

# **Last Man in Tower Study Guide**

**Last Man in Tower by Aravind Adiga**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of the book was used to create this guide: Adiga, Araviind. *Last Man in Tower*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

*Last Man in Tower* is a novel that sets two men against each other over the ownership of a small flat in Mumbai, India. The plot is filled with devious schemes and heart-felt pleading as neighbor turns against neighbor in pursuit of the things that are most important to them. Spiraling to a tragic end, the novel provides an in-depth look at greed and how it can change the human heart, occasionally for the better.

The story begins as the antagonist Dharmen Shah, a Mumbai developer, prepares to make an offer to the residents of the middle-class Vishram Society. Mr. Shah wants to purchase the two-building property, tear it down and build a luxury high rise building called *The Shanghai*. Shah is determined and ruthless and does just about anything to accomplish his goals, including neglect his own health. However, he meets his match in Yogesh Murthy, known as Masterji, a retired teacher, who is not interested in large sums of money, but rather in holding on to the past and his memories of his deceased wife and daughter. Shah's assistant investigates the proposed building site and becomes familiar with its residents. With information in hand, Mr. Shah makes known his offer of approximately \$330,000 per household to the residents of Towers A and B and gives a strict deadline by which to reply. Given that the average income of most people in India is roughly \$8,000 per year, the majority of the residents are eager to accept the buyout offer. But there are several holdouts who have various reasons for saying, "no thank you." The Pintos want to stay because Mrs. Pinto is practically blind, but she knows her way around the building and is worried about how she would cope having to move elsewhere. Mrs. Rego, has been cheated out of money before and has seen a similar situation with her uncle; she is not ready to trust a builder such as Shah. Masterji is not only supporting his friends the Pintos, but wants to stay in his home where his memories of his wife and daughter are most vivid. And Mr. Kudwa is simply waiting a bit to make his decision. Since he heard someone call Masterji a "gentleman" for supporting his friends, he decided to not appear overly anxious to go after the money. As the buildings are cooperative societies, unless everyone agrees to the offer, the building cannot be sold. Thus the conflict.

Initially, gentle persuasion and pleading is used to get those in opposition to change their minds. Several residents, namely the building Secretary, Mr. Kothari and a resident, Mr. Ajwani, make their services available to Shah and his left-hand man to help get the answers changed to yes. Shanmugham, Shah's man, has taken care of difficult people before and uses force to get things done. Ajwani is particularly adept at manipulating people to get them to see the positive side of accepting the offer. He appeals to Mr. Kudwa to take the step and go for the money. He shows him a neighbor's new car and allows him to touch it, realizing that the desire for material things will be difficult to resist. Mr. Kudwa quickly changes his mind. Ajwani also sets another member of the society to work on Mrs. Rego, appealing to her woman-to-woman. Although she



does not want to trust Shah, her longing for a better life for herself and her children wins out over her reservations and she, too, agrees to sell.

Masterji and the Pintos now become the last holdouts. Masterji rises to the occasion and employs the aid of several societal institutions that he believes will surely save them. The police, a lawyer, the newspapers, family and even former students are all tapped to plead his case. One by one each fails him and he sees that Shah's power and money reach everywhere, corrupting the very things he hoped would stand up for him. As the deadline nears, neighbors become more distant and even abusive in their interactions with Masterji. Crank phone calls from Ajwani and Shanmugham, an attack on Mr. Pinto which causes him to break his foot, and feces smeared on Masterji's door are some of the attempts to force "yes" answers. The Pintos give in to the pressure, causing a rift between them and their long time friend. On his own in the battle, Masterji becomes the last man in the tower, fighting not only against Mr. Shah, but against his neighbors as well.

After the Society members vote to officially expel Masterji from the building they believe the battle is over. But when no communication comes from Mr. Shah and the deadline comes and goes they get even more concerned. They take matters into their own hands, no longer relying on the tactics of Shanmugham. In a horrible act of betrayal, greed and loss of humanity, several members knock Masterji unconscious with a hammer and throw him off the rooftop. His death is ruled a suicide and the Society members finally get their settlement with Shah.

Two months later, most of the members are living elsewhere in upscale buildings, happy with the new lives and devoid of any remorse. But Mrs. Rego and Ajwani, who in the last moments realizes the error of his ways and finds a conscience, mourn the loss of the old teacher. They remember him as a man who stood up for his rights and held firm to his beliefs. And even though they too are living with the benefit of a better financial future, their hearts have not been corrupted by greed and they each work in their own ways to pursue honest lives and help those less fortunate.



# Introduction - Book 1

## Summary

The novel *Last Man in Tower* begins with a "Note on Money." It explains the value of Indian currency in relation to the American dollar and translates Mr. Shah's offer to the tenants of Vishram Society as about \$330,000 per family. It also quotes the per capita annual income in India in 2008-2009 as about \$8,000.

The next introductory section provides a list of the tenants of the Vishram Society Tower A, including their names, ages, occupations, children if applicable and the names of apartment owners if they live elsewhere. A general description of the Vishram Society follows. Although the surrounding area is part of the slum district near the Mumbai airport, the building itself, built in 1959, is considered to be "pucca," solid and very respectably middle-class. A large black cross monument stands on the grounds, reminding everyone that the building was originally only for Catholic residents. The two-building compound has a wall surrounding it and a guard booth with a sign-in logbook by the entrance. In need of a face-lift and an overhaul of the pipes, the residents have access to water in the early morning hours and then again for a few hours at night.

Book 1 proceeds to describe how real estate developer Darhman Shah made an offer to buy out the owners of the Vishram Society Towers A and B in order to further his plans for developing the area surrounding Mumbai airport and expand his reach in the local real estate market. One afternoon, a tall man in a white shirt and black trousers approached the guard, Ram Khare and asked to be directed to the office of the building Secretary, Mr. Ashvin Kothari. Mr. Kothari manages the collective issues concerning the maintenance of the building and any disputes that arise between the residents. He is rather secretive about his personal life and no one in the building knows much about him. He works at some type of business for a few hours each morning and apparently makes enough money to afford nice things, especially his high-end motor scooter. The visitor told him that he wished to rent an apartment in the building and was inquiring if a place was available. Upon viewing apartment 3B, where he was told the rental situation was considered "unsatisfactory," the stranger began to ask questions about the building. He inquired if there were any legal proceedings, "peculiar situations," assaults or suicides associated with it or any of the occupants. He claimed he was merely being careful, as the times were dangerous. After he left, Mr. Kothari spoke with Mary the cleaning lady, who said that the man had been there the previous day asking questions as well. He checked the log-in book by the guard booth to see who the stranger had visited. Although his name was not registered and Ram Khare insisted that meant no one had visited, Mrs. Puri, a resident member, arrived on the scene and stated that the guard's watchfulness was dubious. She herself had seen the visitor who was accompanied by another large man with many gold rings on his fingers. She answered his many questions and felt that he meant no harm; there was no need for Mr. Kothari to be concerned. She was concerned however about the bad influence the occupant of 3B might have on her son, Ramu. Ramu was 18 years old, but had Down's Syndrome and



was in need of continual care. Mrs. Puri questioned the Secretary concerning the single woman who apparently had overnight male visitors as evidenced by the condoms that spilled out of her trash bin when the early morning cat turned it over on the doorstep.

The author also introduces other occupants of the building as they gathered for the evening "parliament," the gab fest that occurred each evening while the residents waited for water to return to the pipes. Still wondering about the strange man's visit, Mr. Kothari and Mrs. Puri went inside and up to the third floor. They paused outside 3A, while Yogesh Murthy, known by everyone as Masterji, finished teaching his science lessons with the boys from the building. After the boys left, Mrs. Puri asked Masterji what he knew about his neighbor and if a boy had been visiting her at night. Masterji felt that she seemed to be a decent sort of person and commented that she should not be so quickly judged. He reminded them that at one time Hindus and Muslims were not allowed to live in the building, but that once admitted they all proved to be good people. Mrs. Puri did not like the reprimand, but tolerated it from the husband of her good friend. She looked around his apartment and noticed its disrepair, evident since his wife's recent passing. Mr. Kothari then told Masterji about the inquiring stranger and asked if they should notify the police. Leaning over his sink, Masterji said that they had nothing worth stealing, as only a thin flow of water came out of the faucet.

Later that evening, Mrs. Puri returned to Masterji's apartment for a friendly visit. She brought mangoes as a gift, inquired how he was fairing and if he was going to see his grandson, Ronak. He commented that he hoped she was not the one who had brought in the sick dog who lay in the stairwell. They discussed the anniversary of his wife's death and Mrs. Puri borrowed a murder mystery from his bookshelf.

The next day Mrs. Puri got her son ready for school and walked him to the bus. As he boarded, she handed him a sign that said, "No Noise," and made the other classmates promise to be quiet. She walked back toward Vishram Society and noticed the sign by the construction hole outside the gate. Ibrahim Kudwa (4C) had changed it from "Work in Progress - Inconvenience is Regretted," to "Inconvenience in Progress - Work is Regretted." Ram Khare's notification that the workers had hit a pipe and therefore there would be no water that night reminded Mrs. Puri that she wanted to find a plumber to unclog Masterji's pipes for him. She proceeded to the slums to locate a plumber, but discovered that everyone had gone to see the Muslim man who had just been given 81 lakh (about \$178,000) for his one-room hut and land. Mr. J. J. Chacko from the Ultimex Group had purchased it in his grab for land opposite of another building site owned by the Confidence Group. The companies were developing new sites as part of the city's growth and expansion, making huge buyouts and making many slum dwellers wealthy overnight. Later that night, the residents discussed the good fortune of the man. Mrs. Rego (1B), nick named "The Battleship" by the other residents, returned home and passed through the group. Mrs. Puri and Mrs. Rego argued about politics, the plight of the poor, and the city's influx of new residents, but their battle ended suddenly as water expectantly returned to the pipes.

The author then relates the specifics of a dream that Masterji had that night. Having fallen asleep reading "The Soul's Passageway after Death," he dreamed of the strange



visitor, whose face was a black playing card. He grew wings, posed riddles to the group and then flew away laughing. Masterji realized that some of the images came from the book he had been reading. He heard sounds coming from the kitchen and thought about his wife. Later at the zoo with his grandson, Masterji was unable to recall the name of a specific animal. His grandson became frightened that his grandfather did not know something and Masterji realized that he needed to tell Ronak about his life history before it was too late. He took Ronak home and talked with Sonal, his daughter-in-law. He suddenly spilled out a story about something that had happened to his wife when her father died many years ago. When she went home to bury him, her brothers locked her in a room and forced her to sign over to them her rights to her portion of the inheritance. Masterji and his wife decided to not pursue them legally as it would cost too much money. On his way home, Masterji became angry that Sonal returned a book he had given Ronak as a gift. He heard his wife's voice in his head telling him to not be so angry at her. On the way to the train he became weak and dizzy and had to steady himself against a lamppost to keep from falling. He traveled home on the extremely crowded evening train encountering the "card mafia," a group of friends that sat in a particular corner and played cards on the hour ride home. In the market, an acquaintance told him that someone had been asking around about the members of Vishram Society, causing Masterji to realize that something definitely was going on. Returning to his apartment, the young man leaving apartment 3B accidentally bumped into Masterji. Masterji pushed back hard knocking the young man into the wall.

The scene shifts to the following day when Dharman Shah was visiting his doctor for a report on his health. Doctor Nayak was frustrated that his patient was stubborn and would not listen to him. He told Shah that he needed to leave the city for several months each year and get fresher, healthier air as the construction dust he was continually breathing was causing damage to his lungs. Shah insisted that he could not take any breaks because his competitor, J.J. Chacko of the Ultimex Group, was always busy too. Following breakfast with the doctor and his wife he left with his assistant, Shanmugham, the tall man who was always dressed in a white shirt and black slacks. They drove to his apartment discussing the occupants of Vishram Society along the way. In his eighth floor apartment, they encountered two policemen who had brought home Shah's son, Satish. He and some friends had been caught spray painting cars. The policeman, having recognized the boy as Shah's son, brought him home and kept the incident from reaching the newspapers. In gratitude, Shah made a generous contribution to the police station, to "buy cold drinks" during the hot days. He then consumed a plate of toast before heading out to his construction sites.

When he arrived at the construction sites of his two recent buildings, the Confidence Excelsior and the Confidence Fountainhead, Shah viewed the progress with pleasure. He observed a group of workers standing in front of the Fountainhead and not working. The contractor in charge said that the heat was too extreme and they wanted to go home and tend to their fields. Shah explained to them that the concrete needed to be poured right then, before the monsoon rains came in the next few weeks. He told them how he came to the city very poor but worked hard to become the successful, rich man he was. He offered to increase their pay if they stayed and worked, but warned that if they left, they would not be hired later if they ever returned seeking work. He also



chastised the contractor for not telling him earlier about the unrest among the workers. Shah walked over to the other building and dismissed Shanmugham to wait until it was time to make the official buyout offer to the Vishram Society. He was waiting for an astrologer to tell him the optimal time to make a move. Hours later Shanmugham received word from Shah to move ahead. He quickly went to Vishram and made the formal offer to Secretary Kothari.

Meanwhile, Mr. Pinto (2A) and Masterji were having their weekly dinner of biryani, a meat and rice dish. Mr. Pinto recorded the bill amount in their "No Argument Book" where they kept a running tally of who paid for what meal between them. News of Masterji's rough behavior toward the young male visitor to apartment 3B had spread through the building and Mr. Pinto wanted to tell his friend that people were concerned and talking about him. During dinner, Masterji spied a rat crawling on the rafters of the restaurant and refused to eat his meal. On the walk home, Mr. Pinto suggested to Masterji that he get a checkup at the hospital, because he thought his friend might have diabetes. Citing his short temper with his neighbor's visitor and his frequent nighttime trips to the bathroom, which he could hear from his apartment underneath, Mr. Pinto was concerned. Masterji was offended at the intrusion to his personal affairs. When they returned home, Ram Khare told them there was gold for all of them, because he had heard about the buyout offer. However, the two friends thought he was merely drunk and speaking nonsense so they went straight to their apartments.

Elsewhere that evening, Ramesh Ajwani (2C) was working in his office at the Renaissance Real-Estate Agency. A young woman came to inquire about finding an apartment. Mr. Ajwani proceeded to tell her about his practices and gods: two of them Indian gods, one a listing of important facts which represented the god of "Information," and his fourth god being fitness, as he showed her photographs of his sons wearing taekwon-do outfits. As the two spoke, the Secretary burst into the office and told him about the buyout offer.

In another part of the city, Mrs. Puri prayed at a small Hindu temple for the block in her son's mind to be moved. She frequently visited various places of worship, Christian, Hindu and Muslim, trying to find healing for Ramu. When she returned to Vishram, the Secretary, Mr. Ajwani and the stranger in the white shirt and black pants were standing outside by the black cross. She found her husband and son sitting in the dark in their apartment, dazed by the news of the buyout. If it was true, it was the first miracle to occur in her life, she thought.

Later in the evening, the Pintos lay awake listening to Masterji as he paced back and forth across the floor. Mrs. Pinto said that he did not have diabetes, but that loneliness was what was inflicting their neighbor. Upstairs, Masterji unlocked his wall cupboards and perused the contents, a mirror covered with hundreds of his wife's red bindi dots and her wedding sari. He heard the calendar tapping on the wall again, and thought his wife was speaking to him from the beyond. He felt guilty, but admitted that the girl next door aroused passion inside him. He was jerked from his thoughts by Mr. Pinto knocking on his door, collecting him to go downstairs to see about the commotion in the compound. All the residents gathered around the noticeboard to view the official offer





from the Confidence Group. All the residents of Towers A and B were offered a generous sum to be paid in three installments to move out of their homes. Mr. Shah announced that he would come to the compound to address the residents in person and here introduced himself in part. The strict deadline of October third was also stipulated.

