

Last Man in Tower by Aravind Adiga: A Paratextual Interpretation

آخر رجل في البرج بقلم أرافيند أديجا: دراسة تفسيرية لعتبات النص

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Abstract

Informations about Article

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The Indian author Aravind Adiga's novel Last Man in Tower (2011) describes a dispute between Masterji, a retired teacher, and Dharmen Shah, a real estate developer, for an apartment in Mumbai's Vakola city. This narrative is approached from a paratextual perspective, an attempt no one has done before. This article highlights the interactions of the paratextuality of the novel and its text in order to explore the relationship between the paratexts and the spaces depicted in the novel. This study applies Gérard Genette's paratext theory to demonstrate that Adiga's Last Man in Tower's paratextual components influence the readers' perception and understanding of the literary work.

Introduction

Aravind Adiga, a postmodern Indian author, entered the literary world with his first book, *The White Tiger*, which was published in 2008. He immediately rose to international fame by winning the "Man Booker Prize" that same year. Aravind Adiga worked as a writer, a journalist and a correspondent for *The Times*. He was raised in India and Australia, and he attended Columbia College and Oxford University to study English literature. He is presently a resident of Mumbai, India. Adiga writes for everyman in the same way that Charles Dickens did. The major concerns of postcolonial identity, the simplicity of urban life, and the conflict of underprivileged people are all reflected in Adiga's works. His recognition was to be followed by more novels such as the one which is the focus of interest in this article.

Mumbai is the setting for the 2011 novel *Last Man in Tower*. Adiga portrays the city as a thriving commercial and financial hub with a wide range of options. Dharmen Shah who owns The Confidence Group (Adiga, p. 39), a major Mumbai real estate development company, serves as the man who is against the main character, Yogesh A. Murthy, a retired teacher known as Masterji. Shah plans to buy out the entire Vishram society (Adiga, p. 3) in the

slummy neighbourhood of Vakola. A dispute between the neighbours, who represent the majority of property owners who agree to sell their apartments to Shah, and Masterji, the only owner who refuses to do so is presented to the reader. As described by the narrator, Shah is a generous person offering Masterji's neighbours sweets. The reader discovers that at the heart of his generosity toward his staff and Masterji's neighbours lies the fact that such generosity is merely a means by which he can reach his goals and not an innate quality. Would the narrative have a power scenario remindful of colonial powers?

Dipanjoy Mukherjee in his paper "Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*: a Postcolonial Reading of New India", published in 2015, approaches the novel from a postcolonial perspective. The author shows that the social as well as the cultural values depicted in the novel are affected by globalization. Mukherjee declares that there are: "two antithetical forces: Masetrji who signifies a postcolonial opposition and the greedy developer who stands for neo-colonial paradigm" (p. 56). Two towers are inhabited in the novel and the occupants of Tower A portray the middle-class citizens of Mumbai who try to convince Masterji that Shah's offer will bring them unexpected wealth. Mukherjee declares that, in *Last Man in Tower*,

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Mumbai is depicted as a commercial and financial hub or a site of several opportunities. According to the literary critic, Adiga implies that to have a pucca¹ house in Mumbai is a dream for middle class people because of the intimate relations of the real estate developers and their corrupt politicians (p. 56-57). Would the narrative have a scenario that would be remindful of class struggle?

Badiuzzaman Shaikh (2021) in his article entitled “Masterji’s Resistance in Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*: An Embodiment of the Struggle of the Marginalized Class” analyses the novel from a Marxist perspective. The author of this piece of criticism studies the effects of capitalism, urbanization, privatization, and globalization in postcolonial India. Shaikh sees that the writer finds that all these changes in the Indian contemporary society have effectively forked India into two groups: the privileged upper class and the underprivileged lower class, representative of the rich and the poor, but also of the centre and the margin. While Dharmen Shah represents the group of people who are economically and socio-politically highly influential, Masterji is the embodiment of the marginalized class that is constantly dominated and exploited (p. 84). To the literary critic, Shah becomes an embodiment of the wealthy people in contemporary society who is in a rivalry with the marginalized Masterji.

