



110. Conflict between Self and Society in Romen Basu's *The Tamarind Tree* and Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

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Abstract:

The desire for security, acceptance and meaningful existence has been an innermost part of human nature. The history of man reflects his journey from cave to luxurious apartments to secure better and comfortable living for himself and his near and dear ones. This quest seems to have originated from man's fear of death – devoid of any secured place for living, man used to spend the darkness of the night under the looming dangers of getting devoured by the predators. Aligned with this central fear is an array of different fears and apprehensions – the fear of rejection, of loneliness, of joblessness, of old age and helplessness, of diseases, of carrying on bed ridden life, of financial insecurity, of rootlessness, of alienation and so on. To alleviate this fear man has turned to the institution of marriage and family and to a larger extent to one's caste and community. With a desire to earn a respectable living man trains himself and his wards academically, socially and intellectually and targets his activities toward his self and his personal problems or orients himself to the problems of the society at large. The choice that is made ends in different types of consequences. The self-absorbed dream for betterment mostly proves to be a mirage and pushes the man into a quagmire of degeneration whereas by channelizing one's efforts to cure the ills of the society, an environment of greater good is established, creating a life of fulfilment and happiness for one and all. This quest offers an interesting study of human character. Literature of any nation or age mirrors man's quest for betterment in a realistic manner. The present research paper proposes to investigate the lives of characters coming from different age, backgrounds and cultures, their motives and orientations, their idea of happiness, the choices that they make to materialize their idea, their engagements and the fruits that they taste of the seeds that they sow in Romen Basu's *The Tamarind Tree* and Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*.



Key words: materialistic concerns, self-centredness, rootlessness, societal concerns, fulfilment

Introduction:

According to Dr. Ashish Gupta “A nation’s literature is not a miscellaneous collection of books which happen to have been written in the same tongue or within a certain geographical area. It is the progressive revelation, age by age of such nation’s mind and character.” (Gupta 1) With a view to study the dynamics of human character two very different novels has been chosen, one representing the post-independent Indian village of Gandhian values and the other representing the post-modern Indian metro city where almost all values are put at stake to realise one’s self-centric dreams and desires. The issue proposes to offer interesting findings as though undergoing almost similar kind of dilemma, the central characters of both the novels approach it in quite a different manner and thus creates different types of destinies for themselves and their fellow human beings. The study has been done by focussing on three prominent characters in both the novels – Biren and Mohamaya in *The Tamarind Tree* and Mr. Dharmen Shah in *Last Man in Tower* as through the depiction of these characters, the novelists take the readers into the psyche of human beings and their society at large, course of journey that they take in their life and different destinations they arrive at. Development and upliftment of the village Balavpur through selfless service, dedication and commitment is the central concern of in Basu’s *The Tamarind Tree*. Quite contrary to the theme of *The Tamarind Tree*, the novel *Last Man in Tower* revolves around the materialistic concerns of residents of Vishram Society in Mumbai.

Material and methods:

Apart from the secondary sources listed at the end of the paper, the primary sources used are Romen Basu’s *The Tamarind Tree* (1975) and Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* (2011). To conduct the research, library method has been used. Further, as the research paper proposes to probe the issue in the two novels, the former written in the post-independent period and the later written in the post-modern period, a comparative method has been used to fathom the orientation and motives of human mind and the various factors that play role in forming the human character and their responses.

Results and Discussion:

Anukul Ghose, one of the main characters in *The Tamarind Tree*, an aristocrat settled in Calcutta has his roots and ancestral property in the village Balavpur. His chance visit to the village makes him aware of his property being usurped by his cousin. His mission to reclaim his ancestral property becomes the main cause



of family feuds and brings forth the caste and communal tensions running in the village. The entry of Mohamaya and her persuasive efforts in the entire affair brings Anukul's son Biren closer to her. Her mediation hurts Anukul's ego, developing a dislike for her and disapproval of the relationship between the two. Biren's frequent visits to Balavpur and his growing affection with Mohamaya make him rejected by his father. Mohamaya with her loving care resolves the communal tension in the village along with Biren helping to uplift the village from its numerous problems.

In Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, the money minded meanness of Mumbaities is unfolded with the central incident of Mr Dharmen Shah putting a redevelopment offer before the residents of Vishram, an old apartment, offering them exorbitant amount of money with a dream to replace the dilapidated building with luxurious apartment. Slowly and gradually almost all the residents of Vishram agree to the offer to realize their dream of materialistic life. When a retired teacher, known as Masterji, is not ready to accept the offer, the entire society schemes together, does everything in its power to persuade him. Finally when they realize that Masterji is not willing to give in, they plot his murder and push him down from the terrace of the tower. As a reviewer puts it, "The story, ultimately, is a reflection on human nature. What motivates good people to do bad things? What motivates one person to stand against his neighbours, pitting his will against theirs? How far can you push someone before they crack?" (Eldemerdash)

In *The Tamarind Tree* Basu has depicted human concern for the society through the union of Biren, Anukul's son and an engineering graduate from Manchester with Mohamaya (the village teacher's daughter) whose conviction in the village is very strong. Biren's attachment to the village life and Mohamaya has a seed in his childhood incidence; as his mother died when Biren was very little, he was taken by his aunt to grow in a village; slowly and slowly he begins to develop liking for his village but within a month his father uproots him from the turf of a village to get him admitted to a well reputed school in Calcutta leaving in the boy's mind an unfulfilled desire to spend his life in village. It is this unfulfilled desire that pulls Biren back to a village and feel enchanted to Mohamaya who is the soul of the village Balavpur. Later on, like Mr Shah, filial rejection occurs in the case of Biren also because of his attachment with Mohamaya. But the interesting point to note here is that unlike Mr Shah, Biren does not take the rejection personally, as a blow to his ego and thus he does not take a journey to reconstruct his ego, to prove his strength, to establish himself as a man of might who is mad to make his mark on the world. Rather than carrying on a burden of hurt ego and

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personal suffering, he goes back to his roots and directs his attention to the pain and suffering of the humanity, of the villagers whose agonies and tragedies are more significant to him than his individual pain. It is this orientation of Biren and Mohamaya, that motivate them to act, towards good action which shifts their energy from self-interest to the larger interest of the entire community.

Dharmen Shah, a property kingpin in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* represents the spirit and character of the modern man residing in a metro city, his towering ambition and his materialistic concerns. In Mr Shah we notice the worst kind of degeneration that a man can lower him to. After the death of his mother, his lustful father remarries and kicks Mr Shah out of his home. Feeling hurt, Mr Shah takes recourse in Mumbai, undergoes the hardships of a metro city life without a pair of shoes – it is this very insult that lures Mr. Shah to the world of redevelopment business – a world of soaring ambition and to the cosy company of different young girls who similarly gets drawn to Mr Shah due to their ambition to live a life of comfort, luxury and status. Unlike Biren, the seed of filial rejection, hurt ego and the desire for acceptance result in the sprouting of all pervasive corruption in Mr Shah which becomes the key characteristic of his personality. Pressures of the life of a construction business coupled with the death of his dutiful wife draws Mr Shah to the worst kind of degeneration – ugly nexus with the police, the politicians and the lawyers and sexual relations with the aspiring models. Mr Shah's deteriorating health making him spit phlegm and blood frequently in his handkerchief while moving in his elite car reveals the internal malaise and hollowness of the modern man surrounded by the sheen and glamour of external life.

This schizophrenic divide and contradictory characteristics between the superficial external life and the actual internal life is seen in almost all the characters of *Last Man in Tower*, be it Masterji, Mrs Puri or Mrs Rego, Mr Kothari or Ajwani. Masterji strongly rejects the redevelopment offer of the builder on the pretext of living in his old flat where the thick memories of his deceased wife and his young daughter Sandhya are preserved but actually he opposes the offer to keep his hard earned title of 'an English gentleman' intact given to him by one of his neighbours; Mrs Rego under the sham of social service carries on her so-called social activities for her selfish means, even Mrs Puri who acts like a good neighbour to Masterji instigates Ajwani (one of the residents of Vishram) to kill Masterji when he poses as an obstacle in the realization of her dreams.