## Analysis

The beginning of *Last Man in Tower* lays necessary groundwork for understanding the choices each character will make as the story progresses. Descriptions of the Vishram Society and its place in Mumbai as well as details about many of the characters' lives are important in understanding their choices and motives as well as their actions. Because there are so many characters in the novel, it is very helpful to have a listing of each resident in Vishram Tower A and their pertinent identifying information. It is possible that this is a list that Shanmugham constructed so he and his employer know exactly with whom they are dealing. Also important is the description of the building itself. Although comfortable enough and respectable, the building is old and weather-worn. Its residents think of it as their comfortable home and have learned to adapt to its many inconveniences: intermittent water, a broken lift and crumbling plaster. Such things are readily accepted when there is no other alternative. But what would they do if they had more money in their pockets? One evening as the group sits discussing the good fortune of a man in the slums who has been paid a huge sum of money to vacate his shack and property, Mrs. Puri wishes that someone would give them such an offer. And as she watches Mr. Kudwa ride by one afternoon on his motor scooter she is envious of his happy life. But she knows that he in turn is envious of Mr. Ajwani's fancier motorbike, who in turn probably envies someone else. "...this chain of envy linked them, showing each what was lacking in life, but offering also the consolation that happiness was present right next door," (68). Knowing that the residents of Vishram Society each long for just a little something more material in life makes their actions understandable and authentic as the plot continues.

The problem comes then in realizing that Masterji does not want anything. Everything he wants has gone from his life and he is in mourning over the loss of his wife. His home is filled with memories and he has no desire to leave it. The issue of Masterji's health is also brought up as a reason for his unreasonable behavior. While his potential diabetes is never a major issue in the novel, it does serve as a weakness that Masterji must contend with. What does concern the older man is his lack of deeper connection with his grandson. The author allows Masterji to show considerable irritation with his son and daughter-in-law, even though veiled in politeness. His son keeps him at a distance and does not want his father to treat the boy to sweets and returns a special book he had given as a gift. These things wound Masterji and indicate that there is a rift between the father and son that perhaps goes deeper than the surface irritations.

Additionally the author describes the interrelationships of the tenants so the reader can observe how those relationships dramatically change as the novel progresses. The Vishram Society is a community of homeowners within a single building and the parliament, as it is called, is their informal nightly meeting. They have regular building



meetings about maintenance issues of anything that comes up that is of concern to everyone, but the parliament meets casually every evening as they sit outside waiting for water to return to the pipes so that they can have their evening meal and wash up for the day. There are established codes and routines in the building, not written on paper or established by a formal vote, but adhered to by general consensus and established over time. For example, there is a prime seat among all the white, plastic chairs outside and whoever gets there first each night gets the best view into Mrs. Saldanha's apartment to view the television through the almond shaped slit in her curtain. Once again, Adiga establishes the norm, a certain degree of law and order that exists at the outset, knowing that it will change as the months progress toward the acceptance deadline.

The author must also introduce readers to the complexity of Dharman Shah. He has come from nothing and works hard to be on top. He is in fierce competition with his competitor and is determined to be known for constructing the greatest buildings in the city. However, the author describes him as ruthless in his practices, knowing how to manipulate people to achieve his goals. For example, he needs work to continue on his current projects even though some workers want to leave because of the extreme heat. He makes a generous offer and is willing to pay the workers extra but only to ensure that his goals are met. He also warns them that if they do not accept and leave anyway, they will never work for him again. Shah is further portrayed as a man who gets what he wants by lining people's pockets with money to do him favors along the way. He pays the policemen who bring his wayward son home and keep his name out of the paper and he pays his way to the front of the line at the temple. He is used to seeing his money make a path forward for him, so it is hard to understand why someone might say "no" to him.

There are several symbols throughout the novel, but a very subtle one makes its way into the story in these early chapters. In three different instances Adiga references cards or card games. As Masterji dreams one night he envisions Shanmugham with a face like a black playing card and Shah's doctor is also described as looking "like the Jack of Spades," (48). These images likely reference the game that Shah is playing with the residents of Vishram. Each holds certain cards and one by one they play their hands to the end result. And while Dr. Nayak does not figure prominently into the story, Shah is playing a game with his health, taking a gamble that he will be fine even though he does not follow his doctor's advice.

Adiga also employs the use of beautiful and vivid imagery to describe his characters and settings. Frequent similes and metaphors draw readers intimately into each scene. When describing the courtyard by Ram Khare's booth he writes, "Painted umber like the wall, and speckled with dirt, the stem of the tree bulges from the masonry like a camouflaged leopard," (8). Instead of plane simply taking off, Adiga writes about "the roar of an engine: white and tubular and glistening, like a sea snake leaping up, a plane shot over a small Tamil temple," (33). In describing some of the characters, Adiga uses metaphors to represent their nature. Mrs. Rego is nicknamed "The Battleship" because she is broad and frequently wears grey skirts, but also because she is force to be reckoned with. As a social worker, she always has an opinion on how things should be



and is trying to institute change in order to help people. The author writes of her son, Sunil, as he attempts to raise funds to stop TB, "The son was already proving to be a little gunboat," (26). Finally, the author also naturally incorporates much of the culture of India into story. Ethnic dishes and words are printed in italics so that they stand out and they are typically explained within the context so that readers can understand their meaning.

## Discussion Question 1

The residents of Vishram Society Tower A are listed at the book's opening. Why does the author start the novel this way as well as provide an explanation of monetary equivalents?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does the author refer to the early evening gathering outside the apartment building as the "parliament"?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is the resident of 3B not given a name initially? Why is she considered "questionable"?

## Vocabulary

unimpeachably, gentrification, malarial, dacoits, anopheles, aureoles, namaste, maelstrom, stentorian, riposte, clairvoyance, insolent, phantasmagoria, escutcheons, nonchalance, peon, actuarial, nouveauriche, meritorious



## Book 2 - Book 3

### Summary

As Book 2 begins in the middle of May, Shanmugham was waiting on Versova Beach for instructions from Mr. Shah. He took in the sights on the beach located in the posh suburban area of Mumbai, the wealthy residents on one end and the slum dwellers on the other. In the tall apartment building behind him, Shah waited with his mistress until his astrologer once again informed him of the proper time to visit Vishram in person. A photo shoot was taking place on the beach. One of the sponsors of the reflective photo foils had their name printed on the back. It was a bank advertising an interest rate. Shanmugham became angry because he had recently been guaranteed a special personalized rate by a banker at the same bank, but now this rate offered to the general public was better.

Meanwhile in his apartment, Dharman Shah spent the early morning with Rosie, his latest mistress. He told her about his past and how he came to live in the city. When he was four-years-old his mother committed suicide. His father remarried and had four other sons, all of whom he loved more than his first. Realizing that he would never be treated with kindness by his father, Shah left the village where he lived and walked endlessly, spending what little money he had, and made his way to Bombay, the former name of Mumbai. He decided never to return to the village. Rosie brought Shah several helpings of toast with lots of fresh butter as he continued to talk. He worked at a grocery store then began to smuggle goods from Pakistan and Dubai. Next he moved into real estate and finally into redevelopment. He learned to negotiate, bribe and persuade tenants, government officials and thugs to achieve his goals and make money. Rosie fed him more toast. She tried to discuss Satish and the trouble he was in, but Shah only wanted to talk about his new building, the Shanghai. He then went into Rosie's room for sex, a ritual he performed before every new project with whomever was his mistress at the time. He had met Rosie at a restaurant six months earlier. She lived in his plush second home at his expense and was free to pursue her acting career as long as she was available only to him for as long as he deemed it.

Meanwhile Shanmugham wandered around and waited for his employer and reflected on how his life had changed six years ago when he was hired by Mr. Shah. He interviewed for a position as a labor contractor, the man who hires and manages workers on a job site. When Mr. Shah saw how he handled himself, he "fired" him from that position and took him on as his left-hand man. He told him to tear up his business cards in case they ever got involved with the police. In a small black notebook, Shanmugham drew up a calendar that included the October 3 deadline for the residents to be out of Vishram. In the book he also recorded many of Mr. Shah's sayings that he felt were wise. To this he added, "Do not trust connections made with bank." As he headed back to the beach, he saw a stray dog with an open wound. Still thinking of the banker who cheated him, he threw a rock at the dog's wound. His phone rang as Shah summoned him.



The scene shifts to Vishram Tower A where Mrs. Pinto made her way down the stairs by feeling the shapes in the stairwell wall. She was thankful that Masterji had agreed with her and Mr. Pinto that they did not want to accept Mr. Shah's offer. They all wondered how Mrs. Pinto would be able to learn her way around a new building. They had enough money in the bank for their needs for the rest of their lives and they did not care about having more. They felt safe and secure in their home and among the people they knew well. They also believed that the law was on their side; if one person did not agree, then the builders could do nothing and the deal would fall through. Outside, the parliament was meeting. Mrs. Puri and Mrs. Rego argued back and forth about the deal. Mrs. Rego said that builders such as Shah could not be trusted to actually pay the money, but Mrs. Puri said the offer was too good to refuse. The Pintos got up to take their evening walk around the compound and were joined by Masterji. The three walked around the perimeter of the property. Mrs. Pinto heard Masterji's phone ring upstairs. He said it must be his son, wanting to discuss the money his father could make on this deal. Ibrahim Kudwa quietly asked Mrs. Puri about Masterji's position on the matter. She told him that he would decide in the Pinto's favor.

Elsewhere, as five o'clock approached, Satish, or "Soda Pop" as his friends called him, waited for his father outside a Hindu shrine on Malabar Hill. He mused over why his father thought that spray painting cars was such a bad thing, especially compared to the things he knew his father condoned. His father and Shanmugham arrived and ushered him inside the temple. His father handed over a cheque, which got him to the front of the line, and prayed to the deity Ganesha. Shah used the god's image as the official emblem on all the Confidence Group's letters and buildings. A visit to the temple assured Shah that there would be success in his new project. He commanded his son to pray, but Satish prayed that his father's project would fail and promised the god that he would repay him with even more money when he had made a way for himself.

Meanwhile back at Vishram, Masterji looked out his window at the group awaiting the arrival of Mr. Shah. He felt that first he needed to apologize to his neighbor in 3B, Ms. Meenakshi for pushing her boyfriend a few nights earlier. At first she did not want to listen to him, but he convinced her that he meant her no harm and asked if she was willing to come inside his apartment. He showed her a cabinet filled with awards from his teaching days and a photo of his late wife. He told her that his daughter would have been her age. Ms. Meenakshi asked where his daughter lived and he answered that she had died several years earlier. He then showed her a drawing book that had belonged to her and commented that she was only 19 when she died. He apologized again and they briefly discussed Mr. Shah's offer. She agreed to come back for tea another day and left his apartment.

Mr. Shah arrived at Vishram Society to address the members of Towers A and B and spoke through a microphone to the group. Masterji listened through his apartment window. As he listened he looked through his daughter Sandhya's sketch book. She had been gone for 11 years, killed when she was pushed from an overcrowded train on her way to college. No one had stopped the train to help her, but allowed her to bleed to death on the tracks below. Mr. Shah continued to speak, but Masterji was distracted by the artwork. He overheard Mrs. Rego accuse Shah of being a liar who would not pay



them the money he offered. He closed the window and drifted to sleep in his chair. When the meeting was over, Mr. and Mrs. Pinto went to their apartment but listened to the crowd still gathered outside. Some listened to Mrs. Rego while others gathered around Mr. Ajwani. They felt sure that as a co-operative society if at least one person said no to the deal, then they would not be thrown out.

After the meeting, Shanmugham and Shah drove into a wasteland area off the main highway and pulled over. Shanmugham questioned Shah as to why he offered so much for the properties in Vishram. Shah explained that he needed to not insult people, but appeal to their greed in order for them to consider giving up their homes. He was determined to succeed with this project and build up the land in the eastern part of the city so that everyone would know of the Confidence Group and build his own name. As was their custom Shah asked Shanmugham to complete the deal and he responded with a closed fist then open palm. Soon an auto rickshaw pulled up and delivered Mr. Kothari. Mr. Shah invited him to come to a party he was throwing at his home that evening in celebration of his son's birthday. Mr. Kothari gladly agreed and enjoyed the abundance of food his was served. He was led around as a honored guest among Shah's business associates and he found himself the center of attention. He told the story of his early days growing up in Africa where he loved to watch the huge flocks of pink flamingos. He quoted poetry from his childhood and mesmerized the guests. He told how his father lost his fortune when he was forced to sell his business and return to India because the Africans did not like an Indian man doing well in their country. After Mr. Shah's guests left the party, he continued to discuss business with Mr. Kothari. He told him that he was the key man to the success of the deal. Everyone in Tower B was young and reasonable, but the residents of Tower A were older and had more reasons why they might not agree with the deal. He needed the Secretary to win over those who were not yet convinced to sell. Mr. Kothari returned home and silently crawled into bed, ignoring his wife's questions. That night he envisioned pink flamingos and cried as he remember his youth.

The next day Shah and Shanmugham went once again to the building sites, and pushed the work forward before the monsoon rains came. Shanmugham reported that all the residents of Tower B had agreed to sell, but that four people in Vishram said no to the offer. Shah asked if one of those saying "no" was a teacher. Shanmugham confirmed the fact. A load of floor tiles arrived and Shah noticing that they were the wrong color, hurried down to yell at the delivery men. He stopped to cough up blood-flecked phlegm. Shanmugham tried to get him to the hospital, but he refused, stating the work would not get finished unless he was on site. J.J. Chacko's sign across the street taunted him. He told Shanmugham that he wanted the "nos" to become "yes" at once.

Book 3 begins with Masterji visiting his former colleague at the library at St. Catherine's School. The old friends reminisced about the old days when everyone was not so concerned about technology and making money. The librarian allowed Masterji to make a free call from the payphone. Masterji walked through the marketplace and was stopped by a vendor who pulled up a stool for him. He was in awe of the teacher, because he had heard of the good fortune that had been presented to the members of



Vishram Society. Masterji only wanted to be known for his legacy of teaching many hard-working students and commented that he longed for the old days. He then met with Shankar Trivedi, a priest who performed last rites and first-year ceremonies. He arranged for the man to perform his late wife's first-year Samskara as the anniversary of her death was approaching. Trivedi offered to buy Masterji a coconut water drink and Masterji knew that he was doing so because he had heard of the buyout offer. He felt that he was being treated with such respect because he was being viewed as wealthy already. In the same marketplace both Shanmugham and Ajwani watched as a funeral procession passed by them. At a nearby restaurant, the two men talked. Ajwani told Shanmugham that he knew that he was Shah's left-hand man, the man who did the dirty work for his boss and stepped over the line when necessary. Ajwani then offered his services as an inside man, someone who knew the members of the Society and could best persuade the dissenting few to change their minds. He wanted additional money per square foot for his help. Shanmugham refused the offer. He told him that he had just delivered boxes of sweets to all the members of the Society and that was all that he would get from him. Stopping by the gate on his way home, Ajwani discovered that four people had not accepted their boxes of sweets and asked for the names.

In another part of town, Ibrahim Kudwa was working in his cyber-cafe. Once the cafe was a good idea and made money, but as the cost of an internet connection became more affordable for the average person, his business declined. Ramesh Ajwani stopped in for a visit. He asked Kudwa why he was part of the opposition party. Kudwa said that he was not saying no, but merely taking his time. He wanted people to think well of him, like Mrs. Puri thought well of Masterji who sided with the Pintos. She had called him an "English gentleman" and he also wanted to be esteemed in other people's sight. Ajwani saw that the decision was causing stress for Kudwa, so he took him for a walk to show him something. Arriving at Tower B, the two men stood in front of a brand new Toyota Innova, just purchased by a resident, on prospect of the new money he would make. Ajwani pointed out that things like the new car could be Kudwa's too. He encouraged Mr. Kudwa to touch the vehicle and as he did any reservations about accepting the offer melted away. On his way back to the cafe, Kudwa stopped by the guard booth and asked for his box of sweets. Pleased with himself, Ajwani returned to the market to stroll and think. He would work the others the same way he had manipulated Mr. Kudwa, but he would be sure that Shah paid him for his effort.

