

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SHORT FICTIONS OF PHILIP ROTH'S *THE BREAST* AND O.V. VIJAYAN'S *THE WART*

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Abstract

Comparative literature is an attempt to understand different languages, culture, art, literature, and attitudes of the people. Philip Roth, American novelist's *The Breast* and O.V. Vijayan, Indian novelist's *The Wart* are the classic short fictions in the literary canon, exhibits the similarities and differences in their work. The novellas explore the crucial issues such as evil polity, power, identity, failure of democracy, fear, anguish, political chaos, and corruption. They posit the frustration and angst of modern man which results in the lack of communication and misunderstanding in human relationships. They have captured the dewdrop of modern man's life and reflect it in their intensive writing. These novellas bring into focus the perpetual dilemma of modern man in the twentieth century. This article is an attempt to compare in various perspectives. Nations are different but the narration is similar in both the short fictions. Roth and Vijayan have shown the tragic plight of modern man through Kepesh and an unnamed protagonist who revisit us in the form of individuals in the 21st century.

Keywords: biology, psychology, metaphor, unconscious, emergency, civilization, change,

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Comparative study is helpful to know similarities in two or more writers to find out the same thread of their perspective, ideology, and the way they live in a particular milieu. The present select novellas are written by American and Indian novelist, which are woven with a thread of transformation. Being short fictions, they have limited scope to portray life sketches, but both the writers have aptly used biological metaphors to explore their worldview in an effective way to intensify the torch of present day reality in an allegorical way. They enlarge our vision to understand culture, socio-political ethos and reasons of dissatisfied generations. The comparison of both the short fictions is broadly analyzed on the basis of universality, change, union of psychology and biology. In all the short fictions, evil is predominant like sexual disillusionment in Roth's *The Breast* (1972), evil polity in Vijayan's *The Wart*. These are universal issues that the novellas dealt with. In other words, good and evil within the human being is the main crux of this study. Eventually good conquers over evil is a universal issue that the short fictions narrate. Roth, American novelist, in his *The Breast* which is a biological metaphor of sexual disillusionment. Both the short fictions have shared the concern of craving for pleasure as it is apt to quote what Sigmund Freud has said in his book *Civilization, Society and Religion*:

Modern literature is predominantly concerned with the most questionable problems which stir up all the passions, and which encourage sensuality and a craving for pleasure and contempt for every fundamental ethical principle and every ideal (36).

The Breast as explored a new wave of thought in the writer's pen. The protagonist David Alan Kepesh is a Professor of Comparative literature of the State University of New York at Stony Brook who is suffering from "hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes" (Roth, *The Breast* 12) Throughout the novella, he is very sad over his sexual potency. He has transformed into a female breast with male consciousness. It is the eternal struggle within him. He is neither completely male nor female. His concern is beyond his control. Throughout the novella, a struggle is depicted with Kafkaesque way. The whole ambience of the hospital is his location, such as the nurses, doctors, etc. This breast is a metaphor of American dilemma and sexual repression. The same technique is used by Kafka and Camus in their works. Kepesh is the victim of his own evil impulses like Vijayan's *The Wart*. Kepesh calls all the destructive elements of American life as "banalities and absurdities."

O.V. Vijayan (1930-2005), Indian novelist in his works has reflected the Indian political ethos after Indian Independence (1947). He was leftist so criticizing ruling parties in an unprejudiced way. He is a crusader against false democracy. In his *After the Hanging and Other Stories* (1989) which includes Kafkaesque *The Wart*. His political cartoons had reshaped in his novels and prose work and the *The Wart* is not an exception. It was written in Malayalam in 1975 during the emergency period. It metaphorically questions the evil system in Indian polity through the wart. The wart which lies below the lower lip of the protagonist rules the master. The wart is very powerful which dominates the master to govern all conditions. It echoes Georg Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). The setting of this novella differs. One is setting of one of the villages in Kerala. God's plenty where Keralite ethos, rural background and imaginary town created by O. V. Vijayan is the metaphor which reflects the Indian political period during 1970s. He attempts to disclose India. He uses all the characters to reflect good and evil forces that emerge within the village. The characters, he has used like the unnamed protagonist, he has intentionally not given a name to the protagonist. He wants to reflect universal power structures in Indian parlance.

