

Poisoning of Moral Compass: The Interplay of Imagery, Toxic Relationship and Trauma in K. R. Meera's *The Poison of Love*

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Abstract

The Poison of Love by K.R. Meera tells an excruciating story of exploding human desires, vanity, relationships and values. In this novel K R Meera explores human values through the themes of love, obsession, betrayal, audacity, misery, pain, retribution and self-destruction. The novel delves into how the element of insincerity in human relationships and the difference between what seems to be the case and what it really is can corrupt traditional values such as trust, loyalty, and forgiveness. This paper seeks to explore the interplay of narrative and the web of human relationships which together weave a compelling story. The narrative style of the author does play a role in the telling of this unfortunate story of love and betrayal in which the protagonist, Tulsi, who initially embodies values like dedication and love, gives up her promising academic career for her lover, Madhav. However, the relationship sours and splits like milk and finally turns poisonous under the influence of the vanity of human desires. And, the same is carried strongly by a narrative which is as strong and poignant as the destiny of the protagonist turns out to be as the emotional turmoil leads her to abandon those ideals. The paper explores how the complexities of human relationships, when tainted by callousness and infidelity, can erode not only individual happiness but also ethical values.

Keywords: Moral choices, infidelity, trauma, pain, revenge.

K.R. Meera's *The Poison of Love* presents an excruciating exploration of the human condition, focusing particularly on the erosion of moral values under the corrosive influence of toxic relationships, infidelity, and emotional trauma. This poignant novella unravels the disturbing journey of Tulsi, a young, brilliant woman whose emotional world collapses under the betrayal of a man she once loved beyond reason. The novel is an acute psychological study of how the human heart, when subjected to never-ending deceit and emotional exploitation, can undergo a radical transformation, leading to a tragic self-destruction. The narrative unfolds with a ruthless intensity that mirrors the moral decay it seeks to depict, offering an unsettling portrayal of the human propensity to betray, manipulate, and ultimately destroy what is most precious.

The story commences with the depiction of Tulsi, a nineteen-year-old prodigious student at a premier Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). With a promising academic career ahead and a secure marriage alliance in sight, Tulsi's life is seemingly charted towards stability and success. However, the advent of Madhav "the Krishna of Vrindavan" (TPOLE 17), a charismatic and unscrupulous journalist, marks the beginning of her moral and emotional turbulence. Under the influence of his carefully constructed charm

and seeming sincerity, Tulsi makes the impulsive decision to abandon her family, academic career, and her fiancé to elope with Madhav. This act of elopement, impulsive and passionate, is the first significant fissure in the edifice of her moral compass, driven by the insidious power of love adulterated by deceit. Madhav, who on the surface embodies tenderness and devotion, is revealed to be a serial seducer and pathological liar. His handsome exterior and persuasive demeanor conceal a character hollowed out by vanity, selfishness, and predatory instincts. He is a man for whom women are mere conquests, ephemeral trophies that validate his masculinity and vanity. Tulsi, in her innocence and devotion, becomes the twenty-eighth such conquest and is reduced to the sorry “dignity of a doormat” (TPOL 51). In a chilling echo of Shakespeare’s observation that “one may smile and smile and be a villain,” Madhav’s insincerity is masked by a constant display of affection and false concern, rendering his betrayals all the more devastating.

The Indian Express in its review of the novel says that “*it is tough to tell if The Poison of Love by KR Meera is disturbingly enthralling or enthrallingly disturbing. Regardless, the result is a book that resonates powerfully with some of our most primal impulses — a consuming love, a corrosive hatred, a need for vengeance. (The novel) takes a common theme -of love and betrayal- and uses metaphors and symbolism to turn it into an unforgettable tale of relationship between a woman and the man she cannot forget, but must, if she is to retain her sanity ... the depth of the emotion and the deep understanding of human nature emerges from the book. Tulsi's soul and heart are laid bare, her anguish becoming the pivot for her descent from a normal life to the one she ends up leading in Vrindavan ... Compelling and haunting.*”

The degradation of Tulsi’s emotional and moral universe is gradual but inexorable. Initially, she clings to her ideals of love, loyalty, and forgiveness. She endures Madhav’s escalating neglect, financial irresponsibility, and multiple infidelities with a stoic suffering that borders on martyrdom. However, every act of betrayal chips away at her inner world, corroding her values and sapping her vitality. The birth of her two sons, Kanna and Unni, temporarily anchors her existence, providing her with a fragile thread of hope and purpose. Yet, Madhav’s relentless pursuit of sensual gratification with other women, including actresses and dancers, annihilates whatever residual faith Tulsi retains in the sanctity of love and family.