## Analysis

As the second section of the novel begins Shah prepares to make his move on Vishram Society. Like a man wanting to play his cards right, Shah bides his time and waits till his astrologer tells him the stars are best aligned to ensure his success. Although the prior symbolism of card playing is not specifically used here, this cautiousness and superstitious behavior reveals more about how the builder goes about his game. He has specific routines he follows prior to every job he starts. In addition to consulting the astrologer, he goes to his apartment in Versova Beach to rendezvous with his mistress and enjoy his "palace-of-sin" (82). Here, "in the presence of luxury his capacity for violence was always heightened," (85) which is also a foreshadowing of what will come.



In any deal, there is always the possibility that something will not go Shah's way, and he is determined to orchestrate everything to fit his plan, even if it includes stepping outside the law. Later on in the day, as Shah discusses the plan to win over Vishram with Shanmugham, he asks his loyal assistant if he will do this job for him. Shanmugham's response is a symbolic gesture that is repeated several more times throughout the novel. He puts out a closed fist which he then opens. His action states that what is currently closed to Shah, will be opened up to him. "I've got this Society in my palm, sir. I know these people inside and out" (100), he says.

While Shah waits to proceed with visiting Vishram in person, the author delves further into the character of Shanmugham. The narrator reveals how he came to work for Mr. Shah and hints that he is more than a personal assistant. The fact that he is told to tear up his business cards in case they should ever get in trouble with the police is an indication that Shah wants to distance himself from association with Shanmugham. His tendency toward cruelty and violence are also shown as he hurls a rock at a wounded dog because he is angry about being short changed in a bank deal. Instead of returning to the bank and attempting to get a better deal, he takes his anger out on a weak and innocent animal. By the end of the section it is fully revealed by Ajwani that Shanmugham is in fact Mr. Shah's "left-hand" man. He explains, "He does what the builder's right hand does not want to know about. If there is trouble, he contacts the police or the mafia. If there is money to be paid to a politician, he carries the bag. If someone's knuckles need to be broken, he breaks them" (117-118). When Ajwani further tries to offer his services for payment, Shanmugham get angry and walks away; no one is going to play his game for him.

Shah's attention to the details is further highlighted as he sets off to make his visit to Vishram Society, but first stops by the Temple to pray to Lord Ganesha for success. The god is known as the remover of obstacles and the god of beginnings. He is a symbol that Shah uses on all his correspondence and he has statues of the god in his apartment almost as a good luck charm to bless all his business endeavors. He takes a check with him, which allows him to move quickly to the front of the line once inside the Temple. Shah meets his son Satish here, which provides an opportunity for the author to explore their father/son relationship. Satish is a teenager who is getting into trouble with the police for vandalism. He has no respect for his father and sees him as a hypocrite. To him, spray painting a few cars is "nothing compared to what his father did in his line of work" (91). Although outwardly obedient to his father's command to join in prayer, he inwardly prays for his father's new project to fail, further exemplifying his hatred.

Shah's face-to-face meeting with the Society members is important because it is a turning point for the unified state of co-operative society. The reviews are mixed and the author begins to feature various characters as they step forward and make their thoughts known to the group. As opinions are varied, factions begin to develop. Mrs. Rego does not trust Shah because he is a builder, and she believes all such men to be liars. She yells loudly and takes her position as a dissenter. Mr. Ajwani, the real estate broker, however is excited about the deal and eager to point out to others how much money they will make. The Pintos are the most timid in the group and quickly retreat to





their apartment, Mrs. Pinto fearful that they will get thrown out of the building unless they have someone on their side. But Mr. Pinto, assured of the law and order that exists in their building, assures her that they live in a "Registered Co-operative Society. Not a jungle" (98). Although this is a subtle reference, it is a foreshadowing of what is to develop, as the established order begins to crumble.

Adiga continues to show how Shah works and manipulates by people by getting the Society Secretary to be his voice in the building. His party invitation to Kothari also allows the author to delve into the mind and motivations of the Secretary as he relaxes and lets his guard down, something he rarely has done. Earlier, the author indicated that very few people knew much about Kothari, but in Shah's home, plied with copious amounts of food and drink, he lets loose and talks about his past in Africa to the strangers in the room. He remembers reciting some poetry as a young boy to great applause. His recitation from the "Ramayayana," an epic poem of India, is held in great regard by Shah's guests. Ironically, the passage will come back to haunt him and serves as foreshadowing as he prepares to commit a crime. "Do as you will, evil King: I, for my part, know right from wrong, And will never follow you" (104). Unfortunately, Kothari does act according to his knowledge of right from wrong, but is overcome by his own desire to return to a more comfortable life.

A final note of interest is Shah's question to Shanmugham concerning the people that said "no" to his initial offer. He wants to know if any of them are teachers, obviously hinting that there is something about teachers that disturbs him. Of course, Masterji is a retired teacher, but the author gives no further explanation as to why this is a problem for Shah. Readers are left with the lingering questions of why this is important and who has gotten in the way before. The animosity leaves a bit of suspense in looking toward the days to come.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do the Pintos feel secure in their decision to stay in Vishram Society?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Satish feel toward his father?

## Discussion Question 3

What evidence is there in the text that Mr. Shah obsesses over the details?

## Vocabulary

recalcitrant, rhomboidal, keratin, sluicing, corpuscles, vivacious, palaeosauruses, anthropomorphic, mesomorphic, clamorously, interlocutor, gregariousness



## Book 4 - Book 5

### Summary

The summer rain began to fall in Mumbai. Mrs. Puri and Ramu watched from the window and talked about moving to a new home. Mary, the cleaning woman picked up the resident's trash and rolled the collection barrel outside to the rubbish pit. Ajwani cornered her asked what items were in Mrs. Puri's rubbish bin that morning. He also asked her to daily check the bins of Masterji, Mrs. Rego and the Pintos, the neighbors still saying no to the buyout offer. He gave her a ten-rupee note and a box of sweets for her extra trouble. She then went to the market and the Hibiscus Society to ask about getting work, knowing she would need a job once Vishram closed down. She suddenly ran home because as a man came through the market warning of a slum clearance at the nullah. Back at her tent-home she realized that it was a false alarm. Soon afterward, Mrs. Rego came by and again warned Mary that she should find other housing as the government was determined to clear all land that was illegally squatted on. Meanwhile, Mrs. Rego, having consulted with a lawyer, was somewhat comforted that she would not have to leave her own home based on the law.

Meanwhile Shah had tea with his son in Nariman Point. Satish was eager to get away and asked when he would be allowed to have his credit card back. Shah wandered through the streets a bit, realizing that he was losing his son and eager for him to see the same possibilities of land development that he continually saw in front of him. Shanmugham arrived to pick him up and reported on the progress at Vishram. The four "nos" had become three, but they were not budging. The Secretary said there was nothing he could do, but Shanmugham informed his boss that Ajwani was eager to be persuasive for a price. Shah agreed to pay for the work to be done. That night the first major monsoon hit the city.

Masterji sank into reminiscence, looking at his daughter's sketches and recalling the past as it almost came to life around him. He walked around the rooftop terrace, something no one had done in over 10 years, since there was a suicide in the building. He talked one afternoon with Mr. Ajwani and the Secretary about the number of monsoon-related deaths that year. Three had occurred because an old building collapsed, but Masterji said that would never happen to Vishram. Ajwani asked him to go down to go see where Mr. Shah was building his latest two towers and see if he would not be impressed. When Masterji walked outside, he saw Mr. Kudwa's new, bright red scooter, purchased in anticipation of having new income.

Over the past few days, Mrs. Puri had been telling her neighbors that she was going to the temple to pray, but she had been visiting various buildings looking for a new place to live. She went to Rathore Towers and was enamored with the dark wood built-in cupboards and gleaming handles. She told no one because she did not want the Evil Eye to ruin her chance at happiness. At the Towers, the family ran into Mrs. Puri's college roommate, Ritika, who was also a resident of Vishram Tower B. The families ate



lunch together and discussed the possibility of being neighbors again and that Shah was likely to delay with paying the money. Ritika mentioned that they had heard that Masterji was opposing the deal. Mrs. Puri laughed it off and said he would come around as soon as the Pintos said yes, claiming that he was a quarreler, not a fighter. Outside the restaurant, Mrs. Puri introduced her son to a stranger and made plans to go to an exclusive lounge for coffee later in the week.

Masterji found himself haven fallen asleep one afternoon, a luxury he never even once allowed himself and for which he scolded his wife and children. Later in the afternoon the Vishram children came for science, but class was disrupted as fireworks from elsewhere in the compound became a distraction. The residents of Tower B were celebrating their acceptance of Mr. Shah's deal. Mrs. Puri came by and asked Masterji to please consider Ajwani's request and go see Shah's newest buildings. He went to look and then returned to Vishram. He circled October third on his calendar and counted 99 days.

A few days later, Mrs. Rego wrote a letter to her sister, Catherine, carefully choosing impressive words in order to "trump" her sister in an ongoing game the two had between them. After chastising the maid, Mrs. Rego and her children went through Tower A and removed the Ganesha stickers from the sweets boxes that many of the residents had affixed to their doors. Placing them in a trash bag, she threw them in the rubbish pit and yelled out "Liar."

The narrator continues to comment on Mrs. Rego's past, revealing that she had been raised in a comfortable home and married a man her father chose for her. After a few years of working in Manila, he left her for a younger woman and took all her money. She was forced to leave Bandra and move to Vakhola where things were less expensive. Her uncle had been threatened by another builder in Bandra who wanted to buy his home and redevelop the site. Because of this experience, she did not trust Shah. Returning to Mrs. Rego's activities of the day, she arrived at her job at the Institute. Shanmugham stood outside and offered to take her to a meeting with Mr. Shah. She refused at first, but later agreed. She met with Shah at a very nice restaurant and took leftover food home for her children. Mr. Shah offered her a first installment of the money to come for the buyout but she again refused. He told her to think about it and she discussed the matter with her children. They then traveled to Bandra where Mrs. Rego walked through the streets and shopping districts of the upscale section of the city. She was envious of everything. Her daughter said they should move there, but her son said they could not take Shah's offer because he was an evil man. Mrs. Rego nodded in agreement to both of them.

A few days later, Ajwani approached Mrs. Puri to convince her to go and speak to Mrs. Rego. He believed that she had spoken to Mr. Shah and just needed a bit more convincing to sign, but that a woman needed to do it. Mrs. Puri went down to Mrs. Rego's apartment and found her frozen in her kitchen. She was not able to move out of fear for the lizard that was climbing up her wall. Mrs. Puri dispatched of the creature and sat to talk. Mrs. Rego talked about her husband having stolen her money and how she had always felt "trumped" by her sister. Mrs. Puri told her to accept Shah's offer,



because she was always trying to help the poor, but she should now do something for her children. The two women embraced and Mrs. Puri felt she was getting her "sweetener" because the life she imagined was getting closer to becoming reality.

As Masterji and the Pintos discovered that Mrs. Rego had changed her mind, they conferred and made plans. Masterji encouraged them onward, calling them the Vakola Triumvirate. The Pintos questioned Masterji about changing their minds; they were willing to give in if that was what Masterji wanted to do. He assured them that he wanted to stay at Vishram. Later, Mrs. Puri and Ajwani knocked on Masterji's door. They begged him to talk with his son Gaurav and get his opinion. Mrs. Puri said she cared about the Pintos, but that she needed to think about her own son and his future needs. Soon, other neighbors began to petition him to change his mind, each expressing their need. Doing as requested, Masterji visited his son. Gaurav and Sonal tried to convince Masterji to sign the agreement, but Masterji continued to talk about memories and then his late wife's upcoming one-year anniversary. Sonal offered him pineapple juice to drink and as he left the building, his blood sugar soared. As he arrived back at Vishram he read the notice board. The Secretary had pinned a notice declaring that everyone had agreed to the offer by Mr. Shah and had forged Masterji's signature. Masterji was incensed that the members had made such a bold move. He stormed away but told them all that he still had not made his decision.

## Analysis

Book 4 is aptly named, "The Rain Begins," not only because the monsoon season is beginning, but because everything is starting to get stormy with the Society. Adiga begins to turn up the heat by having the members of the society become very vocal about the deal with Shah. Whereas Shah had wanted Mr. Kothari to convince those opposed to the deal, his "inside man" failed to get the job done. But Ajwani is all too willing to step up to the bar. Like Shah and Shanmugham, he performs his tasks subtly and with care. Initially, he gathers information by having Mary tell him what is in the trash bins. By finding out that Mrs. Puri is actively visiting new buildings he gains an understanding of her passion and desire for a new life. She has brought home many brochures, so he knows that she is very interested in a new place and that she does not want the deal with Shah to fall through. Because she has so much emotionally invested in this new prospect, he knows that she will make a strong ally. His careful suggestions to Mrs. Puri of what she can do and who she should talk to, get her actively participating in the campaign against Masterji. It is easy to see that Mrs. Puri would go and talk with Masterji personally about the deal. They have been friends and Ramu likes "uncle" very much. It is natural that she would try to convince him to think about her and wanting to care for Ramu later in life. She asks him to simply go and see Mr. Shah's buildings down the road. These requests are not out of her ordinary behavior or character. However, Ajwani convinces her to do something that is out of her character, namely speak to Mrs. Rego since the two women strongly dislike one another. Mrs. Puri calls her neighbor, "the communist," not because she is one, but because she does not understand Mrs. Rego's desire to help those people less fortunate than herself. However, during their conversation Adiga creates a touching exchange between the two



rivals. When Mrs. Puri stops by her apartment, Mrs. Rego is not in top form. Terrified by a lizard that is crawling up her wall, The Battleship is not ready to do battle. She is instead vulnerable and opens up about her past. She tells Mrs. Puri about her former husband and all the money he stole from her. The story appears to softened Mrs. Puri toward her neighbor and she encourages her to make a choice that will get her and her children back on track to a better financial life. It seems that in the moment, she is not simply trying to manipulate Mrs. Rego and win her over to her way of thinking, but that she is truly sympathetic and wants her to make a choice that will ultimately benefit both of them (167).

Mrs. Rego's relationship with her sister Catherine is also a place where Adiga utilizes the card-playing symbolism once again. Throughout their lives, the sisters have been in competition with each other, vying for the better marriage, the better home (152). Most recently, their competition took the form of besting each other in a word game carried on through letters. They referred to their competition as "trumping" the other, a reference to the maneuver in card games of playing the trump card, a card that automatically beats any other suit. Mrs. Rego has often felt like she could not beat her sister and moving back to Bandra would help her to feel like she was more of an equal. This is a big decision for Mrs. Rego, because most of her work is about helping people that are not as fortunate and are at the low end of the huge disparity between the socio-economic standings in their culture. She personally knows what it is to struggle and perhaps feels that she is abandoning the poor if she chooses to have such a better lifestyle.

Although not a major theme in the novel, Adiga takes an interesting look at the relationships between fathers and sons through the strained relationships of Shah and Satish and Masterji and Gaurav. In both cases, the sons do not respect their fathers and do not really want to spend time with them. Satish is eager to get away from his father whenever they are together and Gaurav becomes agitated and overeats in Masterji's presence. But the fathers have different perspectives. Shah is aware that he is in trouble with his son and fears that he is losing him (132). He longs to have his son be interested in the construction trade and see the wonder in being able to reclaim the land for one's purposes. Masterji, however does not understand the extent of the void between him and his son, so the narrator fills the reader in on Gaurav's feelings toward his father. He always felt that his father was abusive, hitting him on the knuckles with a metal ruler if he did something wrong. He pushed him toward pursuing a career in science, even though he was not interested in it. But mostly, he is angry with his father and views him as weak because he did not stand up to his uncles when they robbed his mother of her inheritance. Over the years, Gaurav's hatred grew, but always inside him, never confronting Masterji directly (173). While Masterji knows that there is tension between them and things are not quite right he does not know his son feels this strongly. Gifts that Masterji gives to Ronak do not seem to be appreciated and are even returned, a further indication that there is trouble. Yet nothing is out in the open, so Masterji clings to the belief that his son will support his decision to stay in Vishram. He is perhaps even blind to the fact that Gaurav and Sonil seem more concerned about financially planning for the details such as estate taxes and life insurance once they inherit the money themselves (174). Masterji does somewhat begin to question motives though. As he is leaving his son's apartment, Sonil offers him pineapple juice and



almost insists that he have some even though he initially refuses. The couple has been after him to get a diabetes test done and Masterji wonders if they are purposely trying to harm him by offering him a high sugared drink (177). While Adiga does not answer that question, it does make the reader question Gaurav and Sonil's loyalties and motives.

