
In the Dance of Love and Conflict: Re-reading the Poison of Love as a Tale of Ruptured Relationships

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ABSTRACT

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Love frequently appears as a double-edged blade in the complex tapestry of human experience, capable of both tremendous joy and devastating sadness. The English translation of K. R. Meera's Malayalam novella "Meera-saadhu," "The Poison of Love," explores this contradiction in great detail by following the life of Tulsi, a gifted IIT student whose path from emotional disaster to academic greatness serves as a moving tale about the destructive power of love. The novella, translated by Ministhy S., is a philosophical reflection on the nature of love, betrayal, and the human condition that goes beyond simple narrative. When Tulsi leaves her fiancé and family to follow the intriguing journalist Madhav, she enters a world where love can be both a blessing and a curse. Given his nonchalant attitude towards relationships and his belief that his many partnerships are 'alms' to the bereaved, Madhav personifies the fleeting essence of love. The ultimate sacrifice at the altar of love is symbolised by Tulsi's cascading descent into despair, which ends with the poisoning of her children and her transition into a destitute beggar in Vrindavan. The poignant philosophical themes that underpin our most intimate experiences are explored in "The Poison of Love" as readers are led through Tulsi's terrible journey. This story serves as an illustration of the fine line that separates devotion from love as well as the potential for self-destruction found in the human heart.

1.0 Introduction

A common perception of marriage is that it is a holy commitment made by two people to improve their shared life. This system requires care, protection, and dedication by nature. The term "amatonormativity," coined by Elizabeth Brake, emphasises the strongly ingrained notion that, despite the possible drawbacks of marriage, people hardly ever question this institution or look for fulfilment elsewhere. The media and popular narratives frequently glamorise the skewed reality of marriage, which is kept hidden.

If given the opportunity to express themselves honestly, many married women may not encourage marriage in the same way that society does; instead, their personal experiences might highlight a reality that would discourage other people from getting into similar

partnerships. This perpetuates a cycle of servitude since mothers who have experienced the humiliations of a subservient role in marriage frequently still harbour dreams of marrying their children to older, better-educated men. The societal problem at hand has its roots deep in cultural upbringing. The conventional expectations of wifehood and motherhood are so deeply ingrained that many people feel compelled to uphold them even in the face of knowledge of the negative effects of such suppression.

The *Poison of Love*, an incredible novel by renowned Indian author KR Meera, which was first written as "Meera Sadhu" in Malayalam and then translated into English by Ministhy S in 2017, tackles the story of a miserable marriage. The story centres on Tulsi, an "IIT graduate with record marks," and renowned journalist Madhav. Just before the wedding bells ring, Tulsi deserts her fiancée Vinay and her family in favour of Madhav, who acknowledges having twenty-six girlfriends—of which Tulsi is the twenty-seventh. Even though Tulsi first justified her choice of Madhav for Vinay because of Madhav's affection in the early days of their marriage, Madhav's experiences later in life show her to be incorrect. Consequently, she ended up in Vrindavan with her head chopped off and was one of the meera sadhus who committed self-mutilation to exact revenge on him.

As a system of male dominance, patriarchy creates social stratification based on gender, with men controlling women and making them feel marginalized and silent as a result. The phrase "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Sylvia Walby, n.d.) is a fitting way to define it. The author deftly depicts the harsh reality of a young girl's existence as she gives in to the whims of a man who personifies the stereotypical patriarchal image in the 101-page novella. This story offers an in-depth study of the philosophical implications of patriarchy. It explores the ways in which societal systems support gender inequality as well as the ubiquitous effects of male domination on people's personal lives. The novella asks readers to consider the deeper, systemic causes at work in addition to showing the obvious effects of patriarchal rule. The tragic journey of the protagonist reveals the subtle ways in which patriarchy stifles and distorts individual agency. It brings up important issues regarding autonomy, freedom, and the morality of cultural conventions that maintain gender hierarchy. As a result, the novella turns into a critical reflection on the lasting effects of patriarchy as well as a call to reconsider and question the deeply ingrained social structures that uphold gender-based oppression.

A girl is subject to patriarchal ideas from the minute she is born, not only when she is of marriageable age. In "The Second Sex," Simone de Beauvoir states that a woman "becomes a woman, rather than being born." A girl is covered in a pink blanket from birth and socialized to love dolls, be kind, patient, and obedient, as well as to cry when she is upset. On the other hand, a boy dressed in blue is expected to be bold, strong, and in charge. The marital tract is where this hegemonial trap appears. The connection between a man and a woman is based on the power structure, in which the woman internalizes the rules and acts in accordance with them. Anyone who deviates from this behavior is seen as abnormal (Millett). This behavior is accepted as normal.

In *The Poison of Love*, Madhav applies his tactics to ensure Tulsi's submission. The first task for Madhav is winning her heart proving that he is the best choice for her. When Tulsi's marriage is fixed to Vinay, Madhav says "Tulsi, it's stupid to get married at this age. I remember what your teachers said. You were their most promising student. Someone who

could be India's pride! Possibly a future Nobel Prize winner" (Meera, 15). Tulsi feels alighted and further Madhav justifies Vinay to be her wrong choice and himself to be the perfect match for her. He ensures his constant presence with her not to lose her. The forward step that Madhav takes in trapping Tulsi is by tying the Mangalsutra. 'We will tie the Mangalsutra... Everything has been arranged' (Meera, 23)

The Mangalsutra is an evident symbol of patriarchal domination. Through the tying of the knot the woman loses her identity and the man becomes her sole authority. Thereafter, she is not allowed to remove her Mangalsutra till the death of her husband. The woman becomes a ball of wax to be shaped by her husband and society under the norms of the best wife concept. Marriage as an institution is known to be bondage of love, care and protection. Indian society is respected for its devotion in family relationships. Even though this fact is true to an extent, with reference to the situation of a woman it cannot be interpreted so in its true reality. The person with the very least freedom of movement in a family is the woman.