The narrative reaches its emotional crescendo when Madhav, having utterly destroyed the family he forced Tulsi to abandon her life for, proposes separation. The final meeting, where Tulsi signs the divorce papers, is rendered with chilling poignancy. It is only after this act of formal severance that the full measure of Tulsi’s tragic descent is revealed: she had poisoned her two sons before the meeting, enacting a horrific revenge on the man who had poisoned her life. This act of filicide, shocking in its cruelty, represents the ultimate collapse of her moral compass, turning her from a victim of betrayal into an agent of irreversible destruction. The symmetry between the poisoning of love and the literal poisoning of life renders the title of the novel grimly appropriate.

The motif of poison, introduced metaphorically at the very beginning—“Love is like milk. With the passage of time, it sours, splits, and becomes poison”—thus attains its literal culmination in Tulsi’s desperate act. The reference to Putana, the demonic figure from Indian mythology who poisons infants, underscores the depth of Tulsi’s transformation and the loss of her once-pure ideals. No longer the devoted lover or nurturing mother, Tulsi becomes an embodiment of vengeance and despair. The insincerity and the resultant toxicity of Madhav’s love shatter Tulsi’s innate innocence and erode her humanity beyond recognition.

Following this cataclysmic event, Tulsi withdraws into a life of penance and self-abasement, becoming a Meera sadhu in the squalid streets of Mathura. The filth and decay of Mathura, reeking of manure and urine, serve as a stark metaphor for the moral rot that pervades not only Tulsi's life but the broader human condition depicted in the novel. The daily chants of the widows, mechanical and devoid of spiritual fervor, further reinforce the theme of spiritual emptiness and the futility of seeking redemption in a world already tainted beyond repair.

The portrayal of Mathura and its widows is particularly significant in accentuating the hollowness of religious piety when disconnected from genuine compassion and meaning. The deeply poisoned and distorted moral compass of religious places and piety is reflected through the incident when Tulsi on her third day at Mathura Ashram is summoned at night by the old and ugly priest of Rangji temple. The priest has a long tilak on his forehead and his tongue flicks out like that of a snake. He makes a very discomfiting and ludicrously indecent proposal to Tulsi. This episode sheds light on the manipulation of power in spiritual and religious spaces where sanctity can be used to mask cruelty. She recounts:

"- ... all of these provoked utter revulsion in me. He was fondling himself as he talked to me. I felt like vomiting, yet I also felt a cruel sense of satisfaction. When he touched me, I sincerely wanted to oblige him, but my body had turned to stone.

'You are pretty,' he muttered, licking his lips again.

I started laughing.

Why are you laughing?

Shouldn't women laugh?' I asked him. Don't you know that you have to make a woman laugh before you fuck her?'

I had laughed again when he undressed himself on seeing his flat nose. His protruding tummy and shrivelled organ, I had laughed without stopping.

'Why are you laughing like this? Are you mocking this old man?' He was upset.

'Do not get angry,' I told him gently. 'You can rape me if you want.'

Fed up, the old man had let me go. I too was bitterly frustrated.

My body was full of poison. Love's poison. I did not desire to die. I wanted to survive. To live on, like a horrendous, festering wound. Those who saw me ought to feel this pain. Like Madhav's love, I too should corrode everything around me." (TPOL 52-53)

Tulsi, reduced to a skeletal figure with a tonsured head and toothless gums, survives on the meager sustenance provided to the Meera sadhus—just enough to prevent death, yet insufficient to truly live. This precarious existence mirrors her emotional state: a living death, sustained solely by the embers of unresolved anger and hatred.

The final encounter between Tulsi and Madhav, both now physically and emotionally broken, brings the narrative full circle. Madhav, paralyzed and hospitalized, is a pitiful remnant of the seductive man who once exercised such fatal charm. Tulsi, still driven by complex currents of hatred, pity, and lingering attachment, ultimately rejects any final reconciliation. Her self-destruction is consummated not through a dramatic act of revenge but through a slow and agonizing death, as she provokes temple monkeys into mauling her to death in the Govind Dev Temple. This grotesque end set against the backdrop of a temple desecrated historically and symbolically, reinforces the theme of desecrated values and moral decay that runs throughout the novel.

The symbolic resonance of Tulsi's death is profound. The act of provoking the monkeys, creatures associated with both divinity and mischief in Indian mythology, to attack her, reflects an ultimate

surrender to chaos and annihilation. Her death is not a liberation but a final acknowledgment that love, trust, and righteousness have no place in a world governed by deceit, betrayal, and selfishness. The temple, once a site of sacred devotion and now a place of violence and decay, mirrors the collapse of all that Tulsi once held sacred.

Also, the recurring images in the novel are not merely aesthetic devices but are deeply intertwined with the novel's themes of moral and ethical degradation, psychological breakdown, toxic relationships, infidelity, and trauma. The unsettling imagery used throughout the novel intensifies the emotional and psychological landscape of the protagonist, Tulsi, and embodies the eroding moral compass that she and other characters undergo. The image of milk, introduced at the very beginning of the novel, serves as a metaphor for the purity of love and its eventual deterioration. Love, once fresh and nurturing, sours and becomes poisonous with time—just like the milk, which over time becomes a deadly force capable of destroying lives. This image not only sets the tone for the novel but also foreshadows the tragic arc of Tulsi's life, which is marked by betrayal, the corrosion of her idealistic beliefs, and the moral decay she experiences as a result of Madhav's infidelity. The recurring imagery of milk, thus, encapsulates the poison that permeates human relationships, particularly in the toxic dynamic between Tulsi and Madhav, where betrayal and emotional cruelty fester like a slow poison.

