Ecologies of Inequality: Urban Development and Human Fragility in Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*

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ABSTRACT

Urban development in contemporary India is often celebrated as a sign of progress and globalization, yet it produces deep fissures of inequality, displacement, and social fragility. Aravind Adiga's novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011) dramatizes these tensions by situating a middle-class housing society at the intersection of neoliberal urban expansion and individual human vulnerability. This article examines the novel through the lens of ecologies of inequality, exploring how material development, class divisions, and fragile human relationships create a contested urban ecology. Drawing on theories from ecocriticism, urban studies, and postcolonial critique, the article argues that Adiga's text exposes the paradoxes of modernity in Mumbai: economic growth that erodes community, urban space that privileges profit over people, and fragile human lives caught in the machinery of neoliberalism. By analyzing themes of displacement, aging, social ecology, and resistance, the study situates *Last Man in Tower* as both a local narrative of Mumbai's redevelopment politics and a global commentary on human precarity under capitalism. The findings highlight Adiga's critical role in reimagining Indian English fiction as a site of resistance, foregrounding how literature reflects and critiques the ecological dimensions of inequality in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

Aravind Adiga, *Last Man in Tower*, urban development, inequality, ecocriticism, neoliberalism

Introduction

Aravind Adiga has emerged as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Indian English literature, particularly for his exploration of inequality, class politics, and globalization. Since his Booker Prize-winning debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008), Adiga has consistently interrogated the paradoxes of neoliberal India: the simultaneous rise of wealth and precarity, cosmopolitan modernity and local dispossession, urban progress and human fragility. His 2011 novel *Last Man in Tower* exemplifies this concern by depicting the struggles of residents in a Mumbai housing society who are pressured to sell their apartments to make way for a lucrative redevelopment project. At the heart of this conflict lies Masterji, an elderly retired schoolteacher who refuses to accept the offer, symbolizing both resistance to and fragility within the new order of urban transformation.

Urbanization in India, especially in cities like Mumbai, has been described as both an engine of national growth and a source of socio-environmental dislocation (Baviskar, 2020; Fernandes, 2006). Redevelopment projects promise modern infrastructure and upward mobility, yet they often displace vulnerable communities, fracture social networks, and exacerbate inequality. Scholars in urban studies and ecocriticism have increasingly
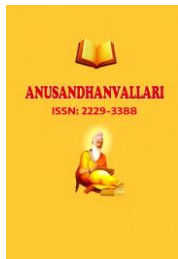
emphasized the need to understand cities as "ecologies" where human lives, built environments, and power structures intersect (Nixon, 2011; Guha & Martinez-Alier, 2013). This ecological perspective allows us to see *Last Man in Tower* not merely as a realist novel about property disputes but as a text that maps the interwoven ecologies of inequality that define twenty-first-century Indian urban life.

The novel dramatizes the fragile balance between individual agency and collective pressure, between the promise of prosperity and the loss of community. Through its depiction of middle-class aspirations, generational divides, and the ethical dilemmas of development, *Last Man in Tower* offers a microcosm of the broader ecological crisis of inequality. This article seeks to explore these dynamics by situating Adiga's novel within the frameworks of ecocriticism, postcolonial urban studies, and theories of neoliberal globalization. In doing so, it asks: How does Adiga represent urban development as an ecology of inequality? How does the novel highlight human fragility in the face of economic and spatial restructuring? And what does this text contribute to global discourses on literature and inequality?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the intersections of literature, ecology, and inequality, while also affirming Adiga's critical role in shaping contemporary Indian English fiction.

### Aravind Adiga and the Literary Critique of Inequality

Since the publication of *The White Tiger* (2008), Aravind Adiga has been widely recognized as a chronicler of neoliberal India's contradictions. Critics argue that his novels consistently foreground the inequities produced by rapid economic liberalization, especially the uneven distribution of wealth, corruption, and the erosion of community values (Kumar, 2013; Mehrotra, 2014). While *The White Tiger* captured the violence of rural poverty and the rise of the entrepreneurial subaltern, *Last Man in Tower* turns to Mumbai's middle-class landscape to reveal how urban redevelopment creates fractures even within relatively privileged communities. Scholars such as Chandra (2016) note that Adiga extends the discourse of inequality from rural dispossession to urban disintegration, positioning the city as both the site of opportunity and alienation.

