Shifting Indian Identities in Aravind Adiga's Work:

The March from Individual to Communal Power

by

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary Indian literature, the question over which sets of Indian identities are granted access to power is highly contested. Critics such as Kathleen Waller and Sara Schotland align power with the identity of the autonomous individual, whose rights and freedoms are supposedly protected by the state, while others like David Ludden and Sandria Freitag place power with those who become a part of group identities, either on the national or communal level. The work of contemporary Indian author Aravind Adiga attempts to address this question. While Adiga's first novel *The White Tiger* applies the themes and ideology of the worth of the individual from African American novelists Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin, Adiga's latest novel, *Last Man in Tower*, shifts towards a study of the consequences of colonialism, national identity, and the place of the individual within India in order to reveal a changing landscape of power and identity. Through a discussion of Adiga's collective writings, postcolonial theory, American literature, South Asian crime novels, contemporary Indian popular fiction, and some of the challenges facing Mumbai, I track Adiga's shifts and moments of growth between his two novels and evaluate Adiga's ultimate message about who holds power in Indian society: the individual or the community.

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CHAPTER 1

ARAVIND ADIGA TREATMENT OF INDIAN NOTIONS OF IDENTITY: "A GREATER

PROCESS OF SELF-EXAMINATION

In 2011, Aravind Adiga published his second novel, *Last Man in Tower*, a book

that portrays a complex image of India by examining the lives and actions of the residents

of two apartment buildings, Vishram Society Tower A and Vishram Society Tower B

located in Mumbai. A lone individual, a retired schoolteacher named Yogesh Murthy, or

"Masterji", opposes the scheduled lucrative demolition of these towers. Within *Last Man

in Tower*, Adiga at first seems to repeat a traditional theme: the balance of an individual's

freedom with the community's needs.

Adiga is a writer with numerous publications of fiction, but his best work lies in

his two novels: his successful debut novel, *The White Tiger*, (2008), dealing with the

opportunities and difficulties afforded to those born poor and disadvantaged in India and

Last Man in Tower, which provides a new perspective on the debate between an

individual's freedom and the community's need, blurring traditional Western notions of

community, the individual, and their respective best interests while questioning the

direction of contemporary Indian identities and nationalism. Such perspectives allow for

further questions: is an individual valuable or is the community more important? Whose

definition of identity dominates power structures within India: those who favor individual

identification or those who favor group identities? Is morality based on securing the

needs of the group or protecting the rights of the individual? These questions are directly

linked to India's colonial past and to the development of post-independence national

identities. This thesis will strive to address these questions by examining Adiga's

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background and fiction, (specifically *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*), his place

in postcolonial, South Asian, and American literary canons, and the success of his

evaluation of contemporary India.

BACKGROUND AND PUBLICATIONS

Adiga (born 1974 in Chennai, formerly Madras, Tamil Nadu, India) grew up

within the Mangalore community (Kernel). His family immigrated to Sydney, Australia,

when he was 15, where he obtained dual citizenship in 1990. He earned his Bachelor of

Arts in English Literature from Columbia University, New York, but also spent time at

Magdalene College, Oxford (Hall). Adiga left the United States, the United Kingdom, and

academia for journalism in India, starting with publications in 2006 in *Time*. His articles

have since been featured in *Outlook India* and *The Times of India* ("Publications"). More

recently, he has focused on creative works. Adiga's fiction and non-fiction involve

contemporary India and the experience of individuals who remain outsiders within their

own Indian communities. His first novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), was quickly followed in

the same year by a collection of short stories entitled *Between the Assassinations*. Short

stories such as "The Sultan's Battery" and "The Elephant" have appeared in other works.

Most recently, he published *Last Man in Tower* in 2011.

Literary scholar Krishna Singh's article "Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger:* The

Voice of Underclass—A Postcolonial Dialectics" recounts Adiga's feelings of isolation.

Singh notes the changes in urban development and identity that Adiga found after a fifteen

year absence from Mumbai. Those changes disturbed him, yet whetted his desire for

exploration (Singh 103). This prompted Adiga to try to capture the voices of those whom

he perceived as part of the "underclass" (99); however, Singh does not examine Adiga's portrayal of this voice through the view of individuality that prizes the autonomy and identity of the one over the many, a philosophical and social problem that is especially evident in Adiga's first novel and early journalistic work. These initial literary efforts attracted an international following, exposing readers to Adiga's contemporary picture of the Indian subcontinent while painting a gritty yet optimistic picture of modern Indian identity.

Awards do not always denote quality, but one pillar of Adiga's writing's value lies with his clear, significant portrayals of contemporary Indian identity. After winning the Man Booker Prize, Adiga suggested that the changes and inheritance facing India requires "writers like me [to] try to highlight the brutal injustices of society… it's not an attack on the country, it's a greater process of self-examination" (Jeffries). Adiga's novel illustrates the global importance of India on the international literary stage, and supporters of his work point out that he expands from Indian relevance in particular to "deal with pressing social issues and significant global developments" from around the globe ("Man Booker Prize 2008 Winner Announced"). Yet Adiga's critics doubt whether he has risen above the level of other problematic authors, like those scholar James English names as "Euro-assimilationist texts [used] to satisfy a 'Western tourist taste for exotica'" (English 308). Following *The White Tiger*, Adiga's next major publication, the collection of stories *Between the Assassinations,* caters to this tourist taste by barely varying in topic and character construction from *The White Tiger*, once again focusing on sympathetic impoverished young individuals as protagonists (Abell). If Adiga seeks to make a name for himself as an author of contemporary Indian literature, he must face the

challenge of critics who categorize him with English's criticism of those who author the

"'post-Rushdie, postcolonial novel of India, which…is a form of evasion or neglect rather

than transcultural contact, a form through which 'the west can settle down to

contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself'" (English 309). Such

criticism is seemingly misplaced, however, in view of Adiga's realistic appraisal of the

issues facing contemporary Indians, an appraisal that earns his work a place in the canon

of contemporary Indian fiction. Elen Turner explains why Adiga's work belongs in this

ongoing canon:

> Much of [contemporary Indian fiction] revolves around the lives of the
> educated, urban, English-speaking elite. Characters are middle-class, with
> aspirations of social and economic mobility, from sections of society
> benefiting from the economic liberalization that began in India in the early
> 1990s… Characters are usually young and grapple with some kind of
> identity crisis brought about by the "clash" of tradition and contemporary
> life. (1)

Turner suggests that the individual in contemporary Indian fiction often supports the

establishment of "traditional forms of Indian adult subjectivity [that] revolve around

marriage, family, and community… A rejection of these types of behaviors — namely

through overt individualism — provides the antithesis" (1). This use of the individual to

weaken "Indian adult subjectivity" demonstrates a uniquely Indian perspective of the

value of the individual. The individuals within Adiga's works experience crises involving

identity, physical needs, economic hardship, and the direction of their personal futures,

while sharing a common heritage. Further, his characters typically range from

impoverished to middle-class backgrounds and span in age from youthful to elderly

characters. Adiga often infuses his own multiple-nationality background into his characters, exploring the impact of class and racial differences while simultaneously examining larger questions regarding the direction of Indian identity and the experience of Indian residents. This infusion, while useful to pair with Turner's work, prompts further study beyond Turner's evaluation, which considers social class while skirting other forms of expression of social immobilizing.

In his early literature, Adiga's use of the South Asian crime novel form places him well within the canon of contemporary Indian fiction and the broader canon of South Asian literature. The treatment of the individual in contemporary Indian literature plays a significant role in the genre of the South Asian crime novel, according to South Asian literary scholar Tanvi Patel, who suggests that South Asian crime novels differ from Western crime constructions because the Western form focuses on:

> criminal profiles, crime specifics, motives and tools of detection…the real innovation of the South Asian crime genre . . . is the representation of current South Asians and their daily circumstances from a more authentic perspective, thus engendering a new space from which subaltern voices can emerge. (18)

The value of Patel's distinction of the characteristics of a South Asian crime novel from Western crime novels lies with the postcolonial space he names and recognizes within these texts that allows for a broader and clearer expression of life within South Asian settings. Patel believes the crime novel "form[s] the ideal space to interrogate and expose socio-political discrepancies and violence" (6). I will further evaluate this violence and its relationship to India as well as to Adiga in my explorations of communalism.