At several places in this section the author also looks at people's tendency to spend money before they have even received it. For example, once Mr. Kudwa is on board with selling to Mr. Shah he goes out and purchases a brand new motor scooter. Masterji knows that Kudwa does not have the money for such a thing and comments to Ram Khare about it. In a statement of profound metaphorical insight, the guard says, "The mouth waters before it has food," (139). Having been previously tempted by Ajwani when he was taken to see his neighbor's brand new Innova, Kudwa is chomping at the bit for something new. He cannot wait until the money is in hand, so he purchases the scooter. Likewise, the entire society is eager to formally announce their acceptance of Shah's offer and get their first installment of money. Masterji has told Mrs. Puri that he will go to his son's place and talk about accepting the offer. But for her and the rest of the members, agreeing to see Gaurav was as good as signing the formal agreement. When Masterji is delayed in arriving back to Vishram, the members cannot wait any longer. Ajwani persuades Kothari to post the official announcement and forge Masterji's signature to the document. Upon discovering the notice, Masterji is naturally outraged at the Society's impertinence. They are so eager to get their money, that they disregard his rights and choose to speak for him.

All of these insights into the characters of Vishram Towers are brought to life by Adiga's masterful use of various literary devices. Personifying the Tower A building itself during the summer rain he writes, "moisture was snuggling into cracks in the paint, licking steel rods, and chewing on mortar" (127). While no one else seems concerned for the existence of the structure itself, the author gives it a life of its own by describing it as an entity with human traits. His description of Indian housing law is also colorful. With a clever alliteration he writes, "But an ambiguous, ambivalent and ambidextrous law was not without its advantages," (131). The mouthful helps the reader to focus on the meaning of the words and cumbersomeness of the law itself. Two particular similes are very effective in describing situations concerning Masterji. The narrator reveals Gaurav's disdain for his father and says, "like a common stock on the Bombay Sensex, the value of Yogesh Murthy's reputation was recalculated daily in his son's mind, and daily it fell" (173). The simile works especially well because Gaurav is in the banking industry and thinks in terms of stock values and worth of things. The comparison is striking as it highlights that the father is not worth much in his son's mind. Similarly, the unpleasant feeling that Masterji seems to leave with people since the buyout conflict began is brought out in another simile. "Amidst the silent germination of schemes, and ambitions all around him, Masterji sat like a cyst, looking at the rain" (136). Everyone is talking about Masterji and to them he is an unwanted, undesirable lump they need to remove. What strong wording to be called a cyst! Finally, a beautiful metaphor describes Masterji's feelings during the conflict, "Thought the men and women around him dreamed of bigger homes and cars, his joys were those of the expanding square footage of his inner life" (136). The elderly man is spending so much time thinking about the past and time spent with his long-gone daughter. The square footage that is



important to him and the place that represents home to him are increasingly in his mind and past.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the interaction between Mrs. Puri and Mrs. Rego. Do the two women truly make peace or is Mrs. Puri simply being manipulative?

## Discussion Question 2

Does Sonal offer her father-in-law pineapple juice out of kindness or malice?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do the members of the Society go ahead and sign Masterji's name to the buyout agreement?

## Vocabulary

imbecile, ambiguous, ambivalent, detritus, garrulous, purgation, epistolary, riposte, stertorously, triumvirate, osteoarthritic, crepuscular, unctuous, ingratiatingly, vector, rationalist



## Book 6 - Book 7

### Summary

As the next section moves into mid-July, Shah was irritated that the deal was still not done and Shanmugham asked if he should take the same kind of action he has previously done. Shah does not answer. Meanwhile, Ram Khare pulled Masterji aside and warned him that he believes trouble is coming, a black snake as he put it. He told him about a similar place where a buyout happened and a man who refused to sign was pushed down the stairs. Masterji dismissed the warning as the guard merely being drunk.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Puri continued her efforts to persuade Masterji to sign. She called Gaurav and tried to get him to come talk to his father again. She and some of the other women in the building talked about him and generally concurred that he was a greedy, old man. Mrs. Puri then met with Shanmugham. He told her to trust him and that he would be trying many things to get the old man to sign. Mrs. Puri and the Society members also tried some of their own things, specifically getting all the families to boycott sending their boys to Masterji for science lessons. Mrs. Puri kicked his morning rubbish bin all over the hallway floor and sent Ibrahim Kudwa to ask Masterji to go see Shah at his home to discuss the matter reasonably. Although not specifically stated as coming from Mrs. Puri, someone posted a sign in the stairwell listing negative "facts" about Masterji and his character. Each time Masterji tore down the sign, a new one reappeared. Bit by bit the neighbors turned their backs on him and ignored him in daily interaction. He felt treated like an untouchable from the old caste system.

One day he was summoned by Mr. Kothari's son to Kudwa's cyber-net cafe. When he arrived, Ajwani and Mr. Kudwa met him at the door. He was told they wanted to take him to meet with Mr. Shah at his home in Malabar Hills. A car and driver had been sent. Traffic was strangely light that afternoon and they arrived at Shah's very early, prior to Shah's own arrival. Shanmugham and Ajwani talked about Masterji while he used the restroom. Masterji knew that everyone was thinking that this was his plan, to hold out until the end and be "persuaded" for a few extra lakhs. As he looked out over Bombay from Shah's terrace he was tempted to sell out. But then, Shanmugham offered him his own "sweetener" or perhaps a "knife." Masterji suddenly knew what he wanted to choose - nothing. He was determined to not be weak like he had been before with Purnima's brothers. His blood sugar suddenly spiked and he stammered. He slapped at a tray of hot treats Giri served and in the commotion fled the apartment. Once back at Vishram he consoled the Pintos and encouraged them to wait out the deadline. Shah was angry that he missed his chance to convince Masterji to sign.

Strange things began to happen to Masterji and the Pintos. They began receiving crank phone calls, first with just a dead line and then with threats being spoken to the Pintos. Masterji tried to get Mr. Kothari and Ram Khare involved to stop the calls, but neither helped. He decided to spend the night on the sofa at the Pintos and planned to go to the





police first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, Ajwani and Shanmugham were meeting in the real estate office and making the crank calls. Ajwani reported that Masterji planned to go see a lawyer the next day. Shanmugham complimented Ajwani on how good he was at this kind of work and the broker admitted that he liked it. Ajwani asked Shanmugham to tell him about some of the things that he had done in order to "persuade" people. Shanmugham confessed to hiring boys to stalk people, to sticking an old man half-way out of a window and delivering a huge sum of money to a politician to help him win an election in exchange for favors. Ajwani asked what he was going to do next but Shanmugham refused to tell him.

Early in the morning the Pintos and Masterji started walking to the police station. The Pintos waited at a restaurant because walking the distance was difficult. Masterji proceeded to explain the situation to the police constable and was reassured that they would look into the calls. The officer also asked him if he was really going to hold out until the very end. Masterji noticed that Ajwani was standing nearby and he realized that he was a familiar fixture in the station. A big part of Ajwani's business was to procure the proper paperwork for some of his clients when they legitimately did not have any, all for a reasonable sum. Masterji reported back to the Pintos and assured them that the law would help. He explained that they had resources on which they could rely, namely the police, media, law and order, social workers, family, students and old school boys. Having addressed the police, the elderly team next addressed letters to the editors of several newspapers, explaining their situation and how they were being harassed. While Masterji was off to see the lawyer, Mr. Pinto sat and scribbled down numbers, calculating how much money they could get for their apartment. He explained to his wife that their children were having financial difficulties in America and that with more money they could send it to their children as well as buy another small flat in the city. Mrs. Pinto said they should remain loyal to Masterji, and Mr. Pinto said he was just calculating. Then they went outside for their evening walk. Mr. Pinto heard a commotion outside the wall with a dog that was being chased by a pack of strays. While outside the wall, Mr. Pinto was attacked.

Masterji met with a lawyer who told him that it was against the law to threaten a teacher. He also said that according to the MOFA Act, the Society could not force him to sell his flat. The lawyer agreed to take the case, knowing that his only payment would be when a settlement came. Upon returning home, Masterji learned of the attack on Mr. Pinto which he claimed was merely a fall in which he broke his foot. He did not want Masterji to go to the police and Mrs. Pinto begged him to give up and join them in signing the papers. Everyone in the building began to shout at him to sign immediately. He ran to his flat and barricaded himself inside. The next day he posted his own statement on the message board letting everyone know that he could not be intimidated to sign. Tension continued to rise. The Society members continued their plotting and came up with a plan to expel Masterji from the co-operative. They intended to kick him out based on false accusations. Everyone agreed except Mr. Kudwa who said doing so was stealing the apartment from him. Ajwani tried to convince him that it was time to step out across the Kala Paani, the ocean of fear, and make a bold decision.



Masterji awoke one morning to find his water and electricity turned off. Using the toilet, he saw black ants circling the toilet bowl and realized that he indeed had diabetes as the ants had obviously come for the sugar in his urine. He then discovered a note on his door telling him that he had been expelled from the Society and was expected to vacate within 30 days. He called his lawyer and within a short time the water and power was restored. A few days later Shanmugham made his way to the lawyer's office and waited outside for Masterji to show up. Inside, Masterji was told by the lawyer that he had arranged a settlement for him with Mr. Shah. He said that since he had been expelled from the Society he no longer had a strong case and that he should settle with the builder. Masterji realized that the lawyer, too, had been paid off. Outside the office, Shanmugham told Masterji once again that he should give up and sign.

Desperate, Masterji reached out to his son and begged him to call any connections he might have in the newspaper, especially with his former student, a famous reporter. He agreed to meet his father and see what they could do. While he waited for news about a meeting, Mary delivered the No-Argument book to Masterji from the Pintos with a note saying that all debts were cancelled. Meanwhile Shah considered his options and remembered the old days when he was quick to dispatch of such problems with violence. He is annoyed that he chose this building to buy, one where a teacher lived. Shanmugham was also waiting for an answer from his boss about what he is allowed to do to close the deal.

The meeting with the newspaper reporter never took place. Gaurav never made a call and finally told his father the truth. He also leveled him with how he felt about him - angry that his was so strict with him as a child. He felt that his mother's life was horrible with him and that she was never happy. He also told him that his students made fun of him behind his back and that none of them ever respected or loved him. Masterji realized that he could not count on the support of the newspapers and especially that of his son. Devastated, he wandered around the streets and stumbled into a dingy restaurant. He saw poor workers struggling all alone just to survive. He suddenly felt connected to these people and knew that his fight was for them as well - to fight to live where and how they wanted.

In the final scene of this section, Shah has just been to the hospital following another coughing episode. Rosie came to pick him up and tried to cheer him up. He was frustrated and disinterested in his work, because the teacher was wearing him down. Rosie asked to be taken to his home which she had never seen. During the tour of the place, Rosie overstepped her bounds a bit and got too nosy. Shah got angry and slammed a cabinet door on her nose, but she sucked it up and continued on with him. Shah finally made a decision and called in his instructions to Shanmugham on how to handle Vishram.

## Analysis

Book 6, with the title "Fear," turns up the tension even further as the deadline gets closer and still nothing has been successful to get Masterji and the Pintos to sign. The



gentle suggestions and pleading have not worked, so other methods will be employed. As the novel is primarily a look at how people in general, but really a few specific people, are affected by greed, the author has focused until this point on the development of a few main characters. Here however, he begins to get some of the other building residents involved. When the boycott of Masterji's science classes takes place, other lesser known family names are mentioned. Also, as Mrs. Puri talks among the other women, their names are mentioned as well. The author incorporates the other residents so that the reader understands the scope of the actions against Masterji. This is not just Ajwani, Kothari and Mrs. Puri against Masterji. They may be the ringleaders and the people who take the initiative, but everyone in the building is in agreement and supportive of what is being done.

Masterji looks for help among the institutions that he respects and trusts that they will stand by him, but Adiga shows that even these will fail a man when he needs them most. Masterji considers these things his resources with which he can fight. He trusts in the law, the police, the newspapers, his family and his former students who he believes love and respect him. He goes to each place one at a time, enlisting their help. At the outset, he finds some hope there and he thinks he can win because the law is on his side. But ultimately, he discovers that corruption is everywhere. Everyone can be bought and bent to the will of someone with the money to do so. As Adiga writes, "Just like the tuning fork he had used in class for an acoustics experiment. Corruption had become physics; its precise frequency had been discovered by Mr. Shah" (259). Even the police only make a cursory investigation into the crank phone calls. The most devastating for Masterji is most likely the abandonment by his son. Masterji has known that things were not good between them, but at their final meeting, Gaurav lets it all loose on his father. Claiming that he was a harsh, non-supportive father, claiming that his mother was unhappy all of her marriage and telling him that none of his students ever liked him, hits Masterji hard. In one sweep, he realizes he cannot rely on the newspapers, his students or his family to help him.

Despite this, for the most part Masterji holds up well to the harassment he faces. The derogatory signs, the crank calls, the mean comments made to him as he passes by parliament must be difficult to take. He does wonder how they can treat him, a teacher who has served children for over 30 years, with such contempt. But as previously mentioned early in the novel, he has had many hardships in his life and he has endured them, so it is not surprising that he stands up under these insults. Yet, the continual onslaught does weigh on him at times. When he is taken to Shah's apartment, he has a moment of wavering, when he considers just taking the deal. But as he looks down over Shah's balcony at the ocean and watches the forceful waves battering the wall that holds it back, he is strengthened. He is determined to stand firm, unlike when he caved into Purnima's brothers.

This section highlights many of the similarities and differences between the two main characters in the novel, Shah, the antagonist and Masterji, the protagonist. Both men are not particularly young and both have lost their wives. Each man is struggling with a disease that could potentially shorten his life and both of them are not really doing anything about it. Shah is very aware of his lung condition, but refuses to take the



measures necessary to ease his suffering. Similarly, Masterji suspects that he has diabetes but will not go to have the testing done to positively determine it and take the necessary measures. Both are very determined in their minds to stick to their ideals. Shah is driven by his desire to make a name for himself by constructing the greatest buildings in the city. Similarly, Masterji has built a legacy, not in his name, but in the students he has taught. Both men are also struggling in their relationships with their sons. Shah seems to sincerely desire for his son to come along side him in his business some day. He worries that he is headed down the wrong path. In contrast, Gaurav has taken a path very different from the one his father imagined for him. He wants to separate himself from his father, an attitude that Masterji cannot quite grasp. It is interesting that two men who have so many similarities are in conflict with one another. The thing that sets them at odds with one another is their perspectives on life. Shah is always looking to the future and how he can build to make the city great. By contrast, Masterji is looking to the past. He does not want things to change and wants to hold onto the many memories that lay within Vishram's walls. This wanting of nothing completely confounds Shah. As he ponders, "A man who does not want: who has no secret places in his heart into which a little more cash can be stuffed, what kind of man is that?" (260).

While Masterji and Shah are the main focus, Shanmugham and Ajwani are explored as well. Both men are eager to make a buck at the expense of others. Ajwani admires Shah's left-hand man for all the dark deeds he has done and enjoys hearing about them. He is flattered that Shanmugham thinks he could work for them full time. Ajwani has been engaging in questionable practices for a long time, obtaining fake IDs for people who needed to have proper papers in order to rent housing. Working for Shah would be a step up the ladder and he is eager to learn. Shanmugham is revealed here as even more cruel than previously, taking money from a young boy and saying that he is looking forward to breaking the old man's legs. There are several instances where Adiga uses suspense and foreshadowing to hint of things to come as the group is making their plans against Masterji. Shanmugham wants to know what Shah wants him to do, but Shah keeps him and the reader waiting to find out. Ajwani also wants to know what is next, but Shanmugham will not tell him. This waiting keeps the reader in suspense and worrying about what might happen to Masterji.

