

CARTOGRAPHY OF METROPOLITAN CITY IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S LAST MAN IN TOWER

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ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga has carved his name in the galaxy of eminent Indian novelists delineating the landscape and places in their writings. India is a land replete with rich cultural heritage and illustrious religions and political history. A literary work, in which a significant interaction occurs between characters and place, depicts the landscape as a dominant character. The main thematic concern of the study is to explore some of the associated ideas of landscape and places in Adiga's *The Last Man in Tower* and how these permeate much of our thinking. Adiga has attempted his best to depict the topography and geography of Mumbai and tries to give the feel of the particular place mentioned by him in metro-city. The paper also explores how urbanization creates major problems and their consequences in Indian metropolitan city.

KEYWORDS: Urbanization, Skyscrapers, Mafia Developers and Builders, Traffic Congestion

Like Khushwant Singh's *Delhi*, Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* is saturated with the details of places. As Adiga's *The White Tiger*, traces the life in Bangalore and Delhi, similarly his *Last Man in Tower* is set up in Mumbai, ultimate in civilization. In an interview with Das Adiga said:

The novel usually evolves out of something I've seen or read. *Last Man in Tower* began when I read an article in the Times of India in early 2007, describing a redevelopment offer by a builder, opposed by one old man in the building. I went to the building and spoke to some of the residents — so it evolved out of real life. I was looking for an exciting plot that would let me tell a story about Mumbai. (v)

The descriptions of places, people, food, culture, etc have been put forth through the landscape of Mumbai. The story begins with the description of a typical building in an area that used to be suburbs and now a hotspot of construction in Mumbai – Vakola also known as Vishram Society: “On a map of Mumbai, Vakola is a cluster of ambiguous dots that cling polyp-like to the under-side of the domestic airport; on the ground, the polyps turn out to be slums, and spread out on every side of Vishram Society” (3). The title *Last Man in Tower* indicates that instead of choosing to limit its narration to one central protagonist, it plays host to a mixture of characters, residents of the Vishram Society (Tower A) comprising variety of social workers, teachers, businessmen and all members of the new Indian middle class. They are a close knit, middle class proud, virtuous group tied together by what Adiga himself has called the novel's central character: the bustling city of Mumbai. The close accommodation of human behaviour to the physical environment measures the progress of the novel.

All the inhabitants of the Tower A are aware that in a crumbling world, Vishram Society stands for decency, and old-fashioned rules and standards. Its residents are long term and consider the Tower their home. Despite the location of

Vishram Co-operative Housing Society close to the airport and bordered by slums, it has been pucca for some fifty years but with the passage of time the landscape of Bombay has changed in half a century. It has changed to a large extent that the area in which Tower A was first built has given a way to a new city, Mumbai as a result of new development and new money of wealthy Indians returning with assets made abroad. Tower A that is six storey tall, stands in the centre of the compound is not what it used to be fifty years ago. It has large number of maintenance issues. Adiga provides a detailed account of the dilapidated face of the Tower A as:

The face of this tower, once pink, is now a rainwater-stained, fungus-licked grey, although veins of primordial pink show wherever the roofing has protected the walls from the monsoon rains. Every flat has iron grilles on the windows: geraniums, jasmines, and the spikes of cacti push through the rusty metal squares. Luxuriant ferns, green and reddish green, blur the corners of some windows, making them look like entrances to small caves. (5)

The main feature of the compound of Vishram Society is a three feet tall polished black-stone cross, covered with flowers and wreaths, situated inside a shrine of glazed blue and white tiles. It is a reminder that the Tower A was originally meant and established for Roman Catholics only. Gradually in the late 1960s, Hindus were admitted followed by Muslims in the 1980s. Therefore the vicinity of the Vishram Housing Society became entirely cosmopolitan i.e. ethnically and religiously mixed. The building of Tower A, though declared as good housing for good Indians but the residents of Vishram disclose that it is not entirely the case.