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It has been rightly observed, “The inhabitants of tower A represent the middle class psyche of Mumbai trying to share the rapid economic expansion, sudden fortune and amazingly glorious riches on account of neo-globalization.” (Ruprah and Saluja) Almost all their activities and motives emanate from their selfish motives - financial security, higher education of children, uncertainty, exorbitant medical bills for the future ailments, commitment to send money to one’s children settled in a foreign country due to looming fears of joblessness, desire to rise in social and property ladder, desire to fulfil one’s childhood dream of residing in a dream house, burning desire to settle scores of one’s hurt ego during college years by living in neighbourhood flat having better amenities than an intelligent and better performing classmate, sibling rivalry, a compelling need to keep oneself occupied with the sham of social service to forget personal grief, failed conjugal life, subtle ego; these are the reasons for which they end their thirty year bond with their neighbour Masterji, as he was the only obstacle in their way to materialize their ambition. Mr. Shah’s success in convincing the occupants of the Vishram and their ultimate step to push Masterji from the terrace of the building to death reveals the modern man’s quest for monetary concerns and the uprooting of the old values of humanity, empathy, kindness and love for one’s fellow human beings. As Dr. Gupta remarks,

Adiga probes deep into the minds of several characters, jumping between tower residents to show their motives and examine how modern Mumbai has amplified their shortcomings. Adiga offers a convincing if grim glimpses of human nature as these upstanding residents turn on one another maddened with greed when they fear the prospect of losing their promised riches. (Gupta 99)

The superficial practice of the two Rego sisters of writing letters to each other with a view to belittle the other by using high-sounding words smacks of petty sibling rivalry; such a preoccupation disqualifies them to rise to a level where they can think about the issues of the society: Adiga observes, “The aim of this Friday-morning epistolary jousting was for each sister, in an apparently banal letter to the other, to slip in a ‘stylish’ word or phrase, which would catch the other off guard, and force her to concede that she had been ‘trumped’.” (Adiga 165)

Basu’s Balavpur is by no means an ideal village in all respects; no there are so many ills in the village such as drinking habits, sexual deviations, caste and communal tensions, petty rivalries in business, exploitation of the poor and the depressed and so on. But the difference is that there are selfless leaders like Mohamaya,



Mastermoshai (the village teacher) and Biren who are committed to the large good of the villagers, have belief in the idea of the village, are committed to uplift it and muster all their courage to remove the ills of the society with their untiring efforts. As Shinde points out, “On the strength of her love for all the people in her village, Mohamaya successfully defies taboos of caste, class and clan.” (Shinde) Further, the element of virtue and goodness is still rooted in the character of the villagers, which just needs to be nourished a little and as a result, we see at the end of the novel, the journey of the villagers from self to selfless, from the material to the spiritual, from the family to the community, from caste and community differences to the ideal of humanity.

On the contrary there is no selfless individual, no single powerful character of integrity who can connect different occupants of Vishram Society in one whole. Rather than resolving disputes, they love to gossip about the petty weaknesses of their neighbours. Further, there are as many differences in Vishram as there are apartments in it. More than that within the apartment there is no sign of loyalty or integrity of character – Mr. Kudwa, a married cyber café owner flirts with Mrs. Puri, Ajwani, a broker and father of two sons exploits women clients in his own house, Mr Rego betrays his wife leaving her quarrelling for petty matters throughout her life, Miss Minaxi, a single lady has live-in relationship with her boyfriend, the denizens of the city frequently visits the brothels on Falkland road which provide an easy means to release their sexual energy, Mr Shah, a widower sleeps with aspiring models in his cosy bedrooms, even a sexagenarian Masterji feels sexual temptation at the presence of a single lady in his neighbourhood.