Patel's characterization of crime novels demonstrates why Adiga was attracted to the genre at the outset of his effort to write fiction. Adiga's first novel *The White Tiger* investigates the "criminal legacy of capitalism and the British colonizing tenets that introduced it to modern India" (189). Employing the South Asian crime novel format allows Adiga to explore the roles of individualism and social ills within broader postcolonial discussions.

The White Tiger features Balram Halwai, a sympathetic antihero who rises from poverty to riches through manipulation and violence. Adiga frames his tale by having Halwai compose congratulatory letters to the Premier of China. Halwai's motivation for reaching out to the Premier lies in his admiration for what he perceives as China's independence: "the British tried to make you their servants, but you never let them do it. I admire that, Mr. Premier. I was a servant once, you see. Only three nations have never let themselves be ruled by foreigners: China, Afghanistan, and Abyssinia. These are the only three nations I admire" (3). In this first novel, Adiga uses realism to intertwine international connections with Halwai's unrealized expectations, demonstrated through Halwai's crime, his intrigue, his humor, and his criticism in his letter to a world leader on what he perceives is their shared experiences. The competing literary tensions between elements of South Asian crime novels, British notions of individualism, the search for identity, and the lingering consequences of colonialism, are embodied in Halwai. He notes, "I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers…I don't insult any of them by calling them 'family,' either. They're my employees I'm their boss, that's all…A White Tiger keeps no friends" (259). Through Halwai, *The White Tiger* becomes a catalogue of the connections within a community, a catalogue that is not shy to rank

relationships and approaches that fail to meet Adiga's notion of just standards. While Adiga is interested in communally developed identity, such as assumed families or how drivers are related to employers, the novel's emphasis is always on the individual and specifically on the success of Halwai.

While not always falling within the South Asian crime novel genre, Adiga's short stories include many of the same elements present in his longer works. He is specifically concerned with the dissection of individuals in trying circumstances that pit them against their communities. In "Elephant", (2009) featured in *The New Yorker*, Chenayya, a bicycle delivery youth, rages against his diminishing life. He cries out to traffic: "don't you see something is wrong here?' . . . They honked back. The world was furious at his fury. It wanted him to move out of its path, but he was enjoying being exactly where he was, blocking all these rich and important people" (2). Like many of Adiga's characters, Chenayya is unstable, quick to anger, often violent, and cannot change his own reality even with the opportunities presented to him through his social networks and modes of employment. Adiga attacks the notion of escaping poverty through work when Chenayya realizes: "As he was cycling, he was working the wheel of life backward, crushing his muscle and fibre into the pulp from which they were formed in his mother's womb; he was unmaking himself" (4). Adiga uses the metaphor of cycling to unlock Chenayya's corporeal and spiritual struggles with his assumed place in his community and country. Many of Adiga's characters experience dire poverty and subaltern identities, and, like Chenayya, rarely find relief. His work employs characters such as Chenayya to stand in for fate or death while tying them to specific regions, as when he places Tamil heritage as representative of fate: "the Tamilian boy was waiting for him. He said, 'I never told the

boss you quit. I knew you'd come back'" (5). Part of Adiga's claim to contemporary

Indian literature comes from the hybridity his stories acquire through the inclusion of

multiple Indian religious and geopolitical identities; however, there is tension with this

inclusion. Instead of engaging in direct communalism, Adiga molds multiple religious

identities into a single and united Indian identity. This mastery of the technical writing

craft, weave of traditions, images of India, and growing body of literary excellence has

established Adiga's work as worthy of praise and careful attention.

Adiga's most recent novel continues his study of the place of the individual

within India. In it, he shows that the individual suffers the consequences of colonialism

while he also interrogates the establishment of sets of national identities. *Last Man in

Tower* paints a complicated microcosm of India through the interactions of Masterji, the

Vishram Society, and Mumbai. The story revolves around the residents of two residential

towers. Dedicated on the birthday of former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru (who is

remembered partially for his work in creating the protection and universal equality of

individual Indian rights within the Indian declaration of independence and constitution

[Moraes 196]), these two towers were to serve as "good housing for good Indians" (6).

This articulated purpose immediately creates questions concerning what constitutes

"good" and "Indian." Adiga offers his answer to this question as the reader learns about

the lives of the middle- and upper-middle class residents, who upon being offered a

generous buyout are faced with the problem of Masterji, the lone resident who refuses

both change and a place within the group identity. Masterji "was one of the first Hindus

allowed into Vishram on account of his noble profession and dignified bearing…in

physical terms, a typical representative of the earlier generation. Good with languages (he

spoke six), generous with books, passionate about education. An adornment to his society" (28). Introduced as a teacher, a scientist, and an authority figure within the society, Masterji embodies the past ideal of Indian nationalism through his connection with education and independence. The towers house Masterji's collective community, and the novel's opening pages introduce the stories of forty-five of its members (355). Masterji and the community must each decide what they are willing to do to achieve their aims. In the end, the community acts to achieve its desired result by murdering the individual, Masterji. Instead of remaining within a single tradition, such as Western or South Asian crime novels, contemporary Indian popular fiction, or postcolonial dialogues, Adiga draws from multiple canons and traditions to fully examine the direction that identity takes when torn between individual autonomy and group loyalty. This examination leads, in turn, to an answer to the questions over the values emerging in contemporary Mumbai and Indian life in this novel. Like characters in Adiga's other works, Masterji struggles as a justice-seeking individual, yet the insight the reader gains by the novel's plot and modern Indian setting leads to a more authentic contemplation of Indian individualism, identity and nationalism than Adiga previously offered.

CHAPTER 2

RECOGNIZING NATIONALISM: ADIGA'S WORK EXAMINED THROUGH

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

I went to my grandfather's house. Its cupboards were full of dusty books,

all in English. This surprised me, because my grandfather, an Indian

nationalist, disdained to speak English, except to correct another

man's…Every foundational document of India was known to me only in

English: the Constitution, for instance, and even Gandhi's autobiography,

written in his native Gujarati, but taught in school in an English

translation. How could we function without our only common language?

Doing away with English seemed to me tantamount to doing away with

India: We were the language's, before the language was ours…The British

had resigned all interest in India in 1947 and seemed to count for nothing

in world politics now, so they were a neutral nation as far as I was

concerned, and their writers soon provided the bulk of my reading.

(Adiga "How English literature shaped me")

ADIGA'S POSTCOLONIAL FOUNDATION

Vital to the postcolonial canon to which Adiga's work belongs is the work of

Franz Fanon, specifically "The Wretched of the Earth," which discusses the emergence of

independent states from colonial rule and the place of violence within this process. Adiga

examines both the emergence of the state and the place of violence in relation to India

within his texts. As India, with its contemporary borders, is a recent phenomenon, the

establishment of a state identified with a civilization after years of British rule created an environment that has produced lingering consequences of colonialism, moments of violence, and identity crises. In Aravind Adiga's work (and in the canon of contemporary Indian fiction generally), much of the debate over identity involves the portrayal of Indian nationalism, for as Turner noted earlier, this canon partially depends upon a postcolonial "identity crisis brought about by the "clash" of tradition and contemporary life" (1). Adiga brings this clash into a new theater, through characters like Halwai and Masterji, depicting the interactions between Indian notions of individualism and collectivism.

As Fanon's critical work focuses on violence within colonial and postcolonial settings, it offers a method for understanding those moments of violence that are one of Adiga's and South Asian literature's primary concerns. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon argues that violence is needed to instigate the reform of language, rhetoric, and the structure of culture as well as government to achieve true political autonomy. Fanon's views relate to both Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower,* as Adiga's inclusion of violence within postcolonial communities elevates the tension between individualism and collectivism. As Fanon opines*,* "national liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" (35).

Fanon's violent phenomena are present within all of Adiga's texts. Within *The White Tiger*, for example, Adiga "ventures that the nation still experiences the drawbacks of colonization because its citizens perpetuate inequality, social hierarchies and

subalternaity" (Patel 188). This perpetual inequality is seen in Halwai's struggles, and within *Last Man in Tower*, if the residents of the Vishram Society are viewed through Fanon's lens as "natives", then Masterji can be seen as a remnant of the colonial past, which explains the violence he too eventually suffers.