To break the tension, Adiga also inserts a bit of humor. When Masterji uses the bathroom at Shah's apartment, Shanmugham wonders what is taking so long. Ajwani says that he has a disease that makes the lower organs weak, the D-word. Shanmugham guesses diarrhea and then dementia (202) in a humorous conversation that lightens the mood for the reader. Another funny moment comes as Mr. Pinto is calculating the possible money that could have if they changed their minds and accepted the offer. He comments, "'I feel young again, Shelley.' She wondered if he was asking for a resumption in their relations, which had ceased some 27 years ago, but no, of course not, all he meant was this: he was being an accountant again" (227).



## Discussion Question 1

To what extent does it matter to the story that Masterji has diabetes?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Mr. Pinto have the No-Argument book delivered to Masterji and close the account?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Rosie so interested in seeing Shah's other home? Why does she want to meet Satish?

## Vocabulary

spectral, errant, incarnadined, namasted, balustraded, agglomeration, sahib, purblind, ensconced, encrustation, peon, hydrostatic, palsied, piety, prise, incandescence, electrolysing, phosphorescent



# Book 8 - Epilogue

## Summary

The deadline date nears as the Book 8 begins. Masterji said goodbye to Ms. Meenakshi as she moved out of her flat. She wished him well and offered to get her boyfriend to write a piece about him in the newspaper he worked for. Trucks backed into Vishram at Tower B as families began to move out. Mr. Shah had paid them two-thirds of the money up front and they had found other places to live immediately. Mrs. Puri stated that she knew Shah would pay, but Mr. Kudwa was skeptical, thinking that something funny was taking place. Mrs. Puri said goodbye to her old college roommate, Ritika as her family left for good. Shanmugham was waiting outside the gate to speak to Mrs. Puri. She got on the back of his motorbike and rode to meet Mr. Shah. Shah spoke firmly with her telling her to get the job done by the deadline or he would leave them. He made her see that she did not want to be cleaning Ramu's bottom for the rest of her life in a dingy apartment. He also told her to use Gaurav against his father. Returning to Vishram, she called Gaurav and begged him to help them. Mr. Kudwa said Shah was setting a trap for them, trying to get them to do the bad things for him, but Mrs. Puri would not listen. The next day, a notice from Gaurav denouncing his father was posted in the noticeboard. Masterji was once again struck hard.

Next Masterji discovered that his story had been published in "The Sun," even though no reporter had ever spoken to him. Ajwani was upset by the news and called Shanmugham to find out what he was doing. His answer was that Shah said the members of Vishram Society must now help themselves. They needed to take care of the problem before midnight on October third. Ajwani tried to convince Shanmugham to do the job himself and in return he would show him how to skim money away from Shah so he could become rich himself. Shanmugham refused and told Ajwani to never call him again. A second article appeared in another paper, this time not so flattering to Masterji. His heart sank again. He returned home to find feces smeared all over his front door. He quietly cleaned it off. When Mrs. Puri came out to the hall to see, Mr. Puri confronted his wife about what she had done, but she turned on him, blaming him for making them have a son when she was older and at higher risk for an unhealthy child. Masterji made an excuse for her, and basically let her off the hook for her despicable act.

The Pintos received a letter from their daughter describing their financial troubles, furthering convincing them that the decision to sign was the right one. Mrs. Pinto knew that something was about to happen to Masterji, and that all they needed to do was keep quiet. She was told that some members of the Society were going to do a "simple thing," and she did not want any further details. Mrs. Pinto went out and ran into Mr. Kothari. He was upset because he had been asked to hand over Masterji's duplicate key. He refused. But as the two talked, Mrs. Puri suggested that Kothari make another key and give them that one. Then he could always have the real duplicate in his possession and, therefore, not break the rules. Mr. Kothari agreed and went into the



market to have the key made. On his way to get the key made, the train conductor quoted the same passage from the Ramayana Kothari had quoted earlier. Kothari gave the extra key to Ajwani. He then distributed cotton to all the residents to stuff in their ears so that they would not hear anything that went on that night.

Later that night two boys entered Masterji's apartment. One of the boys stepped on Masterji's Rubik's Cube and stumbled. The boys fled amidst hits from Masterji. The next morning, Masterji went to the Pintos to discuss what happened the night before. He realized that they purposely ignored what happened and had been aware of the planned attack. Upstairs he ripped up the No-Argument book and threw it out the window. He did not report the incident to the police. Meanwhile Ajwani and Kothari continued to discuss their next move.

Mrs. Puri and Mrs. Rego went with their children to the Catholic church to pray and then had lunch. Mrs. Puri told her that they just needed to do a simple thing, just a little push to conclude the matter and then they could call Mr. Shah. When they arrived back at Vishram, they stood looking at a crow's nest that was hanging down over Mrs. Saldanha's window. Mrs. Puri coaxed Ajwani to take a pole and knock the nest to the ground. The baby birds fell and Mr. Kothari stepped on the neck of one that survived the fall. Mrs. Puri called it a simple thing.

Ajwani was meeting in his office with Mrs. Puri when a client came in upset about some details of her rental. Ajwani returned his broker's fee to help her out. Mrs. Puri said he was not rich because he was too soft. At home, Mrs. Puri told her husband to not come home until ten o'clock the next night. He was aware that something was going on and said that he was going to stick by her side. Masterji knelt in front of his wife's closet and fell asleep. In the morning he performed his own ritual to remember her death, since Trivdei recently had refused. He realized that it was October fifth and the deadline had passed. He breathed a sigh of relief that it was over.

Later that day, Mrs. Puri went to Mrs. Rego and told her to go to her sister's in Bandra that evening taking her children and Ramu with her. She explained that it was a simple thing. Mr. Kudwa became aware that something was about to happen and determined to discover what it was. Meanwhile Ajwani steeled himself for his task ahead and traveled to Falkland Road to get with a woman. While walking through the streets he observed the hard-working laborers struggling to make their way. Something suddenly snapped inside and he realized that pushing Masterji to his death was not a "simple thing," it was killing a man. He immediately tried to call the Pintos and get them to stop what was taking place. But the Pintos were too frightened and wanted to know nothing, so they hung up the phone. Meanwhile, the Puris, Mr. Kudwa and Kothari were all waiting for Ajwani to perform his act. When he did not show, they decided to move forward on their own. They entered Masterji's apartment and put scotch tape over his mouth. With a hammer they knocked him, sitting on him to hold him still until he was unconscious. Mrs. Puri ordered everyone about and they carried the body to the rooftop. Masterji awoke but they had left the hammer in the apartment. They grabbed at him and lifted him over the ledge. Masterji fought back the best he could and tried to hold on. The four pried his hands off the ledge and he dropped to his death below. A



short time later, Ram Khare discovered a body on the grounds and Mrs. Rego received a phone call that an unfortunate accident had occurred at Vishram Society. The newspaper announcement declared that Yogesh Murthy was depressed and committed suicide.

As the novel winds up in the Epilogue, Ajwani becomes immersed in a repentant life. Following the murder, he did not speak to any of the other members of the Society. He moved his wife and son out of the Tower to a rental flat near the train station. People in the market accused him of involvement in Masterji's death, and while he said nothing, he greatly hoped that people would throw vegetables at him or stick hot peppers in his eyes as punishment for what he knew to be his part in Masterji's death. Demolition began at Vishram Society and the workers chipped away at the stone and sawed the wooden beams apart. One day Ajwani leaned against the last remaining banyan tree and watched. Shanmugham came up to him and said he still needed to sign the papers in order to receive his money from the buyout. He then lowered his voice and began to talk about a previous conversation where Ajwani suggested that Shanmugham was smart enough to run his own operation and learn to skim money from Shah. Ajwani wanted no part of it and hurried off down the road.

Shanmugham then went to Shah and tried to blackmail him. He suggested that "someone" might tell the police that the neighbors actually murdered Masterji and they would be compelled to reopen the case, therefore delaying the construction of the Shanghai. Shah realized the attempt and made it clear to Shanmugham that his own life would be in danger if he tried to do such a thing. He also added to his to-do list to find a new left-hand man. He then went to Juhu to pick up Satish from the police station. He had been arrested again for spray painting a van. He asked his son when he would stop doing these things and Satish replied that he needed to do these things now so that he could grow up to be a proper builder one day. While at the hospital for another x-ray he realized that Rosie truly cared about him and wanted to make a life with him. He considered pursuing a different life.

The members of Vishram all moved on. Kothari and his family, the Kudwas, the Puris and the Pintos all moved into other Societies with "good people." The Kotharis and the Kudwa ran into each other one day and discussed how well things were going for all of them. Likewise, Ajwani and Mrs. Rego ran into each other one day on Juhu Beach. They talked about how Masterji was a good man and how he should be remembered for his fight to stand up for his rights. Ajwani had not initially taken the money, but changed his mind in order to provide for his family. Mrs. Rego moved to Bandra but continued to go into the slums to help the poor.

## Analysis

The final section of the novel brings the narrative to a dramatic and tragic end. In these last books, Adiga brings many of his themes together and displays the end result that greed has had on the lives of his characters. In large part the members of Vishram Society have all been blinded by greed to such an extent that they lose their humanity.





What began as civil discourse and gentle persuasion, turned into violence and murder for the sake of grasping at a more secure financial future and better life. For example, Mr. Kothari never did much to make any waves in the Society and always tried to keep everyone calm. Throughout the months of waiting for Masterji to give his answer, he did very little to get involved, despite having been offered a sweetener by Mr. Shah. Reluctantly, he makes a key and he does participate in Masterji's murder. But two months later all is forgotten and as he talks with Mr. Kudwa at the mall, he talks about living with "good people" in his new Society. In reality, he has no idea what it is to be good. Good people do not murder their neighbors. By now he is thoroughly self-deceived. As he leaves the restaurant where he ate, he decides to return to get his bill corrected because he was charged for a bottle of water he did not purchase. He insists on going back, because of the principle of the thing. "You have to stand up for your rights in this world. Your grandfather taught me that," he tells his son (375). But the truth is, Masterji taught him that it is important to stand up for your rights, not his father who fled from his fight.

Mr. Kudwa is also living in deception. Having not heeded his own warning, Kudwa participated in Masterji's murder. When Mrs. Puri wanted to call Gaurav and get him to turn against his father, Kudwa warns her of what he suspects Shah of doing. "He is turning good people into bad people. Changing our nature. Because he wants us to do it to Masterji ourselves" (290). Kudwa had a sense that Shah was manipulating them to turn against Masterji and do his dirty work for him. And although he was correct in his assessment, in the end he also goes through with the plans. Greed wins out again.

Perhaps the most disturbing change in character is in Mrs. Puri. The woman who once called Masterji and "English gentleman" was later barking orders and orchestrating his death. So much of her bottle of anger and frustration comes spewing out as she gets increasingly fearful that she will lose her chance at financial freedom. When her husband confronts her about smearing feces on Masterji's door, she turns on him and blames him for their situation. If he had only advanced in his career faster, they could have had a child sooner, when she was younger and at less risk for bearing a child with a disability. She has kept this anger inside and now it comes out directed at her husband. She is also blinded so greatly, that she can not take any bit of responsibility for her disgusting action. Days later she can still smell the feces on her hands, but she blames Masterji. ""That man made me dirty my fingers. With my own son's ...He made me do that. I can never forgive him" (330). Her mind is so warped that she actually blames her victim for her inhuman act. Adiga also shows Mrs. Puri to have a warped sense of compassion. She and Ramu have been caring for a stray dog and when it is suddenly hit by a car in the market place, they respond with great compassion. Mrs. Puri moves the dog to the side of the road and brings it water. She arranges for someone to come and move the body. She comforts Ramu and lies to him, telling him it was not their stray dog, just one that looked like theirs. Yet, when a nest of birds gets in her way, Mrs. Puri calls it a "simple thing" to knock the nest down and kill the baby birds (325). And then it is only a short step away, to call the murder of Masterji "a simple thing" as well.



It is only Ajwani who is saved from the jaws of greed. Originally, the mastermind behind all the moves against Masterji, Ajwani was just as greedy as anyone. He wants the money and he is manipulating everyone to get it. But somewhere on Falkland Road he finds his conscience and he does a complete turn around. He realizes that pushing a man off a building is not a "simple thing" but killing a man. He spends the next two months seeking penance and wishing he could be found guilty. He initially says no to the money for his flat, but realizes that caring for his family is important. The whole event has turned him into a better man and he becomes a legitimate businessman, turning away from some of his illegal practices.

Another theme that Adiga wraps up is the relationships that the two main fathers have with their sons. Satish is still up to his tricks and breaking laws, but he has learned how to manipulate his father. He tells him, "All of us in the gang are builders' sons. If you don't let us do these things now...how will we become good builders when we grow up?" (369). Shah is appeased and Satish has him where he wants him. Shah can look to the future and see the value of the skill set his son is building. Gaurav however, has completely betrayed his father and destroyed their relationship permanently for his own selfish gain. To make matters worse, he maintains a close relationship with Mrs. Puri, treating her like a mother, despite the fact that she murdered his father.

Again, throughout this section there is a good use of foreshadowing and suspense. The "simple thing" is spoken of frequently, but the reader never knows what it is or how it will happen. Is it a push, a knife, or worse? The Pintos do not want to know about it, so similarly the reader is kept in the dark.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Mrs. Puri is expecting to get a sweetener from Mr. Shah, but he offers her nothing. What becomes her sweetener in the end?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do the Society members refer to their plan as "a simple thing"?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Is it possible that this fictional story could actually take place in society today?

## **Vocabulary**

discompose, conjunctiva, tetrapodal, santimonious, dereliction, confluence, auspicious, penance, reclamation, heterodox



# Characters

## Dharmen Shah

Dharmen Shah is the owner of the Confidence Group, a large real estate development company in Mumbai. He is in direct competition with J.J. Chacko of the Ultimex Group, another developer in the city. He is a man who indulges himself and is used to getting his way. Although generous to his workers and those who he decides to buy out, his generosity is only to accomplish his goals, not a character trait. Shah maintains two homes, one that he shares with his teenage son, Satish, and his housekeeper, Giri. His wife died five years earlier. Since that time he acquired the second flat where he keeps a mistress who is allowed to stay as long as she maintains strict loyalty to him. The second home is more luxurious and meant to be indulgent.

Shah is a large, overweight man who is in poor health. He chews gutka, a tobacco-like substance that stains his mouth red and his teeth black and is obsessed with consuming large plates of heavily buttered toast. The combination of gutka and construction dust is destroying his lungs and his doctor has instructed him to take several months away from the city and get fresh air in order to improve his health. He frequently coughs and spits up mucus tinged with blood.

Shah wears his wealth well. Everywhere he goes it is obvious that he has money. He is driven around the city in a Mercedes and has a left-hand man by his side at all times. His fingers are adorned with many gold rings. The local police know him well and he has lined their pockets with sufficient money to be able to procure favors from them.

Shah is a self-made man who came from almost nothing in a small village and worked his way up in real estate, initially through smuggling of goods. He likes to oversee his projects personally and visits the sites to be sure that everything is running smoothly. However, when it comes to the dirty work of persuading people to sign buyout contracts, he leaves the job to his left-hand man, who is not an official employee or on the payroll. Shah wants to keep himself legally disassociated with any trouble that might occur with the police.

## Masterji (Yogesh Murthy)

Yogesh Murthy, known by everyone as Masterji, is the protagonist in the novel. His familiar name is a title given to most teachers. He is a retired teacher from the St. Catherine's School and teaches science pop-ups to the children in Tower A as refresher classes on science topics.

His wife, Purmina, passed away almost one year ago and he still misses her deeply. He opens a cupboard in their home and reminisces by looking at her bindi dots stuck to her mirror and her wedding sari. Her calendar, pinned to the kitchen wall, still hangs in its



place and frequently taps against the wall causing Masterji to believe that his wife is speaking to him from the beyond.

