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The Dialectics of Ageing in Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

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Abstract:

The essay is designed to assess the space created for the elderly within an increasingly capitalistic and neo-liberal fabric of a metropolitan city like Mumbai by using Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* as a lens. The essay uses the tools of Literary Gerontology to address society's treatment of the aged not just at the microcosmic level, but at a systemic level as well. Its purpose is to look at systemic inconsistencies and politics of neoliberalism that together create a discriminatory practice of the treatment of the underrepresented within society, in this case the aged.

Keywords:

Ageism in Indian Literature, Literary Gerontology in Indian Fiction, Neoliberalism in Adiga, Indian Literary Gerontology, Rising Capitalism and Social Criticism

How does it feel to grow old in rapidly changing suburbs of metropolitan cities like Mumbai? Are ageing members of such social spaces accommodated within the fabric of the metropolis? Or is their abuse symptomatic of heightened parasitic individualism that neo-liberal politics of the populace of India have come to incorporate and represent? The organising theme of this essay is to study the politics of ageing by using the tools of literary and cultural gerontology.

Critics Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin stipulate that, "cultural gerontology has much to contribute to the field of age studies: widening the social gerontological imaginary, bringing new and creative methodologies to bear on the understanding of all dimensions of the lives of people in mid to later life." (9)

The same can also be extrapolated for the field of literary gerontology, which seeks to critically re-examine the field of gerontology vis-à-vis fiction. For the purpose of this essay I will be looking at Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*. The novel takes off when Dharmen Shah, a real estate tycoon of Mumbai disturbs the peace of Vishram society a middle-class housing complex, to buy it off and consequently rebuild it and redevelop the surrounding slums for the purposes of profit. In order to do so, he makes a lucrative offer of Rs 1.52 crore which is at 250% the cost of its current market value, however the deal stipulates that all the residents must agree to the offer within the next six months in order to avail the profit made by the deal. While most members of the society are only too happy to jump at the offer, a few vacillate and one remains resolutely against it. The one remaining resolutely against it is the ageing titular "Last man in tower". And the story revolves around these two characters Dharmen Shah and the retired widower Mr. Yogesh A. Murthy aka Masterji.

The aim of this essay is to figure out how and to what purposes does age become a contributing factor towards the fate of Masterji and other aging members of Vishram Society, namely Mr. and Mrs. Pinto. Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* is a fascinating text to look at how age is perceived and discriminated in Indian society. This is particularly so, because it features a vast array of characters from all generations and their interactions, perceptions as well as their treatment of the elderly.

Critic Ulka Anjaria, who has commented on the nature of social realism used by Adiga in his fiction, writes, "By obscuring the legibility of the symbol, the novel displaces the earnest social critique evident in Adiga's interviews and upturns the conventional idiom of social realism, which is a poetics of visibility, of showing what is otherwise unseen, and of bringing unrepresented experience to light." (120)

When Anjaria talks about upturning the social critique she means that Aravind Adiga's fiction goes way beyond simple formulaic representation. His narrative leaves the readers with an open space filled with ample evidences within the text to take any course of evaluation that they deem fit. He primarily does so by not creating a plotline which features black and white characters. Taking *Last Man in Tower* as an example, we see that Dharmen Shah is not painted as a villainous business tycoon who chooses to profit at the loss of others, even if he does so, it is because Dharmen Shah is just as much a product of the socio-economic politic of Mumbai as are the residents of Vishram Society. He has understood early on that the only means of moving up the social ladder in this Metropolis is via his shrewd and somewhat cold pragmatic and sometimes outrightly manipulative skills. As opposed to him we have the character of Masterji, who at a superficial level may seem to be all that Dharmen Shah is not. However, going past the cursory view of the story, a discerning reader gets to see that the titular character of the story is not painted as a simple tragic protagonist with one fatal flaw, who is a victim of the schemes set in motion by Dharmen Shah. His motivations of choosing to not let go of his apartment are far more complex and self-driven. In fact, the very end of the novel pushes the readers in a highly uncomfortable self-reflexive terrain where they are left to ponder over their own individualistic needs which more often than not come at the cost of someone or something else.