Urban Space and Indian English Fiction

Urban space has long been a central motif in Indian English fiction, with writers such as Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, and Arundhati Roy exploring how cities embody India's modernity and its contradictions. Mumbai, in particular, has emerged as a symbolic site of aspiration and inequality (Srivastava, 2015). Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) and Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* share thematic ground in their depiction of housing, labor, and displacement. Scholars have suggested that contemporary Indian fiction increasingly views the city not just as a backdrop but as a protagonist in its own right (Davis, 2006; Fernandes, 2006). In this sense, *Last Man in Tower* participates in a broader literary trend that treats urban development projects as microcosms of India's neoliberal order.

Neoliberalism, Development, and Displacement

The literature on neoliberalism and urban development emphasizes the paradox between modernization and marginalization. Scholars in postcolonial studies argue that neoliberal globalization, while promising prosperity, generates what David Harvey (2005) calls "accumulation by dispossession." In the Indian context, Fernandes
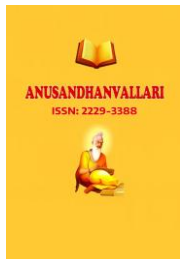
(2006) has shown how middle-class consumer culture thrives alongside the displacement of vulnerable communities. Scholars examining Mumbai specifically point to the rise of gated societies and redevelopment projects that homogenize space while deepening socio-economic divides (Baviskar, 2020). Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* reflects these debates by dramatizing how a single redevelopment offer destabilizes an entire community, pitting collective greed against individual resistance.

Ecocriticism and Urban Ecologies

Ecocriticism, traditionally concerned with "nature" and environmental writing, has recently expanded to consider the "urban ecology" of cities (Nixon, 2011; Heise, 2008). Nixon (2011) introduces the concept of "slow violence" to describe the incremental destruction caused by development and displacement. Urban ecocriticism, therefore, allows scholars to interpret novels like *Last Man in Tower* not only as realist social critiques but also as ecological narratives of inequality, where human and built environments form fragile ecosystems. Guha and Martinez-Alier (2013) extend this perspective by situating Indian urbanization within global ecological debates, emphasizing how environmental degradation and human vulnerability are intertwined. Applying this lens to Adiga's novel illuminates how redevelopment reshapes both physical landscapes and social bonds, producing an "ecology of inequality."

### Human Fragility, Aging, and Precarity

Another critical strand in the scholarship relevant to *Last Man in Tower* concerns human fragility and aging. Scholars such as Gilleard and Higgs (2010) emphasize that aging in neoliberal societies often exposes individuals to heightened vulnerability, as social safety nets weaken and community bonds dissolve. In Adiga's narrative, Masterji's refusal to sell his flat foregrounds not just resistance to development but also the fragility of an aging individual resisting collective pressure. Literary critics such as Bose (2018) have argued that Masterji embodies both resilience and precarity, symbolizing how neoliberal projects marginalize those who cannot—or will not—align with the logic of profit.

Gaps in Existing Scholarship

While considerable attention has been paid to Adiga's critique of neoliberal India in *The White Tiger*, scholarship on *Last Man in Tower* remains relatively underdeveloped, often limited to surface-level readings of urban displacement. Few studies have applied ecocritical frameworks to the novel, despite its clear engagement with ecological metaphors and urban fragility. Similarly, while urban studies scholarship has examined redevelopment in Mumbai, literary analyses often fail to connect these socio-political dynamics with the narrative strategies employed by Adiga. This article seeks to bridge these gaps by integrating insights from urban ecocriticism, postcolonial critique, and studies of inequality to develop a more holistic understanding of how *Last Man in Tower* constructs an "ecology of inequality."

Conceptual Framework

To analyze Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* through the lens of "ecologies of inequality," this study draws on three intersecting theoretical frameworks: **ecocriticism**, **urban studies**, and **postcolonial critiques of neoliberalism**. Together, these perspectives allow for a reading of the novel that situates it not only in the context
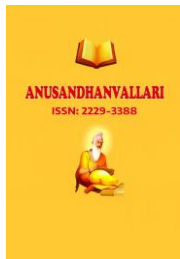
of Indian English fiction but also within broader debates about global capitalism, ecological precarity, and social justice.

