

Aravind Adiga, *The Last Man in Tower*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2011, pp. 432, Rs.699

Aravind Adiga remains majorly recognized for his Booker prize winning novel *The White Tiger* which dealt with the story of a downtrodden but extremely dedicated servant who works to extremes for the sake of his masters. His next work *Between the Assassinations*, a collection of short stories set in a fictitious South Indian town, focused on the issues of poverty and corruption. Both the works, competently exhibit Adiga's skilful use of language with its nuances and his familiarity with his surroundings.

*The Last Man in Tower* starts with a methodical organized detailing laying a "pucca" foundation for the readers. Written in luxuriant words the work befits the genre of fiction. The novel retains the dynamism and finesse of the earlier works. The locale is the Vishram society comprising of Tower A and Tower B, typical Mumbai blocks, which are in a state of depletion. Years of neglect and monsoon lashings would make them collapse any moment. Once pink, the Tower A is now "rainwater stained, fungus-licked grey". In the ensemble of middle class people, unprincipled gatekeeper, Marxist social worker, a precarious internet café owner and a religious but crooked secretary make the community of this society. Also we are familiarized with Mumbai's Versova Beach where rich of the city like bankers and film people jog along homeless and the poor releasing them in open; decaying slums, opulent high rising buildings, venerable temples and typical Mumbai streets jammed with variegated inhabitants. In fact, the author poignantly pictures the contrast between wealth and squalor.

In the gallery of different characters, besides 'Masterji' or 'the last man,' the protagonist, there are more than twenty residents, some more memorable than others-committed social worker Georgina Rego, the insecure internet café proprietor Ibrahim Kudwa, cleaner Mary and strange secretary Ashvin Kuthani. Masterji alias Yogesh Murthy, an unyielding and unbending retired teacher and widower opposes the bait of extravagant money given to the residents to vacate the Tower so that luxury apartments could be constructed. This cash is offered by the villainous property dealer and developer Dharman Shah through his sinuous left hand man Shanmugham. Shah had arrived in Mumbai with ten rupees and his theatrical and remarkable rise has come with a cost. "Like a lizard I went up walls that were not mine to go up." Shah's career as a builder has undermined his respiratory system and made him a chronic bronchitis patient. His health suffers but he has an indomitable drive to work more to earn more. Even his personal life is in a

mess. He knows that his mistress, Rosie, an aspiring Bollywood actress, is with him only because of his attractive financial position. His son, Satish, gets entangled with police but Shah does not have moral strength to restrain him from the wrong path.

On the other hand, 'Master ji' values civility, decency, community living, sharing, and cherishes the memories of his wife above monetary gain. However, unlike Masterji the other residents fall into the trap one by one. The money offered to both the Towers – A and B has similar yet delaying response. The residents are initially skeptical of their luck. Unable to comprehend the situation properly they discuss the offer before finally yielding to temptation for a brighter and more secure future. Their typical middle-class mindset surrenders to the bait of being upper class - living in a posh locality. Tower B filled with young executives is easier to break while Tower A seems to be a difficult task. Nevertheless, Shah is cunning enough to look for personal histories of Tower A and negotiate them. Master ji's opposition to the rebuilding of the Tower somehow represents nihilism, probably his disinterest not only in life but also indifference towards others needs, not a virtuous principle. He is obstinate just for the sake of being resistant, defiant and challenging. He is someone beyond material needs but also someone oblivious of other's want of material possessions. This presents him to be indifferent and unsympathetic towards his fellow residents or community. His position and disposition raise certain pertinent questions - is Mrs. Puri wrong in desiring better surroundings for her 18 years old son Ramu, a victim of Down's Syndrome? Is it too much of desire if secretary Kothari could see flamingos so that "all the wasted decades in between fell away"? Should the eccentricity of one man dissolve and crush the needs and desires of the rest? Still, on the ethical grounds, with Master Ji's stand, Adiga also questions the requisite and relevance of gentrification and the drive for slum clearance.

