



## R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*: A Subtle Craft of Fiction Reimagining Masculinity: A Study of Ecological Masculinity in *Last Man in Tower*

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**Abstract:** *The world has been afflicted with unprecedented devastation of nature and environment owing to man's heedless run for development. The water is contaminated, air becomes polluted, and the land is filled with every kind of wastes. Masculine hegemony is the major reason behind the alarming rate of environmental destruction. Also, it plays a vital role in the construction and maintenance of patriarchal social order which in turn paves way for massive social inequalities. Literature openly confronts and responds to these social evils for the establishment of an egalitarian social system. It tries to explore ways for amendments and to inculcate positive social practices. Ecological masculinity is such a novel social practice which may provide a fresh and new ideological perspective for manhood. Ways of transformation and theoretical foundations are provided in this new treatise. Literature presents ecological masculinity in different ways. This paper tries to examine the novel, *The Last Man in Tower*, written by Aravind Adiga, through the lens of ecological masculinity. The character of Masterji is analysed in the light of ecological masculinity principles. Masterji becomes a champion of the principle through his steadfast struggle against the ruthless idea of expansion under the pretext of development.*

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, hegemonic masculinity, ecological masculinity, profeminism, neocolonialism, environmental devastation.*

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### Introduction

The world has seen and experienced unprecedented devastation in the recent years. Man's ruthless domination over the environment has caused catastrophic consequences. The water is contaminated and air has been polluted. As Cheryl Glotfelty rightly observes in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*:

... if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you would learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest, controversy over the Spotted Owl in



the Pacific Northwest' a wildfire in Yellowstone Park, medical syringes washing onto the shores of Atlantic beaches, boycotts on tuna, overtapped aquifers in the 'west, illegal dumping in the-East, a nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, new auto emissions standards, famines, droughts, floods, hurricanes, a United Nations special conference on environment and development, a U.S president declaring the 1990s "the decade of the environment, and a world population that topped five billion. Browsing through periodicals, you would discover that in 1989 Time magazine's person of the year award went to "The Endangered Earth" (xvi).

## **Emergence of Ecocriticism**

The alarming rate of environmental destruction has been the major concern for many decades. This ecological crisis has initiated critical debates and discussions about human-nature relationship. The cultural ideology of development and expansion has begun to be questioned by activists. The impact of cultural hegemony constructed and sustained by patriarchal social order has necessitated deep inquiries into the possibilities of the establishment of alternative systems for the survival of the planet as a veritable home for life. The critical debates on Earth and environment have been a vantage point of Global literature also. Recent literary texts have tried to address the various aspects of environmental degradation using diverse critical perspectives. Ecocriticism has emerged as a theoretical praxis and practical solution for the evils perpetrated upon nature and environment. It tries to establish and evoke a sense of solidarity with ecologists in order to promote constructive discursive practices on human-nature relationship. According to Glotfelty it is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty xviii).

These earth-centred critical approaches try to inculcate an ecological consciousness and awareness into the social systems so that all developmental plans and activities may be decided in accordance with this environmental literacy. In this sense ecocriticism shows a 'spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis' (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 430). It questions the sagacity of man's idea of development, the ruthless destruction of the earth for natural resources, the uncontrolled wracking of the fossil fuels and the consequent displacement and impoverishment of the local communities, the disregard of the capitalist regimes towards the poor and oppressed, and a lot of other burgeoning social evils.

Hegemonic masculinity, within the framework of a patriarchal social system, has been responsible for almost all the social ills, especially in relation with the annihilation of nature and environment. Ecofeminists have identified a parallel between the oppression of women and nature, the reason being, the dominance of patriarchy and the allied social institutions which propagate the workings of hegemonic masculinity. Ecofeminists perceive a direct bond between nature and woman and uphold the view that the devastation of environment can be stopped only when the cruelties against women are put to an end. Rosemary Ruether endorses this theory in her book *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic



socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society (204).

