

**Circulation of Power and Construction of Identity:  
Reconfiguring Cultural Exigency and Populism in Aravind  
Adiga's *Last Man in Tower***

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**Abstract:** *This paper quite strategically maps out the range, flow and nature of power structure where the force of power taking its shift from one group to another implies its omnipresent nature. The novel *Last Man in Tower* showing the exigency of identity and culture in the post-colonial background focuses on the growth and radical development of communalism and commercialism that consume the value and importance of individualism. On the other hand, the novel emphasises on the praxis of popular culture in the framework of power circulation in metropolitan cum cosmopolitan cities showing the universal crux of cultural presentation in the age of globalization. Adiga believes that the popular culture does not belong to any cultural industry, but to the people; it is produced from within, not imposed by capitalism. The popular culture with its deterioration and development at its peak in a discourse of power politics touches every sphere of life.*

**Keywords:** *capitalism, commercialism, communalism, identity, popular culture, post-colonial, power structure*

Aravind Adiga's most critically acclaimed novel *Last Man in Tower*, published in 2011, examines the very intricate repercussion of the tension between individualism and communalism incorporating the strong sense of national identity that marks a cultural impression on the minds of the people in India. The novel quite defiantly portrays the bare picture of life-styles, actions and approaches of the inhabitants who live in two apartments, named Vishram Society Tower A and Vishram Society Tower B, in Mumbai. The novel centres around Yogesh Murthy, a retired school teacher, also popularly

called 'Masterji' who strongly obstructs the advantageous metropolitan attitude of abolishing these towers. The novel at first seems to suggest the balance of individual freedom with the need of community, but as the action of the narrative goes on; the things change and foreshadow the different and distinguished picture of humanity.

Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* conveys a new insight or perspective on the tension between individualism, community's need, beclouding Western notion of individual freedom and community and their respective interests by interrogating the solidarity of meaning of identities and nationalism. Adiga, through the novel posits the questions about the importance of value of individualism and communalism, about the power structure based on the identity politics and about the security and rights of individual and group. These questions strive to forecast the struggle and exploitation of the Indian people in the field of metropolitanism and post-colonialism.

Adiga's writings are well matched to the inherent protest and hatred for violation exemplified in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that exhibits the origin of independent states from colonial rule and the process of exploitation in post-colonial discourse. Adiga explores both the origin of the independent states and its violation in Indian context. He, in his works also deals with the conflict and crisis of identities that embody the nationalistic sentiments showing the clash between tradition and contemporary life. Adiga, in *Last Man in Tower*, implies the clash between tradition and modernism in a new introspective framework through the portrayal of the character 'Masterji' whose protest for the individual right against new modernist and materialistic view of Dharmen Shah, reflects the stress of discourse between Indian opinion of individualism and collectivism negotiating to the cultural refraction. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, tracing the process of violence, exploitation and domination in backdrop of colonial and post-colonial discourse influences Adiga's present novel incorporating these issues. Fanon, in this book argues that violence is necessary to reform of rhetoric, language, the structure of culture and government to attain the political

freedom in the true sense of the term. Fanon, again in *The Wretched of the Earth*, remarks that-

National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event. At whatever level we study it – individual encounters, a change of name for a sports club, the guest list at a cocktail party, members of police force or the board of directors of a state or private bank – decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one “species” of mankind by other. (Fanon 66)

Fanon’s presentation of violation becomes predominant theme in Adiga’s writings. The themes of everlasting inequality and social hierarchies are prevalent in *Last Man in Tower*, where Masterji’s conviction of his struggle is considered as remains of colonial past and the inhabitants of the Vishram Society are figured out as ‘native’ according to Fanon. Whereas Fanon concentrates on the issue of violence in colonial and post-colonial discourse, Ernest Gelner’s critical book *Nations and Nationalism* marking national identity as an essential ingredient helps the readers to comprehend Adiga’s notion of individualism exemplified in *Last Man in Tower*. In *Nations and Nationalism*, Gelner remarks the very idea of ‘identity’ in the following-

Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating

Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation  
(6-7)

Regarding nationalism, Gelner remarks that “The political boundary of a given state can fail to include all the members of the appropriate nation; or it can include them but also include some foreigners; or it can fail in both these ways at once, not incorporating all the nationals and yet also including some non-

nationals" (1). Another post-colonial theorist Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, has given a different light on the values, importance and development of nationalism and national identity. Anderson comments that nation is considered as an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Anderson argues that the importance of communal actions that determine individual identity considering nations as communities. This view is reflected in Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (7).