Similarly, the image of Mathura's filthy gullies, reeking of manure and urine, symbolizes the moral and emotional degradation of the characters, especially Tulsi. The visual and olfactory imagery of the gully represents the putrid, hopeless conditions to which Tulsi's life is relegated after her entanglement with Madhav. This image underscores her internal desolation as she moves through a space of religious and cultural disillusionment, where the chanting widows—described as disoriented, mechanical, and animal-like—mirror her own sense of self-neglect and loss of identity. The image of these widows, living skeletons with tonsured heads, creates a visceral sense of suffering, echoing Tulsi's own existential anguish. Furthermore, the snake, a recurring motif throughout the novel, becomes an embodiment of Tulsi's own metamorphosis. Initially, it represents her emotional turmoil and the venomous memories of Madhav that she cannot escape.

As the narrative progresses, Tulsi's transformation into a cobra symbolizes her inner rage and the desire for vengeance—much like a serpent waiting to strike at its prey. This imagery is potent in conveying her psychological descent, as it encapsulates both the dangers of repressed anger and the toxic nature of revenge. The image of corpse-eating ants, seen repeatedly in the novel, also serves as a metaphor for death and decay—whether it is the death of innocence or the physical death of those whose lives are consumed by trauma. These visual elements culminate in the tragic and gruesome final image, where Tulsi, symbolizing the wounded and broken individual, is attacked by monkeys in a fierce, gory scene. This violent and symbolic confrontation mirrors her internalized pain and suffering, marking her irreversible transformation from a hopeful young woman to a tragic figure consumed by trauma and loss. The Yamuna River's black water further deepens this imagery, coiling around Tulsi's legs like a snake, symbolizing the inescapable nature of her trauma and the moral rot that has bound her to a life of suffering. Through these vivid and disturbing images, K.R. Meera effectively employs symbolism to convey the novel's themes, encapsulating the emotional and psychological devastation wrought by toxic relationships and the insidious effects of betrayal and infidelity.

In *The Poison of Love*, K.R. Meera crafts a narrative of classical tragic dimensions, where personal flaws and external circumstances converge to produce inevitable catastrophe. The novel's tight structure, rich symbolism, and intense emotional register lend it the stature of a contemporary classic. As reviewers

from *The Hindu*, *The New Indian Express*, *Outlook*, and *The Financial Express* have noted, the novel's compelling portrayal of human anguish and its deep understanding of emotional complexities set it apart from conventional tales of love and betrayal. The distress and the anxiety which Tulsi experiences due to Madhav's escapades and indifference lead her to a severe trauma which she seeks to give vent to through physical pain. Roger Luckhurst says that "(a)ny experience which calls up distressing affects-such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain-may operate as a (psychical) trauma." (Waugh 498)

The Hindu writes in its review that "The Poison of Love, an intense dramatic novel written in a spare, well-crafted prose, delves into the most terrible bitter, corrosive emotion that can pass off as love ... K.R. Meera keeps a firm, economical grip on her words, and most sentences either express an emotion or move the narrative this way or that... A deep, dark tale."

The novel may also be termed as a bold feministic literary piece as it is a searing critique of the idea of marriage which is otherwise a very sacred institution for most Indians. The novel showcases the devastating impact of marriage on a budding scholar by ruining all her future prospects. In his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, Pramod K Nayar says :

"Marriage, suggest numerous writers, does not guarantee the safety of home or a clear identity for the women. Many women writers in India, for instance, emphasize that marriage might indeed be detrimental to the woman's identity. ... Marriage makes unreasonable demand on the women, and offers little in turn." (Nayar 131)

In Tulsi's case, marriage even gets more devastating. She makes all kind of sacrifices, including her own dignity, her father's equanimity, the careers of two sisters etc, and what she gets in return is nothing but loneliness, anxiety, shame, insecurity and a trauma which makes her destroy everything which was close to her heart, including her little sons.

Ultimately, *The Poison of Love* is a devastating meditation on how insincerity, betrayal, and unchecked desire can corrode the human soul, leading not merely to personal ruin but to a collective erosion of moral values. Tulsi's descent from a bright, idealistic young woman to a broken figure seeking death in a derelict temple encapsulates the profound tragedy of a life poisoned by love turned toxic. The novella offers no easy resolutions, no redemptive catharsis; instead, it leaves the reader with a haunting reminder of the fragility of human values and the terrifying ease with which they can be destroyed.

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