
RESEARCH ARTICLE

STRENGTH OF *LAST MAN IN TOWER* BY ARVIND ADIGA: AGAINST THE REAL ESTATE

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Abstract

Literature and society shares a reciprocal relationship. All the issues of human society are voiced in literary planes. A large number of issues in contemporary human society are related with natural resources and their exploitative usage, human greed and concern for protecting the environment. After air and water, land is the most important natural resources which is a limited entity. In the entire history of human civilization, we see the struggle for land between kings and empires. Today this struggle takes the disguise of land acquisition, real estate dealings. This paper has an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of social science and literature. The fictional text, *Last Man in Tower* by Arvind Adiga discusses the issue of real estate business. Industrialists are often accused of acquiring lands in name of development projects by unjust measures. In the aforementioned text, is presented a character of an old man Yogesh Murthy who refuses to sell his land to the businessman. This is the story of his stand against the agents of real estate. In this paper, I am making a comparison between

his defiance and the much disputed Land Acquisition Bill passed in 2013. Till date, this bill remains a bone of contention between policy makers and activist forces; speaking from peasants and land holders side.

Keywords: Real Estate, Land Acquisition, Urbanization, Resilience

The history of modernization and the Industrial revolution worldwide witnessed the tussle between two forces: Industrial forces backed by the state versus peasants and citizens backed by the voices of social activism. In past, such reactions were the result of the forceful seizure of land and properties from the peasants today these tussles are the result of unjust bills and laws passed by democratic nations, which favors the industrial forces in a disguised manner. Literature and society share a reciprocal relationship, as both serve as cause and effect of each other. In the literary world of Premchand and Sharat Chandra, land was always described as a prized commodity, a symbol of belonging and honor. People selling their lands

RESEARCH ARTICLE

willingly is different from when they are made to give land in terms of land dealings, development projects, etc. In contemporary literature, the issue of land acquisition comes along with the issue of urbanization, environment, development projects, industrialization, business, and politics. Though in heart of all such narratives lies the greed and unpredictable human nature. This paper deals with the problem of land acquisition but not in relation to the peasantry but civil society. *Last Man in Tower* is the second novel authored by Booker prize-winning author Arvind Adiga. This novel was published in the year 2011. Adiga in his works continuously give voices to the marginalized and exposes the pitfall of modernity.

Land acquisition is the legal procedure of acquiring private lands to industrialize, develop infrastructural facilities, or urbanize the private land. It claims to provide compensation to the affected landowners for their rehabilitation and resettlement. With the passage of time, new dimensions have been added to the issue of land acquisition. The city and village both are facing the issue of land acquisition in a different manner. In cities, land acquisition takes up the guise of real estate business; while in villages land is acquired or snatched in name of development projects. Till 2013, India has been following the Land acquisition law passed

in 1894. With efforts, activism, and movements the retarding law of colonial days got improved in the Land acquisition, rehabilitation, and resettlement Act passed by parliament 2013. Land was being acquired for building dams, mines and infrastructure. Such developmental initiatives were justified as steps being taken to achieve rapid economic development necessary for public welfare. The new model of growth based on competition in a market economy created immense opportunities for the expansion of the private business.

The government has tried to reform the existing laws to smoothen the process of land acquisition. But, such measures have faced challenges on public platforms. Resistance to land acquisition is far more organized and powerful than it was yesterday. The LARR act of 2013 got amended in 2015 again, which strengthened the side of land holders against businessmen and real estate. The novel *Last Man in the Tower* takes up the theme of real estate. Real estate is understood as the buying and selling of lands with buildings and properties on it. Real estate is a flourishing business that deals in three sectors which are industrial, commercial, and residential. In the backdrop of the narrative lies Mumbai, the commercial capital of the country. It has a rags to riches story of a businessman along with the story of an idealistic man who dares to stand

RESEARCH ARTICLE

against him. Dharmen Shah who is the representative of real estate in this novel, comments about himself,

“ In a socialist economy, the small businessman has to be a thief to prosper (Adiga 34)”.

After his semi-successful ventures as smuggler and contractor, he entered the business of redeveloping' chawls and slums-buying out the tenants of ageing structures so that skyscrapers and shopping malls could take their place. With a nexus of politicians , policemen, and thugs he embarked on the path of success. His experiences from smuggler years made him learn the importance of generosity over violence. With a brutal charm, he used to fix the price of land. He believed in providing cheques and force was his last measure to vacant a land. He earned a reputation as a man who made other men rich. At times he could shove a man's head out of the window and indicated that the rest of him would follow in three seconds-unless a signature appeared on the appropriate documents.

In words of Mango Wodzak the Australian author,

“ It is an unwritten and widely unacknowledged fact that land always ends up belonging to the most violent”.