Being married Tulsi loses her career and she becomes a 'cult of domesticity'. She shrinks her to the world of Madhav thereby accepting her total submission. Though Tulsi is a highly educated woman, she chooses her later life to be spent inside the four walls of her house playing the role of the best 'wife, mother and entertainer' (Beavoir). She takes up the domestic function of the female. She is even ignorant of the life of her husband and is degraded into the status of a childish play thing.

'I, who had graduated from IIT with record marks, became the handmaiden of Madhav.

I washed his clothes with affection, and ironed them with devotion.

I cooked his beloved food with reverence.

The places where he stood and sat, I cleaned as if they were sacred.

I blissfully surrendered to him and he accepted me with compassion.' (Meera, 46)

The patriarchal society injects the ideas and morals of a perfect womanhood thereby persuading them to their ultimate subordination. "He disliked women who raised their voices. Women should stay beautiful. They should always be smiling" (Meera, 86)

'What the hell do you know about a man? You think I will spend all my time pampering you? Look, Tulsi, be practical! No man can ever confine himself to a single woman. That's the way men are built.' What about women? I asked. 'That's different. You are genetically tuned' (Meera 86, 87).

Marriage demands not only for the subordination of women but also for their 'visibility'. A married woman should be an open notebook in front of her husband. It doesn't mean that the husband should be so to the woman in turn. In the modern time where mobile phones are in vogue, a woman is not supposed to set any lock for her phone. The WhatsApp chat history, how often she is online, has she deleted any message; all such details are under surveillance. But this is never demanded from the man. In case he is asked, the woman will be tagged as ill-mannered. Madhav hides his true self and continues his patriarchal power and domination upon her in the name of his false pretention of love. There is a situation when Tulsi doubts and asks him about his extramarital relationships.

Love me, trust me. Do not doubt this at all. The past and the future do not belong to us.

Today, this moment- this is the only reality, and it is everlasting.

I became dull and dispirited... Forget everything and just love passionately. Jealousy is irrelevant in love.’ (Meera, 47, 48)

Madhav shuts her mouth through his systematic administration of power by evoking the notion of jealousy, a trait that is not accepted from the part of an ideal wife towards her husband. It is evident that this approach of Madhav can be explained with the concept of cultural hegemony envisioned by Antonio Gramsci. ‘The dominant ideology justifies the social, political and economic status quo as natural, inevitable, perpetual and beneficial for everyone, rather than as artificial social constructs that benefit only the ruling class.’ (Gramsci). Cultural hegemony ‘is the idea that the dominant ideology of society- the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values and morals- reflects that of the ruling class.’

Tulsi is not the only one female character who undergoes submission, but one among the many. The many girlfriends of Madhav, including Lily who is abandoned, Bhama, who is tortured by Madhav for the abortion of Madhav’s baby, the other characters like Mallika and Tamara, Tulsi’s sisters who were rushly married of by their father because of the elopement of their eldest sister without considering the bright and promising career, Nabneeta, Chameli and the thousands of meera sadhu’s in the Vrindavan, all of them being the victims of ‘masculine hegemony’.

The novella is not just a portrayal of the male dominance, but how Tulsi breaks her silence to the evil wills of Madhav. Tulsi never succumbs herself to the subordination under Madav. As soon as she understands his evil side, she breaks all the bondages that attach her to him and escapes. The novel mostly speaks of how Tulsi tries to retort to all the evil works of Madav by distorting her identity as a beautiful woman. Beauty is a concept that is attributed by the patriarchal society. There are many instances in the novel where Madhav appreciates the beauty of Tulsi. In her path of revenge, the first thing that Tulsi does is getting a tonsure. When the beautician asks the reason for it, she replies ‘I want to be free’ (Meera, 31)

Shulamith Firestone says that the male dominance come off as a result of the females thinking that only they can protect the family and bring for their livelihood. Only way for the females to be free is by keeping away from the task of reproduction. Females are not here to satisfy the sexual desires of man and give birth to baby. Motherhood becomes central to woman. If not able to reproduce, she is dispensable. A woman can be independent by keeping her notions of beauty to be attracted by men apart and becoming self-sufficient and independent (Firestone).

Elaine Shawalter has pointed in her work *Towards Feminist Poetics*, a female experience is portrayed more realistically when written by a female writer and analyzing her characters show the true colour of patriarchal tactics and experiences of women who are thus subjugated. Here in this novella, KR Meera has portrayed the plight of the married women and the countless tortures one experiences. That is the reason for the wholehearted reception of this work by the female readers admitting that they could see themselves mirrored in Tulsi.

1.1 Conclusion

In the story, milk—often associated with gestation, purity, and the feeding of the gods—is associated with evil 'love'. Love, the precious experience, is compared to things like spilled

milk, to the demon Putana, to "a serpent that had swallowed its own tail" (Meera, 29), and even to "acid that corrodes the vessel itself" (Meera, 45). Love is therefore portrayed as detrimental to itself, demanding prudence. Once eaten, it results in death. Love corrodes, so watch out for its hold. It is said that patriarchal society's hegemonic trap manifests itself in marriage. Instead of giving in to the deceptive promises made by men, a woman should concentrate on starting a career in order to maintain her independence. According to Judith Butler, gender and sex shouldn't be associated with one another and should continue to exist separately (Butler). Socially assigned gender roles are flexible and can change as circumstances demand. Depending on the circumstance, men can adopt traditionally feminine roles and vice versa. Before committing to anything, it is important to establish an equitable sharing of rights in a meaningful relationship.

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