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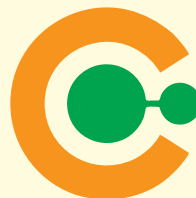
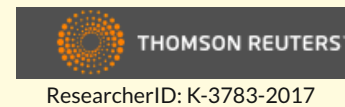
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An Exploration of Unquenchable Physical or Emotional Voyage in K. R. Meera's *The Poison of Love*

Sonali Pandey

Research Scholar, KNIPSS, Sultanpur. (UP)

Dr Sunita Rai

Associate Professor, KNIPSS, Sultanpur. (UP)

ABSTRACT

An unquenchable mental voyage in love is an everlasting journey of discovery and growth of an individual feeling, fuelled by a profound and insatiable curiosity about the partner and the partnership. It reflects a deep commitment to continuously nurturing and enriching one's connection with an enduring patience and relentless quest of feeling and understanding which deepens one's connection with one's partner. This journey involves continuous intellectual and emotional engagement, in the exploration of understanding and intimacy within one's relationship. Supporting each other's personal and intellectual development, encouraging new interests, and facing challenges together is the definition of conjugal life but if they are not dealing with the conceptual background of the relationship, there creates serious problem in their lives. Maintaining a sense of wonder and fascination with each other, never taking the relationship for their granted willingness, and always seeking to know more about, can have the sense of unquenchable love. The present paper explores Meera's very pathetic incidental novella, *The Poison of Love* in the common consciousness of unquenchable love.

Keywords: Love: Self, Familial, Romantic, Platonic, Feelings , etc.

FULL PAPER

Love is perhaps the most frequently used word in any language, encompassing a wide spectrum of vastly different emotions. Love is a multifaceted emotion that transcends boundaries and connects individuals on a profound level. It is a force that can inspire and uplift, fostering deep connections and a sense of belonging. Love is often characterized by feelings of affection, compassion, and a desire for the well-being of others in its many forms—romantic, familial, platonic and self-love. Love plays an important role in shaping our experiences and attractions and interactions between the individuality. It can be categorized into different parts. Romantic love brings passion and intimacy, creating bonds that can have everlasting concept of meeting the body and soul of the individuality. Familial love offers a foundation of support and security, while Platonic love provides companionship and mutual understanding for dealing marital life successfully. William Shakespeare writes in his sonnet no 116, “Love is not love, which alters and when alteration finds... O no! it is an ever-fixed mark” (Shakespeare, 341) but when one reads the present novel of K. R. Meera, one finds that Madhav is something more than this Shakespearean concept of love.

The Poison of Love as suggesting its title is a story of love which becomes a curse in the affection as well as in the conjugal life of Madhav and Tulsi. K.R. Meera, an influential writer, most prominently wrote in Malayalam, with many of her works translated into English. The present novel was originally entitled as “Meerasadhu” in Malayalam, which was translated into English by S. Ministhy. It portrays various dimensions of love which focus particularly on the pathetic experiences of relationship that engulfs the protagonist’s life in darkness and disappointment. It presents femininity as both strength and weakness, in the different tone of emotions and passions such as love, care, rage, revenge, sympathy and antipathy. The narrative of the novel portrays a life of self-condemnation and self-degradation. Additionally, this work analyses the situation of women in Vrindavan poignantly. The journey from abundance to nothingness, leading to a path of redemption and self-sacrifice, is a key concept of widowhood in this novel which is looking to be synthesized for the portrayal of Vrindavan where most of the widows can be seen in the worshiping of gods and goddess.

K. R. Meera’s present work is dedicated to “all the Meeras of Vrindavan,” who may better convey the depth of this tormented life—the complete degradation of pride and self within an ancient religious context of singing, dancing in bereavement and ecstasy as the novelist cites the hymns of the medieval saint Meera. As a labouring sweeper-woman in the temple, cleaning floors splattered with urine and phlegm, she tries to hold the key concept of many of the temple’s doors, symbolizing for those heavenly beings, whom their human counterparts, rely on labour as much as on devotion. Tulsi, the protagonist of the novel arrives in Vrindavan after being discharged from the psychiatry ward of Thiruvananthapuram Medical College,

suffering from the detachment of Madhav, the symbol of unquenchable love. There, she started to work like other widows and is named after the Meera's Sadhus.