Ecocriticism and Urban Ecology

Ecocriticism, in its early formulations, focused primarily on the representation of nature and environmental issues in literature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). However, the discipline has since expanded to include urban ecologies, recognizing that the built environment and human interactions within cities constitute ecological systems in their own right (Heise, 2008). Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" is particularly relevant here: the idea that environmental degradation and displacement unfold incrementally, invisibly, and often disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

In *Last Man in Tower*, the redevelopment project represents a form of "slow violence," where the promise of modern infrastructure hides the erosion of social bonds and the silencing of dissenting voices. Ecocriticism enables us to see beyond the narrative of progress, highlighting how the novel maps ecological tensions between space, community, and vulnerability. By reading the cooperative housing society as an "ecosystem," one can trace how the introduction of capital investment destabilizes its fragile equilibrium, eventually destroying the balance between collective solidarity and individual survival.

Urban Studies and the City as an Ecology

Urban studies provide another critical lens for understanding Adiga's novel. Scholars like Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (2005) conceptualize the city as a socially produced space where power, capital, and human life intersect. Lefebvre's notion of the "right to the city" emphasizes that urban dwellers have a claim to shape the space they inhabit, resisting its commodification. Yet, in neoliberal contexts, this right is often eroded as redevelopment prioritizes profit over people (Harvey, 2005).

Mumbai, as depicted in *Last Man in Tower*, exemplifies this dynamic. The Vishram Cooperative Housing Society becomes a contested site of redevelopment where global capital meets local aspiration. The "ecology of inequality" is evident in the way some residents view redevelopment as an opportunity for upward mobility, while others, like Masterji, perceive it as a threat to community, memory, and dignity. Urban studies frameworks allow us to situate the novel within the broader discourse of gentrification, privatization, and the homogenization of urban landscapes.

Postcolonial Neoliberalism and Dispossession

The third framework is postcolonial critiques of neoliberal globalization. Scholars like Achille Mbembe (2001), Aihwa Ong (2006), and Chatterjee (2004) have argued that neoliberalism in the Global South produces new forms of exclusion, often under the guise of progress and modernization. David Harvey's (2005) concept of "accumulation by dispossession" resonates strongly with the novel, as redevelopment represents a mechanism for capital accumulation that displaces or marginalizes those unwilling to conform.

In the Indian context, Fernandes (2006) and Baviskar (2020) show how neoliberal reforms have reconfigured middle-class identities, embedding them within consumerist aspirations while simultaneously producing precariousness. Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* reflects this tension: the residents' willingness to sell their flats reveals their internalization of neoliberal logics, while Masterji's resistance exposes the fragility of those who fail to align
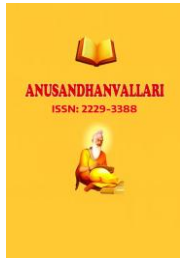
with this trajectory. Postcolonial theory underscores how these dynamics are not universal but deeply inflected by India's specific history of colonialism, modernization, and uneven development.

Integrative Approach: Ecologies of Inequality

By bringing together ecocriticism, urban studies, and postcolonial neoliberal critique, this article proposes the concept of "ecologies of inequality" as a critical framework for reading Adiga's novel. This approach emphasizes that inequality is not merely economic but ecological: it emerges through the interaction of human fragility, built environments, and socio-political structures.

In *Last Man in Tower*, the ecology of inequality manifests in multiple ways:

- The **physical ecology** of Mumbai, where redevelopment projects restructure space for profit.
- The **social ecology** of the housing society, where solidarity unravels under pressure.
- The **human ecology** of aging and vulnerability, as embodied in Masterji's resistance.

This integrative approach highlights how literature can reveal the interconnectedness of urban development, human precarity, and ecological imbalance, making Adiga's work relevant to both literary studies and broader interdisciplinary debates.

Textual Analysis of *Last Man in Tower*

Urban Development and Displacement

At the center of *Last Man in Tower* lies the redevelopment project initiated by Dharmen Shah, a powerful builder who seeks to acquire the Vishram Cooperative Housing Society in Santa Cruz, Mumbai. The offer of financial compensation—far exceeding the residents' current property values—seems irresistible to most. The narrative captures the allure of urban development as both material progress and symbolic entry into middle-class modernity. Apartments, once modest symbols of stability, become negotiable commodities within a rapidly expanding real estate market.

Yet the promise of development conceals its destructive underside. Redevelopment is not framed as consensual progress but as coercive restructuring, where dissent is silenced through intimidation, persuasion, and ultimately violence. Shah embodies what Harvey (2005) calls "accumulation by dispossession": the acquisition of space for capital gain through the displacement of its existing users. Adiga dramatizes this process by showing how the community is gradually dismantled—not by bulldozers, but by shifting loyalties, eroded trust, and the lure of money.

