

## Longing for an Emotional Fulfillment: A Critical Study of Biyot Projna's *Palmful of Stars*

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### Abstract

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Biyot Projna Tripathy is an Indian writer who writes in Oriya, a regional language. *Palmful of Stars* is her self-translated, rather trans created short story through which she can reach out to more people. *Aanjula* was translated by her into English as *Palmful of Stars* in 2015, nearly five years after the 'original' was published. Whether she writes in a native, regional, or foreign language is not significant. What matters is the common link or the identification. She makes an effort to portray sensitive issues considered taboo. Such writings are significant development, not only in modern regional fiction, but also Indian writing in English. The story deals with the experiences that women face in their family and outside, and is woven around the heroine. This subject has been dealt with by creative writers in all times. The writer has a critical view of the life around her, as she has an exposure to different societies, inside and outside the country. Minute details are depicted wonderfully from a woman's point of view. This kind of writing is factual, i.e., true to life. The main focus of the present paper is how the heroine bears the weight of many sexual abuses and longs for an emotional fulfillment. She desperately needs it. How she cannot evade memories of these bad experiences, the same way she cannot evade the memories of love. Unfulfilled desire is presented here. The intention is also to see the contemporary picture of feministic writing.

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The main focus of the present paper is how the heroine bears the weight of many sexual abuses and longs for an emotional fulfillment. She desperately needs it. How she cannot evade memories of these bad experiences, the same way she cannot evade the memories of love. Unfulfilled desire is presented here. The intention is also to see the contemporary picture of feministic writing. "Desire is a sense of *longing* or hoping for a person, object, or outcome. The same sense is expressed by *emotions* such as "craving." When a person desires something or someone, their sense of longing is excited by the enjoyment or the thought of the item or person, and they want to take actions to obtain their goal."<sup>1</sup>

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*Palmful of Stars* is a piece of creative writing, another star added in the constellation of bold writings by women writers. It highlights the issues related to women, their plight and emotions. The writer sheds light on the dark rooms of society. The opening passage is so bold, in both form and content that it hints the further development of the story: "From homosexuality among senior students in the school to molestation by older relatives at home, I had seen it all in my childhood. Grew up with so much of sexual abuses that while reaching my puberty I used to get furious at any kind of touch without my permission, of any human, be it a man or a woman."<sup>2</sup>

From here, the readers can have an insight into the inner trauma of the character. The past and the present are simultaneous. Later on, the heroine falls in love with one of the junior students at the university. "Normally in life, stories, novels, movies, we hear about girls falling in love with boys who are equally or more educated and of the same age group or a little older to them. The common norm also being that the boys are taller than them."<sup>3</sup> Her love story was different. She took the initiative. "He was not able to look straight into my eyes till a year of our acquaintance, and he never touched me on his own. For these reasons, I started liking him more."<sup>4</sup>

As a small girl, she had to go through some haunting experiences, so she longs for real love and emotional support. She is so harassed that she develops a very sensitive attitude to any kind of touch. Discomfort of being a woman in this world is not easy. "Denial forces victims to retreat in lifeless existence, dying in the shadows of buried trauma and painful memories."<sup>5</sup>

After her Post graduation results, she left for Delhi University for further studies. While both of us were perhaps bidding good bye to each other, sitting quietly in the players' gallery of the basketball court, he suddenly took both my palms on his hands, and covered his face with them and started sobbing like a child. That was the first time in my life I felt like hugging someone tight without hatred, without annoyance. But did not have the courage to do so in the middle of the basketball court in broad daylight. I just wept and wept, for not been able to hold somebody the way I want to for the first time in my life.<sup>6</sup>

The long-term traumatic impact of molestation which causes behavior problems is revealed here. The relationship between physical abuse in childhood and later psychological disturbances is portrayed. Childhood sexual abuse can be traumatizing. "Often times, people don't realize how much their childhood still affects them when they are an adult. Or other people don't realize the affect things still have on those they know. Other people might even say, "Get over it" or "Move on". But it's usually simply not that easy."<sup>7</sup>

Life goes on and after finishing her Doctorate in Australia, the heroine gets married to her British tutor, Gleen who is a divorcee and fifteen years older to her. He is very sharp and knowledgeable and always appreciates her point of view, opinion, and level of understanding. Briefly speaking, it is a marriage of convenience.

During the first sexual encounter with him before marriage I kept my eyes closed the entire time. I really do not know why; because of being shy or scared or out of love. That very first time whatever he did to me, I liked everything about it, but we could not make love. I felt a lot of pain. Neither did he force himself on me nor did he ever felt bad about it. Rather he was happy that we could not make love at our first attempt and told me "above all, you are an Indian woman. Such kind of behavior before marriage is against your social values. So it's best that we get married at the earliest."<sup>8</sup>

In spite of being a Western man, Gleen respects her traditions. On the first night of their marriage, when he tries to help her to undress, the faces of those men who abused her sexually as a child float in front of her. All of them were either her relatives or family friends. She has a combined feeling of extreme hatred and fear. Gleen never tries to undress her after that evening, revealing his feelings through other gestures. They consult a marriage counselor and a psychiatrist too. In spite of all this, she is not able to make love. Every time she feels as if one of those men of her childhood is holding her tight. Not only her body, but even the soul is abused. She is haunted by those memories all the time. "Fears, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) behavior problems, sexualized behaviors, and poor self-esteem occurred most frequently among a long list of symptoms noted, but no one symptom characterized a majority of sexually abused children."<sup>9</sup>

On the psychiatrist's advice, both of them go to Turkey for a vacation of two weeks. Turkey represents the combination of Asia and Europe like their marriage which combines East and West. The hybrid of Indianness and Englishness is portrayed. There is a vivid portrayal of East - West culture too. Gleen also has knowledge about Hindu culture and mythology.