While Anjaria's analysis of *Last Man in Tower* is purely limited to understanding the complex socio-economic politics of Adiga, I would like to assess the category of Age and see how the 61 years old Yogesh A. Murthy and his neighbours are presented within the novel and the way in which Adiga's presentation of age is just as complicated and intricately linked with the socio-economic politics of an urban city like Mumbai.

When Masterji is introduced in the text he is shown as an upstanding and contributing member of Vishram Society. Although, still grieving over his wife who has passed away not more than a year ago, Masterji is not painted as a man who is severely depressed. He is shown as a man who has come to terms with his loss, he is the unofficial librarian of Tower A who is always too happy to lend books and educate his fellow neighbours, he gives science tutorials to the young kids within Vishram which he enthusiastically calls his Top-up

Sessions. He also occasionally helps out his neighbours and is also supported by them. He has his daily dinners with the Pintos. He is extremely prompt in his weekly rendezvous with his grandson. As such, he as an active social member of his society. Although, his life is marred by tragedies which include the early demise of his young daughter and the recent demise of his wife, Masterji is never painted by Adiga as a man who is severely depressed at the losses incurred in his life. Such a build-up within the text can only be prepared for a downfall which is not far off within the text. When the incidents within the text take a sour turn, that is when the offer is finally made in the text, the seemingly calm and utopic façade of the society is immediately peeled off and the opportunistic individualism of the characters is finally brought to surface.

The neighbours who have for so long been in cahoots with Masterji are now shown picking sides. Their reverential treatment and regard for Masterji quickly disintegrates and gradually moves towards that of abuse. However, what makes *Last Man in Tower* surprisingly unique is the ways in which the hypocrisy of Indian cultural values is brought to the fore.

Particularly shocking for the readers is the change in the treatment of Mrs Puri, who has for so long been considered Masterji's closest friend. The text makes no qualms in showing her hypocrisy and desperation in enforcing all attempts to remove the final obstacle between her and the golden ticket to the upper-class suburbs of Mumbai. For her the money comes with the promise of complete healthcare for her son, Ramu, who suffers from Down Syndrome.

I would further extrapolate from Anjaria's argument and look at the matter of ageing within the novel and see if age functions at a mere metaphorical level or does it actually succeeding in trumping many ageist assumptions which are abound not just in Indian fiction but Indian culture as well. Weihsin Gui in his essay "Creative Destruction and Narrative Renovation: Neoliberalism and the Aesthetic Dimension in the fiction of Aravind Adiga and Mohsin Hamid" argues how Adiga in *The White Tiger* consciously presents his inherent critique of neoliberalism and globalisation and via his fiction, aesthetically highlights the trope of "Rising Asia". Within this trope is embedded the notion of Asia's neoliberal politics which instigate its citizens to be greedy because of its unabashed focus on success. While Weihsin Gui's assessment is for *The White Tiger*, however, one can clearly see similar politics being incorporated within *Last Man in Tower*.

All the members of Vishram Society instantly begin or even gradually begin making their plans for upward social mobility the moment they are presented with this opportunity. This wish for mobility and success is most clearly presented vis-à-vis Mrs Rego, the most outwardly left oriented character in the novelist. A social worker by profession, Mrs Rego is initially shown as a woman who is thoroughly repulsed by the offer made by Mr. Shah. Sparked by the jealousy of the more affluent lifestyle of her married sister, it doesn't take much to persuade her that it is in her and her kids' best interests to accept the money and rise up the social ladder in Mumbai. Initially she is presented to the readers as the most politically conscious characters within the text, but her adoption within the neoliberal politics of a metropolis like Mumbai doesn't

take long to be realised, almost making Dharmen Shah's assessment about men that there is a price for everyone come true.

As the narrative progresses the critique against the neoliberal inclinations of the members of Vishram society only gets clearer. In fact, every subsequent abuse against Masterji beginning from his abandonment by the society members, to the thoroughly humiliating tactics of Mrs Puri, where she throws bags of her son's shit on his doorstep, to the final blow on his head and the shove from the terrace are motivated less by his age and more from their thirst to rise in a city which offers little opportunity for these seeking betterment.