The Wart is the powerful allegory which throws light on the issues like casteism, feudalism, superstition, corruption, patriarchal hegemony, immorality, totalitarianism and so on. The wart below the lower lip of the protagonist is a metaphor which ruins the unnamed protagonist and his family. At the beginning of the story, it is a sign of luck but gradually it became a sign of the curse. The wart transformed into a lemon, then tomato, and finally big elephant. It separate from its master and orders him to rape on Naani's (maid-servant) corpse again and again. To quote from the text: "The wart asked me to lie down on Naani's corpse once again for a funeral mating." (Vijayan *After the Hanging and Other Stories*, 27) The protagonist's relationship with Naani, young sister in-law of Chaath than, the head serf of the house, disclose the burning issue of casteism. She belongs to the lower strata of society. In the absence of his wife, narrator exploits her rather the wart seeks pleasure in her lap. Actually the wart forces him to exploit Naani, the young and beautiful aboriginal woman is almost coerced into attending to the protagonist. Murali Nair, Malayalam director, has directed a movie based on *The Wart*. According to Nedumudi, an actor who performed the role of the protagonist in the movie has rightly said: " *The Wart* (Arimpara, 2003) speaks about tyranny. Emergency, capitalism, imperialism and globalization are some of its manifestations. All these interpretations perfectly suit the story and it has universal currency."

In both the short fictions, the biological transformation of the protagonists catches the invisible sight of the human psyche. Art finds its expression to reflect such world to realize social concern in a prevalent society. The concept of biology that both the writers use to denote multi-layered meaning of the texts. They use the tools of satire to criticize the world around them. The religion lost its concern to humanity. David Kepesh who suffers from neurosis, a biological concern literary comes out of frustration, lack communication and a sense of fear. The similarities are evident. For Example, David Kepesh who is thoroughly involves the teaching of Kafka, Gogol and Swift and the unnamed protagonist in

the Wart is obsessed with his ancestors. Both the protagonists are representative figure of the frustrated youth generation. Their concern is a universal one. Change is the central concern of both the fictions. It is the change of modern civilization.

It is very apt when we think it of *The Breast* in which the biological concept of the Breast 'stir up all the passion' of David Kepesh who could not separate his passion with his profession. It is a similarity that the Indian ethos which has been reflected in O. V. Vijayan's *The Wart* and American ethos in *The Breast*. The protagonist is rootless and 'craving for pleasure' in the lap of maidservant Naani for funeral mating. The ethical principle of his marriage with Suma and son Unni. He forgets all the merits in life. The reason behind is perhaps that the marriage is incomplete to fulfill his psychological drive. What Freud says in the book *Civilization, Society and Religion*: "It must above all be borne in mind that our cultural, sexual morality restricts sexual intercourse even in marriage itself" (46). It is the reason that David Kepesh and protagonist in *The Wart* fail to continue their nuptial wedding. Their fatal flaw of weakness is lagging behind them. They are obsessed with their weaknesses and just want to satisfy their soul with adulterous relations. David Kepesh relations with friend Claire Ovington is also the same.

After three years of their relationship, it is on the verge to end it. In case of the protagonist in *The Wart* whose wife pathetically left him along with their son. It is the specimen of their falling moral principles. The transformation itself is the journey of the characters from modernism to post-modernism. They looked at their humanity in the past, but they have reached to post-post-modernist phase of simulacra, pastiche and illusion. They are unable to come back to their predecessors. They 'miserably try to be a dangling human being.' Their life is a mere skeleton without flesh and blood. They have forgotten their roots and shadows. Vijay was a postmodernist in his presentation, brought the technique from Gogol's *The Nose* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. He is original in shaping and nurturing the wart in Indian context.