On the other hand, critics and historians categorise many violent events as communalism in the setting of South Asia. David Ludden's viewpoint reflected in his article "Introduction Ayodhya: A Window on the World" helping the readers to make out the theme of communalism and national identity, concentrates on the construction of the group identity incorporating his presentation of religious flavour and national sentiment. He remarks in his article that "communalism is a product of orientalism and the colonial state" (11) and again points out that "communalism is a collective antagonism organised around religious, linguistic, and/or ethnic identities" (12). The perspective of communalism is different in India from other countries. Ludden in his same article argues that "In India, communalism is based on the fundamental idea that Hindus and Muslims constitute totally separate communities in essential opposition to another" (12). In respect of India, the sense of nationalism is constructed on the ground of communalism that creates religious community in the image of a family and a nation. In Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, communalism is well exercised in the process of victimizing Masterji who tried to be identified as a Hindu. It is conspicuous that national identity or construction of nationality is consisted of communal groupism that guides and creates political discourse in a state. Regarding this view, Ludden, in his article entitled "Introduction. Ayodhya: A Window on the World," included in *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy of India*, remarks – Communalism is alive in everyday politics that

invokes community identities – in the streets, courts, media, elections, religious and cultural institutions, schools, academic research and intimate conversation – anywhere that people can be influenced to form their own identities and public opinions around oppositional ethnic or religious categories. (Ludden 13)

Power emerges within the communal group by discrediting the individual value. With the emergence of communal power that controls and directs the entire state, the individual right, value, identity and power are destroyed. The power of communalism exercising in the form of violence in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, through the consummation of inhabitants of Vishram Society relates to Ludden's comment on new communalism: "India's new communalism has arisen during a struggle to reconstruct India politically. The struggle is centrally concerned with the legitimacy of the state, the distribution of state resources, power in society, and justice" (18). Whereas nationalism is essential to set up the rightness and legality of a modern state, communalism is needed to mould collective identity which is well manifested in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*.

In *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga tactfully and critically has used the theme of greed, popular growth and the changes which are the aftermath of urban development in Mumbai. He also portrays the pressure of real estate business showing the flexibility of India's future and has incorporated the sense of violence as the consequences of India's colonial past. The novel has exemplified the violence and the political strategies of real estate business holder in the post-colonial discourse. Adiga has shown in his present novel how violence creates its own space and states where everyone has to enter and accept the policies. Adiga argues that "Every man and woman entering the mall became a high-risk terrorist threat. A quick frisking and opening of bags restored their name and good reputation, allowing them to ride the escalator to the Big Bazaar supermarket on the first floor, or the Landmark Book Store on the second" (373).

The British specification and division between private and public create a stress on the minds of people to identify or re-

identify themselves. Adiga's novel shows such tension between individual right, value and identity and communal power showing the struggle of the people on their personal and public spaces entangled with the ideologies, authorities and the nationalistic ideas. As a result, there is gradual transformation of individualism into communalism on the basic ground of self-identification. The inhabitants of the Vishram Society as exemplified in the novel, enjoyed a good and healthy atmosphere of the surroundings. The society including two towers is a middle-class, respectable and co-operative with apparently mutual understanding and sharing some common sentiments. Adiga remarks in *Last Man in Tower*:

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 cooperative 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). (14-16)

Adiga has created a hybridised world in the Vishram Society by allowing people from different cultures, religions and backgrounds to live without discrimination. The towers in that society were set up in such a manner that nobody can distinguish people regarding their castes and classes. The setting of the door of the flat gives a glimpse of cosmopolitan society which is presented in the following-

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 practised only in this building. (23-24)