The members of Vishram Society almost function as an adoptive family for Masterji. These are people with whom he has spent the most of his life. It is with these members that Masterji is shown at his utmost ease. He visits to his sons' apartment are less to spend time with him and more to maintain a bond with his grandson. His presence there is also not a welcome one as his son is rarely present during those brief visits.. But once the offer is made and changes have come within Masterji's adoptive family, the text for some time almost functions as a typical melodramatic plot where the elderly are abused in order to gain their compliance. There truly is very little difference between his real family and his adoptive one when it comes to their motivations for abuse.

However, Adiga's true attack on ageism within the fabric of Mumbai comes at the very end of the text in which he parodies Masterji's suffering by consummating it with a newspaper report declaring his death. It is with this report and the Vishram Society's narrative superimposition of Masterji's life story that age-related prejudices among the people of Mumbai becomes glaringly obvious. From being an upstanding member of Vishram community his life story is moulded to suit the fabrication of the circumstances of his death. His age is used to present him as a man at the cusp of dementia, suffering from severe depression because of the death of the two women in his life. He is presented as a senile man on the brink of collapse and his murder is covered up for a suicide.

Masterji's treatment at the hands of not just the members of Vishram society, but also the public service institutions of law and enforcement reveals the systemic failure of the city to protect the rights of its elderly citizens. It is the apathy of the people, who are unwilling to poke holes into the completely fabricated lies by Masterji's murderers.

The two newspapers reports included in the narrative serve the purpose of commenting on the inefficacy of newspaper journalism. There is no denying that the fate of Masterji is utterly tragic. But the response that is created of his fate is even more tragic because of its brutal apathy.

Both the articles are meant to reinvoke ageist prejudices of the populace so that no sympathy is ever created for his rebellion. They wrench Masterji's life story from his hands and twist it to suit the purposes of the neoliberal politics of Mumbai. The first article functions as a combustion engine for the rigour of Masterji's revolt. The article reads as follows, "By describing himself thus as the small man in the situation, Murthy may hope to win the sympathy of some, but how honest is this picture he paints?" (Adiga, 325) The aim of

the article is to portray him simply as a man standing in the way of the wishes of his fellow neighbours. His reputation is torn to bits and all that he associated with his neighbours ends up being in shambles.

While the people of the nearby slums show their hollow support towards Masterji at his revolt, the readers of the novel who have for so long been completely aware of the motivations of Masterji know that it has very little to do with his political inclinations and drive to stand in as the sacrificial lamb for the poor man and more to do with his personal needs to keep things the way they are. He is a man who is acutely aware that the respectful and independent existence that he has created within Vishram will be hard to recreate elsewhere in Mumbai. His is not presented to the readers are an old and wise man who wishes to make his fellow residents realise that Vishram Society stands for far more than they realise.

Adiga never paints the middle age housing complex as a place that is fully functioning in itself. The building is clearly in much need for renovation. There are kinks within the water supply. Its dilapidated structure is almost at the brink of collapse. As such, the opportunity provided by Mr. Shah to move to a better place is seen by the residents of Vishram as well as the readers as a welcome one. While Masterji's initial rebellion sparks up in support of Mr. and Mrs. Pinto, the elderly couple, whose disabilities would make it truly hard for them to find a new place that would suit their aging needs. Living without any assistance from their kids who live abroad, for Mrs. Pinto who is partially blind and Mr. Pinto her aged husband, the Vishram housing complex is an extension of their being. Aware of every nook and cranny of the place, the couple has created a functioning life which doesn't require much outside help. A move at this stage might just become detrimental to the life they have created in the absence of a support system.

The same is also true of Masterji, for whom the structure of Vishram Society is littered with the memories of his late wife and daughter. Memories which have helped him cope with feelings of depression. The narrative at this point does bring forth values which can never be calculated and priced by the capitalistic endeavours of business tycoons like Mr. Shah, whose drive for wealth is now the collective reality of cosmopolitan Mumbai.

However, once Mr. Pinto is threatened by Mr. Shah, and as he is aware of the incompetency and reluctance of the law force to take action against the offense, he along with his wife choose to accept the offer. Masterji's initial support for Mr. and Mrs. Pinto, now turns towards a fight against the injustices of Mr. Shah and the people he represents, and very soon this battle for justice is converted to the battle of the egos. By the end of the narrative it is hard to truly pinpoint the reasons for his obstinacy, as he is willing to forego the happiness of his fellow residents and establish its own success.