Dominance in the name of culture, religion, development, modernization etc. is to be addressed and tackled if we have to save 'mother earth'. Françoise d'Eaubonne examines the environmental costs of 'development' in her epoch making work *'Feminism or Death'* and identifies women as the subjects of change (d'Eaubonne 2). It is a fact that most of the environmental problems are the direct outcome of the hegemonic oppression of masculinities upon nature. Thus ecofeminism becomes a vital critical approach in the ecocritical arena. Toxic masculinities are explained and exposed by the ecofeminists to revolt against the social inequities and to suggest alternatives for a better future.

### **Ecological Masculinity**

It is in this context that the discussion of ecological masculinity becomes significant. Masculinity is to be studied and analysed within the context of its structural artefacts. It should be understood that masculinity is inherently plural and diverse. Also, man has the ability to transform and revive the lost connection with nature. He can express deep care for nature and for fellow beings. As Paul M Pulé and Martin Hultman observe, "These social and environmental ills are not the product of an inherent shortcoming of Western men. On the contrary, we believe that all men (like all the human beings the world over) can feel and express broader deeper and wider care" (Hultman and Pulé 2). There is the presence of an alternate masculinity, which may rightly be called as ecological masculinity, (Hultman and Pulé 51) which exhibits high levels of care for the environment and for the entire species upon the earth. This new conceptual framework emphasises the need of the hour to green the masculinities so that they may regain their long lost love and care.

There are expressions of this new masculinity in literature in recent times which are modelled on the ecologisation of male hood. They are also profeminists in spirit that they strive for the establishment of a social system which will promote equality among all irrespective of gender and other differences. As Bob Pease points out:

profeminist men are involved in reconstructing or exiting dominant forms of masculinity may be able to envisage new non-oppressive ways for men to relate to nature, as they discover new ways for men to relate to nature, as they discover new ways to relate to women, other men and themselves (Pease, "Men and Masculinities" 33)

### **Last Man in Tower**

Literature manifests such male characters in abundance who do not want to share the dividends of patriarchy. On the contrary, such male characters act as catalysts of social change. It is in this scenario that *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga becomes a symbolic manifestation of ecological masculinity. Aravind Adiga is one of the most celebrated Indian novelists of the present day Indian English writing. His debut novel, *The White Tiger* has won the prestigious Man Booker Prize and has made him a celebrity among the new Indian novelists writing in English. Adiga's novels are emphatically realistic and descriptive in nature so that he is often called the 'Dickens of India'. In line with the Dickensian traditional style, his novels invariably portray the dilemma of Indian modernization, the inherent corruption in the Indian society and the false testimonies of Indian development where a large majority of the people live in slums and shacks and in abject poverty. The plight of the farmers and the coolies on the street has never occurred to the policy makers and hence their voice has never been heard when developmental decisions are implemented. These stark realities are truthfully pictured in



Adiga's novels and short stories. Being a journalist, he has witnessed all that is being described in his texts. Also, Adiga is an ardent observer of life and times which makes his writing extremely realistic and honest. *Last Man in Tower* is also a realistic description of events and characters that he has experienced and observed while living in the metropolitan city of Mumbai. Adiga himself admitted in one of his interviews with Goodreads that "the format of the new novel is dictated by my own experience in Mumbai. The apartment building was based on the one that I lived in" (Goodreads). The novel is a critique of the neo colonial capitalist ideology of uncontrolled development and urbanization. It attempts to expose the hollowness of India's claim of progress and expansion by juxtaposing the two entirely contrasting geographical entities together: the largest slum centre of Vakola and the busiest of India's domestic airports, the Santa Cruz. This ambivalence of development is truthfully narrated in the novel by which Adiga unravels the ever-widening chasm between the haves and have-nots in India. The corporate capitalists and the bureaucracy have joined together to loot the resources and to bypass the regulations of ecological preservation. Rositta Joseph writes about this in her essay, "Aravind Adiga's Last Man in Tower: Survival Strategies in a Morally Ambivalent India" that:

In an era of indiscriminate capitalist globalization and uncontrolled urbanization, when India strives to join the league of the global superpowers, a generation of Indian English novelists is engaged in exploring the bitter truths underlying India's journey to success. Amid the glitter of smart cities, ultramodern corporate hubs, and vast industrial zones, some stories remain to be told—those of the native colonizers who appropriate common national resources, of farmers and tribals mercilessly plucked out of their lands, of the injustices heaped upon the middle classes, of the destruction of vital ecosystems to satiate capitalist greed. (Joseph R 1)