Tulsi is a brilliant and ambitious woman who graduates with honours in engineering and has ability to do in her field. Her life takes a dramatic turn when she meets Madhav, a charismatic, passionate, and morally corrupted man whose love, however, proves to be both toxic and intoxicating. He draws Tulsi into a whirlwind romance and Tulsi, blinded by his intrigued love, abandons her promising career and distances herself from her family completely. As their relationship progresses, Madhav's true nature is revealed. He is manipulative, possessive, and unfaithful, exploiting the devotion of not only Tulsi but many ladies for his emotional and passionate satisfaction. Despite his betrayals, she like other beloveds remains fiercely loyal, even as she loses her sense and her life spirals out of control. Her descent into despair is marked by moments of intense emotional conflict and self-reflection in this novel. Her journey is further complicated by the societal expectations and gender norms that pressurized her to conform and sacrifice her happiness for the sake of love and duty. The novel critiques these norms, highlighting the destructive impact they can have on individuals, particularly women. Coming to the end of the novel, Tulsi's story is found very tragic in love and self-realization. Her unwavering devotion to Madhav leads her to a point of no return, illustrating the fatal consequences of love that becomes an all-consuming poison in her life.

The novel portrays love not as a gentle, nurturing force but as an obsession that consumes and destroys the personalities, especially of women so it can be called as the unquenchable voyage of love and relationship. Tulsi's complete surrender to her feelings for Madhav highlights how love can become a form of self-inflicted poison for those who are true and loyal. It is developed well through Tulsi's increasing isolation and loss of self, showing how obsessive love of Madhav can erode one's identity and autonomy. The psychological impact of betrayal on her is depicted with intense emotional depth, emphasizing the trauma and disillusionment that follows the novel in the efforts of Tulsi. Meera uses Tulsi's story to comment on the broader implications of these norms, questioning the fairness and humanity of demanding such sacrifices in the name of love and duty. Her journey is a tragic arc of self-destruction driven by her unwavering love for the smartness of many men like Madhav. The novel traces her decline from a successful, independent woman to someone entirely consumed by her emotions and passions.

Love is the most prominent characteristic of feminine sensibility, but for the protagonist, it becomes a weakness that leads her through various phases marked by self-growth, love, sacrifice, rage, self-castigation and finally to her and her children's pathetic death. Partly, its story seems in the form of an autobiography, changing between the time of past and present in the personal life of the novelist. Historically and mythologically, this novel is framed within the context of traditional Indian folklore and mythology, drawing parallels between Tulsi's story and the tale of Meera Bai, the 16th-century poet-saint known for her unwavering devotion for Lord

Krishna. This interweaving story of contemporary narrative and ancient myth creates a rich tapestry that explores the complexities of love and the sacrifices.

The novel begins with a note on love, but it presents its thematic concern in the dark side of responses, "Love is like milk. With the passage of time, it sours, splits, and becomes poison." (TPL, 3) Tulsi, a progressive student at IIT and the daughter of an Inspector General, had grand visions for her future. Very early at her age, she got engaged in the sweet and luring talking of Madhav, a renowned journalist in Delhi and fell deeply in love with him. Madhav is very apt in the loving affairs and he has ability to interchange any lady generously from his own perspective that is why he has many affairs. Very easily and effortlessly, he compelled many girls to surrender themselves before him mentally and physically and Tulsi is one of them. Before hunting her, he tells her about his twenty-seven affairs very frankly but so cunningly that nobody could understand his character easily. He presents his unique justification of love as "I shall never refuse any woman's love. It would devastate her. If my love can make a woman happy, why would I want to deny her?" (TPL, 17) He also makes her understand that, "They were all unhappy. They had never been loved. They had been denied love by fathers, husbands, and sweethearts. I offered them my love as alms" (TPL, 17) He explains her why he accepted them all, "This body of mine will be eaten up by ants and worms one day. If it can be of use to another human being, why should I refuse?" (TPL, 17) The man named after a legendary hero and deity from mythology has become the sign of obsession among modern lovers through the portrayal of Madhav in this novel. Though his words reveal him as a philanderer, the protagonist initially perceives it disrespect but very soon transforms it into her affection. Madhav fascinates women with his honeyed words, making them fall for him. Tulsi, being intellectual student could not understand him and finds her happiness in his presence, though she is acutely aware of his love which will bring her downfall, "love weakens humans-makes them fragile and pliable." (TPL, 61) Further, the novel tells that she was about to get married with his friend, Vinay who was the person to make their meeting but Madhav's separation disturbs her and his phone calls, letters and presence drove her panic for him. In his final attempt to coax Tulsi to elope with him, he compared himself to Vinay and his kisses made her lose her senses, as she confesses, "His touch was magical, spell binding. It was as if I was in a trance. Like a Gopika enchanted with Krishna's divine flute music..." (TPL, 22)