Being a traditional, Masterji is well acquainted with the consciousness of morality, equality and human right. But the situation constantly changes showing commercial and cosmopolitan development in post-independence and post-colonial context. Foreshadowing Masterji in a conflict with the inhabitants of the Vishram Society, the beginning part of the novel implies the message which is documented in the Hindu Watchman's booth which is thus: "I was never born and I will never die; I do not hurt and cannot be hurt; I am invincible, immortal and indestructible" (16). Here the Watchman represents symbolically the everyman with common sensibilities, as the narrator remarks thus: "If you talked to him long enough, you would discover he feared China, worried about Jihadis on the suburban trains, and favoured a national identification card to flush out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants; but most had never known him to express any opinion, unless it was related to the game of cricket" (26).

Adiga does not portray a society of flat duplicates where power is misused through commercial and colonial authenticities. The differences amongst the inhabitants forcing them to direct in their different ways, ultimately summon them to the power of collective communalism. Such differences in wealth, thought, and approaches on the part of the inhabitants in Last Man in Tower, are delineated in the following:

Differences of wealth among the members did not go unnoticed – Mr Kudwa (4C) had taken his family last summer to Ladakh, rather than nearby Mahabaleshwar, as everyone else did, and Mr Ajwani the broker owned a Toyota Qualis – yet these were spikes and dips within the equalizing dinginess of Vishram. The real distinction was leaving the Society. (30)

In the novel, the death of Masterji implies such difference when he exits from the group identity. His sacrifice also reveals the very evils of materialistic and communalistic proceedings of society in which rights, identities and moralities cannot be claimed. Adiga portrays such conflict through his characters in the background of colonial and postcolonial discourse.

community of Vishram Society is reflected throughout the entire novel in Adiga's presentation of India, as an imagined community that retains its advantage on Masterji when the society was being moulded according to the trend of communal interaction, economic development and urbanization of the area. The sacrifice of life of Masterji is conspicuous to the other inhabitants as he is devoted to "what he believed to be right. He had a conscience. No matter what people said to him or did to him he never changed his mind, and never betrayed his conscience" (379).

On the other hand, Adiga concentrates on the Indian popular culture in the miniature framework of cosmopolitan and metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore and Chennai. The novel *Last Man in Tower* portrays the consumer society that incorporates several popular cultures such as prostitution, theology, narco-culture, communism and capitalism. A society traditionally is equipped with the notions of national integration, citizenship and nation-state discourse. Though Aravind Adiga encompasses the cultural, economic and social globalization in his novel, the crux of identity is merged with the national space anticipating culture and everyday life. This issue is well documented in the novel in the description of Vishram Society:

Vishram is a building like the people living in it, middle class at its core. Improvement or failure, it is incapable of either extremity. The men have modest paunches, wear checked polyester shirts over white banians, and keep their hair oiled and short. The older women wear saris, salwar kameez, or skirts. All of them pay taxes,



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Tension between traditional and constitutional notion of power of individuality and the constant changing demand of communally based power is well projected in the attempt of Masterji to uphold his moral right as an individual before the power of communal and cosmopolitan framework. Masterji's experiences towards his complex importance and value to the community of Vishram Society is reflected throughout the entire novel in Adiga's presentation of India, as an imagined community that retains its advantage on Masterji when the society was being moulded according to the trend of communal interaction, economic development and urbanization of the area. The sacrifice of life of Masterji is conspicuous to the other inhabitants as he is devoted to "what he believed to be right. He had a conscience. No matter what people said to him or did to him he never changed his mind, and never betrayed his conscience" (379).

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Vishram is a building like the people living in it, middle class to its core. Improvement or failure, it is incapable of either extremity. The men have modest paunches, wear checked polyester shirts over white banians, and keep their hair oiled and short. The older women wear saris, salwar kameez, or skirts, and the younger ones' wear jeans. All of them pay taxes, support charities, and vote in local and general elections.