In the short literary review of the analysis of *Last Man in Tower*, it clearly appears that no study has been attempted from a paratextual standpoint. The present one tries to shed lights on the interactions between the novel’s paratextuality and its text. The paratexts of the novel exist in the use of map, title, front cover image, and tower layout. This article discusses the status, importance, and interpretive potential of the paratexts as well as their purpose and function as accompanying parts to the main text. In order to study the paratexts of the novel and to show its participation in the readers’ perception and interpretation of the narrative, the article’s major material utilizes Gérard Genette’s idea of paratexts. The use of paratexts and how they relate to the context become the foci of this research. This study underlines the importance of deep investigation into the role played by the paratextual components in Adiga’s *Last Man in the Tower*. What do the paratextual components indicate? What connection can be made between a literature that describes a fictional universe and a map that accompanies the text?

In his study entitled *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), the French Literary theorist Gérard Genette

states that a paratext is:

a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that ... is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it. (p. 2)

Still according to Genette, Paratexts are “the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public” (p. 261) as suggested in *Introduction to the Paratext* (1991). In other words, the way literary texts read and are interpreted is affected by the paratextual elements. Because it provides invaluable insights into how texts are presented and received by the intended audience, the study of paratexts is of utmost importance. Adiga’s work is an example of how important paratexts are and how the above statements are expressive and related.

The elements of notes, maps, titles, dedications, and pictures that accompany a text are referred to as paratext. In other words, readers are exposed to the paratextual aspects before they are exposed to the text itself. These paratextual elements may therefore have a significant impact on how the reader interprets the text, leading to varied interpretations. For Tally Jr (2013) “to the writer’s literary cartography, we might add the reader’s literary geography. The critical reader becomes a kind of geographer who actively interprets the literary map in such a way as to present new, sometimes hitherto unforeseen mappings” (p. 79). Trying to position oneself while interacting with a novel can be quite significant because once the readers come across a setting, they might go back to the map, for instance, to locate themselves. Instead of just passively taking the information, the reader actively participates.

According to Genette (1997), paratextual materials accompany productions to the text in order to present, extend, and surround it (p. 1). The scholar categorizes paratexts in terms of spatial positioning into: peritext (paratexts inside of the book) and epitext (paratexts outside of it) (p. 2). The former is the subject of the study because the paratexts we deal with in this analysis are located between the pages of the book. Genette (1997) argues that the paratext “...is neither on the interior nor on the exterior: it is both; it is on the threshold” (p. XV11). That is to say, the paratextual devices whether inside or outside the book, support the content of the book and serve a single and obvious goal for both the writer and the readers since the majority of the paratexts are approved by the author and noticed by

1 The Hindustani word *Pucca*, Adiga uses, means in English permanent and solid. It is ironically used; none of the residents believes that his/her building is old and threatens to fall although they face various problems.

the reader.

Genette (1997) believes that the major goal of the paratext is to guarantee that the text is consistent with the author's objective rather than to make the text "look nice" (p. 407). The paratext's subliminal influence and manipulation are frequently sensed unconsciously. This mode of operation is unquestionably in the author's best interest, even when it isn't necessarily in the reader's (p. 409). This idea is particularly crucial when the fictitious map is viewed as a particular kind of paratext that can help the reader understand and organize the information from the story.

The study of Genette (1997) purposefully chooses to concentrate on textual paratexts. This critic focuses on the paratext that "shares the linguistic status of the text" (p. 7). This prompts the inquiry of a visual paratext, as the map, and whether it has got the same impact as the linguistic paratext. Though there exist cases where the definition of a map as a paratext permits it to be considered as a minor element, it is not the case as in Adiga's novel. In fact, this explains why maps are frequently discounted or ignored in literary works. Thus, one may think about the literary meaning or worth of the map as defined by its paratextual function and features.

Genette (1997) identifies some key features that determine and relate to paratextual elements in the sense that: defining a paratextual element consists of determining its location (the question *where?*); the date of its appearance

and, if need be, its disappearance (*when?*); its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situation of communication - its sender and addressee (*from whom? to whom?*); and the functions that its message aims to fulfil (*to do what?*). (p. 4)

This identification outlines the five fundamental elements of the material relationship between the text and paratexts found in *Last Man in Tower* which are: temporal relationship, location within the literary work, linguistic and visual communication, from author to reader, and the role of the paratexts in accordance with the text.

Providing a description of the location of the story's space, the story opens with a welcome map that reflects the Vishram Society centering in Mumbai. Adiga uses the Vakola setting where Masterji lives as the space that the protagonist is striving to secure from Shah's egoist intention in the destruction of Tower A. The reader sees the map as a clarifying piece to go along with the text's information about particular areas in the entire space referred to in the novel. First place positioned maps are more likely to be noticed by readers than end position maps. Obviously, the map is used and interpreted in relation to the text which influences the readers' comprehension and interaction with the work as a whole. Instead of engaging closely with the map's details, the first contact focuses on the aesthetic appeal. This can be verified with the following map (p. 9), which Adiga uses in his novel.