The best kind of Love is found in the relationship between mother and son, but the novel seems to suffer with the suspect of genuine love initially, "love me when you grow up. That love should be true. It should be real. Do not betray your mother. Do not cheat her with lies" (TPL, 72) In the same context, one can see Nabaneeta who has been victimized of the same kind of love as she was abandoned by him at Kashi. In her journey of spiritualism, she was molested by several men before she finally reached Vrindavan. So, she was bitten and beaten by her love which made her hatred rather than love for every man including the idol of Krishna. Tulsi's passionate love for Madhav led her to self-destruction describing love as a poison like a serpent swallowing its own tail, an acid corroding its own container, like demon Putana who

poisoned her own nipples for destroying the generation. Despite his betrayal, Tulsi's love for Madhav remained surprisingly so deep that she sought to unite with him even after death, "Madhav is mine. I love him forever. I will love him with malevolence. I will defeat him with love. I will purify him. Then, at last, I will merge into him" (TPL, 101).

Women are often seen tending to sacrifice and giving up her most valuable things for the sake of others but there are very few who understands it. A mother, for example, sacrifices her body for the sake of next generation in the form of producing children but the children when grew old, reject their mothers. However, in the case of the protagonist, one can see Tulsi, sacrificing herself for the sake of her family. Consequently, she leaves her family without concerning her father's pride, her bedridden mother suffering from uterine cancer, and her sisters' future. She does everything for the sake of Madhav as she abandons her ambitious life, one capable of bringing pride to society, and transforms herself into a full-time homemaker to make Madhav's life easier, "I, who had graduated from IIT with record marks, become the handmaiden of Madhav. I washed his clothes with affection and ironed them with devotion. I cooked his beloved food with reverence. The place where he stood and sat, I cleaned as if they were sacred. I blissfully surrendered to him" (TPL, 46). Further, one can find that various sacrifices take on a new perspective when feminine strength of love is challenged. In Tulsi's determination to prevent her children from suffering in society and from becoming future Madhavas, a mother decides to poison them all. She, once the kind of Meera transforms herself into a Putana, poisoning her own breast which tells the greatest sacrifice of a woman, "We cannot give up, my children. We have to defeat your father. We have to leave him before he can abandon us. We have to purify your father with the pain of separation too" (TPL, 91). Tulsi sacrifices her beloved for another and it can be seen when she leaves Madhav for Bhama, even though she is pregnant with his child. Renouncing her beauty to save her family, she surrenders herself to Madhav, Lord Krishna, in Vrindavan and begins to live the life of a widow, despite her husband's being alive.

Further, it is said that motherhood is the most precious boon in a woman's life, highlighting the creation of a new life and bearing the special bond between the mother and the child. In the story, the protagonist, Tulsi is a mother of two children, Unni and Kanna. Despite being bedridden, Tulsi's mother, a minor character, is determined to see her children settled in better positions even holding on her death for their sake, "My mother's uterine cancer had progressed to the third stage. She was hurrying to offer her three daughters- Tulsi, Tamara and Mallika at the feet of three suitable bridegroom" (TPL, 15). Tulsi's mother understands that after her death, her children may not receive proper care which reflects her deep concern and nurturing attitude towards her daughters. Similarly, Madhav's mother, although playing a minor role, takes care of her daughter-in-law during pregnancy. She exemplifies great motherhood, having raised her son with his father. Her struggles as a widow and as a mother highlight her commendable motherhood qualities, "She was a simple woman. She spoke with great pride about Madhav's father. He had died when she was

pregnant. She had given birth as a widow” (TPL, 69). Tulsi even enjoyed her first pregnancy when she was expecting Unni, “I constantly chattered with Unni as I worked in kitchen. I spoke about my life. My dreams... My foolishness... As he lay on his back, moving his little feet and hands, I had looked up my baby pleadingly... He sobbed when he heard that he had a cleft in his chin, just like Madhav. Yet when I looked at his face, I saw my own” (TPL, 72).