The novel though reads as unpredictably predictable -the reader guesses the end, however, wonders how that finish would close- becomes intense towards the last fifty pages. It becomes dark as the story of dishonesty, betrayal and corruption and greed which breed in an otherwise well knit community unfolds. Intimate friendships and relationships turn out to be not what they seem; these are built on petty resentments and take a brutal inhuman shape. (Neighbours take matters in their own hands). Nonetheless, Masterji evokes our sympathy even as the once harmonious living falls into bits. The incidents which began with gossip and eavesdropping take malicious turns and turn violent as all start treating

Master ji with scorn, contempt and viciousness. The narrative grows dense as the reader wonders whether Masterji would triumph or succumb to the pressures of circumstances. The murder turned suicide of Masterji by his own community leads to shock and yet an acceptance of the murderers.

Adiga has managed, as in his earlier works, to reveal and expose the corruption and violence bred in societies because of the overwhelming capitalist and consumerist culture. The human greed which becomes insatiable leads to the violence of the extreme – murder. Nothing evokes the dormant humanity of the people. Life goes on and the societies and people move on. The book raises several moral and ethical questions and interrogates the values prevalent in the contemporary Indian society.

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Vihang A. Naik, *Poetry Manifesto (New & Selected Poems)*, New Delhi: Indialog, 2010, pp. 72, Rs. 80 (HB).

Indian poetry in English is a threatened genre. It seems to have fallen into bad days over the last decade or two. Nissim Ezekiel is dead, so are Kamala Das, Ramanujan, Dom Moraes and several other talented poets. True, there is still some good poetry that is published occasionally. Keki Daruwalla continues to write and so do a few young poets like Arundhathi Subramaniam, Meena Kandaswamy and others, but on the whole, the picture is not very optimistic with the over-enthusiastic spirit of cultural nativism that has been sweeping the country of late. While poetry in regional languages seems to thrive, that written in English seems to be languishing. We seem to forget that English too is now an Indian language, which is why it is essential to encourage writers who attempt to write their verses in English.

Vihang Naik is a poet from Gujarat who has gained a fair amount of recognition in his home state as a poet and translator. Along with poetry in Gujarati, he has also penned some verse in English and the collection under review brings together several of his old poems along with some new additions. There is no denying that Naik's is a perceptive, poetic appreciation of the world: the sensitivity, the intuitive grasp of emotion, the near-concrete imagery and the manner in which he grasps a finite moment and freezes it in verse – all this is worthy of admiration. This is what a reader expects from a poet. Naik's work evidently merits a closer look.

This is a collection of 72 poems. Apparently only the

first 28 poems are new while the rest are recycled. There are some exceptionally good poems among the old ones, for instance, when the poet speaks of "Dead poets" in his "A Disturbed Sleep":

"Dead poets  
haunt your dreams  
and disturb your sleep.

You wake up,  
startled  
as in a battlefield  
fighting the airy nothing.

Last night,  
you remember,  
the mosquito fight  
you could not win." (48)

There is a subtle humour in this poem, the element of surprise that bears testimony to the author's intelligent approach to poetry.

Speaking of dead poets, it is interesting to note that the dedication of the collection is to "Nissim Ezekiel / A.K. Ramanujan / Dom Moraes / Arun Kolatkar / Dilip Chitre" all of them dead poets who have probably been an inspiration to Naik. Walking in their footsteps, perhaps Naik aspires to reach the same heights of fame, a legitimate enough ambition for an upcoming poet. It is reminiscent of a similar thought expressed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* where he imagines himself in the company of great minds of the past: Horace, Juvenal, Virgil, Homer and Ovid. Dante, as we know, succeeded in fulfilling his ambition and is now listed among the greats; let us hope that Naik's dreams, too, are realized.

This reviewer, however, has a few doubts about the poetry. In the first place, the title of the anthology, "Poetry Manifesto," sounds presumptuous. It would be accepted had it come from an established writer of international acclaim but from one who is little known on the Indian literary scene, it smacks of arrogance, as though the poet is laying down rules that should govern poetry. A little more modesty is called for.

Another point relates to the language of the poetry. One is familiar with the term "poetic license" but poetic license does not mean incorrect grammar. True, the reader expects some manipulation of syntax and word play but when one comes across a phrase like "Now/ since hundred years" or a "slut searching / the father of her children", it is a bit difficult to swallow the faulty grammar. There are several such examples.

Turning now to some specific poems for their 'poetic'