The fictitious map depicts spatial relationships that, if one develops a habitual attitude for them, will have a substantial impact on events in a sequential narrative that the reader has not yet encountered. Sometimes the map is used as a mere illustration. Instead of being actively used to deepen the reader's comprehension of the literary area, it stays in a useless state. The map can have an integral meaning only after the narrative world become meaningful. This occurs when a reader who is interested in spatiality carefully examines the map before drawing links to the text. In this instance, the map's effectiveness as a paratextual component is revealed in its capacity to act as a powerful tool for communication that, once read, can engage in dialogue with the text.

Similar to Adiga's previous use of maps, *LMIT* opens with a map rather than an epigraph to signal the beginning of the story. The map's paratextual presence foreshadows the book's discussion of spatial issues. Adiga includes a map in *Last Man in Tower*, entitled "Mumbai" much like some authors do with epigraphs frequent in literary works. One should note that the map can be viewed as a segment in itself, which further implies that the context works in concert with it. This paratextual presence of the map creates a space for transaction between the reader and the text that contributes positive guidance to the text. The narrative spaces portrayed in the story's world are strongly tied to the novel's materiality. The author's intention in providing a map is to guide his readers following the narrative process; the novel is full of details and depicts various spatial areas where the events in Mumbai take place. As a result, the map prompts the reader to consider its contribution to the narrative in general and enable him/her to locate himself/herself within the space of the novel in particular. The map in the novel helps the reader get ready for analysis by reducing the text to a few key components, abstracting the spaces from the story's setting, and creating an accompanying element of the map. Adiga provides situational explanations with a visual representation of

the actual elements of the narrative linguistic aspect. In combination with the text, the map encourages the readers to enter the author's fictional world and explore the concept of city space. Readers can position themselves and move across different spatial locations. As so many sites are covered in the book, one can trace and follow Adiga's map of *Mumbai* to identify the paths that work as a massive web of the city. As a result, the map is helpful and complementary to the reading process. The reader becomes active in reading and checking places and locations from the text onto the map.

Furthermore, other paratextual components mirror the novel's overall aspects, which in various ways deal with space dimensions. The novel's title sounds like last man in power, which reflects the story. The reader's attention is drawn to the title's symbolic meaning in this section. Masterji, as the title implies, is the last man in the tower and the last person standing up for his moral principles and legal rights in the face of constant social pressure. In the end, Masterji will have to defend himself alone, not just from Shah, but from the entire neighbourhood and his friends.

The main character experiences remorselessness in the unjust and dominant spaces of the city which are reflected through the title. The protagonist's experience is symbolic of the displacement of Tower A inhabitants for spatial and financial purposes. The word "Tower" in the title relates to an architectural feature of the castle, but is now imagined as a tall modern structure. Hence, the tower is or rather was symbolic for the strongest part of a castle that was inhabited by the monarch who was the property owner and man in charge. In this novel, the man in authority is Shah, who is opposed by the man in the tower, Masterji; there is a power imbalance as the man in the tower challenges the man in power. Masterji maintains his stance of refusing to leave the Tower. His position is also illustrated on the novel's cover image, which is actually a paratext.



The image on the front cover of the paperback edition, which Atlantic Books published in 2011, is another paratextual element or presentational aspect. It depicts a shadow of a person, clearly representing Masterji the “Last Man” standing by himself on the balcony of the first floor of the tower. The figure stands for Masterji, in the novel, he stands alone against the rapacious capitalists of globalised India; in the courage and bravery that is bestowed to him by the author. The cover also features a flamingo bird, an aquatic bird which symbolises purity, wisdom, loyalty, divinity, and enlightenment in Indian tradition. Symbolically, the flamingo is Masterji, who is the lone inhabitant loyal to the old building that he calls home rather than a house.

Flamingos also symbolize the necessity for social life, especially as they migrate in groups which indicates the power of unity, unlike masterji who is the only resistant in the face of Shah. Flamingo symbolism reminds one that the individual may be different from others, distinct and firm in his/her decision. Just like Masterji who finds himself surrounded by greedy owners who do not give value to people’s feelings and emotions. He is the only inhabitant sticking to his house that carries his memories. In addition, it is common that Flamingos stick together to maintain protection as well as longstanding and enduring

friendships rather than random, loose connections unlike Masterji’s relationship with his neighbours and friends that is built on shaky basis gnawed by the love of money. His tenacity becomes a symbol of the perseverance of underprivileged persons in Indian modern society despite the fact that he stands alone. These most important elements that distinguish the bird are similar to masterji’s traits that make him differ from his neighbours.