Shah's property developing business leads him to towards Vishram society,

tower A. It is a relic from a co-operative housing society established in the 1950s. It is situated in Vakola near illegal slums with its law-abiding middle-class residents. Vishram society can be seen as a microcosm of India as people from all background and community lives there. They are regular tax payers and share a bond of harmony and friendship among themselves. Dharmen Shah needs the land of Vishram society for its most ambitious building project in Shanghai. Despite their pride over Vishram society, it is an old building in a decrepit state. Dharmen Shah, the property developer offers them a price double the market price of the building. Sooner or later, everyone agrees to the offer except the one.

Dharmen Shah meets his opposition in 61 year old protagonist Yogesh Murthy, who is a retired school teacher. He is fondly called Masterji by other residents. For the first time, the tactics of Shah fail as he gets a blunt denial by Masterji. He had a simple logic behind his deliberate no; that if a man wants to die in his home, he is free to do so. His personal decision affects other residents as Shah had given them a deadline of 3rd October for the final decision or the contract will be canceled. The further actions expose the veneer of civility, friendship, goodwill and perfect neighborhood. Masterji is neglected, mistreated, threatened, bullied and boycotted by the same people who once

RESEARCH ARTICLE

respected him. As the last choice available, Masterji is murdered by the combined conspiracy of residents and builder.

Along with the issue of land acquisition and real estate this novel also depicts the moral ambivalence in Indian society and foregrounds the enormous pressure on an ordinary Indian to become rich. If land is to be acquired for purpose of development; it is mandated to be acquired lawfully by paying the right sum of money to the landholders. But, what if land is acquired for the purpose of money making by private groups? What if people are being displaced to make luxury rooms for the rich? What if people are not ready to leave their land despite the right compensation given to them? Attachment and memories related to a place makes people repulsive to the idea of leaving home. Amarthaluru Subba Rao, executive director, Finance and Strategy for CLP India comments,

“In India, it is still an emotional asset. Land is not a problem, it is the lack of a right policy to utilize the land available. Land is an environment and a political issue,”

This text depicts the individual struggle of man against the society, market and system. The real test of Murthy’s character lies in his defiant stand against the threat by real estate kings and a state apparatus subservient to the wealth. In his

personal crusade Masterji turns out to be general and inclusive. In his arrogance and stubbornness, he was the only one who gave a thought about the poor servants who were going to lose their job after the demolition of Vishram society. Visualizing the ecological catastrophe, he shows concern for the greens on the land of Vishram society. But the question of being on right side is ambivalent for the readers. Who is acting judicious—the practical residents who are ready for any battle to build a better home for their kids or Masterji who is willing to block the progress of all for the comfort offered by old memories of his wife and daughter? In its review of the novel, leading newspaper, *The National* puts the comment,

“Who is right, the champions of idealism or the practical developers of glittering cities that promise to take India out of centuries of backwardness? (qtd in Vijyamatham)”

Data according to Environment Impact assessment found that the investment project has no significant social benefits to the local communities, as measured by technological transfer, employment opportunity, crop production and local infrastructure development. It is also determined that the project has negative impacts on local economy in terms of loss of grazing land, crop land, grass land, firewood and water resources; all of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

which have negatively affected local livelihoods. Moreover, the investment project has negative environmental effects as demonstrated by clearing of vegetation cover, depletion of water resources and soil degradation. Thus, it is concluded that the Large Scale Land Acquisition has adverse socio-economic and environmental impacts on local livelihoods.

Urban renovation projects, sporting events, infrastructure expansion and more recently, the designation of large areas as tax-free Special Economic Zones, have resulted in the displacement of millions of families, most of whom have not received adequate compensation and rehabilitation. Though the novel is a dark comedy, it ends with a note of rejuvenation and consolation. The closing lines of the novel offer an image of survival; the old banyan tree of Vishram Society that, like Masterji's spirit, survives the demolition, and offer shelter to homeless families. In Indian culture, the banyan tree is a symbol of resilience, liberation, growth, compassion, and the wisdom of selfless giving. And looking at the tree, Adiga leaves a ray of hope that nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free.

The residents are guilt-ridden following the death of Masterji and many of them refuse to take money from Shah. They indulge themselves in welfare schemes for the poor and downtrodden. Adiga's novel thus offers a birds-eye view of

contemporary urban India. There is a new India and there is an old India with communication gap between the two. The grand narrative of progressive India is compromising GDP for happiness. The novel resonates two parallel events. It was published soon after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which led to the displacement of nearly 1.8 million people. By the time *Last Man in Tower* was published Antilia, the world's first billion-dollar skyscraper home belonging to Mukesh Ambani of Reliance group came into existence.

It is set amid the massive slums of Mumbai filled with poverty and squalor. Gaining name as second expensive residence of the world after Buckingham palace it invited a lot of criticism as the land had been acquired by paying little of market price. The novel *Last man in tower* appeals to draw a fine line between compromising humanity for sake of prosperity. Should we ignore the concern of the environment that sustains us; and the poor dependent on us for a better house? What is more important to us and why the land or the price offered for it. The answer must be judicious.

Gerald O' Hara the famous character from the novel *Gone with the wind* says,

“ The land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

worth fighting for, worth dying for because it is the only thing that lasts .”

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