Fanon influenced and laid the foundation for future writers around the world in the decades after his own, for as Caribbean literature scholar Silvia Nagy-Zekmi points out, Fanon's work "allow[s] a new phase to emerge which emphasizes notions of hybridity and heterogeneity, contact-zones, and 'third spaces' instead of the binary mode of center/periphery that replicates representations of the inequality of the colonial system" (Nagy-Zekmi 136). Any reliance on Fanon's views for studies of Indian literature by past or current critics, however, requires examination of his relevance to contemporary India. Nagy-Zekmi notes that Fanon's continued relevance to postcolonial literature arises from the continuing influence of imperial forces: "this post-colonial world is neither post- nor past…Fanon's legacy is alive and well in academic and non-academic (i.e. activist) circles" (135-136). Adiga's characters exist within this "neither post- nor past" colonial world of Fanon's. As will be seen, while Adiga initially adopted a binary mode of center periphery in his first novel, as his writing has matured, Adiga has moved towards multiple approaches of defining the value of the individual in contemporary India.

Literary scholar Toral Gajarawala connects Adiga's early work explicitly with Fanon: "*The White Tiger* breaks with realist traditions of representing poverty and backwardness in Indian Anglophone literature. Instead, it poses a challenge in Fanonian terms" (1). Gajarawala observes that "Balram declares class injustice but he posits a

means [to a solution] that not everyone can apply; his methodology is Fanonian in vision but in application to the very few, like Dostoevsky's daring Raskolnikov, can aspire" (2). Gajarwala demonstrates Nagy-Zekmi's correct assertion of Fanon's relevance in his own use of Fanon theoretical foundation to understand Adiga; however, Gajarawala fails to recognize the changes in Adiga's depiction of Indian individualism.

NATIONALISM

While Fanon explains violence within decolonized spaces, other postcolonial theorists offer valuable explanations of the development of national identity. Ernest Gelner's *Nations and Nationalism* considers national identity as another element essential to understand Adiga's notion of individualism. Gellner is vital for this discussion, for Adiga's stories of communities may also be read as his story of the modern Indian state. In the second edition of Gellner's book, he suggests that:

1. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.
2. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they *recognize* each other as belonging to the same nation. (6-7)

Gellner's stipulations come from two different organizing forces, with the first force revolving around group identity and prioritizing of the collective and the second stipulating that identity originates from the recognition of another. Benedict Anderson's influential work *Imagined Communities* takes a different approach to understanding the development of and importance of nationalism. Anderson suggests that a nation is an "imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"

(6). Specifically, Anderson places communal actions over the individual, noting that nations are communities because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship" (7). This horizontal inclusion is what builds the state and allows "for so many millions of people not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7). Gellner also examines the inclusions and exclusions of nationalism. He suggests that "the political boundary of a given state can fail to include all the members of the appropriate nation; or it can include them but also include some foreigners; or it can fail in both these ways at once, not incorporating all the nationals and yet also including some non-nationals" (1).

The combination of the work of Fanon, Gellner, Anderson, and Adiga synthesize that the political boundary of the state is continually shifting within the context of postcolonial India. This shifting further illustrates "the country's rise as a potential global economic power whose major population lives in crushing poverty … Adiga's narrative argues that many Indians are facing the experiences of colonialism well after Independence" (Patel 16). Therefore, continued study of Adiga's narratives could offer increased understanding of the shifting political boundaries and the experiences of India's population. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga portrays the isolation of individuals as way to focus on the divide between communities. He "confirms that attaining national independence does not automatically translate to its social and cultural equivalents since many of India's elites, to a certain degree, have internalized and appropriated colonial discourse in order to preserve their hierarchical positions" (17). The problem is that in some moments Indian nationalism includes all those within their geopolitical borders in

the national identity. Unfortunately, in other instances Indian nationalism excludes the

poor, the Islamic, or those who are still attached to the past. When this occurs, violence

often results, illustrating a reality quite distant from Anderson's idea of "a vast,

horizontal comradeship" (7).

COMMUNALISM

Within the setting of South Asia, historians and critics classify numerous

instances of violence as communalism. David Ludden provides a valuable resource

toward understanding Adiga's treatment of communalism and identity, owing to

Ludden's focus on the formation of group identity, including his treatment of religion and

other factors contributing towards nationalistic identities. He states that "communalism is

collective antagonism organized around religious, linguistic, and/or ethnic identities" (12)

and notes "communalism is a product of orientalism and the colonial state" (11). Where

in other locations, such as Sri Lanka, Palestine, and Ireland, communalism has been

applied more closely to include ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities, Ludden states,

"[i]n India, communalism is based on the fundamental idea that Hindus and Muslims

constitute totally separate communities in essential opposition to another" (12). This is

not wholly separate from nationalism; in fact, much of Indian nationalism has been

constructed around communalism. Ludden suggests that "this basic idea [of

communalism] creates religious community in the image of a family, a nation" (12). In

Adiga's *The White Tiger*, this religious community confronts Halwai with adversity

through caste-based issues (54), whereas with *Last Man in Tower*, communalism

victimizes Masterji for his failure to fully identify as a Hindu (27). If nations are defined

through group identity, then communal groups create nations out of specific and exclusive collectives. How then do these groups interact with the political needs of the state? Ludden suggests:

> communalism is alive in everyday politics that invokes community identities—in the streets, courts, media, elections, religious and cultural institutions, schools, academic research, and intimate conversations—anywhere that people can be influenced to form their own identities and public opinions around oppositional ethnic or religious categories. (13)

Through communal identities, power results from placement within the group rather than from justice or the value of the individual. Ludden notes, "people see antagonism—and thus communalism—as morally correct, inevitable, necessary, and even progressive" (14). The group appears either to consume or destroy all individual identities. Similar to the consuming drive of the residents of the Vishram Society, "India's new communalism has arisen during a struggle to reconstruct India politically. The struggle is centrally concerned with the legitimacy of the state, the distribution of state resources, power in society, and justice" (18).

Sandria Freitag, a historian, also continues the contemporary analysis of Indian identity, nationalism and communalism. Her research provides a method for identifying the steps which lead imagined communities within India to form. These steps include the creation of set identities for community, a set identity of the state, the involvement of dramatic moments, the development of special vocabulary, claims in public in order to sway public opinion, and organization of mobilization in the streets that features violence and the creation of an Other (220-221). Freitag's historical examples of events that feature violence against the created Other include the 1890s Cow Protection riots (222),

and "the Benares riot of 1811 to the Bijnor riot of 1992" (221), both of which portray violence delivered by the community in similar ways to Adiga's residents. Freitag's vocabulary is immensely useful when applied to Adiga's work; it is especially useful for evaluating violence occurring within the deeper levels of socio-political movement in *Last Man in Tower*. The process of communal identification involves a group that first must "rest on the evocation of an imagined community, one generally constructed in opposition not only to the imperial state, but to an indigenous Other seen to imperil their shared values" (220). As nationalism is needed to establish the legitimacy of the modern state, communalism then seems to be a rapid method for creating this collective identity, as seen by Adiga's community that rallies under the flag of religion as well as quickly establishing new parameters for the Indian state as key parts of their shifting identities.

CHAPTER 3

ADIGA'S EARLY INFLUENCES : HALWAI'S BEGINNINGS

In an interview with his publisher that is placed as a coda to *The White Tiger* Adiga declared that his greatest "influences …were three black American writers of the post-World War II era (in order), Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright" (284). In this coda, it is important to note that Adiga is using past tense, placing this influence within expired temporal relevance, rather than placing these authors in his current sources of influence. Adiga also stated that another inspiration for his main character, Balram Halwai, came from "a composite of various men I've met when traveling through India" (285). This identification of explicit influences demonstrates a connection that Adiga sought to make at the time with both American and Indian audiences. By way of his American education and a desire to be applied to broader literary canons, Adiga claims literary heritage with these three African American authors. The individual's plights in the works of these three authors address many of the same issues as Adiga using a shared Fanonian background, and evidence of their influence in Adiga's early work makes this shared background even clearer. Relying on the review of the literary contributions of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin in terms of their influence over *The White Tiger*, I will explore Adiga's earlier views of the plight of the individual so that his later understanding of the individual in India can be brought into sharper focus.

WRIGHT AND ADIGA: A NEW BIGGER FROM BIHAR

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) challenged American ideas of multiracial communities and integration through its depiction of Bigger Thomas, a poor, black, young man who is tried for his acts of murder and rape. Wright describes Thomas as "not old enough to vote. Living in a Black Belt district…he has not come in contact with the wide variety and depths of life. He has but two outlets for his emotions: work and sex—and he knew these in their most vicious and degrading forms" (377). Wright secured his place within modern American literature by capturing the experiences or assumed experiences of many impoverished African Americans with the restricted choices and outlets heaped on Thomas. Wright continues to "enjoy a lasting place of honor in the African American and American literary traditions, and [is] recognized as an author of world-class dimensions" (Rampersad xxii). Wright provides a productive template, in terms of plot, themes, and execution for Adiga, and it is little wonder he claims Wright as an early influence.