One of the major issues that have been discussed in this context is immorality. Through the protagonist's late great uncle Koppunni Nair's character, we can observe it. The protagonist frankly self-introspect himself that they were gentle and pious people but their genealogy is captured by proud and egoist ancestors and Koppunni Nair was one of the examples. He used to walk with long steps to the hillside in the rain and get the power of the green fiber of the recurring seasons. To quote the author about his temperament from the text:

He was shorn anew into nakedness and could romp down the hillsides to seek out wedded matrons and sow in them the seed of bastard sovereignty— and the children, in the incestuous unknowing of their ancestry, would chase and mate with one another

(Vijayan, *After the Hanging and Other Stories*, 20)

O.V.Vijayan has used this symbol to focus the light on the protagonist's ancestors who are rude and morally degenerated human beings. This might be the curse upon the

next generation like protagonist who are much like them. On the other hand, Kepesh is also not worried about his wife and commits adultery with Claire.

Both the characters suffer from their identity crisis, cultural phenomenon, socio-political ethos. Kepesh considers him a public figure. He doesn't have any personal integrity to maintain it any longer. Identity is disintegrated because of his restlessness in the trends around him as Kepesh says: "I wasn't the man I once had been, but wasn't a bleeding buck private any longer either" (*The Breast*, 9). Each character is surrounded in their same trace of the feeling. Kovalev is also facing an identity crisis. He needs title because he wants to have status in society. The Protagonist has lost identity because of the wart's presence. The wart enforces his identity to his master. His identity is removed. The protagonist in *The Wart* says 'darkness dwarf' at the beginning. They are representatives of the Twenty-first century generation. At the present time, people have lack of communication and suffer an identity crisis. They are not socialized themselves. They want to be introvert and invite their own isolation. Actually, the lack of communication forced all the characters to loss their recognition in the family as well as society at larger scale.

Both the protagonists in their short fictions jointly share the predicament and quest of modern man. The outer appearance is transformed in all characters, but they do share similar human consciousness. The past memories are haunting them. They have to neglect their wishes in a similar way as Kepesh's failure in marriage, his three years of relationship with friend Claire. It resembles the unnamed protagonist in the wart who is also obsessed with his late uncle Koppuni Nair and Dhanvantari medicament as well as failure in married life. The biological aspect that is a basic human urge for sex is dominant metaphor which helps us to decode the text at deeper levels. This aspect made them to forget their culture they are the part of it. O.V. Vijayan in *The Wart* the unnamed protagonist caught in a net of his evil sexual need and cross the boundaries of cultural and religious notions. David Kepesh is also similar in this aspect. He had a relationship with Claire for three years and at the concluding stage of their relationship, he transformed into a female breast. His basic urge made him to forget religious norms that govern human mind.

In short, selected novelists have taken painstaking efforts in order to explicate the crucial issues in the modern society. Both the protagonists suffer from various problems and become nihilistic. They have effectively used biological metaphors to suggest the symbolic meaning behind it. Their transformation is the metaphor of a rootless man in search of meaning to life. It happens because of their self-imposed isolation. In other words, all the writers have shown the tragic plight of modern men through showing comparison in their works. In short, Roth and Vijayan have taken painstaking efforts in order to explicate the crucial issues in the modern society. Their protagonist Kepesh and Unnamed protagonist suffer from various problems and becomes obsessive. Life has not remained worthy for them. Their transformations are the metaphor of a rootless man in search of meaning in life. It happens because of their self-imposed isolation. Their self-imposed work does not allow them to participate in the sorrows and joys of the family. It creates disloyalty and misunderstanding in human relationships. In other words, Roth and

Vijayan have shown the tragic plight of modern man through Kepesh and unnamed protagonist who revisits us in the form of individuals in the 21st century. The novelists try to defend the human values and ethics through comparing Kepesh with the unnamed protagonist in *The Wart*.

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