As Masterji is confronted with the buyout he becomes more reflective on his past life with his family. He also greatly misses his daughter, who died after she fell from a train on her way to college classes. She was an artist, and Masterji spends hours looking through her old sketchbook and remembering all the places she drew and the time they spent together as father and daughter. He also has a son, with whom he is not very close. His grandson, however, is a delight to him.

Masterji is initially seen as a wise man and well respected in the Society. However, as the residents of the building turn against him, they discredit him and treat him inhumanely. His health is also declining as the novel progresses. There is initially a question that he might have diabetes and should get tested. Various physical symptoms show up and eventually mount to reveal that Masterji is, indeed, affected.

Masterji is a strong willed and loyal individual. Initially he refuses the buyout contract in an effort to stick by the Pintos as moving to a new building would be difficult for them. Later, he is determined to stay in an effort to stand up for his rights to say no. He wants to stay where his memories are strongest and he commits to fighting for his property. No matter what happens or what people say or do to him, he is willing to fight for that which he believes. However, he is perhaps a bit egocentric and blinded to caring for other people. He was not aware that some of his students called him names behind his back as he felt all of his students adored him. He is also not aware of how his strict handling of his own son, Guarav, caused him to hate his father. He lives in a bit of a cloud, thinking all is well and he is admired, when in fact people are able to easily find fault with him when they have a reason to be mean.

## Shanmugham

Shanmugham is initially introduced only as the stranger wearing a white shirt and black slacks who visits Vishram Society and asks many questions about the building and its residents. He is employed by Dharman Shah as his left-hand man, doing the research leg work into properties he wishes to acquire, making offers, and keeping his ear to the ground to know what people are saying in the industry. He began as a real estate broker and answered an ad to be an assistant to Mr. Shah, the developer. He proved himself to be smarter than the others and acquired the position. He also learned to handle tasks that went outside the bounds of legality in order to achieve the results Mr. Shah desired. Mr. Ajwani refers to him as Mr. Shah's left-hand man, stating that he is the person who does the things Mr. Shah does not want to see or do himself, but still wants done - the dirty work. He boasts to Ajwani about the methods he has used in the past: hiring thugs to intimidate people, offering "sweetners" and even holding an old man half-way out a window and threatening him to sign a document on the spot.

Shanmugham is very precise and exacting in the small details. He carefully folds his handkerchief each time he uses it and places it carefully away. He cuts his ice cream



into 16 small sections and eats each one slowly to bide time. He respects Mr. Shah and frequently writes down his pithy sayings in a little black book which he carries with him everywhere. He also thinks Shah spends too much money, being too generous to the workers and offering too much in the buyouts. Although grateful for his job, he feels under-appreciated by Shah. He feels like a dog that is told to go fetch but is never rewarded (365). For this reason he takes the advice of Mr. Ajwani and tries to make more money for himself by suggesting to Shah that he is in a position to make trouble for him, a tactic that backfires on him in the end.

## Ramesh Ajwani

Mr. Ajwani is a real-estate broker in Mumbai. He owns the Renaissance Real Estate Company and is one of several similar businesses on his street. He knows his business well and also knows how to sell to customers, using flattery and humor. But he has a darker side as well. For a price, he offers his services to Shanmugham to convince the members of Vishram Society who have said "no" to Mr. Shah's offer. He looks to their weaknesses to persuade them to sign the buyout offer papers.

He is eager to become a success and wants to learn from Shanmugham. Ajwani is very interested in the tactics the left-hand man uses to intimidate people. He wants to know what things he has done and how far he has gone in order to get the desired result. For most of the time leading up to the offer deadline, Ajwani is pushing people to gang up on Masterji and even the Pintos. He stirs up animosity and gathers allies in his plotting, namely Mr. and Mrs. Puri and Mr. Kothari. He is the one who hires some boys from the slums to threaten and scare Mr. Pinto when he goes outside the compound wall alone. He is the one who is supposed to do "the simple thing" and push Masterji from the rooftop.

Despite his many indiscretions throughout his lifetime, Ajwani sees reason in the end and acquires a conscience. He does a complete turn and tries to prevent a disaster from happening at Vishram Tower. He is married and has two sons, so for the sake of his family he turns legitimate as a businessman and accepts the money from Shah in the end.

## Mrs. Sangeeta Puri

Sangeeta Puri is a character who dramatically changes for the worst throughout the novel. Initially she is a good friend and neighbor to Masterji. She was best friends with Purmina, his wife, when she was still living. Since her death, Mrs. Puri has looked out for Masterji and frequently buys him mangoes and goes out of her way to hire a plumber for him. She is also a mother who cares for her 18-year-old son who has Down's Syndrome. She prays at various religious shrines and temples (Catholic, Hindu and Muslim) not preferring any one over the other, hoping that somewhere, some god will hear her prayers and move the mental block, as she defines it, in her son's mind and make him better. She is very attentive to his needs and perhaps even overly protective.



She makes him carry a sign that says "No Noise," so that people around him will not agitate him with excessive sound.

As the buyout offer comes to Vishram Society, she is immediately eager to take the money. The large amount of money will guarantee that Ramu will be cared for once she is no longer living. Initially, she is proud of Masterji for standing by the Pintos and saying no to the offer and even calls him an English gentleman (89-90). But as Masterji's obstinance continues, Mrs. Puri's ugly side and greed reveals itself. Her unkind words and actions escalate in their inhuman nature and she even detaches herself from all responsibility for her actions. When she smears her son's feces all over Masterji's door, she later complains that he basically forced her do it because he would not yield to the offer. She also has his water and electricity turned off, an act that deprives the old man of even the basic necessities that he needs to live. Her cruel heart is even further exposed as she shows great compassion for the stray dog that is run over by a car in the market place yet is willing to destroy a nest of baby birds and, ultimately, her former friend. For her, murder has become a "simple thing," and she has lost her conscience and humanity.

## **Mr. Sanjiv Puri**

Mr. Puri is an accountant by profession and fairly inactive character in the early parts of the novel. He enjoys drawing pictures of animals for his son, Ramu. He and his wife called each other by their titles, Mr. and Mrs. Mr. Puri's first name is not used by the author until much later in the plot when he participates in the actions taken against Masterji. He joins in the plot as his wife becomes more aggressive and lashes out at him, accusing him of being the reason that their child is mentally disabled. Waiting until he reached a managerial level in his work before having a child, Mrs. Puri was then older and, therefore, at a greater risk for having an unhealthy child. Perhaps out of guilt, he supports his wife in this terrible act in an attempt to fix things for her. He follows her orders and is an accomplice in Masterji's death.

## **Mrs. Shelley Pinto**

Mrs. Pinto lives in the apartment directly beneath Masterji. She is in her mid sixties and nearly blind. She finds her way around the building by feeling the notches and shapes in the walls and by counting steps. She has developed a great sense of smell and hearing and, when walking outside, she can tell where she is based on the smells in the neighborhood and the distance and direction of sounds coming from the building. She works as a team with her husband to get through life. They have a daughter and a son, both living in America. With enough money in the bank from which they draw a monthly amount, they can be sustained for their remaining years and have no need to accept Mr. Shah's offer.



## Mr. Albert Pinto

Mr. Pinto is a quiet man and a retired accountant who worked for a Biscuit Company. He has trouble breathing and needs to pause frequently when he exerts himself physically. Mr. Pinto and Masterji have been good friends for more than 30 years and eat the Sunday evening meal out at restaurants, trying a new biryani place each time. They have a "No Argument Book" where they record all the financial transactions that take place between them so that money will never become an obstacle to their friendship. After Mr. Pinto is threatened and has his foot broken, the couple decide to agree to Mr. Shah's offer. Feeling like he has broken faith with Masterji, he apologizes by tearing out the pages of the accounting book and writing "all debts cancelled" on them.

The Pintos eventually turn their back on Masterji by remaining quiet and doing nothing to stop the horrible events moving forward. They do not want to know the details behind "the simple thing" that is being planned. They agree to stuff cotton in their ears and, in effect, turn a deaf ear to the crimes taking place. They finally move out to another Society.

## Mrs. Georgina Rego (The Battleship)

Mrs. Rego lives with her two children, Sunil and Sarah. A social worker by profession, she often goes into the slums to help people. She is a Christian woman, but Mrs. Puri does not like her and calls her a Communist. She is also called "The Battleship" by most of the members of the Society because of her wide girth and grey skirts. She and Mrs. Puri argue over politics frequently.

Concerning the buyout offer, Mrs. Rego immediately says no. She is distrustful of the builder since an uncle of hers was threatened and cheated during a similar situation. She believes that Mr. Shah is a liar and will never pay the residents the money. As the offer deadline nears, Mrs. Rego begins to reconsider the situation. The author reveals that her husband left her and moved out of the country and stole all of her money as well. She then had to move to Vishram Society, which was a step down from her former lifestyle. She feels the sting of it constantly as she writes letters back and forth with her sister. The two have always been in competition and try to "trump" each other in a word game. Mrs. Rego feels that her sister Catherine has the upper hand in life as well as she is married and lives in Bandra, one of the nicest sections of the city. She visits Bandra and reconsiders Mr. Shah's offer, since accepting it would allow her to return to a pleasant life there.

Mrs. Rego goes quietly along with the plot to get Masterji out of the way. She takes Ramu with her and the children so they are not at home when the others plan to do "the simple thing" to Masterji. When she hears that he has been killed, she breaks down in tears. Months later, she has moved to Bandra, but continues to do her work among the poor people in the slums. She and Ajwani remember Masterji fondly and honor his name with the children, encouraging them to be people who always strive to stand up for the things they believe in.



## Ram Khare

Ram Khare is the guard who sits in the booth at the entrance to Vishram Tower A. He lives in the back section of the building and spends his time drinking and reading from his holy books. He is aware of everyone who comes into the compound and has them sign into a log book. He has a sense that something dark will happen to Masterji and warns him that perhaps he should just accept the offer. He is the person that finds Masterji's body after he is killed.

## Mary, the cleaning woman

Mary is the cleaning woman for Vishram Tower A. She lives near the nullah in the slum near the Vishram Society. She has a son, Timothy who enjoys playing cricket with some other boys in the Tamil temple grounds. Ajwani pays her extra money to go through the trash of the four members who initially say no to Mr. Shah's deal so that he can gather information and find their weaknesses. She tries to stay out of the business that is going on in the Tower and is merely trying keep her job and support her son.

## Ms. Meenakshi

Ms. Meenakshi is a single woman who rents an apartment owned by someone else. The other members of the Society think of her as "unsuitable" since she has a male visitor that comes to her apartment at night. Although Masterji had a brief altercation with her boyfriend, she becomes friendly with her neighbor and later tries to help him. She is in public relations by profession and uses her connections to get an article written about Masterji standing up to Dharman Shah. Since she is only a renter and has no say in what is going on in the building, she moves out of her apartment.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Sweetener

"Sweetener" is the term used to mean incentive or extra financial compensation in exchange for a service or favor that is needed in order to close the deal. Several people are offered or ask for a sweetener in addition to their buyout offer. Mr. Kothari is the first to be offered extra money in order to persuade Masterji to accept the offer. Mr. Ajwani is familiar with how this sort of thing works in the real estate world, so he goes directly to Shanmugham and offers his services in exchange for the extra payment, saying that he has valuable insider knowledge and, therefore, is necessary to closing out the deal. Even Mrs. Puri is aware that there is extra money to be made. Additionally, Shah offers everyone a sweetener the day after he makes the offer known in the form of boxes of sweet treats he sends as a token gesture of generosity. It is an act meant to push anyone hesitating over the edge. By accepting the box of sweets, a society member was acknowledging Shah's generosity and saying they were willing to accept his buyout offer as well.

## Kala Paani

The Hindu word for the ocean is Kala Paani, meaning black water. In the past, Hindus were not allowed to sail on the black water. Mr. Ajwani says that this is what kept Indians backward in the world, being fearful of the world beyond. He says that the decision in front of the members of Vishram Society is like standing in front of the ocean. In particular, he is talking to Mr. Kudwa about expelling Masterji from the Society completely. He knows that they are going against a long time resident and friend, but tells Mr. Kudwa that he must not be fearful. He implores him to step out into the "black water" (245).

## Signs

Signs figure prominently into the fabric of the novel, showing up everywhere to indicate people's intentions and sometimes provide comic relief. All of the buildings or sites are labeled by the builders as they announce the construction of their towers so everyone can see who is responsible for this latest architectural masterpiece. Mrs. Puri has Ramu carry a sign that says, "No Noise," because she wants all those around him to be as calm as possible so not to upset him. The message board on the main floor of Vishram Tower A is of key importance since all the notices concerning the buyout offer and many of the personal attacks on Masterji's character are pinned to this board. If anyone wants to know what is going on in the building, they check the board.

The author also uses signs to provide comic relief in the book. An advertising pamphlet announces that "Impatience is now a virtue - High-speed Broadband Internet" is available. When street workers post a sign saying, "Work in Progress, Inconvenience is



Regretted," Mr. Kudwa writes over the words and changes the sign to say, "Inconvenience in Progress, Work is Regretted." While the change is humorous the sentiment also hints at a theme within the novel - the redevelopment that the builders of Mumbai push through and see as progress for the city causes inconvenience for some and a forward path that is regretted and undesired.

## **Cards**

There are several references to cards or card playing in the novel, which represents the "game-playing" that goes on between the developers and the residents of the towers. On the train near the novel's beginning, Masterji is kept from taking a certain seat because members of the "card mafia" reserve the seats for their friends so they can play cards on the train ride home. The players in the game use a certain degree of force to get what they want on the train. This foreshadows the force that is used by Shah to get what he wants out of Vishram Society. At the novel's end, Ajwani and Mrs. Rego look across the street where they are toward a banyan tree, but they also see a group of people playing cards. The author gives this brief nod to the theme that the "playing of games" in other people's lives continues even though the game was over for the members of Vishram Society.

## **Daughter's sketchbook**

Sandhya's sketchbook represents Masterji's happy past. He looks at her many drawings of plants and buildings throughout their neighborhood and he connects deeply with their former life. He has lost so much with the deaths of his daughter and wife and his retirement from teaching, and the book is one of his few connections to everything that he loved. In fact, he clings to it so strongly that it empowers him to stand firmly against Shah.

## **Purnima's calendar**

Masterji has left Purnima's personal calendar with her handwriting hanging on the kitchen as a way to remember her. Occasionally, as he thinks about her and grieves her passing, he seems to hear the calendar moving and tapping against the wall. The calendar represents her presence with him in spirit and the communication she maintains with him from beyond the grave.

## **A knife**

A knife in the novel represents any type of aggressive force used to persuade someone to sign their home over to the builders. People are asked to choose between the money or the knife. A physical knife may be used to threaten someone, but other means are used as well. A push down the stairs, a scare on a dark street, intimidating phone calls, or peer pressure are all tactics that are represented by "the knife."



## A closed fist turned to open palm

Several times throughout the novel, Shanmugham shows his boss a closed fist and then turns it to an open palm. He repeats this ritual for every project he has completed with Shah, showing that what is closed to them will become open as Shanmugham does his job of persuasion. The closed fist represents the unavailability of the Vishram Society at the beginning of the project. At the novel's end, Shanmugham releases his fist into an open palm to show that the deal is finally completed and they have complete access to the Tower.

## Rubik's cube

The Rubik's cube is a single, small connection that Masterji has to his son Gaurav. Masterji always encouraged his son to pursue science and was disappointed that he pursued a career in banking. Gaurav, purposely left the cube behind at his parents' home, not having any interest in it. Masterji continuously plays with the cube as he ponders his next moves against Shah and reminisces about the past. He is trying to work out a plan and put the pieces together just as he is trying to solve the Rubik's Cube puzzle.

## Victoria Terminus

This Railway Station in Indian was formerly known as Victoria Terminus and served a central point to the rail lines throughout India. Named for Queen Victoria who was reigning in Britain during the time the station was built, the name literally means "victory's end." This is symbolic because in front of this station Masterji is cut-down by his son, ending his expectation of support. Thinking that his son was helping him to meet a reporter for the newspaper, Gaurav instead tells him that he will get no support from anyone. He spews out hatred toward his father and tells him that he is on his own. Masterji realizes that everything he thought he could rely on in society had failed him. It is only when he looks around and sees the poor, hard-working laborers on the streets that he feels united to them and wills himself to carry on his quest for their sake.