Moreover, on the cover photo, there is a plane that symbolizes Santa Cruz Airport, a fusion of natural and artificial components. In the centre of the map, Santa Cruz Airport, which is located in Vakola in the spatially bustling city of *Mumbai*, is drawn to show the story’s setting. The author displays the geographic significance of the location as a strategic one, given that it is both in the city and close to Santa Cruz Airport, indicating that Shah the investor, like other investors in India, is attempting to select the greatest spots in the country, even at the expense of its citizens. According to the text, Masterji’s neighbours’ sole objective is to maximise their profit from Shah’s project. This explains Adiga’s choice of symbolizing the airport in the middle of the map and a plane on the cover photo. The airport offers

easy access to travelling abroad; attractive to businessmen and retired people, a place of tourism and flights.

The layout of Vishram Society, found on pages 11 and 12, is a paratext that supplements the text in laying out the

Vishram society. *Last Man in Tower* has got the layout of the Vishram society, which is located in Vakola Santa Cruz, Mumbai, and whose occupants form an integral element of Adiga's novel.

**PLAN OF VISHRAM SOCIETY (TOWER A)
VAKOLA, SANTA CRUZ (EAST), MUMBAI – 400055**

Ground floor:

- 0A the security guard's personal room
- 0B allotted to the Secretary of the Society for official work, with an alcove for the cleaning lady to store her broom, disinfectant, and mopping cloth
- 0C Felicia Saldanha, 49, and her daughter Radhika, 20; Mr Saldanha, an engineer, is said to work in Vizag

1st floor:

- 1A Suresh Nagpal, 54, timber merchant, and wife Mohini, 53
- 1B Georgina Rego, 48, social worker, and son Sunil, 14, and daughter Sarah, 11
- 1C C. L. Abichandani, hardware specialist, 56, his wife Kamini, 52, and daughters Kavita, 18, and Roopa, 21

2nd floor:

- 2A Albert Pinto, 67, retired accountant for the Britannia Biscuit Company, and wife Shelley, 64
- 2B Deepak Vij, 57, businessman, his wife Shruti, 43, and daughter Shobha, 21
- 2C Ramesh Ajwani, real-estate broker, 50, his wife Rukmini, 47, and sons Rajeev, 13, and Raghav, 10

3rd floor:

- 3A Yogesh A. Murthy (known as 'Masterji'), retired schoolteacher, 61, now living alone after the recent death of his wife Purnima
- 3B Given on rent to Ms. Meenakshi, possibly a journalist, single woman of

about 25. Owner Shiv Hiranandani (known as 'Import-Export') lives in Khar West

- 3C Sanjiv Puri, 54, accountant, his wife Sangeeta, 52, and son Ramesh, 18, afflicted with Down's syndrome

4th floor:

- 4A Ashvin Kothari, 55, the Secretary of the Society, occupation unknown, his wife Renuka, 49, and son Siddharth (known as 'Tinku'), 10
 4B George Lobo, 45, respectable chemist, his wife Carmina, 40, and daughter Selma, 19
 4C Ibrahim Kudwa, 49, internet-store owner, his wife Mumtaz, 33, and children Mohammad, 10, and Mariam, 2

5th floor:

- 5A Given on rent to Mr Narayanswami, 35, working in an insurance company in the Bandra-Kurla Financial Centre. Wife said to be in Hyderabad. (Owner Mr Pais lives in Abu Dhabi)
 5B Sudeep Ganguly, 43, proprietor of a stationery shop in Bandra (East), his wife Sharmila, 41, and son Anand, 11
 5C left empty, on request of owner Mr Sean Costello, after the suicide of his son Ferdinand, who jumped from the terrace of the building; owner currently in Qatar, working as chef for American fast-food company

Other regulars:

Mary, 34, the *khachada-wali*, or cleaning lady; and Ram Khare, 56, the security guard; maids and cooks are employed in most of the households