### **Ecological Masculinity of Masterji**

The novel is a story of capitalist greed in the peripheral layer which throws light on the vicious entanglements of the real estate mafia in a metropolis like Mumbai and the ineffectual resistances of the middle class to fight against the all-encompassing and all-pervading capitalist neocolonial dominance. The methods of coercion, threat and intimidations that the capital forces employ to evict the people from a place they want to invade are clearly portrayed in the novel through the characters of Dharmen Shah and Shanmugham as they try to 'sweeten' the people who are hesitant to agree to the buyout offer in the beginning. At the same time, these corporate representatives are not reluctant to use potential threats to overcome strong opposition even after their 'sweetening'. Vishram Society, as presented by Adiga in the novel, is a symbol of the middle class dilemma of Indian life in a metropolitan city. They are neither poor nor rich, always carry the 'middleclass' virtues of respectability and social decorum, but willing to stoop themselves at the magnificent prize offered by the developer to sell out their rights to the neocolonial power. Only Yogesh Murthy, a retired teacher, affectionately called Masterji, is able to withstand all the temptations and pressures of the capitalist plutocrat. Hence he becomes the 'Last Man' in the tower who symbolizes the urban ecological masculinity fighting against the penetrating forces of neocolonial capitalism. It tries to safeguard the remaining ecological balance of the city which has already been torn apart by the expansion ideas of the authorities and the reckless conquest of the real estate mafia. Even though the novel presents the protest of a single man, it is evident that ecological masculinity is present even in



the most crowded, inhuman and mechanical cities also. Last Man in Tower thus becomes a parable of urban environmentalism in an indirect manner.

Adiga's Masterji is not only a man who stands against the ruthless oppression of the neo colonial capitalist forces but also a representative of all the activists who strive for ecological preservation in the Metropolis of Mumbai. He raises questions on the priorities of national development and urbanization at the cost of an ecological catastrophe. Masterji is a symbol of staunch protest against the unhindered, indiscriminate corporate greed for amassing more and more wealth. He knows that skyscrapers and luxurious apartments do not make this city a better place to live. He prefers the old 'pucca' cooperative life in the Vishram society where people care for each other. The opening pages of the novel describe the harmony among the inmates of Tower A where if one family sleeps early, others also switch off their television and go to bed. Even though the other inmates gradually succumb to the temptations lured by the property developer Dharmen Shah, Masterji holds on to the earlier mode of living. He is satisfied to live out his life here in this dilapidated flat where he keeps the memory of his wife and daughter. At the same time, he is not blind to the social changes of the times. He perfectly understands the motive behind the arrival of Dharmen Shah and the conspiracy of the 'neighbours and wellwishers' also.

Adiga presents Masterji as a man of wisdom. It is described that his door was the only one without any picture of Gods, "the only one in Vishram Society unmarked by religious icons" (Adiga 24). Also, he is a learned man, a retired teacher after thirtyfour years of good service, who has been revered by everyone in the Society. Their children are getting bi-weekly top up sessions on science from Masterji. He is "good with languages (he spoke six), generous with books, passionate about education." (Adiga 30) Adiga also describes Masterji as an epitome of stoic suffering who has borne all losses including the deaths of his daughter and wife with a spiritual indifference and dignity.

Yogesh A Murthy, affectionately called Masterji by the residents of Vishram Society, does have the major traits of ecological masculinity that we discussed in the introduction. At the outset itself, he shows his profeminist, egalitarian convictions when Mrs. Puri speaks about the 'number two activities' of the single woman resident next to Masetrji's apartment. He declares without any hesitation that,

"She seems to me, though I have only seen her from a distance, a decent girl... when this building first came up, there were no Hindus allowed here, it is a fact. Then there were meant to be no Muslims, it is a fact. All proved to be good people when given a chance. Now, young people, unmarried girls, they should also be given a chance." (Adiga 26)

Ecological masculinity goes hand in hand with this profeminist conviction. Masterji believes in the equal rights and freedom of human beings irrespective of gender and socio political and religious differences. This egalitarian attitude can be taken as a platform for redefining male subjectivity and masculine ecologisation by which men may become supporters of ecofeminists in the long battle for both female rights and the preservation of environment.