Wright's *Native Son* influenced Adiga in his treatment of the individual, as Sara Schotland suggests. Her article unlocks the significance of both Adiga's and Wright's protagonists murdering their employers and struggling against their colonizers. As Schotland notes "both Balram Halwai and Bigger Thomas are born into sharply divided societies where the lower classes struggle in dire poverty without hope of advancement" (1). Schotland suggests that "both Bigger and Balram turn to violence to escape the oppression that relentlessly threatens their aspirations for livelihood and manhood" (1). Halwai and Bigger "each justify [murder] as an existential act. Balram goes so far as to justify murder as comparable to the misdeeds routinely engaged in by senior government

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officials and successful businessmen as they climb to the top" (Schotland 1). Similar to

Bigger, Halwai is an individual, who, like a white tiger, comes "once in a generation"

(Adiga 30). In this metaphor, India is a rooster coop where the economy and population

cannot create their own success or escape and are ruled, but a white tiger is able to

manipulate the circumstances in order to succeed. Unfortunately, it does not seem as if a

white tiger can fully escape the system; this leads to violence, despite manipulation and

potential monetary success,

Historian Peter Van der Veer suggests that violence is not a spontaneous

occurrence, as he explains that "violence is created by politicians who control access to

state licenses, jobs in bureaucracy, educational opportunities. Their electoral strategies

that make use of the state apparatus are the cause of civil unrest and violence" (264).

Bigger and Halwai both engage in violent acts after being denied mobility or opportunity,

but Schotland suggests that while Bigger is punished, in *The White Tiger* crime pays.

Balram becomes the new master, enriching himself but at the same time perpetuating a

"neocolonial structure" (2). Thus, Adiga's similarities with Wright do not create a

reliable bridge into defining the value of the individual for Adiga; unlike Wright's

characters' use of violence, Adiga's instigators of violence typically profit from the act

and, more importantly, they gain power from it. Schotland also observed about *The White

Tiger*: "The injustice and corruption of twenty-first-century India is so deep rooted and so

pervasive that the only way a poor man can better himself is by an act of aggression, even

the extremes of theft or murder…Adiga's vision remains dystopic" (18). Adiga's

"dystopic" view of India within *The White Tiger* may also be traced to his second

influence, Ralph Ellison.

Published shortly after Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) "with its dazzling modernist techniques, its lyricism, humor, and final optimism about American…tended to make *Native Son* seem crude in comparison" (Rampersad xxii). Like *Native Son*, *Invisible Man* deals with issues of race and identity, specifically with the narrator's struggle to be valued as an individual and to honor his assumed responsibility to the community (12), but it does so in a way that lets readers critique the world through humor.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga connects Ellison's use of humor and creation of the "invisible man" motif to create his own catalogue of invisible men. In "Book of a Lifetime: Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison," Adiga expanded on his college experiences at Columbia University. Adiga's application of Ellison to his own life experiences appears in the "Invisible Man" that Adiga meets every day living in Delhi. Adiga connected his time in New York with Delhi, noting, "I have left Harlem, but I am still surrounded, by Invisible Men. They are of my own race, their skin is the colour of my skin, and yet I cannot see them" ("Book"). Here, Adiga, while discussing a Harlem removed from Ellison's experience by fifty years, echoes Ellison's protagonist's opening pages:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar
> Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man
> of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be
> said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people
> refuse to see me… It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it
> is most often rather wearing on the nerves. (2)

Like Ellison, Adiga catalogues invisible men; unlike Ellison, Adiga, in "Book of a Lifetime: Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison," stresses class privilege over race difference ("Book"). Adiga notes:

> If you come to Delhi, I will tell you: 'Everyone in this city eats late.' Thousands of day labourers, rickshaw pullers and beggars, will lie, by the side of road, by nine o'clock, covered in blankets and driving past pavements clogged with the sleeping poor, I will reassure you, 'I've never seen a person in Delhi in bed before midnight. This is a party city.' And what is invisible to me will become invisible to you too. Until the day when the Invisible Man speaks to us with his fists, which will insist: 'First you must see me' ("Book").

Adiga aligns the Invisible Man with the subaltern, the voiceless, and the poor, who like Ellison's Invisible Man are invisible because white people choose to not acknowledge their existence. In addition to Adiga's journalistic efforts, Ellison's invisible societal members are present in *The White Tiger* as well. In this novel, Adiga implies that the invisible men are invisible due to caste-based differences and capitalism. Capitalism seems to be functioning as a negative force, a consequence of colonialism, and as a major force for initial post-independence identity of Indian individuals. These invisible men are often tied to inescapable and specific class and caste identities, factors that place Adiga within the realm of South Asian crime novels through protagonists' investigation of injustices suffered by subaltern individuals. Halwai's different jobs (candy maker to driver) demonstrate that "caste mobility does not ensure class mobility" (Patel 209). Halwai's initial inability to escape also illustrates the ways in which "the old caste system

has modified, through capitalist practices, to reduce the poor into a repressed working class while insuring the hegemonic control of the wealthy" (16).

Kathleen Waller examines the emergence of Indian individualism from a secular and democratic society. Comparing Ellison and Adiga, Waller suggests that "Non-identities in literature, especially through nameless or multiply named characters, have been precursors to actual social changes in the past. Ralph Ellison's nameless narrator in *Invisible Man* preceded the Civil Rights Movement in the United States" (2). Ellison, who published *Invisible Man* in 1952 before the 1960s racial strife, used individuals to represent a group of people, but more so, used an individual to demonstrate tension. Waller goes on to explore Ellison's precedent:

> Like Adiga, Ellison does not spell out a solution for US-America's race problems...Instead, he focuses on individuals and the energy that can be created through abstraction… Adiga himself has deconstructed style and authorship through self-discovery of his artistic purpose and for this reason he feels comfortable with an elusively defined narrator as in Ellison's novel. (2)

She suggests Adiga's portrayal of poverty and capitalism is countercultural and that he often challenges "definitions of Indian identity" (2). Discussing definitions both of internal and external identity, she raises important philosophical questions:

> There must be a way for individuals within society to seek redefinition through both lawful and ethically correct means… Individuals' free will is not just an action here, but a state of being and the ability to change what one's being is defined as. Nonidentity becomes a form of empowerment. (2)

Waller identifies a need for secure methods for the individual to self-identify, perhaps in conflict with a collectively assigned role, such as member of a lower class; in so doing, Waller supports a western notion of the value of the autonomy of the individual, which Adiga seems to embrace in his first novel. While she is supportive of the assumed rights of the individual in the work of both Adiga and Ellison, Waller is far more skeptical of Adiga's criticism of change through an individual's willpower in *The White Tiger*. Halwai, she posits, "should be free from hierarchy and therefore equal to the social class of the [Chinese] premier. However, the reader knows that even a communist premier would see himself as higher and removed from the rest of society" (2). Waller is correct in her evaluation of Adiga's attitudes about collective power within *The White Tiger*, yet, Adiga's view changes drastically in his later work. Unlike Halwai, who tries to reach out to the communist premier while achieving success and survival through the might of the individual, Masterji in *Last Man in Tower* experiences the opposite: he is an individual martyred for trying to hinder the utilitarian good of the collective.

ADIGA AND BALDWIN: A WHITE TIGER IN THE STREET

James Baldwin's autobiographical essays in *No Name in the Street* (1972) details his experiences growing up in New York, living in France, participation in the Civil Rights Movement, and his repeated isolation from the "American intellectuals" (30). Baldwin moves through his frustrations with Americans, racism in every community, and his issues with politicized literature that is "reductive of human character and thus fatally limited as art" (Rampersad xxii). If *No Name in the Street* is allowed to stand for the themes and messages in much of Baldwin's writing, it is clear that Baldwin's writing

connects closely with the experiences of Halwai, yet a comparison with Baldwin demonstrates Adiga's shift in view in his second novel regarding the worth of the individual from post-enlightenment notions of human rights, equality, and autonomy to identification and value derived from group identities. Little has been written on Baldwin's scope of influence on Adiga. Baldwin's work, like Halwai in *The White Tiger*, follows the protagonists from childhood to adulthood, potentially placing both works within a *bildungsroman* category, Tanvi Patel enumerates on this categorization:

> Adiga argues that the classic maturation narrative of the *Bildungsroman* when interjected with a capitalist pursuit of monetary wealth effectively reverses its trajectory and leads one to become more individualistic and carnal. Developing a critique of this modernization that stems from the legacy of British rule and enables such capitalistic quests, Adiga reveals the absurdity and irony of this development narrative. (193)

Here, Patel uses "individualistic" to denote selfishness, but his argument is still applicable if individualistic is defined as supporting a western notion of prioritizing the autonomy and value of the individual. Adiga uses this notion as he moves beyond his earlier view of the individual struggle to a less western view of how community needs to change the course of a developmental narrative for its own best interests.