Just one glance at Vishram in the evening, as its residents sit in white plastic chairs in the compound, chit-chatting, fanning

themselves with the Times of India, and you know that this Society is – what else? –pucca. (19)

The novel *Last Man in Tower*, unfolding cultural, economic and social metamorphosis in the configuration of instability of forming knowledge and thought centralises a critique adapting with the process of metropolitanism and urbanization, controlled by institutions and individuals. Adiga's present novel raises the voice of protest against the unethical and assumed notions of ethnicity, language and religion and marginalisation to construct a perfect society or nation-state. Low cultures are identified as something wild, invaluable, local and non-reflexive. It is believed that the forms of entertainments, conventions, rites and vernacular events are not the construct of elite class of the society, rather simplified by the middle class. Adiga critiques the knowledge on the basis of which the privileged group creates the divisions in culture where the culture of elite people is considered as high culture neglecting the popular or mass culture in the gradual process of power discourse. Adiga has quite defiantly rewarded the suppressed culture in its positive height and considered it as an integral part of national identity. He has channelized his view regarding the notional consciousness of the backward countries like India in the consumerist society with cosmopolitan sentiment that up-grades the capitalist community and constitutes various sub-cultures. This cosmopolitan viewpoint is captured by Adiga in *Last Man in Tower* thus:

Outside, parked along the compound wall are a dozen scooters and motorbikes, three Maruti-Suzukis, two Tata Indicas, a battered Toyota Qualis, and a few children's bicycles. The main feature of this compound is a three-foot-tall polished black-stone cross, set inside a shrine of glazed blue-and-white tiles and covered in fading flowers and wreaths – a reminder that 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). (Adiga 16)

Adiga, in this novel, gives a light on the role of consumption as social and political force that pervades all spheres of human life and commercialise the Indian popular culture constructing popular or mass cultural identity. The Indian popular culture has a wide range of usage as inter-textual references as exemplified in *Last Man in Tower* in the form of popular murder mystery in the following-

For his retirement, Masterji had hoped to re-read his collection of murder mysteries, and history books of old Rome (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*; Tacitus, *The Annals*; Plutarch, *Illustrious Figures of the Roman Republic*) and old Bombay (*A Brief Life of Mountstuart Elphinstone*; *The Stages of the Creation of the City of Bombay*, fully illustrated). An Advanced French Grammar (with Questions and Answers Provided), bought so he could teach his children at home, also stood on the shelf. But since the murder novels were in demand throughout the Society, and neighbours borrowed them frequently (and returned them infrequently), he would soon be left only with history and foreign grammar. Mrs Puri claimed one of the last Agatha Christies from the bookshelf and smiled – there were a few Erle Stanley Gardners too, but she was not that bored. (36-37)

In cultural studies, the notion of cosmopolitanism is connected to the contemporary diasporic sensibility but the idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism in Adiga's novel records the knowledge of everyday experience in metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Chennai. Adiga has portrayed in *Last Man in Tower* the metropolitan as well as cosmopolitan realm with the people in their physical features, postures, manners, customs, religions and language etc. These qualities identify a certain or particular region or locality with its speciality, uniqueness, flaws and distinguished spirit. In this present novel, Adiga begins his narrative journey with the topographical presentation of a particular place Mumbai, but in course of the narrative, he goes beyond the particularity and attains the universal issue of the problematic confrontation of people in metropolitan cum cosmopolitan framework. The

illustration of Bombay proves such thing "What is Bombay? From the thirteenth floor, 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" (57).

Adiga, throughout the novel, has channelized the very crucial message that the value of communities and neighbourhood is no longer stable or permanent as they are constructed, maintained and reshaped and re-modified. The behaviour, performance, value, morality and attitudes of the inhabitants of a certain community are influenced and controlled by the surroundings. Thus, Adiga's novel *Last Man in Tower*, intimating the praxis of popular culture and merchandise of social life, quite deliberately displays the multifaceted natures of power and violence and constant flow of subjugation and exploitation of the marginalised and down-trodden. The novel nourishes a dominant motif of resistance against the socio-political, cultural, and economic ideological superstructures and the hegemonic social structure to unfurl the cracks of the existing power and to overtone it to formulate an alternative power, tradition and property relation.

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