From the first to the fifth floor, the plan depicts the various inhabitants' spatial locations. The spatial arrangement of Masterji's and his neighbours' floors mirror the actual space they occupy. Adiga's choice is ironic. While the tower's plan depicts the neighbours as a single connected unit, the story's world describes their distant and disconnected relationship. As the Vishram society's deadline for demolition draws near and Shah's offer might decline, Masterji's neighbours' desires grow; they turn against him, and Masterji is thrown from the top of Tower A. The narrator relates the incident which the neighbours desire to be perceived as mere suicide while they actually push the old man from the top of the tower:

And then he (Masterji) realized that the thing that was

blocking his passage was cleared, and he was falling; his body had begun its short earthly flight – which it completed almost instantaneously – before Yogesh Murthy's soul was released for its much longer flight over the oceans of the other world. Down on the ground it lay, sprawled, in perfect imitation of a suicide's corpse. (p. 324)

The previous quote depicts the contrast between the content of the text, which proves the disagreement and dispersion of the neighbours into pieces, and the outline of the building, which represents them as one united block. Such unity is relevant again in their desire to sell their flats as opposed to Masterji. Similar to the paratexts, the content reflects the differentiation of the residents. In the novel's last paragraph, the narrator relates:

... all of which were hemmed in by the fencing; except for one greying ancient, whose aerial roots, squirming through barbed wire and broken glass, dripped down the wall like primordial ooze until their bright growing tips, nearly touching the pavement ... (p. 346)

This description of the trees that are grouped symbolises Shah and Masterji's neighbours, while the grey and the lone tree represents Masterji. The book's final italicised sentence conveys a moral lesson when Adiga writes: "*Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free*" (p. 346). This line of the narrative takes an unexpected and unanticipated turn. Friends become enemies willing to abandon their values in order to make a profit. This novel shows the new India that Aravind Adiga explores and exposes, where ordinary people are tempted by money and material well-being in a corrupt society.

Conclusion

The paratextual devices analysed in this article reflect what happens inside the boundaries of the literary work.

The novel is analysed as a material object to focus upon the material and aesthetic tensions and transactions that occur between the text and the paratexts. It also examines how the paratexts influence the reception and the interpretation of the text. The paratextual elements in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* influence how readers interact with the work's overall meaning; they are not mere accessories of the text. The novel's paratexts reflect the story world and their material presence is closely related to the content. The paratexts function as a guide for readers to locate the elements of the story and follow the narrative process. In addition, the visual paratexts, as the map, are as equally important as the linguistic paratexts such as the title. This paper analysed the link the paratexts that are surrounding the text and the reader's interpretation of these paratextual aspects represented in Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*.

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آخر رجل في البرج بقلم أرافيند أديجا : دراسة تفسيرية لعبات النص

ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية

عقبات النص
النص
الفضاء
القراء
الخريطة

تصف رواية المؤلف الهندي أرافيند أديجا، تحت عنوان آخر رجل في البرج (2011)، نزاعاً بين المدرس المتقاعد ماسترجي، والمطور العقاري دارمن شاه، حول شقة في مدينة فاكولا في مومباي. يدرس المقال العقبات النصية لهذه الرواية، المنظور الذي لم يتطرق له أحد من قبل، حيث يسلط الضوء على التفاعلات بين عقبات الرواية ونصها لاكتشاف العلاقة بينها وبين الفضاءات المصورة في الرواية. تطبق هذه الدراسة نظرية عقبات النص لجبرارد جينيت لإثبات أن العناصر الشبه النصية لرواية أديجا آخر رجل في البرج تؤثر على إدراك القراء وفهمهم لهذا العمل الأدبي.

Dernier Homme de la Tour d'Aravind Adiga : une Interprétation Paratextuelle

Résumé

Le roman de l'auteur Indien Aravind Adiga *Dernier Homme de la Tour* décrit une lutte entre Masterji, un instituteur retraité, et Dharmen Shah, un promoteur immobilier; à propos d'un appartement dans la ville de Vakola à Mumbai. Aucune étude d'un point de vue paratextuel n'a été menée parmi les approches critiques de ce roman. Cet article tente de mettre en évidence les interactions entre la paratextualité du roman et son texte afin d'explorer la relation entre les paratextes et les espaces représentés dans le roman. Cette analyse applique la théorie du paratexte de Gérard Genette pour démontrer que les éléments paratextuels du *Dernier Homme de la Tour* d'Adiga influencent également la façon dont les lecteurs perçoivent et comprennent l'œuvre littéraire.

Mots clés

Paratextes
Texte
Espace
Les lecteurs
Carte



Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests

تضارب المصالح

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