Baldwin's *No Name in the Street* highlights his own experiences of isolation within intimate relations, as he reveals how his father pushed his children "to depend on each other and became a kind of wordless conspiracy to protect [our mother]. (We were all, absolutely and mercilessly, united against our father)" (5). Baldwin rhetorically places the formation of a united collective against an individual as superior either to supporting individual action or to supporting the authority of the individual. Within *The*

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White Tiger, both Halwai and his boss Ashok suffer from identity crises, but within *Last Man in Tower*, several characters highlight the difficulty of forming an identity after joining the collective. Dharmen Shah seems to be the model of individuality; his background is a retelling of Horatio Alger, only more aggressive and seemingly more self-serving. The use of this comparison with Shah is not to say that Baldwin ignores the crisis of identity between the collective and the individual. As compared to Adiga, Baldwin seems to connect more so with Shah's sentiments over Ashok, for both Shah and Baldwin seem to struggle with never being "able to make real for my countrymen, or myself, the fact that I had 'made it'" (12). Both men attain financial success, but both men are insecure with the effects of that success on their identities and relationships with their communities.

Baldwin also illustrates the challenge arising from the individual's expectations, such as social mobility and financial success. Baldwin finds success isolating; he notes of his peers, "I was brighter, or more driven than [them]," (12), and "I was guilty because he was just another post-office worker, and we had dreamed such tremendous futures for ourselves" (13). It is interesting that Baldwin, like Halwai, feels isolated by his success. Again similar to Halwai, Baldwin finds himself compromising his values and identity in order to remain powerful. Baldwin suggests this stems from "the loss of empire [which] also implies a radical revision of the individual identity" (25). Baldwin's individual identity is wrapped in isolation, as he laments rising to success while maintaining both individual identity and morality and suggests that "nothing could be more paradoxical: to have thrown in your lap what you never dreamed of getting, and, in sober, bitter truth, could never have dreamed of having, and that at the price of an assumed betrayal of your

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brothers and sisters" (12). For Baldwin, this assumed betrayal to the community came in the form of financial success, competitive employment, and a shift in community placement away from his domestic origins. For Halwai, this is a literal betrayal of his family and community; he actually trades the lives of his family and employers to acquire "what [he] never dreamed of getting" (Adiga 12). In all, Adiga uses Baldwin's themes of isolation and violence to create a radical revision of the terms Halwai's successful climb out of the slums of India.

While Halwai deals with slums in post-millennial India, Baldwin faced many of the same issues living in New York in 1952. He quotes and challenges protests slogans from this time: "*East Side, West Side, all around the town, We want the landlords to tear the slums down!*" (29), as Baldwin blames "Liberal intellectuals" (34) for their lack of action or perceived concern about slum life, "wonder[s] what they really felt about human life, for they were so choked and cloaked with formulas that they no longer seemed to have any connection with it" (34). Halwai's employers are like Baldwin's intellectuals: characterized as middle class and upper middle class professionals, they are educated and financially stable, yet, they prove violent and aggressive in increasing their financial security. Halwai's employers' wealth, privilege, and education align them with Baldwin's intellectuals, and both are implicated in violence in maintaining and increasing their status.

The comparison of political to individual freedom both concerns Baldwin and Adiga. Political freedom must always come at the expense of individual freedom, for by limiting individuals with laws, individuals are guided towards a perceived greater good and policed morality. Yet Baldwin offers a different perspective: he suggests "political

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freedom is a matter of power and has nothing to do with morality" (87). He continues by

noting that "power… can have no morality in itself, is yet dependent on human energy,

on the wills and desires of human beings" (89).

The White Tiger has direct ties to the American authors that Adiga so clearly

connects with in his early career and relied on for his Man Booker win. Reviewing

Adiga's explicit acknowledgement of the literary influences of Ralph Ellison, Richard

Wright, and James Baldwin shows that while *The White Tiger* reflects their interest in the

worth of the individual and the collective, *Last Man in Tower* explores these same issues

from a very different perspective, one that further incorporates contemporary Indian

cultural movements in Indian identity, thus providing a more authentically Indian

judgment of the individual within contemporary Indian society.

CHAPTER 4

LAST MAN IN TOWER: A STORY OF MUMBAI'S URBAN GROWTH

So far this study has reviewed Adiga's work reflecting his postcolonial and

African American influences, but a study of his most recent novel makes clear that Adiga

also uses platforms specific to contemporary Indian literature and experiences. The

following chapters explore these additional influences and evaluate the dimensions of

forty-two characters who add to Adiga's portrayal of the individual and the collective and

to the direction of Indian identity.

MUMBAI

Adiga uses setting as an influential factor in his stories. *Last Man in Tower* is set

in Mumbai, India. The most populous city in India and the fourth most populated city in

the world, the commercial capital of India, and home to Bollywood, Mumbai represents

India's future (Nakasar). Adiga opens his "13 May" chapter with a catalog that questions

this future: "What is Bombay? From the thirteenth floor, a window answers: banyan,

maiden, stone, tile, tower, dome, sea, halk, *amaltas* in bloom, smog on the horizon,

Gothic phantasmagoria (Victoria Terminus and the Municipal Building) emerging from

the smog" (47). Adiga merges the natural world, the past, and the present within the

vocabulary of construction materials and buildings as markers of colonial authorities.

 A rarely examined but significant aspect of *Last Man in Tower* concerns the fight

for and connection between space, residency, and real estate. All are deeply involved

with the definition of success within India. Adiga also posits these themes as crucial to

India's global identity through the figure of Dharmen Shah, a real estate mogul who

compares Mumbai to Shanghai, which he equates with "roads as far as the eye can see, skyscrapers, everything clean, beautiful…those Chinese have all the will power in the world. And here we haven't had ten minutes of will power since Independence" (50). This competition over development, production, and postcolonial history drives many of Adiga's characters to Mumbai and to remain in the city. Nakasar suggests that this urban retention stems from "the commercial demographics, [which] are large and variegated, and there is a constant inward migration from all over the country. Mumbai, being the archetypal 'City of Opportunity' generates an unprecedented demand for properties across the residential, commercial and retail sectors" (Nakasar).

Formerly Bombay, Mumbai's name itself reflects intentional renewal and collective rechristening. After the Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena won power, it "announced that the port city had been renamed after the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi, the city's patron deity… They argued that 'Bombay' was a corrupted English version of 'Mumbai' and an unwanted legacy of British colonial rule" (Beam). Adiga uses this legacy in his pairing of the British-built towers housing the Vishram Society and the city of Mumbai, both acting as locations for groups that embrace a group identity. Developing a collective identity requires leaving the colonial past and creating a future by shifting away from British notions of identity which were grounded in the value of the individual as opposed to the value of identifying with the community.