There is no shying away from the fact that Masterji's rebellion has within it seeds of revolt against the rampant corruption and the abject social reality of India. However, to paint the ageing "Last Man" within the work to be someone who stands against it all will also be a gross misreading of the text. While clearly commenting and vehemently critiquing the neo-liberal politics of India,

Adiga also presents his readers with its inescapability. It is a system that sustains itself because of the common consensus, as well as incorporation of any form of rebellion (case of Mrs Rego), and when that doesn't work the system simply switches to threatening the revolt with elimination which is clearly the case of the Pintos and when even that doesn't work it just as easily shifts to the actual elimination of the threat which is finally the tragic case of Masterji.

Critic John Thieme, in an essay titled "Urban Chronotopes: London and Bombay", writes "Masterji's saying 'no' stops short of making him a tragic protagonist in the vein of, say Sophocles' Antigone, Arthur Miller's John Proctor or Jean Anouilh's Joan of Arc, characters who choose death over dishonour. There is little sense of uncompromising moral integrity driving his behaviour. He simply wants things to stay as they are; he wants place and all the associations that go with it to remain static." (199) However, such a reading of the text is also extremely reductive and ageist, as it refuses to account for the need of systemic incorporation of policies that would help the elderly become acclimatised with the rapidly changing landscape of Mumbai. Masterji is not a man closed against all aspects of modernity. His gradual friendship with his new neighbour, a single woman and an independent journalist whose boyfriend occasionally comes for a visit and who has also been painted as a scandalous woman within Vishram society, is proof of the fact that he is not a man bound by traditional ethos unwilling to accommodate with the changing times. As such to side-line Masterji with tradition and Mr. Shah with rising modernity would be a woefully ageist presumption within the minds of the readers. And Adiga takes excessive pains within his narrative break that binary and show the complexities of the stance of both of his adversaries. Age for Adiga is never a sole driving factor for the motivations of his titular character.

Coming now to the second newspaper report within the narrative is when we finally see Adiga's critique of ageism becoming prominent. His critique of ageism is far more nuanced than any typical narrative that would seek to address the issue of the abuse of the elderly. Adiga's final dramatization of the murder is far from being melodramatic. In fact, the scene is meant to unmask the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality when faced with the opportunity to rise above its station. Post Masterji's Murder, the newspaper article titled "Suicide in Santa Cruz (East)?" reads:

My Yogesh Murthy, a retired teacher at the famous St Catherine's School in the neighbourhood, allegedly committed suicide last night from the rooftop of 'Vishram' Society in Vakola, Santa Cruz(E).

While there is no suspicion of foul play in the matter, the Santa Cruz Police say they are not ruling out any possibility at this stage. An investigation is underway.

It is believed, however that the deceased had slipped into a state of extreme depression following the death of his wife almost exactly a year ago. Residents of the neighbourhood say that he had been progressively losing his mind under the pressure of diabetes and old age, withdrawing into his room, talking to himself, engaging in antisocial behaviour and

fighting with his entire Society over a proposed offer of redevelopment, which he alone opposed. (Adiga 395)