In this way, the novel positions urban development as an ecological disturbance. Much like an invasive species introduced into a delicate ecosystem, the builder's offer destabilizes the equilibrium of the society. Where there was once relative harmony, suspicion, greed, and betrayal take root. The redevelopment project thus becomes an allegory of neoliberal India, where the march of progress corrodes the foundations of solidarity.
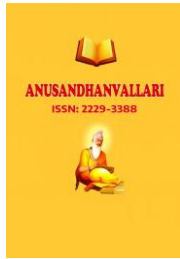
Caste, Class, and Inequality in Urban Space

Although the residents of Vishram Society belong broadly to the middle class, Adiga highlights the layered inequalities that persist even within this demographic. Some residents view the compensation as a long-awaited chance to move into more affluent neighborhoods, while others simply see it as financial security against future precarity. This divergence reflects the uneven distribution of capital and aspiration within the same social category.

Moreover, the novel suggests that urban space itself is stratified. Mumbai's geography mirrors its inequalities, with gated communities and luxury towers rising beside slums and aging cooperative societies. Scholars such as Fernandes (2006) note that middle-class housing societies represent both aspiration and exclusion, as they separate residents from poorer populations while still subjecting them to the pressures of redevelopment. In *Last Man in Tower*, this tension surfaces in the way residents rationalize their decision to sell: they see it as upward mobility but also as escape from the perceived decline of their neighborhood.

While caste is not explicitly foregrounded in the novel, its shadow lingers in the background of urban hierarchies. The middle-class identity of the residents is not caste-neutral; it is shaped by historical privileges that allow them to access property ownership in the first place. Masterji's resistance, therefore, does not simply mark him as stubborn but as a figure who disrupts the smooth functioning of neoliberal redevelopment by invoking values—memory, dignity, community—that transcend transactional exchange. The ecology of inequality here is not only economic but also social, embedded in long-standing structures of privilege and exclusion.

Human Fragility and the Figure of Masterji

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Last Man in Tower* is its portrayal of human fragility, embodied in the figure of Yogesh A. Murthy—affectionately called Masterji. A retired schoolteacher and widower, Masterji lives alone in the society after the death of his wife and the emigration of his children. His refusal to sell is not purely economic; it is deeply tied to memory, attachment, and dignity. His flat becomes a repository of his past, a fragile link to his wife and his life's work.

Adiga frames Masterji's resistance as both heroic and tragic. On one hand, he symbolizes ethical steadfastness, refusing to be swayed by greed or coercion. On the other, his position highlights the vulnerability of individuals who resist the tide of neoliberalism. His neighbors, once respectful and affectionate, begin to see him as an obstacle to their prosperity. In their eyes, his fragility becomes a liability, justifying their eventual betrayal.

Masterji thus represents the "human ecology" of inequality. Aging, loneliness, and social marginalization are not merely personal conditions but structural vulnerabilities exacerbated by neoliberal development. As Gilleard and Higgs (2010) suggest, the elderly in neoliberal societies are often rendered expendable, their values and attachments dismissed as outdated. Adiga captures this poignantly in Masterji's gradual isolation, showing how fragility itself becomes politicized in the context of urban redevelopment.

Community vs. Individual Survival

A central tension in the novel is the conflict between community solidarity and individual survival. Initially, the residents of Vishram Society appear united by their shared space and history. They celebrate festivals together, share gossip, and maintain a fragile sense of belonging. Yet when the redevelopment offer arrives, this solidarity
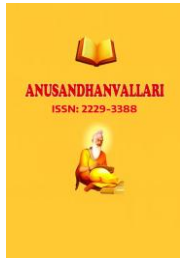
unravels. Collective identity gives way to individual calculation, and eventually, to collective coercion against the lone dissenter.

Adiga masterfully depicts how community can turn predatory when individual resistance threatens collective gain. The residents, who once valued Masterji as a moral compass, begin to vilify him, rationalizing their hostility in the name of progress. This dynamic reflects what Nixon (2011) terms the "ecology of violence": the way communities internalize systemic pressures and reproduce inequality at a micro level.

The breakdown of community in *Last Man in Tower* is not merely a narrative device but a commentary on the fragility of social bonds under neoliberalism. As Baviskar (2020) notes, middle-class identities in India are increasingly defined by consumerist aspiration rather than collective solidarity. The society's transformation from a cooperative community to a fractured collective reveals how neoliberal urbanism corrodes the very idea of community, reducing it to a transactional calculus.