As evidenced in Adiga's real estate mogul, Shah, there are benefits of belonging to and influencing a collective. *In Last Man in Tower*, Shah builds the identity of communities as he constructs his buildings and thus his future. At a dinner for the builders, a Bollywood star explains the process: "When they come out of a film, people

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throw away the tickets, but the builder's name is always on the building. It becomes part

of the family name. I am a Hiranandani Towers man. He is a Raheja Complex man"

(102). This character's role in Mumbai real estate echoes many of the conclusions that

appear in Robert-Jan Baken's *Plotting, Squatting, Public Purpose, and Politics*, a text

that examines contemporary trends and issues with Indian real estate. Baken's work

offers numerous insights that reinforce the characters' experience buying land, selling

residences, and building within *Last Man in Tower*. Baken's work is valuable to

understanding the character of Shah and the treatment of Mumbai real estate power,

"since independence, India has undergone a phase of rapid urbanization…the average

population of million-plus cities increase from 2.35 million in 1951 to 3.09 million in

1991" (1). Adiga suggests that this growth is synonymous with aggression, understood as

competiveness: "the builder is the one man in Bombay who never loses a fight" (105). In

the years after independence, this national growth ensued because of:

> [A] focus on the 'supply/demand characteristics and land prices in the
> urban residential land market at large'. This 'new' concern with land
> markets was at least partially provoked by land and housing issues in the
> 1980's…The 'new' approach to urban development laid down an 'agenda
> for the 1990s' primarily sought to (more openly) promote market
> efficiency, and regarded the private sector as the main force of
> development to be 'enabled' by the government. (5)

For Adiga, the main sources of authority and power are found in private businesses such

as Shah's company. They may also be found in community actions within the

traditionally defined "private" or domestic sphere. By aligning these two forces of private

business and community actions into a single unit of authority (Shah and the residents as

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a unified force), Adiga creates a power force of both authority and identity. Baken suggests that within India "the complexity of urban life proves an obstacle to the application of economic analysis" (13), further specified upon reflecting:

> The imperfect knowledge of buyers and sellers, the 'uniqueness' of each site and building…the unwillingness of some owners to sell despite the certainty of monetary gain…the length and legal rights of property interests…these are some factors which prevent land from transferring smoothly to its most profitable use. (13)

Adiga captures all of these concerns in the experiences of his novel when he depicts the Vishram Society towers' unique location (7), Masterji's resolution to not sell (270), and the complicated legal actions of the residents (181). Surrounded by slums and old mansions, the towers are "anchored like a dreadnought of middle-class respectability, ready to fire on anyone who might impugn the *pucca* quality of its inhabitants" (5), while Masterji's story centers on his "unwillingness . . . to sell despite the certainty of monetary gain." The tension of the novel arises from both the application of and uselessness of the law and the transfer of property. By developing the fictional story of the Vishram Society residents, Adiga recreates the current story of Mumbai and Indian urbanization.

Masterji's problem with his Vishram Society neighbors stems from his self-definition. Masterji sees himself—and his neighbors for that matter—in the western view espoused by the African American authors that Adiga had earlier cited as influential: autonomous, free to choose and prioritize what they wish based on the possession of individual property. This colonial view of the individual understandably attaches to someone closely identified with that era. Masterji believes the possession of space grants individual autonomy because he deduces "the earth, in infinite space. A point on it was

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the city of Mumbai. A point on that was Vishram Society. And that point was his" (250). Instead of stopping at Mumbai, or the Vishram Society, Masterji bases his definition of self on his own space and sovereignty. He is delivered a new and sharper reality when the law decides "your society is sovereign of your flat" (256). Masterji begins to understand that all his pillars of authority which in the past encouraged individuality now work to engulf him into communal life: "Masterji saw before him not just two bullying lawyers, but the primal presence of authority. *Is this how my students saw me all those years*?" (257). Instead of accepting this and exploiting it in his favor with Shah, Masterji rejects this loss of identity and decides, using British nomenclature: "*The heart of Bombay—if there is one—it is me, it is me!*" (267). Masterji still aligns himself with a British name and a British view of the individual.

As with earlier works, Adiga succeeds in communicating his characters' struggles by embedding into his stories localized historical and cultural contexts. Unlike his prior work, Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* moves beyond his American influences to establish a view of the individual and of the community with these localized elements at the forefront; using Indian history and its current realities, he shapes an authentic view of current Indian identity. While this section revealed the influences of urban expansion and population growth on Indian notions of identity, the next chapter will examine how violence through communalism demands shifts in contemporary Indian identities as well.

CHAPTER 5

LAST MAN IN TOWER: GROWING PAINS OF INDIAN IDENTITY

While issues arising from urban development, such as greed, population growth,

and the changes to Mumbai provided Adiga with the theme and one mode of change in

Last Man in Tower, depicting violence allows Adiga to incorporate another narrative of

Indian history. With depictions of pressures involving real estate, Adiga's displays

India's changing future; with his portrayals of violence Adiga indicates the consequences

of India's past.

COMMUNALISM

Post-colonial upheaval in Mumbai has left the city with a legacy of violence. This

violence is in keeping with postcolonial theorists' projections. Ludden suggests that in

the 1990s India's "free-market insecurity, fear, ambition, poverty, class anger,

criminality, patriarchy, and communalism joined hands" (xv). Since the publication of

Last Man in Tower, the number of mass violence incidents has risen to over half-a-dozen,

including the 26/11 attacks (TNN). While Adiga mostly focuses on violence against

specific individuals, he also notes within *Last Man in Tower* that violence creates states

where "every man and woman entering…became a high-risk terrorist threat" (372).

Mumbai sits on the intersection of many competing groups, identities, and pictures of

Indian nationalism, which gives rise to tension and outbreaks of violence.

While Adiga's writing includes muted references to terrorism or moments of

contemporary violence, a review of recent occurrences of violence helps ground the

discussion of the place of such conflict within contemporary Indian fiction and

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consciousness. After the Babri Mosque was destroyed in 1992, discussions of the location

of a Hindu temple led to riots in 1992 and 1993, which resulted in almost 2000 deaths

("Q&A"). These riots were followed by thirteen bombings, resulting in over 200 deaths,

and 800 injuries ("1993: Bombay"). In 2002, additional bombings took 50 more lives

("Three Bombs"). Then, in 2008, the city was again marked by violence when "a number

of well-trained militants came ashore from the Arabian Sea on small boats and attacked

numerous high-profile targets in Mumbai, India, with automatic weapons and explosives"

(Popov vii).

As India moves toward a community governed in the name of specific collective

identities in tension with predecessor individual identities, these collective identities are

neither necessarily nor inherently violent. On the other hand, those identities do not seem

to be congruous with the initial notions of identity in post-independence India. The value

of the individual espoused within the Indian constitution, specifically within the treatment

of the individual's "Fundamental Rights" ("Fundamental Rights"), finds little resonance

in the shift towards communal identities. The discrepancies between the priority of the

individual verses priority of the group originate in colonialism, according to Sandria

Freitag:

> In British India, the colonial state created institutions and political
> processes predicted on the assumption that 'public' and 'private' were
> easily distinguished…within this dichotomy, the state identified itself as
> the protector and protagonist for 'general' or 'public' interests; it then
> relegated 'private' or 'particular' interests to the myriad of communities
> that constitutes the realm. (212)

These contradictions lead to the assumption of personal autonomy and safety in the character of Masterji, who proceeds from the belief that a state protects an individual's livelihood and physical safety but remains removed from individual autonomy. Masterji follows these British divisions and thus fails to understand his son's frustration with his sharp division of his private and personal life (176). Masterji sees his fellow Indians as unified in the political spectrum (they are all Indian citizens), but as each having separate private lives. He continues to believe that he can separate his private from his public life, however quotidian it may be, and separate this life from his neighbors, failing to understand that they all belong to the same identity and must share a common fate. In doing so, he does not recognize Indian collective identity within the walls of his building even though he becomes subject to its consequences. Freitag identifies the issue with this type of artificial division when she cautions:

> The problem with this neat division was that it assumed all 'political' issues could be accommodated within the state's institutions. At the same time, it labeled issues related to religion, kinship, and other forms of community identity as apolitical—as private, special interest, and domestic and therefore not requiring the attention of the state and its institutions. (212)

This British categorization and division of spaces and issues between the artificial and ill-fitting groupings of public and private created the tension that motivated future generations to reorganize and re-identify. This led the people of India to "utilize kinship (including fictive kinship) structures [in order] to forge ties through the expression of shared community identities among people" (213). As Adiga's novels show, such tension between individual and community, private and public, and politics and religion did not

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end with the British, whose methods of categorization and priority left India with an increasingly tangled web of competing ideologies, authorities, and ideas of nationalism. Eventually, the populace turned to communalism as a method of unifying group identities.

This is evident to Masterji, as he comes to recognize that "truth is a communal thing, a consensus of opinion" (196). As reviewed earlier, Freitag suggests that the process of communal identification involves a group that first must "rest on the evocation of an imagined community, one generally constructed in opposition not only to the imperial state, but to an indigenous Other seen to imperil their shared values" (220). Within *Last Man in Tower*, this process begins when the residents first voice opposition against the authority of the government. This pushback against the government follows Adiga's earlier works where the individual rebels against a more powerful authority. But Adiga has a new view of the individual in his second novel. Now, the community ultimately pushes back against the individual as Masterji becomes the "Other" clearly removed from the community's shared values. Within these Indian public identity contests, "the tension between individual and group identity is often resolved, at moments of crisis, in terms of group identity" (221). In *Last Man in Tower*, Masterji initially causes tension by being the spokesperson for individuals wishing to remain; however, he is quickly isolated as all others react to the crisis by folding into the identity of the Vishram Society. This sharpened division makes him "become a stranger to us" (Adiga 136), excluding Masterji from the inclusive objective pronoun, aligning him instead with the isolated and vulnerable individual.