Despite being a loving mother, Tulsi poisoned her two children to save them from a selfish poisonous society. Her deep affection is notable as she carries their dead bodies. Before killing them, she loved and conversed them a lot, “I lay down with Unni and Kanna, hugging them to my chest. I think I must have wept. I told them about a lot of things. About those days when I had carried them inside me. About their father. About the unending love I had for Madhav” (TPL, 90). Who can define the poisonous love of a mother for her children who killed them for the fear of another Madhav in the world, “My dead children. Their bodies slowly cooled, resting against the warmth of mine. Kanna was sucking his thumb even then. Blood dripped from his mouth, rolling down his chubby hands. I kissed my baby son again” (TPL, 90-91).

Longing for something is a form of desire and after meeting Madhav, Tulsi longs initially to marry him which she achieves finally. Despite becoming a Meera Sadhu, her love for Madhav remains constant and she yearns for his presence everywhere. Her desire to purify both herself and Madhav intertwines love and lust in one. This story references the relationship between Radha and Krishna to illustrate this poisonous aspect of jealous love as “The Lord abandoned Radha because of her jealousy” (TPL, 47). It can also be seen in Madhav who loves everyone without any distinction. His love extends equally to his wife and his many beloveds. Despite having twenty-seven beloveds, Madhav claims them for being merely lovers and not intimate with him. However, his masculine lies fall apart when one of his beloveds, Lily, rushes to his home and shows her affection for him and because it happens before her that’s why Tulsi’s emotions are conveyed that “jealousy was indeed irrelevant. Even on the day when Lily Varghese can half run with her American bag” (TPL, 48). Madhav always acts smartly and handles every situation very cunningly which can be understood when he visited Lily after she left the house, Lily claims that, “He had come to my hotel room. He fell at my feet and begged for forgiveness. He washed my feet with tears” (TPL, 51). These words of Lily smashes Tulsi as she realizes that the man she loves, has many other women to love and to be loved. Lily, the twenty-sixth lover of Madhav, is so lovely to him that despite loving Lily, he calls Tulsi to check on her well-being.

Femininity encompasses not only love and empathy but it also has strong emotions of hate, either there is human being or gods and goddesses. In the words of Cixous, feminine writing is not merely a new style of writing, it is “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards” (Cixous, 249). It can be seen in the matter of Nadaneeta who is exemplified with her hatred towards the god who altered her destiny. Consequently, she refuses to praise Krishna,

seeing him as a thief and brute, as he views all women in the same manner, “He will steal any woman’s clothes, eat anyone’s butter...I am telling you, do not worship him! Beat him off if he comes near you” (TPL, 66). Tulsi’s sisters, Tamara and Mallika are furious with Tulsi for eloping with Madhav without considering their lives. Mallika, who dreamed of becoming an IAS officer, saw her dreams to be shattered when she married with her available doctor. Tamara, the topper of the ‘All India Entrance Examination,’ married a businessman eighteen years senior to her. They did so because of Tulsi who stated, “I do not want to see you. You destroy your life as well as ours” (TPL, 60). Tamara’s words filled Tulsi with a stunned realization of her own fault. She desired her husband to suffer, to understand his role in her plight, “my hatred for Madhav was all consuming. I wished to smash him into smithereens and yet I also wished that he would live on. I wanted his beating heart- so that I can corrode it myself” (TPL, 54).