In Adiga's novel, the response of the characters to the concreteness of place and its symbolic relation to their lives is an important action that makes him to choose Mumbai as the setting for his latest novel *Last Man in Tower*. There were slums that push against the walls of ambitious high rise apartment buildings with names like "The Shanghai" and "The Milano". Adiga weaves a tale of how rapid re-development can turn friendly neighbours into strangers, and sometimes enemies in the space between these opposing forces. Adiga's *Last Man in the Tower* presents Mumbai as a cradle for the activity that reflects the city itself- decaying in parts, hungry for overnight fortunes, with pangs and suffering of humanity and living in harmony is thrown aside. The book answers the question as: "What is Bombay? ... a window answers: banyan, maidan, stone, tile, tower, dome, sea, hawk, amaltas in bloom, smog on the horizon, gothic phantasmagoria (Victoria Terminus and the Municipal Building) emerging from the smog" (51).

Mumbai is literally a city which never stops growing, created by clutter, rubbish, debris and mulch. It is a dream of every land developer and builder. One of the chief characters, Dharmen Shah is analogous and he says: "There is a golden line in this city: a line that makes men rich" (54). At the same time Adiga appreciates the growth and development. His admiration is for the new dream merchants of Mumbai, those who hustle and force change upon this city. When Shah speculates and surmises Mumbai:

... Santa Cruz airport there, ... the Bandra-Kurla Complex there. ...the Dharavi slums there. ... the financial centre at Bandra-Kurla is expanding by the hour. Then the government is starting redevelopment in Dharavi. Asia's biggest slum will become Asia's richest slum. This area is boiling with money. People arrive daily and have nowhere to live. Except, ... here. Vakola. The Fountainhead and Excelsior will be ready by November this year. ... the main show is next year. The Shangai. (55)

The real protagonist of the novel emerges as a very specific architectural location: the eponymous Tower from within the intricate urban landscape. The plot rotates around the Tower A, home for many characters. However, tension arises when Vishram Society and its ordinary residents are offered a chance, by a real estate developer Dharmen Shah, a greedy, rich businessman needs the land to build a luxury apartment complex in the heart of the city. The Tower is located upon Shah's desired place of real estate, and he thus offers each resident 300% of the market value of his or her apartment in a bid to persuade them to move out by a rigid deadline, with the gradual movement leads the place towards an increasingly heighten tension. The term landscape once referred to all that could be seen on the surface of the earth from a single vantage point, but now it has been extended to include unseen things, such as a configuration of ideas or a set of conditions, or the psychology of an individual. The final catch in *The Last Man in Tower* is that if one resident of Vishram Society refuses, the deal is broken, and no one receives any money. Initially tentative, then deadly analysis of the effect of large sums of cash upon a social group charts the disintegration of a close-knit community into a collection of isolated and selfish individuals. This 'once in a lifetime offer' 'god's blessing' cannot take place because an occupant known as Masterji refuses to sell his apartment and becomes both literally and metaphorically the thorn in the flesh. The conflict divides the characters living in the fictional Vishram Society Tower A, a decrepit apartment building that has enough problems to keep a handy man in business for decades. Also an airport that it is so close disturbs the peace of the residents and the building rumbles as planes fly overhead as: "You open your window and there it is: a Boeing 747, flying right over your building."(7)

Adiga's Mumbai is fairly a typical land for constructing the luxury building for the middle class, lower middle class and older retired people. The building's main attraction for developers is that it occupies what has become valuable land, a commodity which is scarce in the metropolitan city. The landscape of the Tower draws out Masterji's neighbours—Ramesh Ajwani, a real-estate broker, a social worker, a cyber cafe owner, an aged couple—who have their unique lens on the city, but they all unite under a canopy of wanting. They all want Masterji to go along with the new construction so they can make a tidy profit or salt something away for their children.

Pollution, population and lack of space have always been traditionally described as the ultimate problems of Mumbai while relegating the acute problem of environmental degradation into oblivion. Adiga tries to sum up the entire landscape of Mumbai as he describes the land of Nariman Point through the eyes of Shah as: "Look: how this city never stops growing: rubble, shit, plants, mulch, left to themselves, start slurping up sea, edging towards the other end of the bay like a snake's tongue, hissing through salt water, there is more land here, more land... All of Bombay was created like this: through the desire of junk and landfill, on which the reclaimed city sits, to become something better" (146).