Masterji's role is made more interesting by his simultaneous representation of the individual and of India's past in his role as educator. While members of the community seek to rise together through financial means, Masterji still clings to the power and importance that he attaches to his role as an educator. In many ways, although a figure of Indian authority, Masterji is also a pillar of Western tyranny or at least a figure whose actions pit him against his neighbors. While they represent contemporary India, Adiga casts Masterji as the protector of tradition and India's heritage, a mix of both colonial and post-independence ideology. Masterji's books provide one example of this role as protector: "Since the murder novels were on demand throughout the Society, and neighbours borrowed them frequently (and returned them infrequently), he would soon be left only with history and foreign grammar" (27). Trying to aid the common good by lending out books and in turn encourage education, Masterji is reduced to the role of protector and owner of history and foreign grammar—both things easily associated with India's colonized era:

> The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course. (Fanon 46)

By clinging to his education, his atheism, and his assumed authority over his neighbors, Masterji lives by what he perceives to be the "eternal" and "essential qualities of the West."

The community views this asserted authority as one more damning feature of Masterji's superiority complex. After he refuses to join them, they chastise him, noting

that "because he was a retired teacher, he got respect from all of us… but to go to him for tuition, or private lessons, was the 'kiss of death'…[he] never taught English to students even though he knew Shakespeare and other big writers who were part of the examinations" (196-197). The community directs its anger at Masterji's failure to distribute his education to the collective and at his choice to do whatever he wishes. His application of his background to individualist pursuits instead of to utilitarian good causes them to reject him. Adiga also comments on the use of English language and text as currency within the school systems in this text, supporting Baldwin's suggestion that "education is a synonym for indoctrination" (60). Education within *Last Man in Tower* serves as a means toward future freedoms for the individual instead of liberation for the masses.

Actions against Masterji eventually solidify the Vishram Society into a clear collective. This builds from earlier signs of the community's shift to a united organism. An earlier example appears when resident Mrs. Rego and her child Sunil accept money from Shah and then unite and collectively declare their next residence: they "said in almost one voice: "Bandra**"** (158). In addition to the verbal unification, the residents agree to their shared identity through written texts such as the posters that exhort the residents to vote as a group: "NONE OF US IS AS STRONG AS ALL OF US VOTE IN EVERY ELECTION IT IS YOUR RIGHT AND DUTY" (165). This use of posters to reinforce communal identity is present throughout the building; "The lift at the Vishram Society moved like a coffin on wheels…carrying with it a sign: IT'S YOUR SOCIETY. KEEP IT CLEAN" (192). Through the comparison to a coffin, the reader can sense the confinement and direction of the individual that Masterji feels, so that as much as

Masterji wishes to fight it, he finds himself hemmed in by his surroundings: "a man is what his neighbours say he is" (196). These neighbors say Masterji is dangerous, for he desires "nothing" (210), which is a need that is antithetic to a community which by necessity unifies its members based on shared needs and purposes. The Vishram Society rejects Masterji's autonomy for "a man must want *something*" (210). Just like the dogs that kill the lone vulnerable puppy (228), they seek to destroy Masterji. Instead of the individual engaging in violence to profit as Adiga portrayed in *The White Tiger,* the community now engages in violence to obtain benefit at the expense of the individual: the new Indian paradigm.

The Vishram Society and Masterji also correspond to communalism's role within the victimized narrative of the modern Indian middle-class. Freitag suggests the intense pressures of the increasingly numerous group numbers:

> The numbers of those who could be counted as middle-class in India has grown significantly through education as well as the expansion of entrepreneurial possibilities. Yet these numbers had met with reduced employment opportunities, while at the same time they were increasing their debt load by trying to live up to middle-class consumption standards. These economic changes led to a middle-class perception of themselves as profoundly disadvantaged. (226)

Such perceived economic disadvantage encourages the development of economically supported communalism, as the residents note of the arbitrariness of the future: "as wealth comes to some, and misery to others, stories of gold and tears reached Vishram Society like echoes from a distant battlefield" (35). Within the two towers, this perceived economic divide is expressed through images of war.

This is partially an economically based conflict. Contemporary Indian media scholar Victoria Farmer notes, "commercial interests had no reason to counter the attempt to create an Indian market—defined by the state and nationalized cultural forms" (Farmer 106). State government and private business appeal to and support such images because they create and reify a collective identity and a market from which a picture of a unified middle-class emerges, involving both inclusive markers, such as middle-class consumption standards, and exclusive ones, as the members take pride that they are not the colonial elite, Islamic, or impoverished.

The constantly changing building and community are portrayed as immutable in yet another way. Foreshadowing Masterji's conflicts with the Vishram Society members, the novel's opening pages relate the message printed on a sign in the Hindu watchman's booth, which reads: "I was never born and I will never die; I do not hurt and cannot be hurt; I am invincible, immortal, and indestructible" (7). As one of the first Vishram Society members introduced, the watchman is a type of everyman, as the narrator relates:

> If you talked to him long enough, you would discover he feared China, worried about Jihadis on the suburban trains, and favoured a national identification card to flush out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants; but most had never known him to express any opinion, unless it was related to the game of cricket. (17)

Although "Hindu identity is multiple," (Ludden 7), with this description, Adiga establishes the priority of communal affiliation in shaping identity, a fact that is reflected in European studies of India, which were founded on two foci: language and religion. As Ludden suggests, conflation between religion and Indian identity and definition continues: "histories of Indian civilization, art, society, politics, and culture routinely

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separate Hindu, Muslim, British, and national epochs." (4). Religious prejudice and colonialism contribute to favor the collective identity above or against that of the individual. Adiga seems to be conflating Indian nationalism with a Hindu worldview, much as Ludden outlines: "India and Hindu are often equated when defining Indian culture, whose core characteristics are most often taken to be Hindu…Indian Islam is thus portrayed as being foreign and derivative, alien to India" (Ludden 4-5). Signs of Adiga's possibly sympathetic portrayal appear in the novel's brief mention of "jihadis" and "illegal Bangladeshi immigrants" (17). His depiction of in-group collectivism at first centers on Islamic individuals as a part of communally-identified Hindu characters, but this initial focus on Islamic individuals shifts to a focus on Masterji, whom they think of as "an English gentleman" (245).

While the watchman is portrayed as a possible representation for India, the other residents' identities are reduced to their garbage: "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…we have no business with her rubbish" (24-25). The residents, in discussing who to accept, strive to accept anyone who, like their garbage, is able to mix and meld with the rest of the community. This advice regarding the vicissitudes of toleration is little heeded, as the strong societal pressure already makes itself clear through the actions of the residents. These can appear to be comical, as in the case of one belligerent resident: "Mrs. Puri was not one to pry—not one to ask what was happening within the privacy of a neighbor's four walls—but when condoms come tumbling onto your doorstep, well, then!" (21). While Adiga does not paint a society of

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flat duplicates, and the differences between the characters appear to drive their actions in very different ways through much of the novel, it turns out that they ultimately obey the ultimate will of the communal collective, as the "differences of wealth among the members did not go unnoticed…the real distinction was leaving the society" (21). As Adiga implies, differences only matter if and when exit from the group identity occurs, and such exit would be punished as evidenced by Masterji's death.