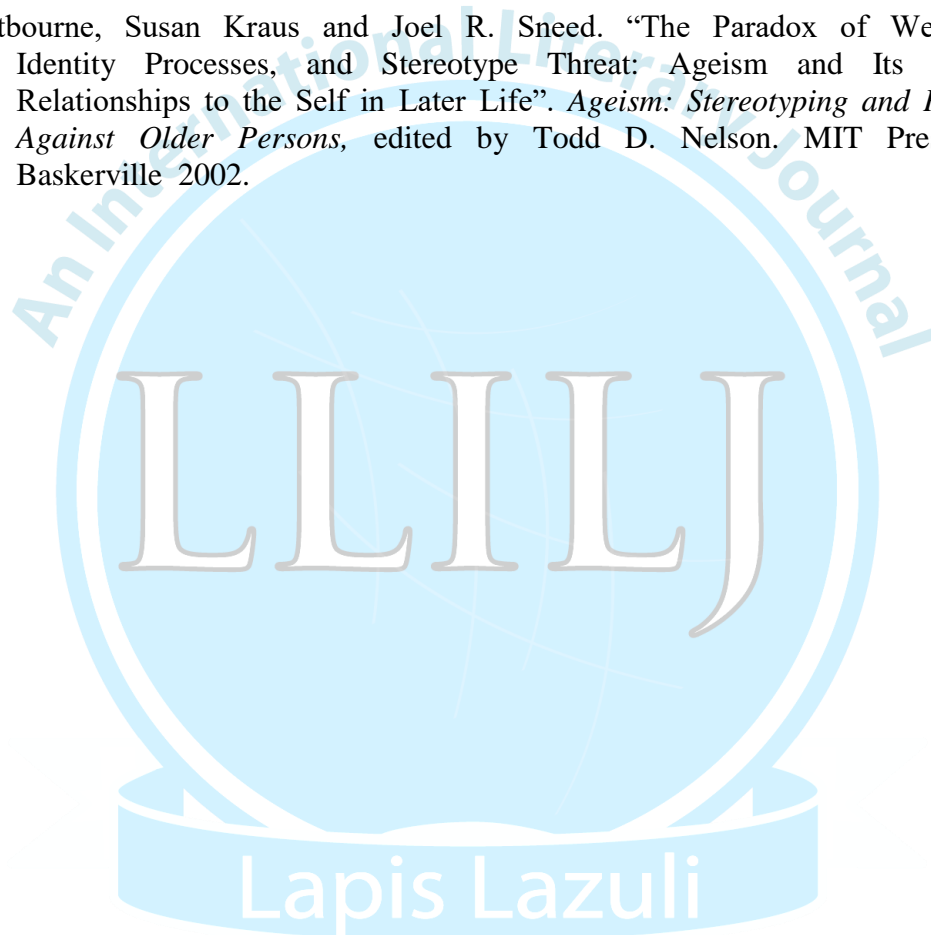
The report of his death shows the rampant bias in terms of relaying the story of Masterji. As he is left with no spokesperson, it is only the readers who are left privy to the truth behind the report and as such are exposed to the apathy not just at a societal level but at a systemic level as well. It is his old age which creates the plausibility of dementia to be the propellers for his death. The story of a reasonably ageing man clinging to his home for sentimental reasons is changed to that of a senile delinquent whose refusal of Mr. Shah's 'generous' offer can only carry the plausible symptom of deteriorating dementia. His abandonment by his fellow neighbours is given the name of self-propelled exile. And his anger displayed at the abuse and betrayal by them is projected at irrational episodes of uncontrolled rage and finally the murder is camouflaged to give the appearance of a suicide. However, this disguise serves to function only as a camouflage, as the authorities are pretty much aware about the truth of this incident and choose not to probe the matter further, as it would risk upsetting the authorities.

Gerontologists Susan Krauss Whitbourne and Joel R Sneed believe, "Negative attitudes towards ageing take several forms (Kite and Johnson 1988). The first is that older adults are lonely and depressed. This stereotype portrays older adults as lacking close friends and family and as having higher rate of mood disorders than is true for younger adults. Both components of this stereotype clearly are myths (Cooley et al. 1998; Whitbourne, 2001). They conflict with the weight of evidence supporting the view that older adults are high on psychosocial resources, both personal and interpersonal." (244-245)

The above postulations can truly be held true for Masterji, whose death is covered up using stereotypes about the old which can easily be believed by the authorities reviewing the case as well as the people living nearby. As such, Adiga brings to light the true potential of ageist prejudices within a capitalist society that gives leverage to capital and utility based recognition and is unable to acknowledge, incorporate and quantify moral and ethical responsibilities. Such a system is destined to devalue the members who are no longer considered a productive force.

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BIO-NOTE

Himanshi Saini works as an Assistant Professor (Ad Hoc) at Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi. She has done her BA and MA in English from Delhi University. She is currently pursuing M.Phil in English for Delhi University and is in the midst of researching for her dissertation. Her topics of interest are Genre Theory, Popular Fiction, Narrative and Literary Gerontology in Indian Literature. Her teaching areas are Postcolonial Literature, Modern British and Postmodern British fiction and poetry.

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