Masterji is trusted and revered by almost all residents in the Vishram Society. He has been a confidante for Sangeeta Puri, for instance, that she tells her problems and conflicts to Masterji and he always tries to find out solutions for her. Same has been the case with other residents as well owing to his profeminist principles and attitudes. Even though Masterji is not a declared profeminist, he holds the predominating characteristics of ecological masculinity with



profeminist foundations. In a city like Mumbai, it is extremely difficult to follow these principles since new temptations and pressures always attack the ethical realm of human thought. It is because of this temptation that the residents of Vishram Society crave for the money when they are offered it by the property developer. Masterji only does not succumb to this greed and stands tall against the oppression. The consequences of the rapid expansion of the city is either neglected or overlooked by all others in the novel while Masterji fights a lone battle against the ill effects of this heedless economic process. Since the urban scenario is not to be trusted, he resorts to silence and disagreement. He understands the words of 'the Battleship' when she exclaims,

What is the definition of a dying city, Mrs. Puri? I will tell you, as you do not know: a city that ceases to surprise you. And that is what this Bombay has become. Show people a little cash, and they'll jump, dance, run naked in the streets... These developers are mafia. (Adiga 39).

Masterji fights a lone battle against the ruthless invasion of the corporate mafia even when all others succumb to the exorbitant offers promised by the developers. He knows that the heedless urge for development is to be restrained and curtailed if we are to make a sustainable future for the planet. Masterji epitomizes this restraint through his quiet and reticent way of life. Nation states have their eyes on the increased number of economic activities and the subsequent financial growth. Thus the much-needed debate on the impending danger of environmental degradation has either been neglected or postponed. Also, the impact of human activities upon nature has not been adequately addressed owing to the manipulating power of the corporates and the capitalist forces. The opposing voices are often muted by the mechanism. The fictional characters in global literature, like Masterji for instance, act not only as symbolic representations for environmental protection but also as models for future generations.

Masterji becomes a model for environmental philosophy in this scenario. He exhibits the innate qualities of ecological masculinity described in detail in the introduction of this study. He is humble, egalitarian, reticent, non-violent and above all, firm in his principles. His neighbours also know this very well. The broker Ajwani speaks to Shanmugham about this in a private talk.

"Only one person really opposes it. The other three don't know what they want." (Adiga 129) But Masterji never resorts to any unlawful means to fight against the mafia. Rather, he tries to raise the issue through all the possible means like media, social workers and the court. So he is writing letters to the editors of newspapers, calling his former students for help and filing case against the builder only to realise the unholy nexus of the capitalist mafia with different executive agencies of the Government, and the other social institutions.

While Masterji follows his principles even in his death, the others prove the extent of crimes to which human greed may lead the otherwise good people. He adhered to his principles in life even when death knocked on his door and these principles are that of care, compassion and empathy for fellow beings and a vision for the future generations. The neighbours also admit that he lived up to his philosophy of life. Mrs. Rego, towards the end of the novel, expresses this feeling in the following remarks:

Boys, where Masterji was born, where he studied – these things don't matter now. What matters is this. He did 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. He was free to the end... All we need are a few more good men like Masterji and this island, this Mumbai of ours, it will be a paradise on earth... I know



that there are future Masterjis among you, and this city will again be what it was, the greatest on earth (Adiga 416).

Like almost every martyr for the good cause, Masterji also is fondly remembered and deeply revered after his death. The same people who ended his life wish their sons to be grown up like Masterji so that they shall rise against atrocities and injustices. This structural change in the social psyche is presented in the novel to signify the rising of a new type of masculinity which is deeply rooted in the care for others and environment. Adiga's novel thus becomes a narrative of ecological masculinity and a chronicle of the devastation of Mumbai under the expansion projects supported by the governmental machineries.

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