THE INDIAN INDIVIDUAL: CONSTITUTIONAL QUANDRIES

These observations about the origins and continuing development of communalism shaping modern Indian views of individualism track Adiga's changing views as evident in his portrayal of the fate of the individuals in *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*. This shift likely results from the postcolonial move from British categories of identity to Indian ones, "for the initial constitutional emphasis on the relationship between the individual and the state began to give way before an increasing reliance on the relationship between communities and the state" (228). This seemingly organic, healthy move would imply governing authorities relenting in ways that align with their citizens' wishes, even if not fully in accord with the nation's constitutional framework:

> [a] lack of fit between constitutional needs and these actual practices…these practices began under the British, and had at that time the goal of maintaining a balance of power. After independence, the constitution denied the need for a balance of power among communities…now however, the state has begun to move away from its connection to individuals as it elaborates a stronger relationship to

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communities. This does not fit well…with the constitutional framework

built on the relationship of the individual and nation-state. (Freitag 231)

Tensions between the constitutionally defined divisions of power (with the individual)

and with the changing demand for communally based power is manifest in Masterji's

attempt to defend his right as an individual citizen. In that struggle, he turns both to the

police (221) and legal counselors (257). Each fails him by making it abundantly clear that

they side with and support the community's needs over Masterji's rights. Perhaps then,

communalism is:

> not the problem but simply a symptom of a much larger and more
> challenging process under way: the redefinition of Indian civil social space
> and who will be allowed to participate publicly inside that discursive
> space. The ambiguity between the state's relationship to the individual
> citizen, and its increasingly institutionalized relationship to imagined
> communities, contributes to the conundrum now being faced in
> postcolonial India. (Freitag 233)

Masterji's experiences of his ambiguous value to his community echo throughout

Adiga's representation of India within the characterization of the Vishram Society, as a

clearly defined imagined community that simultaneously holds the advantage over

Masterji, the individual citizen, while also setting and following the trends in communal

interactions and in the economic development and urbanization of the area. Masterji steps

into the role of an offering, a sacrifice, corresponding to the observation that "the dark

underside of patriotic love is rooted in fear and hatred of the Other, and this is often also

expressed in sacrificial terms" (Van der Veer 250). This offering is clear to his neighbors

as Masterji is sacrificed to "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" (379). Masterji's life and death act as the sacrifice of a now discarded British

view of individual autonomy and rights as a shift in power occurs to the emerging

collectives.

Adiga makes clear that India can never become a national community working for its

own benefit without killing its western past. Yet, Masterji's death is not meaningless.

LIBERATION IN THE FALL

Indian notions of liberation and the worth of sacrifice are useful and perhaps

necessary to evaluating the ultimate value of Masterji's sacrifice. More than *The White*

Tiger, Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* highlights a number of belief systems before moving

into a focus on the emerging Hindu faith of Masterji. Mislav Jezic suggests that within

the Indian literary tradition, the concept of liberation "can have different meaning

depending on what one is being liberated from" (91). Masterji seeks liberation, but it is

unclear initially what is binding him. Jezic notes the most common forms of liberation

include liberation from bonds of distress (like sin or evil), liberation from death,

liberation from pain or evil, liberation from the wandering through successive existences,

liberation of the soul (leading to immortality, the attainment of heaven or the path leading

to the Gods). (91-92). Within the Indian literary tradition and the Hindu belief system,

Jezic poses the question of whether it is better to be liberated while still alive or to be

liberated though death (90). The residents who seek liberation from their financial needs

would be too focused on the here-and-now, as opposed to Masterji, who seeks nothing

and who seems to find bliss through nothingness in his death, when "his soul was

released" (Adiga 356). Such liberation equated with nothingness and obliteration is consistent with Jezic's summary of Hindu doctrine: "[w]ith the crystallization of the concepts of tsamsara and karman, liberation becomes not only from sin/evil, from death, or from pain, but also from any future rebirth…liberation is interpreted as a state of inner peace, withdrawal of the senses from the outer world, remaining in deep concentration or enlightenment" (92).

With this idea of liberation after death in mind, we return to Masterji's character development within the novel. Masterji begins as a reluctant Hindu, only religious for his wife's memory, as he changes from wanting to stay in his apartment for pragmatic reasons, to refusing to move in order to achieve nothingness and be nothing, Masterji realizes his focus has been on the temporal, revolving around his assumed life goals: "Marry. Teach. Have children. And then his obligations were done and he would become drops of water again, free of life and its rainbows of restrictions" (335). While the rest of the community reflects the contemporary Indian value of the group, of identity and justice through communal actions, and of the violence and corruption currently synonymous with India, Masterji's insistence on individuality allows him to determine his self-worth; he finds fulfillment in seeking Nirvana by crossing from life to death. At the novel's close, Masterji is ironically valued and respected for his unwilling sacrifice while at the same time the community is happy and fulfilled (378-379). Adiga concludes the novel with trees that whisper in the wind: "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free" (382). While the individual can no longer exercise "selfish rights" to satisfy its individual needs or desires, its value lies in its continued ability to find meaning in the way it chooses. Masterji, while not part of the future of India, could be free.

CHAPTER 6

REBUILDING THE TOWER: ADIGA AS HERALD OF THE INDIA OF TOMORROW

Adiga's picture of contemporary India in *Last Man in Tower* centers on a real

estate conflict in Mumbai as a symbol of the growth and urbanization of India. Within the

novel, communal pressure and Hindu literary tropes depict the value of the individual that

is quite different from what appears in Adiga's first novel. In *The White Tiger*, Halwai's

individuality is synonymous with western notions of selfish interests and the value of the

individual citizen (as articulated through Ellison, Wright, and to a lesser extent Baldwin).

The corruption and atrocities that keep, hinder, twist, or restrain the Indian subaltern

reflect a combination of prejudices that are left over from both colonialism and from the

persistence of caste-based differences. Adiga's postcolonial framework shifts in *Last

Man in Tower* as Masterji and the Vishram Society confront issues currently facing

contemporary India and its notions of the individual.

Throughout this most recent novel, Adiga challenges the assumption that

individualism holds any promise of benefit either to the individual and the community.

While Masterji seems to embody the Indian constitution's promise of individual

freedoms, his peers, on the other hand, function and thrive through collective identities

instead of individual liberties. In Masterji, Adiga creates a character who on the surface

resists a greedy, bullying, capitalist thug; however, there seems to be little benefit from

Masterji's defeat. Masterji's son will not tolerate his father's attempts at martyrdom; he

chastises him: "Don't you see what's behind this nothing? *You*. You think you are a great

man because you're fighting this Shah. Another Galileo or Gandhi. You're not thinking

of your own grandson." (270). Masterji is confronted with the reality of his isolated

situation: "You. Are. All. Alone" (271). As Masterji continues to reject this sentiment, he searches for a collective support system that will recognize the merits of his individuality and goals. He believes that he finds this affirmation in strangers whose "eyes met like foreign languages, and the labourer, without moving his lips, spoke at last. *Have you never noticed before how many are all alone?* (274). Masterji takes this interaction as a validation of his pride and values, as he realizes "for the first time since his wife had died—that he was not alone in the world" (274).

Yet, Masterji's desperate desire to validate his individuality is met by rejection, betrayal, and violence at the hands of his closest friends. Upon his final refusal to sell his flat and grant universal wealth to his community members, his neighbors attack him, and throw him from his own balcony. Adiga's attention to historical context and irony then ensure that it is "no coincidence that some of the novel's most violent actions take place against a background of patriotic songs and Mahatma Gandhi's birthday" (Valdes). Adiga aligns Masterji with Gandhi, who espoused a life of peace yet ironically died from violence. During his plunge to death, Masterji realizes "that the thing that was blocking his passage was cleared, and he was falling; his body had begun its short earthly flight— which it completed almost instantaneously—before Yogesh Murthy's soul was released for its much longer flight over the oceans of the other world" (356). The community frames the murder as a suicide, and they collectively profit from finally signing away Masterji's suite. They have acted as a single identity, as a nation. Anderson comments on the shortsightedness of this kind of action: "this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7). Krishna Singh suggests something of the viciousness

that Adiga's work encompasses when noting that "murder, manipulation, malpractices, opportunism, bribery, absconding police and judicial proceedings all are justified for success and teaching based on the facts of life" (99-100). Adiga's characters profitably utilize many of these actions, showing that they are not used solely to modernize, but rather to create a unified identity, collective, and nation.

Adiga's treatment of the individual and the collective reveals a writer who has made great strides in synthesizing many disparate issues into a single discourse. His treatment of Masterji and the Vishram Society demonstrates the connections between rapid population growth, Mumbai real estate, and British divisions of the public and private sphere. In understanding these connections and the resulting violence, Adiga points to the tensions, which are a vestige of imperially influenced nationalism that communalism now perpetuates and exacerbates. Despite the priority accorded to individuals in British notions of identity and governance, group identities and imagined communities tend to have more power than the individual in contemporary India. In moving from an American understanding of the individual and a British understanding of justice to Indian notions of both identity and justice, Adiga has made a value statement about a notion of identity he prefers and which he prescribes for India's welfare. Understanding this dynamic is key to the future of India's markets, political battles, and national identity. While this future apparently holds great potential in his eyes, Adiga will continue to probe those elements that have emerged to challenge India's effort to move beyond colonialism; for him, India remains a healing wound with group identities, exclusion, and an ever-changing set of possible national identities.

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