# Settings

## Mumbai (Bombay)

Mumbai is a major city on the western coast of India. It has been previously known as Bombay and was officially renamed in 1995. The author occasionally refers to Bombay in the text, so it should be noted that this is the same city. The city is the second most populated city in India and is the leading center for finance and entertainment in the country. As with many major cities, there are various sections that comprise the whole, each with their own name and distinct characteristics. Throughout the novel, the characters travel between Vakola, Bandra, Versova Beach, Malabar Hill, Marine Drive and Juhu Beach.

## Vakola, Santa Cruz

This is a section of the city of Mumbai that is under a great deal of redevelopment by many of the builders in the area. The area is located near the international airport. Builders are buying up pieces of land and chipping away at the slum areas to build luxury high rises. Shah has two buildings under construction here, The Confidence Excelsior and The Confidence Fountainhead. He is working on acquiring more space by buying out the owners at Vishram Society and constructing a third building, the Shanghai. The area itself has been largely thought of as "slummy," but Vishram Society, built in the middle of it, has always somehow been thought of as middle-class.

## Vishram Society Tower A

Vishram Society is two apartment-type buildings where the units are owned by the occupants and the members are part of a housing collective that operates similarly to homeowner associations in the States. There are two separate buildings in the complex, named Tower A and Tower B. Tower A is a six story building that was considered grand in its day, but is now getting shabby with water and fungus stained walls, a failing elevator and an intermittent water supply. Each evening, residents sit on white plastic chairs in front of the building and visit with each other while they wait for the evening water supply to return. The compound is surrounded by a thick wall and features a black stone cross in the yard, a sign that the housing was originally established for Roman Catholics. However, Vishram is now both ethnically and religiously mixed.

The Vishram Society is the name for the residents of the towers. Tower B was built 11 years later and is considered a better place to rent. Young, successful businessmen live there with their families. A guard booth stands at the entrance of the compound gate and visitors must sign the visitor's log book. Other signs grace the wall advertising the businesses of two of the building occupants. Of special interest is the board where building notices are frequently hung by the society's Secretary, Mr. Kothari. The Tower A building has a rooftop terrace which is rarely used by the occupants.



## Malabar Hill

Dharman Shah has his primary home in Malabar Hill which he shares with his son, Satish. His apartment is on the eighth floor of the building. A golden medallion of Lord Ganesha sits above his doorway. In the living room a large bronze statue of the Dancing Nataraja shares a table with a plaster-of-Paris model of his latest project, the Shanghai. A housekeeper cleans, cooks meals and pays bills for him in this home. A balcony overlooks part of the city as well as the ocean.

## Mirchandani Manor at Versova Beach

This luxury type flat is Shah's second home. He built it as an escape from the home he shares with his son and housekeeper, Giri. It exudes luxury: down pillows, allergen repellent sheets, lights that turn on and off with a hand clap and gold fixtures in the bathroom. He comes here prior to the start of every business deal to spend time with whomever is his mistress at the time. It is located on a cliff overlooking Versova Beach which is shared by the wealthy residents of the area and the very poor who live in the nearby slum.

## The nullah

In Hindi the word nullah refers to an intermittent waterway, much like a small creek that appears and disappears depending on the rainfall. A nullah exists down the road from the Vishram Society Towers and a slum has developed along its banks. The land is often squatted upon and people set up tent-like homes in these temporary villages. Mary, the cleaning woman at Tower A, lives in this slum with her son Timothy. Although many of the people who live here are poor and cannot afford an apartment home, they are working and skilled laborers.

Early in the novel, Mrs. Puri goes into the slum to hire a plumber to unclog Masterji's plumbing. Mrs. Rego, frequently goes into the nullah as part of her social work duties. She tries to help the people and warns them when the government is coming to clear them off the land. The nullah is the common term used by most people. Some sections of the land are especially desired by the big builders who are redeveloping the area and constructing fancy new structures. In this way, some very poor people are offered large amounts of money to sell their shacks and move out.

## Bandra

Bandra is a very nice, even posh, section of Mumbai. It is cleaner and more modern than Vakola. Mrs. Rego's sister, Catherine lives here with her husband, a journalist. Mrs. Rego considers taking Mr. Shah's offer because she would like to return to having a nicer lifestyle and the opportunity to live in a place like Bandra. She thinks about having



money again for the stores and restaurants of this part of the city and to be able to be on par with her sister with whom she has always competed.

## **Juhu Beach**

Juhu Beach is a popular beach along the ocean. Hundreds of people frequent the beach, especially to play cricket. Mrs. Rego brings a group of boys from the slum area here to play cricket by the water's edge. At the novel's end, she and Mr. Ajwani run into each other here. In this calm place, they and the boys memorialize Masterji.

## **Marine Lines**

Marine Lines is the section of the city where Gaurav Murthy, Masterji's son, lives with his wife and son. It is located in southern Mumbai, near the famous Marine Drive which runs along the water. It is a nice area and reflects Gaurav's good financial position.



# Themes and Motifs

## Individual versus Society

In the novel, Adiga raises the question of whose rights should prevail when an individual comes into conflict with the larger society. As the title states, Masterji is the Last Man in Tower, a single entity standing for his personal beliefs and rights while struggling to endure intimidation from everyone in the Society to comply. Although the Pintos were initially by his side as part of the Vishram Triumvirate, Masterji eventually must stand on his own, not only against Shah, but really against his former neighbors and friends. As Ajwani later realizes, it is part of Shah's plan to allow the society members to do his own dirty work. He knows human nature and that "good people" will turn against each other when the promise of lots of money is involved.

But although Masterji is saddened that the Pintos betray his friendship and desert to the other side, he is also okay with standing alone. He has firm beliefs for which he is willing to stand, namely his right to choose where to live. But his stubborn adherence to that right is precisely what sets him against his neighbors. At no time does he consider their equal right to have a chance at a better life. Mrs. Puri's concern for her son's future and medical care is legitimate, but Masterji never thinks of her. Others have suffered losses in the past and would like the opportunity to improve on their lot in life. Mrs. Rego is a single mother whose ex-husband stole all her money and she would love to be able to start over again. Mr. Kothari had to leave Africa as a boy because his family was looked down on because of their race and he would love to return to the land of the flamingos. But Masterji knows none of this or even cares to ask anyone about their hopes for the future.

Masterji does have a particularly strong motivator in keeping him steadfast in his fight. Having previously failed his wife in fighting against her brothers for her inheritance money, he is determined to not fail again. He feels like the goat tied to a pole who can only move so far and do so much because he is tethered fast (41). But Masterji is going to pull as hard as he can against that pole.

Ultimately, the larger society wins in the outcome as far as achieving victory in the fight over Vishram Tower A. However, Masterji is remembered as the morally better party by the few whose lives he positively impacted. Ajwani and Mrs. Rego realize that Masterji was a good man who had the commitment to fight for his rights, which ultimately they desire their children to do for themselves.

## Greed Produces Malevolence

The character development in Last Man in Tower illustrates that the promise of wealth produces changes in the human heart that can lead to ill will and even violence.



Throughout the novel's progression, several characters develop from being mild, happy members of a cooperative society to become cruel, antagonistic and even murderous.

Mrs. Puri clearly stands out as one who turns her back on Masterji and shows no concern for her actions. She moves from calling Masterji an "English gentleman" (90) to "the most selfish man in the world" (296). In the beginning she frequently brings extra mangoes as a gift for her upstairs neighbor, but by the novel's end she is smearing feces on his door and giving instructions on how to keep the old man quiet while the murderous posse throws him off the rooftop. While Mrs. Puri had a stable but challenging life caring for her disabled son, she was kind and accepting of her fate in life. But with the promise of a huge sum of money that would provide her with luxury and an assured future for her son, her true inclinations become known. She wants a better life for herself and her son and she will stop at nothing to make sure she gets it - even committing and covering up murder.

Other Society members join in the plot against Masterji, even though less prominent in the novel. Adiga features a handful of residents in the storyline as primary characters, but as the plot thickens more residents enter the scene. Spouses such as Mrs. Kothari, Mr. Puri, Mrs. Lobo and Mrs. Kudwa make brief appearances to add to the numbers of those opposed to Masterji and to emphasize that everyone is eager to move on and start a better life rife with financial benefits.

But Adiga's indictment does allow for some hope, because not everyone at the Vishram Society loses them self completely to greed. Mr. Ajwani, who for most of the novel is a ring leader in the fight against Masterji, suddenly see the truth. The "simple thing" he is about to do for the sake of the Society's gain is not so simple, it is killing a man. He comes to his senses and attempts to put a halt to the horrible plan that has been set in motion, albeit too late. Filled with remorse, he seeks penance for months and even initially refuses to accept his share of the buyout money. For Ajwani, the pitfalls of greed have taught him a lesson and it has ultimately made him a better man.

## **Dichotomy between Compassion and Cruelty**

Throughout the novel, Adiga uses people's interactions with animals to illustrate a dichotomy between compassion and cruelty and underscore that both traits can exist with equal force within one's soul. Both Mr. Shah and Shanmugham are positioned as antagonists within the novel so it would be natural to expect some type of negative behavior from them. Shanmugham, the left-hand man, is by definition a person who does illegal things in order to close deals for his boss. When he becomes angry at a bank manager's offer of a low interest rate, he throws a stone at a nearby dog. He purposefully aims at an open wound on the dog's side, with the intent to inflict harm (87). The degree of his cruelty toward the animal is noticeable, but it coincides with what is already known about his general nature.

Shah on the other hand shows a dichotomy in his nature. Following a meeting with his doctor to discuss his medical condition and failing lungs, Shah drives to his work sites.





In his Mercedes, he passes a cat that has been killed on the road, headless and smeared about. Shah immediately feels compassion for the animal and is sorry that it stood no chance in an area busy with heavy traffic. But the cat seems to mock him, saying that soon Shah will be just as dead, infected and destroyed by the world he lives in. Shah's heart immediately turns and spits on the cat (52). The focus here seems to be on the ability of a heart to quickly turn and direct the actions of a person. Initial compassion is suddenly turned to disdain and a heartless action.

The same type of change and dichotomy is exemplified in Mrs. Puri as she radically shifts in her attitudes and actions. Initially, Mrs. Puri is seen as a kindly woman and over-protective mother. She allows her son to feed a stray dog that comes into the compound and buys extra mangoes to share with Masterji, exemplifying her compassion for the less fortunate. When the stray dog is hit by a car in the market, she is very upset. She brings water to the dying animal, moves it to the side of the road and makes sure that the body will be removed and disposed of properly. Yet her compassion for the baby birds in a nest outside Mrs. Saldanha's window is non-existent. The birds are annoying everyone and Mrs. Puri wants the nest removed. She gets Ajwani to knock the nest down and Kothari stomps on one of the fledgling chicks. Her response to everyone is "A simple thing, wasn't it?" (325). This harshness is repeated in her treatment of Masterji as the acceptance deadline nears. She initiates a boycott against him, has his water and electricity turned off and smears excrement over his front door. The contrast between her concern for a stray dog and disregard for preserving basic human dignity is astounding. But the change that greed has worked in her heart allows for this dichotomy. The dog was innocent and did nothing to stand in her way, but Masterji, an old friend and neighbor, became dispensable in her mind.

## Human Connection Across Class Lines

Although class distinctions are obvious, the novel brings classes together as they meet on the basic level of working and struggling for survival. The members of Vishram Society are described as living in a pucca, middle class society. They are better off than many, but not as set as many in better sections of the city. Most have maids who cook for them and the building itself has a cleaning woman. Nearby is a slum where people live in shacks and live in fear of being chased off the land they have squatted on. Then there is the wealthy developer, Dharman Shah who owns two apartments, displays handfuls of gold rings and drives around in a Mercedes. The disparity between the residents of Mumbai is obvious.

But despite the class differences, several of the characters are able to see themselves not so much as part of a distinct class, but as a part of the human collective where everyone is seeking to attain the necessities and freedoms of life. For example, Mrs. Rego is a social worker who goes into the slums and helps many of the people who live there. At one point as she is thinking about taking Shah's money and moving to Bandra, she talks down to her house maid about breaking dishes. But when she realizes what the fight against Shah costs Masterji, her self-importance is diminished. In the end, even



though she moves to Bandra, a nicer, wealthier section of the city, she still has a heart for the people in the slums and continues to serve them.

Likewise, Masterji, although feeling alone in the fight against Shah, at some point looks at the struggle of the masses in the market place and on the packed trains. Everyone works hard to make a living, to feed their families and care for the children. In his mind, his fight becomes no longer for just himself, but also for the common man. He becomes more determined than ever to fight for the right to stand up for himself and others and not cave into the demands of one rich man and his money. Similarly, this observance of the hard working, struggling class of society is what snaps Ajwani into reality. His trip to Fawkland Road opens his eyes to the existence of basic humanity and he can no longer go through with killing Masterji.

## Money Leads to Corruption

A secondary theme in the novel is that societal institutions that protect and serve are frequently corrupted by money and useless to the weak and powerless individuals they are meant to help. Believing that he will find help in a variety of places, Masterji composes a list of everyone he can contact for help in fighting the powerful Shah. When Masterji and the Pintos receive crank phone calls, he goes to the police seeking their protection. Initially, they make a small investigation, but Shah has many police in his pocket and they never seriously pursue anything. Masterki then seeks the help of a lawyer and clings to the hope that the law governing housing societies will save him from being forced out of his home. Initially, his lawyer serves him in getting his water and electricity turned back on since it is unthinkable to take away a man's basic right to life-sustaining necessities. But Shah works his magic with money, and pays the lawyer off to convince Masterji to accept a settlement offer and not push the matter any further.

As the legal route failed, Masterji attempts to get his story in the newspapers, but the reporters never speak to him directly and write negative slants that do him more harm than good. Even his own son does not support him in his stance. Rather than help him locate his former student who writes for the paper, his son disregards his request. Ultimately, he himself has his eyes on the money that he assumes would one day end up as his. He reveals animosity toward his father and is in no way going to help him fight the builder. Masterji realizes that Shah's powerful and wealthy hand reaches everywhere, corrupting the institutions that he thought would stand by him. Law and order, former students and family all failed him and he feels terribly alone.

# Styles

## Point of View

Aravind Adiga uses the third person omniscient point of view to create his tale in order to give the reader a complete understanding of the dynamics between the residents of Vishram Society. The novel consists of many primary characters, who all have a stake in the future of the Tower, whether it stands or falls. As a cooperative society, the residents all interact and in many ways function as an extended family. They have known each other for decades in some cases. They know one another's habits and are accustomed to the noises coming from each others' apartments. For example, when the young Ajwani boys get up each morning they practice their tae kwon do and wake the upstairs neighbors. But it is expected and familiar. The Pintos likewise can hear Masterji's nighttime pacing and frequent trips to the bathroom, adding to their concern that he perhaps has diabetes. Adiga includes such details of the characters thoughts, observations and conversations in order to lay the groundwork for his character-centric work. Once the reader has a basic understanding of the mindset of each character and a sense of their personality and view towards life, Adiga is able to explore how each one reacts and changes their attitudes and behavior once the promise of wealth enters their world.

Frequent conversations between characters that highlight a particular tone of voice or word choices also reveal their inner thoughts and perceptions. When Mrs. Puri and Kothari go to Masterji's apartment and discuss his neighbor, the single woman in the next apartment, Masterji chastises Mrs. Puri for being a busybody and judging the young woman because she has a frequent nighttime male visitor. The narrator says that Mrs. Puri winces and would not take that kind of talk from anyone else, revealing indirectly that she respects Masterji for his age and position and defers to him in certain matters.

