to the relentless forces of capitalism and its consequences.

This novel with its crystal clear journalistic style depicts the problems of corruption, politician builder nexus, the dearth of standard life, unhygienic conditions of living, slums and the perpetual problems of visionless politician which have been remained unsolved by successive governments since 1960 and also after the globalization. Hence, Development in terms of globalised India is the subject matter of this novel. It not only reflects unimaginable riches who breaks social bonds and enters into corrupt relationships but also marks the clear divide in India of have and have nots. The tower was built in 1950 where it is described on a plaque in hour of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as 'Good Housing for Good Indians' with an intention to serve as an example but the intention remained in initial stage and remained absent in progress of the course of developing India. It reflects the citizens having worries, concerns and lack of pleasures. The location of tower is a symbolic example of progressing India in the midst of wretched slums ridiculing a utopian dream of 'Developed India'. Mumbai is the central character in 'The Last Man in Tower'. The cultural values change on accounts of rise of materialism and consumerism as side effects of the globalization, weak political system, capitalist economy, exclusive growth, vote bank politics and importance to influential rich economic class which has given the most significant place for money in deciding over the principles, cultural values, morality and patriotism. This in turn has given rise to tremendous greed as almost everyone wants something i.e. a piece of wealth destroying the sense of community sharing and responsibility. The background to this tension-filled plot is Mumbai itself, where countless workers commute on nightmarishly overstuffed trains, where they all emerge: "fish, birds, the leopards of Borivali, even the starlets and super-models of Bandra, out of the prismatic dreams of Mother

Garbage. Here, fetid slums, the most luxurious high-rises of the future, and the temples of old co-exist within a fragile and all-too-often corrupt democracy.”

VI. Conclusion

Aravind Adiga has dealt with the subject of Globalisation and its impact in Indian life with much depth, insight and seriousness. Adiga's entire body of fiction circles around the theme of Globalization, the most decisive force in moulding the socio-cultural, economical and political discourse in India. Adiga asserts that, “at a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination.” Hence Adiga's fiction delineates a comprehensive panorama of the changing socio-cultural, economic and political paradigms and how these transform human lives in India. With the advent of neo-liberalism and capitalism, the middle-class residents of Vishram Tower- A script a future of their own by asserting their collective will. By embracing the winds of change brought in by economic liberalization and globalization, they fashion their identities. *Last Man in Tower* explores the conflicts between individual and collective will power, between supply (real estate developer) and demand (prisoners of necessity), between principle and greed. Vishram Society which Mr. Adiga first describes as “anchored like a dreadnought of middle class respectability” is shown to be anything but respectable, once money is prioritized. What is highlighted here is that money can not only disintegrate a united community but also can paralyze their long preserved notions of idealism and sentimentalism. Adiga probes deep into the minds of several characters, jumping between tower residents to show their motives and examine how modern Mumbai has amplified their shortcomings. Adiga offers a convincing if grim glimpses of human nature as these upstanding residents turn on one another maddened with greed when they fear the prospect of losing their promised riches. Adiga takes us deep into the soul of Mumbai where no act can seem too desperate or too outrageous; no wall can be built high enough to hold back the urban realities.

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