The biggest symbol of the destruction of the mangroves in Mumbai is the Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC), built on reclaimed land almost strangulating the mouth of the river. Creation of infrastructure is important in the city like Mumbai, aiming to gain an international look. However unplanned urban development negating the environment may lead to some disaster. Adiga takes the issue into consideration and attempts to focus on the changes that take place at the Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC) as:

The residents of Vishram Society, even if they kept away from the slums, were aware of changes happening there ever since the Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC), the new financial hub of the city, had opened right next to it. Bombay, like a practitioner of yoga, was folding in on itself, as its centre moved

from the south, where there was no room to grow, to this swamp land near the airport. New financial buildings were opening every month in the BKC – American Express, ICICI Bank, HSBC, Citibank, ... enriching some and scorching others among the slum-dwellers. A few lucky hut-owners were becoming millionaires, as a bank or a developer made an extraordinary offer for their little plot of land; others were being crushed – bulldozers were on the move, shanties were being leveled, slum clearance projects were going ahead. (38)

There is something noble about the unceasing pursuit of betterment so why should not the inhabitants of Mumbai desire to grow and have dreams especially when the opportunity knocks at their door. Unchecked migration into the city by people in search of jobs, antiquated housing laws and sky rocketing real estate prices. Adiga depicts the migrants into the metropolitan city who dreamt all their lives of better food and clothes and worked hard as: “The city of wealth was playing its usual cat-and mouse- games with migrants: gives them a sniff of success and money in one breath, and makes them wonder about the value of success and the point of money in the next” (322). Tower B of Vishram Housing Society was filled with young executives eager to rise in the world and the decision to vacate was unanimously and quickly finalized. Mumbai is a fast changing reality and the determination to change is reflected in the characters’ desire to change and this is the reason why Adiga’s characters behave the way they do but as the city transforms, it doesn’t always improve. A man is innocent because he has not had a chance at corruption “Man is like a goat tied to a pole.’ Meaning, all of us have some free will but not too much” (44). When there is an opportunity, he becomes mercenary and a murderer.

Mumbai is one of the most populous cities in India. More than half of its population lives in the slums. The population of city is increasing day by day as too many people come and settle here. As a result the shortage of water gets worse unless the monsoon arrives in the place. Mrs. Puri speaks about the scarcity of space in over populated city to Mrs. Rego as: “My parents were born in Delhi, ...but I was born right here. There was enough space in those days. Now it’s full. The Shiv Sena is right, outsiders should stop coming here” (39). Furthermore the station of Santa Cruz was so crowded that the old man had to climb the stairs leading out one step at a time as Masterji says: “Shakespeare underestimated the trauma of life in Mumbai by a big margin” (48). The city is full of mafia developers and builders who make people rich and at the same time Adiga writes about the beggars in city “who get off at Victoria Terminus every day” (39). Adiga describes Mumbai as ever developing and expanding city. Construction activity in the city is always on with full gear – on vacant lands and also on land made vacant using hook or crook methods like driving away the occupants by money power or muscle power and demolishing existing structures. The construction work in the city gives rise to the problem of chronic bronchitis. The doctor tells Dharmen Shah with infected lungs:

It’s the construction business that is doing this to you. All the dust you inhale. The stress and strain.... It’s all those old buildings you are around. The ones you break up. Materials were used then that are banned now. Asbestos, cheap paint. They get into your lungs....Very polluted. Diesel in the air, dust. The system is weakened by pollution over time.... The one thing money can’t buy here is clean air. (53)

Furthermore the *Last Man in Tower* reminds the reader of the air pollution crises that is to a large extent caused during the rush hours on the roads of Mumbai. Adiga describes the situation of South Mumbai:

South Mumbai has the Victoria Terminus and the Municipal Building, but the suburbs, built later, have their own Gothic style: for every evening, by six, pillars of hydro-benzene and sulphur dioxide rise high up from the roads, flying buttresses of nitrous dioxide join each other, swirls of unburnt kerosene, mixed

illegally into the diesel crackle like gargoyles, and a great roof of carbon monoxide closes over the structure. And this Cethadrel of particular matter rises over every red light, every bridge and every tunnel during rush hour. (174)