Further, the hollowness of human character is revealed through different episodes where under the eyes of the protectors of laws many crimes happen, where a lawyer on the promise of legal help grabs unreasonable fees from his client and takes under the table money from the accused builder, where a newspaper misrepresents the murder of Masterji as a case of suicide and misguides the investigation team, and where post-mortem experts give a hoax report not finding any man-made injury on Masterji’s head and where not a single commuter pulls the chain of the train to save Masterji’s daughter who was pushed from the crowded coach of a running Mumbai local because of the pressure to reach their offices in time. The element of goodness and humanity is not visible in a single living character of the novel except Ramu, Mrs Puri’s son, perhaps because he is mentally paralysed with Down’s syndrome.

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In both novels, we see the characters attracting what they desire for so intensely. And additionally, we notice the elimination of those who pose a kind of direct or indirect obstacle in their goals. It is Biren's selflessness, love for village and orientation towards community service that make him attracted to Mohamaya and the village Balavpur. In their company, he finds his entire being nourished; Mohamaya besides being his beloved gives Biren all the motherly love and care which bring fulfilment in his life. Whereas kicked by his father, Mr. Shah takes recourse in Mumbai, struggles a lot to carve out his existence in a metro city, his insulted ego draws him to the world of ambition, of redevelopment business and the entire world of corruption and cherishes a desire to make a mark in the world before he dies by constructing Shanghai, a luxurious apartment. His connections with the corrupt world and his sexual relations with aspiring models degenerate him morally and spiritually and make his life a dog's life literally. Further, his exposure to the old construction material eats him away physically and his search for meaning in life proves to be a mirage. Spengler's comment on the dilemma of modern man's existence expressively brings out the dichotomy between the self and the society: "The crisis of the present manifests itself in alienation from oneself, from one's fellowmen and from nature; the awareness that life runs out of one's hands like sand, and that one will die without having lived; that one lives in the midst of plenty and joylessness." Though Mr Shah enjoys all the luxuries of the material life, he fails to get human love – losses his mother during childhood, is rejected by his father, losses his wife who was homely, caring and virtuous lady making easy for the builder to live a life of licentiousness. Had she lived longer, Mr Shah perhaps would not have got entangled in the web of ambition, crime and sex. As life proceeds, different women like Nannu and Rosie get attracted to him – devoid of any love in their own life they help to release his sexual energy with a target to fulfil their desire for money and material. Moreover his own son Satish too detests Mr Shah – he jeers and hates the way he speaks and the way he chews tobacco. Acting with a focus on his self, he attracts those who are interested in their self, instigates the entire Vishram society to remove the obstinate man posing as a threat to their motives and clears their way to create a life of their selfish dreams and desires. Ajwani's talk with Mrs. Rego reveals his realization at the end of the novel: "You and I were trapped: but we *wanted* to be trapped." (Adiga 419)

Mohamaya known as "Basu's most thoughtful creation" (Prasad 177) represents Basu's vision for development which lies in an Indian village. She is the soul and spirit of the entire village Balavpur. Unlike Mr Shah she is nourished with unconditional love and high degree of acceptance in her family, so she

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naturally reflects acceptance, love, care, warmth and sympathy for her fellow human beings. The only religion that she follows is the religion of humanity. When asked by Biren whether she wants nice clothes or jewellery, she instantly replies, “No one here has them. Why should I?” (Basu 51). This statement puts Mohamaya in sharp contrast with the occupants of Vishram who are feverish with greed and material desire. In a caste burdened village, she freely takes lunch with the people who are considered to belong to lower castes. She is an independent girl in the real sense of the term as she is beyond the boundaries of caste, religion and other misbeliefs. She has equal love for humans as well as animals. Most of the male characters in the novel, except Biren, are egoistic, quarrelsome, hankering after money and land who rather than curing the ills of the society aggravates it. As Gobindo rightly introduces her to Biren, she is “A gift from heaven. Without Mohamaya, Balavpur would not be livable. She is everywhere – with the *chamars*, *kanoras*, *domes*, *Musalmans*.” (Basu 37)

