



ROLE OF MEMORY IN *LAST MAN IN TOWER* BY ARAVIND ADIGA

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Abstract: In *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga, memory and place attachment are central themes that shape the narrative, influencing characters' identities, relationships, and their reactions to change. The novel uses Vishram Society, an old but cherished housing cooperative in Mumbai, as a symbol of this deep connection between memory and place. Vishram Society is not just a building; it is a space imbued with decades of memories for its residents. For Masterji, the protagonist, the building represents stability, community, and the life he shared with his late wife and daughter. His attachment to the place is rooted in the emotional and historical significance it holds, making it impossible for him to part with it, despite the lucrative offer from Dharmen Shah. The article tries to explore the connection of memory and place attachment in the selected work.

KEYWORDS: Memory, Place Attachment, Relationship, Conflict.

I. INTRODUCTION

Memory and place attachment are recurring themes in literature, often serving as powerful forces that shape characters' identities, relationships, and decisions. These concepts explore how physical spaces and the memories tied to them influence individuals and communities, reflecting broader questions of belonging, nostalgia, and the passage of time.

Set in the vibrant city of Mumbai, *Last Man in Tower* centers on Vishram Society, an aging yet cherished housing cooperative. The narrative unfolds when Dharmen Shah, a wealthy and driven real estate developer, proposes a generous offer to the residents to vacate their homes, intending to replace the building with a luxury skyscraper. While most residents, lured by the promise of financial gain and improved lifestyles, agree to the deal, one man—Masterji, a retired schoolteacher and widower—refuses to comply.

Masterji's resistance triggers growing tensions within the community, once united by strong bonds of friendship. As the pressure to sell intensifies, the solidarity of Vishram Society unravels, exposing the darker aspects of human behavior. Friends turn against Masterji, resorting to manipulation, coercion, and even violence in their pursuit of personal gain.

The novel delves into themes such as urban development, ethical compromise, greed, and the human cost of progress. It vividly depicts the fractures in communities and moral dilemmas that arise in a rapidly modernizing society, offering both a critique of contemporary India and a reflection on the challenges of navigating change.

In *Last Man in Tower*, memory plays a crucial role in influencing the characters' sense of self, their interactions with others, and their choices. Aravind Adiga utilizes memory to examine themes such as the past, nostalgia, regret, and the impact of personal and collective histories on individuals. Below are several key ways in which memory is depicted and functions throughout the novel:

1. Personal Identity and Nostalgia

Memory plays a central role in shaping the character of Masterji, the protagonist of *Last Man in Tower*. As a retired schoolteacher, Masterji is strongly connected to the past, cherishing memories of a time when his life was stable, predictable, and meaningful. His recollections of his teaching career, the values he upheld, and the relationships he shared with his family are essential to his identity. For Masterji, selling his apartment would mean losing not only his physical home but also a vital part of his personal history that defines who he is.

Masterji's memories act as a contrast to the evolving world around him. While other residents of the tower view the developer's offer as a chance to secure financial gain and embrace a more modern lifestyle, Masterji perceives it as a betrayal of the past. His strong attachment to the building, which has been his home for many years, symbolizes his deeper connection to memory, tradition, and the life he has built over time.

2. Collective Memory and Community

The collective memories of the residents also play a significant role in shaping their shared identity. The apartment building itself stands as a tangible representation of the memories of its residents, with each apartment, hallway, and corner holding the weight of their shared histories, past interactions, and the connections that once unified the community. Initially, the tower reflects a microcosm of old Mumbai, characterized by a diverse, intergenerational group of people. However, as the pressure from the developer increases, these shared memories begin to unravel, as the residents' previous bonds deteriorate under the influence of greed and the pursuit of financial gain.

For the residents, the tower had been a place where they established their lives, raised families, and forged meaningful relationships. Yet, as they are confronted with the decision to sell or remain, the shared memories of the past transform into a point of contention for their future. Those who choose to sell are, in effect, erasing their pasts in favor of an uncertain, yet financially rewarding, future. Masterji, the "last man in tower," is the sole character who resists, unwilling to sever his ties to the memories and the past that the building represents.

3. Memory as a Source of Conflict

Memory also becomes a point of conflict among the characters, particularly between the younger and older generations. The younger residents often see the building as an outdated structure, while the older residents regard it as a meaningful space filled with cherished memories. This clash reflects the generational divide and highlights the differing ways in which individuals relate to their pasts. While the younger residents view selling the apartments as a path to securing their futures, the older generation is more focused on preserving the legacy of their memories.

Additionally, the developer, Dharmen, exploits the residents' memories to manipulate their decisions. He attempts to persuade them to sell by appealing to their past hardships, offering a vision of a better future that supposedly erases their struggles. This effort to reshape their memories in exchange for financial gain underscores the idea that memory can be manipulated or commodified for personal advantage.

4. Regret and the Burden of the Past

Regret is another theme closely tied to memory in the novel. Several characters are confronted with how their past memories influence their present actions and decisions. For instance, some residents feel burdened by past choices, such as neglecting family relationships or compromising their principles for financial gain. In Masterji's case, his memories are not merely nostalgic; they are filled with regret over missed opportunities and the decisions that led him to a life of solitude.

Masterji's recollection of a happier past increasingly contrasts with his current reality. His choice to cling to his memories and his home ultimately isolates him, as he remains in the tower while the others decide to sell. This situation illustrates the paradoxical nature of memory—it can both provide stability and confine individuals, preventing them from moving forward and embracing change, even as it ties them to the past.

5. Memory and the Changing Cityscape

The novel also explores the relationship between memory and the transformation of the physical environment. Set in a rapidly changing Mumbai, the apartment tower is located in an area where old neighborhoods are being demolished to make way for new developments. This shifting landscape mirrors the fragility of memory, as familiar landmarks are replaced by modern, impersonal buildings. This transformation symbolizes how personal memories, too, can be erased by the passage of time and societal progress.

Masterji's decision to refuse selling his apartment can be interpreted as an act of resistance against this erasure—not only of the physical space but also of the collective memories it represents. His attachment to the building serves as a rejection of the forces of modernization that threaten to erase the past.

6. The Role of Memory in Moral Decision-Making

Memory also plays a significant role in shaping the moral choices faced by the characters. For Masterji, his memories of his late wife and the life they shared provide an emotional foundation for his decision to resist selling the apartment. These memories are closely linked to his values of honesty, loyalty, and sacrifice, and they serve as a moral compass, guiding him through the ethical challenges posed by the developer's offer. The novel suggests that, for some characters, memory can act as a source of strength and determination, helping them navigate complex moral dilemmas.

In contrast, other characters engage in selective memory, deliberately forgetting past experiences and relationships in favor of pursuing personal interests. This contrast underscores how memory not only shapes individual identity but also influences ethical behavior.

Conclusion

In *Last Man in Tower*, memory emerges as a potent force influencing characters' behaviors, relationships, and identities. It functions as both a stabilizing element and a source of tension, encapsulating the conflict between past and present, tradition and modernization, as well as communal values and personal ambitions. The novel ultimately demonstrates that memory—both individual and collective—shapes a sense of identity while simultaneously complicating the process of adapting to a rapidly evolving world.

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