The protagonist, being aware of her own weaknesses, wanted to punish him but finally decides to punish herself. She attempts to inflict various forms of harm upon herself. As a married woman, she shaves her head and travels to Mathura, known as the city of widows. There, she identifies herself as a widow and adopts the name Meera Sadhu. Each day, she devotes herself to Krishna’s devotional songs and engages in self-punishing activities, such as walking barefoot in the scorching summer heat, even burning her feet. Widows are traditionally given meagre provisions—two and a half rupees, a bit of milk, ten grams of rice, and dal. The places they inhabit are similarly miserable, cramped and filled with other women in similar circumstances. Meera finds solace in enduring these hardships, which she has chosen for herself. A priest attempts to molest her, but she surrenders herself only to burst into laughter. Her laughter symbolizes the irony of a former IIT topper who sacrificed everything for love and now finds herself in such a situation that her worshipping is tinged with a desire to inflict pain upon herself, “I needed wounds. To hurt myself more grievously, I needed more wounds” (TPL, 77). She died from monkey bites that were as vicious as a dog, yet even in that moment, she laughed- “the monkeys came rushing in. I fought bitterly with them. They surrounded me like ants. They bit me like dogs. Blood flowed from my neck, arms, and legs. I laughed as if tickled” (TPL, 101), reminding the lines, ‘Dard Peeta Hun Magar Pyas Nahin Jatee Hai, Tum Haste Ho To Meri Ruh Tharrati Hai. Meri Hothon Ki Hasi Dekhkar Ye Mat Samjho Ki Main Khush Hun, Itna Mayush Hun Ki Rota Hun Phir Bhee Hasi Aatee Hai.’

In this way, in K. R. Meera’s narrative, Madhav and Tulsi transcend mere individual to become archetypes of the men and women we encounter in society. Madhav epitomizes conventional masculinity, advocating for a natural division of household responsibilities between men and women. While he comfortably expresses his own sexuality, reduces women’s sexuality to mere objects of his pleasure. Despite appearing progressive superficially, he embodies traditional gender norms deeply. In contrast, Tulsi represents the quintessential woman trapped in an abusive relationship, whether through physical or emotional consideration. Tulsi’s plight mirrors that of countless women worldwide, illustrating a pervasive narrative of societal constraints

and female subjugation. After losing everything she cherished, Tulsi resolves to deprive Madhav of all she had ever bestowed upon him. Now residing in Vrindavan among widows, living off alms, she views her existence as a form of penance. The price of her liberation was her children, yet she remains bound by her longing for the man who stripped her of everything. In Vrindavan, she waits for Madhav's inevitable arrival but finds death amidst the desolation of Vrindavan's signs and symbols of ruins.

Thus, the theme of violent, fateful, and unquenchable love is introduced from the very first page of the novel: "Madhav gave me that poison. I did not die; instead, I killed him. I, the widow, came to Mathura's Vrindavan" (TPL, 3) which is not depicted through detailed descriptions but rather through a montage of vivid images and smells like manure, the black-waved Yamuna, sour milk, crushed marigold, aluminium tiffin carriers, scuffling, infected monkeys, 5,000 temples, more temples than houses, and the floating name of Krishna from the lips of 10,000 shaven, white-robed widows, including runaways and abandoned women, their faces resembled lamps that had died out, bereft of oil and the pervasive, invisible lovemaking of the gods. In this novel, Vrindavan is less a concrete, historical, or mythological town and more a series of sensory impressions that evoke corresponding images in Tulsi's psyche. In the narrative, Tulsi makes several significant sacrifices for her relationship with Madhav, which ultimately highlights the novella's themes of love, obsession, and self-destruction. She was an ambitious, career-oriented woman with dreams and aspirations. As her relationship with Madhav deepens, she begins to prioritize his needs and desires over her professional goals. She gives up promising opportunities and her career progress to support and be with Madhav, believing this will strengthen their relationship.

To conclude, Tulsi endures emotional manipulation, mental stress, and physical neglect as she tries to maintain the relationship. Her self-worth and self-respect diminish as she continually sacrifices her own needs and desires for Madhav and tolerates behaviour that undermines her dignity, believing it is necessary to keep the relationship intact. She compromises her moral and ethical values to align with Madhav's expectations and demands. She foregoes chances for personal growth, happiness, and desire fulfilment outside of her relationship with Madhav. Her sacrifices underscore the novella's exploration of the destructive nature of obsessive love and the importance of self-awareness and self-preservation. Her journey illustrates the painful consequences of giving up feminine identity and well-being for the sake of a relationship, ultimately leading to a profound realization and a quest for reclaiming her life in pain and plight. In the study of women as writers and the subjected history of feminine modes are impregnated with: "history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition" (Showalter, 248). In this context one can also remember, the opinion of Andrienne Rich the feminist vision has recoiled from the female biology for these reasons which will, "I believe, they come to view our physicality as a resource rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life, we require not only control

of our bodies ... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence" (Rich, 16).

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