Traffic congestion is one of the major concerns for the city. The rising issue of traffic congestion in Mumbai has become a major challenge for the state government. The city has high rise in vehicles on road. Adiga recalls Mumbai of nineteenth century with the epidemic plague caused by rats. Rats have always fought humans in the city and Adiga writes as: "Even today they outnumber us: six rats for every human in Bombay. They have so many species we have just one"(69). Unlike the good roads in Delhi in Adiga's *The White Tiger*, doctor Nayak laments about the deteriorated and poor development work in Mumbai as: "How else will we improve? Look at the trains in this city. Look at the roads. The law courts. Nothing works, nothing moves; it takes ten years to build a bridge" (55).

Last Man in Tower highlights several problems faced by Mumbai. However the common thread that runs through all the various problems is the lack of government will and apathy. These problems are the collective result of the nexus between builders, bureaucrats and politicians who have time and again exploited the city's land and its people for selfish gains. All infrastructure projects with an environmental clearance are used to create more land so that this extra land can be allotted to builders and more money can be made. Mrs. Rego makes it clear when she defines the dying city as: "a city that ceases to surprise you. And that is what this Bombay has become. Show people a little cash and they will jump, dance, run naked in the streets.... These developers and builders are mafia" (39).

Adiga's description of the landscape and places in Mumbai is very fascinating as one can see, hear, smell, taste, and experience Mumbai in true sense through his portrayal of a crowded market as: "a row of blue wooden stalls, lit by white tube-lights or naked yellow bulbs, in which the most disparate trades were conducted side by side: a chicken shop smelling of poultry shit and raw meat, a sugarcane-vendor's stall haloed in raw sucrose, a Xerox machine in a stationery shop yawning flashes of blinding light, and a barber's salon, busy even at this hour, stinking of shaving cream and gossip"(69). Besides this he goes on further at railway station marketplace to say: "In the market by the station, mango sellers waited for the returning commuters: ripe and bursting, each mango was like a heartfelt apology from the city for the state of its trains" (49).

Adiga raises the issues of urban development, the massive real estate growth that has taken place in Mumbai in the last few years. It does contain a lot of the same things of *The White Tiger*. At the end of the novel, Adiga writes, "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free."(419). It is this unbending will and ambition that Mumbai fosters as he commemorates in *Last Man in Tower*. Adiga himself offers his admiration for Mumbai, in an interview he said: "I spend a lot of time out on the street, walking, observing things. These experiences are particularly rich in Mumbai. I love the city and wanted to capture my experiences in exploring her in a novel. Mumbai made me a successful writer, and I will always be grateful to her and her people. The real hero of '*Last Man in Tower*' is Mumbai" (Adiga, 2011). Dinesh Kumar in "Postcolonial Cartography of an Indian Town" writes about Adiga's description of the place as:

This description also shows that Adiga's narrative is a geonarrative, narrative that gives birth to a place, legitimizes its existence and highlights its familiar spots in the process of telling. Further it shows the incongruities of postcolonial spaces which are hijacked by the forces of capitalism and corruption. (181)

Adiga has made an excellent attempt in giving spatial identity in his entire fiction. His fiction evaluates a significant interaction between characters and place, depicts the landscape as a dominant character. Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* is set up in Mumbai, describes it an ideal place and is ultimate in civilization. The setting is important and the use of Mumbai city sets the tone of the novel. The metropolitan city is not just the setting but almost a living character as the city is growing at an alarming rate and Adiga portrays the fast changing landscape of its growing economy throughout the novel.

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing discussion makes it amply clear that Adiga in *Last Man in Tower* raises the issues of urban development, the massive real estate growth that has taken place in Mumbai in the last few years. It does contain a lot of the same things of *The White Tiger*. At the end of the novel, Adiga writes, "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free"(419). It is this unbending will and ambition that Mumbai fosters as he commemorates in *Last Man in Tower*. He presents the landscape of the Post-Independence India and attempts to show that in spite of the claim of having world of technological development, privacy is dead and consumerism is built on capitalism's wager on the infinity of human needs. Adiga explores how mafia developers and builders create major problems and their consequences in Indian metropolitan city in the present time of globalization and urbanization.

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