Mohamaya’s strong belief in the village and her untiring efforts to make it an ideal place to live for come from her father, who is fully committed to his profession and tries to serve the villagers of Balavpur in the best possible manner. Mastermoshai says: “... we have to make our roots stronger. Those who run away neither help themselves nor the place.” (Basu 182) The life in a village gives her all the freedom which she feels smothered in Calcutta, where she has been married. Leaving all the luxuries of a city life, she prefers to go back to her roots with which she is deeply attached. Contrary to the ambitious mind set of the residents of Vishram, Mohamaya shuns the pleasures of aristocratic living due to her oneness with the poor and ill-fated villagers of Balavpur. Contrary to Mohamaya’s sacrifice, Adiga’s Mrs Puri, a middle class woman’s dream to have a dinner at the Taj Hotel in the wake of Mr. Shah’s redevelopment offer, reveals the superficial desire of a modern woman:

Since she was a child, she had seen its pale conical lampshades behind the dark windows: the Sea Lounge at the Taj Hotel. This Sunday they would walk in, hand in hand, and ask the waiter: ‘A table in Sea Lounge, please.’ Good behaviour would be observed by all, especially by Ramu May be a film star would come in. After settling the bill (hundreds and hundreds of rupees), they would keep it as a memento. (Adiga 158)

Bestowed with the godly qualities of unconditional love for her fellow human beings when a villager falls ill, she nurses him, when somebody becomes a victim of depression, she encourages him, when bitterness



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and caste and communal tensions pummel the village, she removes it with her sheer force of feminine energy and emotional intelligence. It is this quality of Mohamaya which melts the heart of the Muslim businessman at the end of the novel in the village which is virtually on the verge of destruction due to communal tensions and rivalries. Her success at the end of the novel reflects the villagers' inherent belief in the good over the evil and of course the sheer force of feminine energy and her strong aura which overwhelms the petty fights and differences in the villages for the greater good of the society. As P.Somanath beautifully puts it, "She is one of the rare women characters in Indian fiction in English. She is a shining example of the virtues, strength and wisdom of Indian womanhood." (Somanath 89) In contrast to Mohamaya's concerns for the villagers, Adiga's Kothari, secretary of Vishram, is a hypocritical being to the core. Kothari's creator sees through the man as he observes:

Asked to resolve disputes, Kothari listened to both parties, nodding his head and scratching sympathetic notes on scrap paper..... When the disputants left his office, he threw the paper into the waste bin People were forced to adjust; temporary compromises congealed. And life went on. (Adiga 17)

The tamarind tree, in the novel of the same name, is situated in the central location of the market in the novel. It has been planted by Anukul's father, Manmatha Ghose, who used to sit under it to recite the Gita. The Tamarind Tree, rather than a physical entity, is a symbol: it signifies old values, man's desire to go back to his roots, his belief in the world created by God, of returning back to village, offering the shade and sweet fruit by subjecting oneself to the life of commitment in the service of the community. Similarly in Adiga's novel, the Shanghai, Mr Shah's luxurious apartment of dream _ symbolises man's ego, his lonely existence, his petty differences, his rejection of the world created by the God and his beliefs in the system created by the human, the man-made, and the artificial. It stands for man's towering ambition, his competitive nature, his internal hollowness, his desperate attempts to rise in ego, his fear of death and ephemeral nature and his desire to be remembered forever.

The study of the dynamics of human character in two different types of novels have proved to be a fruitful investigation as both the novels offer contradictory concerns lying deeply in the recesses of the human mind. Basu's characters turn the village into a heavenly place where there is fraternity, equality and liberty earned

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through selflessness, dedication for the purpose of the community, renunciation of the luxuries of life and upliftment of the lives of the poor and the depressed. At the end of the novel, we see spiritual fulfilment in the lives of Biren and Mohamaya as well as the villagers. Whereas Adiga's world presents the modern man, his selfish pursuits, his materialistic concerns, the superficial pleasures of life, dirty competition for material gains and degeneration of human values because of their selfish gains. Consequently we see different characters materially sound but feeling rootless and their desire for fulfilment remains a mirage.

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