## Language and Meaning

Adiga uses a variety of literary devices to add texture to his novel. Most prominently, he fills the pages with similes and metaphors that add depth and richness to the descriptions of places and characters, bringing them to life in tangible ways. For example, the reader can almost experience the exploding cupboards in the Puri's home as he writes, "their doors gave way suddenly to let books and newspapers gush out with traumatic force, like eggs from the slit-open belly of a fish" (29). Similarly, Shah's dinner one evening is almost lifelike, "The fish's head sat on top, its lips open, as if pleading for breath among its own body parts" (260). Some phrases simply provide beautiful imagery - "Thick blackened wicks emerged from the melting candles like bone from a wound" (321).



The authors use of metaphors also provides readers with an additional layer of meaning as descriptions become more vivid. For example, when introducing Masterji he writes, "What would he do with his remaining time -- the cigarette stub of years left to a man already in his sixties" (28). Rather than simply describing Masterji as an elderly man who was recently retired from teaching, he uses a metaphor of a cigarette, much of it spent with only a short bit remaining. The reader immediately gets a mental image and gains insight into the character's life. In another instance, Adiga uses a metaphor to describe the control that Shah is able to wield over people who can assist him in his cause. Masterji realizes that the lawyer he has hired has been talking to Shah and is now trying to convince him to settle along with a nice extra financial incentive. The narrator describes Masterji's thoughts as he likens Shah's skillful control to that of someone using a tuning fork to coax a note to match an exact frequency. "Just like the tuning fork he had used in class for an acoustics experiment. Corruption had been physics; its precise frequency had been discovered by Mr. Shah. If he engaged another lawyer, that thick tongue would fine tune him too" (259).

Other devices that Adiga employs are foreshadowing and suspense. Near the beginning of the novel as Masterji still struggles with his wife's passing, he has mental conversations with her. In one such instance she counsels him to identify with his conscience, "to guide him through what was coming next" (71). Here the author tells the reader that some big thing is coming into Masterji's life and he will need his conscience to guide him. This is a foreshadowing of the stand the old man takes against the developer and his neighbors. Also, the plot of the novel contains a specific deadline by which the residents must respond to Shah's offer or they will lose the opportunity to make the huge amount of money. As the deadline gets continually closer, the heat is turned up and there is increased talk of persuasive tactics. Ram Khare warns Masterji to beware of threats against him (188) and Shanmugham tells Mrs. Puri, "Just last year we encountered a problem like this Masterji of yours. There are many things we can do, and we will try them one by one" (191). Bad things are planned and the reader waits to discover what they are. Eventually, the neighbors take matters into their own hands and devise a way to deal with Masterji. They talk about doing a "simple thing" -- a euphemism for pushing him off the rooftop. They talk about the "simple thing" frequently, but not until the moment when they commit the horrible act does the reader know specifically what they are planning. Until the end, the reader is left in suspense, wondering if Masterji will receive a severe threat or something far worse.

A final technique that Adiga uses is to insert bits of humor into an otherwise dark look at human nature. An early example in the novel is when Mr. Kudwa changes a construction sign from "Work in Progress, Inconvenience is Regretted" to "Inconvenience in Progress, Work is Regretted" (31). Not only does the change provide a chuckle for the reader, but it subtly exhibits an irony. Perhaps one of the most humorous moments in the novel is when Mr. Pinto tells Masterji to get a physical to get checked for something that "begins with D" (63). Masterji replies that his bowels are fine. Word spreads through the complex that Masterji may have diabetes, but no one refers to it that way, they only call it the D-word, which leads to confusion. Ajwani tells Shanmugham, "He has that disease, which is called D-something. It weakens the lower organs" (202). Shanmugham incorrectly guesses diarrhea and then dementia. The

comic relief helps to offset the tense situation for the reader as the two men are trying to persuade Masterji once again.

## Structure

Before *Last Man in Tower* even begins, the author provides important information that helps the reader to start from a baseline of understanding. Since the novel is set in India, Adiga's "A Note on Money," provides helpful monetary conversions for readers who are not familiar with the monetary system. He also helps readers to understand the disparity between the average annual per capita income in India and Mr. Shah's offer. Next, he lists all the residents of Vishram Tower A. It is possible that this list of names, ages, occupations and apartment numbers could be one that Shanmugham put together so that he and Mr. Shah would know exactly who they were dealing with prior to getting into the deal. But the list also serves as a helpful reference to the reader, to check on names and apartment locations when a large list of characters could potentially be confusing.

The novel itself is divided into nine books, each with a title summarizing the main plot point within. Each book contains smaller sections labeled with a date. The novel begins in mid May and concludes in December of the same year, just two months after Mr. Shah's offer deadline. The date listings help the reader to understand the timeline and see that the deadline of October third is approaching. Not only does this add a small element of suspense to the story, but it aids in understanding just when events take place. Within each day, there are additional subsections. Various character interactions are highlighted in each of these sections and there are frequent scene changes over the course of a day. Masterji is visiting his grandson, Mr. Kothari is working in his office and Mrs. Puri is walking to the slums all in the course of one day. This mini-division with a clear structure gives readers an accurate view of the daily lives of all the key residents of Vishram Society.

Signs also figure prominently throughout the novel. They are offset in the text and it is very clear that a sign is being read. The typeface is also changed as appropriate to the type of a sign. Notes written by individuals are set in a script type and notices officially produced by Secretary Kothari are set in a type consistent with that of the typewriter on which Mr. Kothari composes his building announcements.



## Quotes

Man is like a goat tied to a pole.' Meaning, all of us have some free will but not too much. One shouldn't judge oneself harshly.

-- Masterji (Book 1)

**Importance:** Masterji is speaking to his daughter-in-law Sonal and quoting one of his wife's favorite sayings. She said this in particular when Masterji questioned if they had made a mistake by not taking legal action against her brothers to get back her rightful inheritance which they had forced her to relinquish. She felt that even though getting her rightful money was her desire, that her hands were tied by the legal system and it would take too much money and time to be worth it. In general, it seems she felt that people may have desires and a will, but like a goat that can only eat the grass within his circle of reach, there is always something stopping them from getting what they really want. In short, they were powerless to do much, so why beat themselves up about their decision.

She understood that her husband's life had bent to magnetic poles marked 'Shame' and 'Guilt': yet one of the grey wavelengths in between must be Conscience. That faint line was the one he should find. To guide him through what was coming next.

-- Narrator (Book 1)

**Importance:** Here the narrator conveys that Masterji's dead wife is speaking to him from beyond the grave. These are not audible words, but the thoughts Masterji believes his wife is passing on to him. She does not want him to feel guilty for desiring another woman; he was always faithful to her in marriage. She does not want him to feel shame for anything else in his past. She wants him to let his conscience guide him for what is coming next. The author uses this bit of foreshadowing to indicate that something is going to cause upheaval in Masterji's world and he will need to let his conscience guide him rather than react based on shame or guilt.

Starting out as a contractor for another builder on Mira Road, he soon realized that much as he loved cement and steel, he loved people more. The human being was his clay to squeeze.

-- The Narrator (Book 2)

**Importance:** The narrator is continuing the backstory of Shah's life where the character himself left off in telling it to Rosie, Shah's mistress. As Shah worked his way up in the business world, he realized that real money could be made in legitimate companies. He worked at first for a construction company as a contractor overseeing jobs. But he soon discovered the world of development and enjoyed the thrill of manipulating and persuading people to sell their homes so he could build bigger more luxurious ones. Shah squeezed people as if they were clay in order to achieve his ends.

Do you know what a builder is?...Architects build houses, Engineers build roads....The builder is the one man in Bombay who never loses a fight.

-- Dharman Shah (Book 2)



**Importance:** Mr. Shah is speaking to Mr. Kothari at the end of Satish's birthday party. He has just told Mr. Kothari how important it is that he convince the dissenting members of Tower A to say "yes" to his offer. Here he is letting him know that one way or the other he will win the fight, because he never loses. He is a developer and he gets what he wants.

He took the brimming coconut in his hands and felt its weight. When you're rich, you don't have to give people things, he thought. They give you things.... he understood for four or five seconds, what it was to be a millionaire.

-- The narrator (Book 3)

**Importance:** The narrator reveals what Masterji is thinking as he accepts a cool drink of coconut water from Trivedi, the priest he is hiring to perform his late wife's first-year ceremony. Money has always been a bit of an issue between the two, with Trivedi arguing over the bill. Here, Masterji realizes that the priest is being unusually generous because he is seeing the teacher as a wealthy man whom he should show respect and also "butter up" for future business. Treating a wealthy man with honor, may be good for his own financial future. Even though Masterji is not interested in Shah's money, for those few moments, he understands what it is like to "be" wealthy, as people see and treat you differently.

Ajwani picked up a papaya and smelled its base for ripeness. He would do the same with Masterji, the Pintos, and Mrs. Rego; sniff and tap, sniff and tap, find their weak spots, break them open. Kudwa he had done for free, but Mr. Shah would have to pay for the next three.

-- The narrator (Book 3)

**Importance:** The narrator is revealing the thoughts of Mr. Ajwani as he strolls around the marketplace. He has just convinced Mr. Kudwa to officially say "yes" to Mr. Shah's offer. He took what he knew about the man and used it to his advantage to persuade Kudwa to make up his mind. He used Kudwa's desire for an easier life and the knowledge that people want to be seen as well off to push Kudwa over the fence he had been sitting on. Ajwani felt confident that he could do the same with the others of the "Opposition Party," but he was going to make sure that his services were financially rewarded by Mr. Shah.

Amidst the silent germination of schemes and ambitions all around him, Masterji sat like a cyst, looking at the rain and his daughter's drawings of Vakola, or playing with his Rubik's Cube...

-- The narrator (Book 4)

**Importance:** The opposition against Masterji is beginning to mount as the summer rains come. People are talking about him behind closed doors and they are scheming about how to get him to change his mind and sign the buyout papers. The author uses a metaphor of a cyst, an unwanted and ugly thing that clings to the body, to describe how Masterji's position affects everyone. He simply sits in his apartment clinging to the items



that remind him of his past and bring back many memories of his family. His daughter's sketchbook is filled with drawings of plants and buildings surrounding Vishram Society and he wonders about what life would be like if his daughter had lived. He had given the Rubik's Cube to his son as a boy, but Gaurav has left it behind.

A man is not what his neighbours say he is. Laugh and let it go.  
-- Masterji (Book 6)

**Importance:** Masterji is reacting to a sign that is posted on the message board in the Society. Someone made a list of negative things about Masterji and questioned if anyone in the building should continue to respect him as a teacher and neighbor. While everyone has some attributes that others may not like, the ringleaders of the movement against Masterji have put unkind words boldly on display in an attempt to shame and embarrass the man and turn others in the building against him. Initially, Masterji shrugs it off, thinking that he is his own man and it does not matter what others think of him, but upon reflection realizes that people form an opinion based on what they observe and experience. He realizes that people do not have the best opinion of him after all.

All of us are now at the Kala Paani. We have to cross it, or we'll be stuck in Vishram Society for the rest of our lives.  
-- Mr. Ajwani (Book 6)

**Importance:** Ajwani and Mrs. Puri have gone to visit Ibrahim Kudwa at his shop to get him to sign a document expelling Masterji from the Society. Ajwani tries to convince him by telling him that everyone is standing on the edge of the Kala Paani, or black water, an old Hindu term for the ocean. In the past, Hindus were not allowed to sail on the water and Ajwani says that is what has kept them backward and fearful in the world. Now, he is encouraging Mr. Kudwa to step out boldly and not be fearful about taking this step against Masterji. He is portraying it as a necessary step to get everyone out of Tower A and into a better life.

The law won't work.' He could hear the builder's tongue vibrating within Parekh's mucus. Just like the tuning fork he had used in class for an acoustics experiment. Corruption had become physics; its precise frequency had been discovered by Mr. Shah. If he engaged another lawyer, that thick tongue would fine tune him too.  
-- Masterji (Book 7)

**Importance:** Masterji realizes that the lawyer he has hired to represent him against Mr. Shah has gone behind his back and tried to make a settlement. The author uses a science metaphor to communicate how the lawyer, Mr. Parekh, has been tuned and manipulated by Shah. Masterji now sees that the law will not work for him, but against him since the Society has voted him out of the building. His lawyer has not given him full counsel and been willing to fight his case to the end, but instead has been paid off by Shah to drop the case and persuade Masterji to settle.

Sangeeta and Renuka Kothari came today and said, if all of us agree to do something -- a simple thing -- would you and Mr. Pinto agree? "What is this simple thing, Shelley? I





don't know, Mr. Pinto. I told them not to tell us.  
-- Mrs. Pinto (Book 8)

**Importance:** The Pintos have been hold outs along with Masterji on accepting the buyout offer. However, they are beginning to think they should accept the money as their children in America could use some financial help. They have been Masterji's friend for more than 30 years and do not want to betray him, but here they are asked to go along with the rest of the society and do a "simple thing." They do not even know what the "thing" is and want to remain ignorant of it. Ultimately, they and the others in the building stop their ears with cotton so they can legitimately say that they did not hear any noise or trouble that night in the building. The "simple thing" is to literally turn a deaf ear as some hired thugs come to scare Masterji into signing. But as Ajwani later discovers when the plot intensifies, pushing Masterji off the roof is not a "simple thing," it is killing a man.

My fingers still smell, she whispered. That man made me dirty my fingers. With my own son's...He made me do that. I can never forgive him.  
-- Mrs. Puri (Book 9)

**Importance:** Mrs. Puri cannot get the smell of feces off her hands after she smeared it all over Masterji's apartment door. Her cruel and disgusting act was in an attempt to get him to sign the buyout papers. That she takes no responsibility for her own actions and blames it on Masterji shows how greatly she has allowed her greed and self-concern to take over. She once was best friends with Masterji's wife. She bought mangoes for him and looked after him, even trying to procure a plumber to clear his water pipes. Her son likes his "uncle." But now, her desire to be "fixed for life" and to know that Ramu will be cared for after she is gone has clouded her judgement, sense of personal responsibility and even humanity.

He cursed his luck. Of all the things to pick up from Falkland Road - all the horrible names he had worried about for all these years -- gonorrhoea, syphilis, prostatitis, AIDS -- he had to pick this up: a conscience.  
-- The narrator (Book 9)

**Importance:** Here the narrator reveals that Ajwani has suddenly grown a conscience. For years, Mr. Ajwani has been coming to Falkland Road to get with prostitutes. He came to this section of the city on this particular evening in order to prepare himself for what he was going to do to Masterji later that night - push him off the rooftop terrace. While walking in the streets, he hears the noise of the metal workers behind the brothel and walks down the alley. He sees all the men working and sweating, smells the harsh chemicals of their trade and something clicks inside him. He realizes that it is not a simple thing to push a man off a building, but it is in fact murder. It seems strange to him, that instead of contracting a sexually transmitted disease, he acquired something good, a conscience that kept him from killing a man.

TNT could not be used in a neighborhood this densely populated; the destruction had to be done by human hands.



-- The narrator (Epilogue)

**Importance:** Although this statement is directly about the physical demolition of Vishram Society Tower A, it serves as a metaphor for the social and psychological destruction that took place among the members of the Society. The building is being torn down, but it must be sawed and pulled apart by hand because it is too close to too many other standing buildings and people; explosive devices cannot be used to tear it apart. Similarly, Shah needed to tear apart the social structure of the people in Tower A. He did not come in with direct heavy handed threats and blow everyone away. He worked subtly and let the individual members work against each other to dismantle the civility and "pucca-ness" of the Society.

What matters is this. He did what he believed to be right. He had a conscience. No matter what people said to him or did to him he never changed his mind, and never betrayed his conscience. He was free to the end.

-- Mrs. Rego (Epilogue)

**Importance:** Mrs. Rego is giving a speech to the boys who usually play cricket outside the Tamil temple. She has taken them to Juhu beach to play by the water. Mr. Ajwani and Mary, the cleaning lady, are also there and listening. The group is remembering their former neighbor and honoring his life and name. Mrs. Rego wants the boys to remember the man as someone who was true to his conscience and stood up for what he believed. Despite all the pressure everyone put on him, he never wavered. Mrs. Rego tells the boys that she hopes that many of them will grow to become men like Masterji. For the adults in the group, this is a moment of expressing some small bit of truth about what really happened at Vishram Society. They are truly saddened by Masterji's death and promise to remember and honor him.