
Yogesh A. Murthy, ‘Masterji’, is the last man in Tower A: the retired schoolteacher who inadvertently becomes a ‘David’ opposed to the capitalist drive of property developer Dharmen Shah. In an efficient portrayal of rapacious greed and ambition, Shah tantalises the residents of Tower A with enough rupees to double their dreams for self-improvement. However, the decision to accept Shah’s offer must be unanimous: all in or all out.

Vishram Society was built in the 1950s in Vakola. At that time, it was a fashionable address for the aspiring middle class. But fashions and aspirations change over time and entrepeneur like Dharmen Shah sense these shifts and act swiftly. The construction industry of the world’s ninth largest economy depends on the labour of peasants who work in appalling conditions using unsafe work practices. Drawn by the lure of making a quick profit in the city, their own farms are left without a workforce.

Community in the novel is a dispirited collection of individuals attempting to survive with whatever luck and talent they were born with. The residents of Tower A seemed to be a cohesive and amicable group. If not friends, they were alert to the presence of their neighbours and willing to assist if something had gone awry. It does not take a great deal to dismantle this veneer of civility and mutual regard: an offer of money. Some grasp the opportunity faster than others but only Masterji refuses the offer. It is difficult to see Masterji as a moral hero or anti-capitalist worker’s hero. He is merely an old man whose memories and identity are fixed to the tiny apartment he had once shared with his wife, daughter and son. Masterji’s toxic relationship with his son is one of the novel’s poignantly understated subplots. He still feels emotionally closer to the two dead women in his life. The facts of his daughter’s death – in the midst of a seeing and sightless mass of her countrymen and women – is truly disturbing.

Dispossessed of the support of family, friendship and society, Masterji turns to the institutions of law and order to aid him. It’s impossible not to think of the works of Charles Dickens when reading *Last Man in Tower*. The law firm of Parekh and Sons, Advocate, ‘Legal Hawk with Soul & Conscience’ might occupy rooms next door to Mr Jaggers in *Great Expectations*. However, for all his skill at portraying a sense of place, Adinga fails the reader in his characterisations. There are glimpses of the scathing satire and irony Adinga is capable of writing when Parekh and Sons lead Masterji on a wander round the mulberry bush in the mutable world of Indian jurisprudence. Dickens’s characters are beautifully and richly evoked: Masterji and his fellow Tower A inhabitants become tedious and repetitive. Real life is inescapable but fiction must elevate it to art so that the reader can perceive its multitude of connections.

Shah poses the question, ‘What is Bombay?’ while assessing the city with his customary avarice. He was one of the peasants who arrive in the glittering city with cow dung on their bare feet and inarticulate hopes. He now owns more than enough material splendours but his health has been corrupted by the atrocious working practices he advocates. He is a widower who has totally lost any connection with his only son. He is a pathetic figure and a disappointing character. He is neither
sufficiently nasty to be captivating, neither sufficiently ignorant to be pitied. The contest is reduced to the wealthy lonely old man versus the poor lonely old man.

As part of his Dickensian experiment Adinga writes some wonderful vignettes:

Three goats had come out from an alley, and one of them rubbed against his left leg.

Day-labourers slept on the pavement, oblivious to the moving feet around them. The wooden carts that they had been pulling all day long lay beside them; from beneath one, a dog’s claws jutted out, as if the cart were relaxing its animal digits in the cool of the evening. An old man sat beside stacks of newspapers held down by rocks: each rock looking like a crystallization of some hard truth in the newsprint. Masterji stopped to watch the newspapers. (300)

Great writers understand that by portraying a city’s crowd they can reveal to the reader a surprising array of individuality. Adinga has a keen eye for detail and his prose easily captures the essence and intimacy of a single moment. But this novel’s foundation is not sturdy enough to support so many levels of multitudes. The insights into the lives Adinga spotlights read like a collection of vignettes better suited to the short story form. The novel lacks an interesting central storyline and memorable major characters to serve as the mortar which would render the novel a cohesive journey through Mumbai, a city with more than 20 million souls striving to lead lives of purpose.

Adinga’s highly successful debut novel, *The White Tiger*, was a narrative tour de force, masterfully propelled by a rich and original vein of dark humour. His second novel, *Last Man in Tower*, is also set in modern day India but it is a subdued and surprisingly uninteresting narrative.

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