Synthesis of Findings

Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* functions as more than a realist depiction of a housing dispute in Mumbai; it dramatizes the ecological dimensions of inequality in neoliberal India. The redevelopment project at Vishram Society is not simply a narrative of property acquisition but an allegory of how urban ecologies are reshaped by capital flows. The society itself can be read as an "ecosystem," once sustained by fragile bonds of trust and memory, but destabilized by the intrusion of speculative capital.

From the perspective of ecocriticism, the novel highlights the ways in which urban development constitutes an ecological disturbance. Just as natural ecologies are disrupted by industrialization, so too are urban communities fragmented by redevelopment. The "slow violence" of displacement (Nixon, 2011) occurs not only when bulldozers arrive but in the gradual erosion of solidarity, dignity, and belonging. In this sense, Adiga's narrative reveals how inequality is produced not as a sudden rupture but as a creeping transformation of urban space and human relations.

Urban studies frameworks deepen this reading by emphasizing the commodification of space. As Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, the city is socially produced, and residents have a "right to the city" that extends beyond economic valuation. In *Last Man in Tower*, this right is steadily stripped away, as the society's members are convinced—or coerced—into viewing their homes not as lived spaces but as financial assets. The commodification of their apartments marks the triumph of neoliberal rationality, reducing memory, history, and belonging to economic terms.

At the same time, the novel foregrounds human fragility as an essential dimension of inequality. Masterji's resistance exposes how aging individuals, widowed and socially isolated, are particularly vulnerable in neoliberal ecologies. His moral stance is dismissed as senility, his fragility weaponized by neighbors to justify betrayal. This resonates with broader critiques of neoliberalism, which tends to marginalize those who do not—or cannot—contribute to the economy's relentless drive for accumulation (Harvey, 2005). Masterji's tragic fate thus exemplifies the human cost of development, reminding readers that inequality is experienced not only in terms of wealth but also in terms of dignity, memory, and care.

Thematically, the novel also underscores the fragility of community under neoliberal pressures. What begins as a cooperative society devolves into a site of coercion and betrayal, as residents turn on one another in pursuit of individual gain. This transformation illustrates Baviskar's (2020) claim that middle-class identities in India are increasingly defined by consumption rather than solidarity. The erosion of community in *Last Man in Tower*
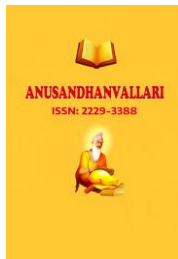
suggests that neoliberalism fosters not only economic inequality but also social impoverishment, eroding the bonds that once sustained collective life.

Taken together, these readings position Adiga's novel as a vital literary intervention in debates about globalization, inequality, and urban development. By dramatizing the ecological dimensions of inequality—spatial, social, and human—the novel invites readers to consider how the promises of modernization conceal profound forms of fragility and loss.

Conclusion

Last Man in Tower dramatizes the paradox of India's neoliberal urban transformation: redevelopment promises prosperity, yet it fractures communities, marginalizes the vulnerable, and erodes the moral fabric of collective life. By situating the Vishram Cooperative Housing Society as a microcosm of Mumbai's redevelopment politics, Adiga reveals how urban ecologies are reshaped by capital, aspiration, and coercion.

This article has argued that the novel is best understood through the lens of "ecologies of inequality," a framework that highlights the intersection of physical, social, and human dimensions of precarity. The redevelopment project disrupts the physical ecology of space, the social ecology of community, and the human ecology of aging and memory. In doing so, it exposes how inequality is not merely an economic phenomenon but a deeply ecological one, affecting the very conditions of human survival and dignity.
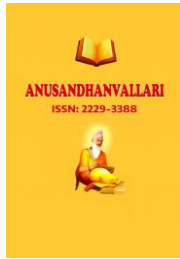
Adiga's narrative is significant not only within Indian English fiction but also within global literary debates. The tensions depicted in *Last Man in Tower*—between development and displacement, community and individual survival, prosperity and fragility—resonate with urban struggles across the Global South and beyond. By foregrounding the ecological dimensions of inequality, the novel contributes to a broader conversation about how literature can illuminate the human consequences of neoliberal globalization.

Ultimately, *Last Man in Tower* challenges readers to rethink the meaning of progress. It reminds us that development, when divorced from ethics and community, can produce not prosperity but dispossession. In Masterji's tragic resistance, we witness both the resilience of human dignity and the vulnerability of human fragility, making Adiga's novel a powerful testament to the ecologies of inequality that define our contemporary world.

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