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "If the whole world were one country, Istanbul would be its capital." Turkey stands for diverse cultures and is the meeting point of the East and West. In spite of being modern, it has historical significance too, like the heroine who is modern yet traditional.

Despite all their efforts, after one and a half years of their marriage, the couple ultimately gets divorced on the ground that the marriage could not be consummated with mutual consent. The marriage fails physically, but both of them have a feeling of respect and admiration for each other.

The writer tries to show how some ideas about relationships are fixed, how children are sexually abused by their own people, and as a result get disturbed psychologically. Hypocrisy is exposed.

After getting divorced, the heroine comes back to India, and becomes a member of her University Sports Advisory Committee. She starts remembering all those moments she spent in the basketball court before fourteen years and 'his face again became prominent.' She tries to know his whereabouts, but without any gain. The moment when he put his face on both of her palms starts haunting her every now and then. She thinks to herself "This time I will not let him go, I will hug him tight with all my energy, never to leave him."<sup>10</sup> The writer here comments: "But things hardly happen according to one's wish in life."<sup>11</sup> Here, there is a feeling of getting disheartened.

When students applaud on her success in the basketball court, she has a sense of fulfillment in that moment. But she feels restless on her unsuccessful pursuit of him. "There is a restless search and longing in the world for the perfect love relationship. One that makes us feel secure, special, energetic, joyful, supported, and connected and where love and loyalty is never doubted."<sup>12</sup>

Towards the conclusion of the story, her team loses the finals despite of giving a tough fight to the opponents. Once again, she feels that it is her personal failure. A sense of losing all the time is hinted at. The captain also feels very miserable. He suddenly turned, and took both my palms with his hands and covered his face and started sobbing the way someone had sobbed fourteen years ago. All his tears had flown into my eyes through my palms. Looking at this, the rest of the team came near me and started crying in silence, as if I am a sponge, which will absorb all their tears, all their grief.<sup>13</sup>

After that day, all the university athletes poured their hearts out to her. "Their new tears would flow from my eyes becoming old, and I felt as if I am breathing, my body and mind felt light. I am breathing only because he might come someday like these people and shed his tears through my eyes covering his face with my palms."<sup>14</sup>

Tension is present throughout, but the story ends on a note of hope. Vocabulary is in accordance with the sexual harassment or incidents. The writer is without apprehensions. Sexual imagery is reflected through the use of bold language, for instance, 'mesmerized by the scent of his body', 'ejaculated', 'nude'.

In spite of all comforts, the heroine doesn't feel at peace. There is a feeling of discontent though she is successful in worldly terms. The use of words also hints at it: 'lost', 'failed', 'miserable', 'frustration', 'console', 'sobbing', 'angry', 'offended', 'devastated', 'crying', 'tears', and so on.

Language is full of negative emotions. Look at the use of words such as, 'hatred' and 'annoyance'. Dirty words like 'puking' and 'dust' are employed to show the dirty intentions of people. Words like 'vain' bring to the mind imagery of defeat. On one hand, the relationships are being abused. The small girl is molested by the near ones. On the other, pure relationships are portrayed through both the men in her life who are extremely caring and respect her.

Much attention has been diverted to childhood sexual abuse in recent years. Researches show that usually women who experience familial abuse are more depressed than those who experience non - familial abuse. The heroine can take her own decision and break the bond of marriage. There is no real fulfillment, even though the husband is committed and she herself has a soft corner for him in her heart.

She frees herself from Gleen, but fails to free herself of the memories. She wants to know everything about her love. No name is given to her. This is a very strong indication that the character operates not on a personal level, but universal. She represents all woman kind. Through her character, the author desires to expose the inner self of her own kind. As seen earlier, language is highly suggestive. The phrase 'living dead' explicitly reveals the inner turmoil of the main character. What happens with her is not uncommon in any society. "It is a psychological truth that the mind of a child is so sensitive that when his innocence comes in contact with experience, it begins to bleed and consequently it is haunted by this nightmarish experience all through his life."<sup>15</sup>

And this is what happens with this girl. Her story is significant to study as it shows how a passive sufferer develops into an active decision maker. She is a smart girl and has a level of understanding. Somewhere inside, she wants to be free. She is searching for her own identity.

It has also been revealed how thinking is a social product, how people have fixed norms regarding relationships. For instance, "The common norm also being that the boys are taller than them." The heroine is totally involved in her love. He is the very source of her existence. Life seems too long without him. Basketball match also symbolizes losing the game of life, being unsuccessful in relationships.

I am neither joking nor exaggerating when I say that the role that love plays in our physical and social lives is more important, and of greater consequence, than any other factor. Indeed, it is almost as though it lies hidden behind every action, just as the breath of life lies concealed in each living organ, driving and directing it. Perhaps you already know that there are scientists who attribute to it every activity in the life of the human being without exception. I always try to steer clear of general universal principles, however; they provoke apprehension and doubt in me. Therefore, let us content ourselves by simply acknowledging that love occupies an important place in the life of the individual and in society.<sup>16</sup>

The tears of both the captain of the team and her lover flow into her eyes through palms. They act like the mediator. Like a sponge, she absorbs the tears of others, as well as her own.

The long - term influence of sexual abuse causes behavior problems. The main character here is independent and aware of her situation. In her relationship with Gleen, she tries to be active as possible. She is not a prey. Although she is charmed by his looks and talent, she refuses to submit completely, or is not able to do so.

It is a realist and reflexive story, and has to be comprehended in terms of cross - cultural studies. Even people who take a stand against such writings by women will acknowledge its significance and take it into their grave consideration. There is a combination of physical and emotional assaults, and a sense of pathos is there. It would not resolve this problematic issue, but at least it would seek to expose it. Maybe it seems obscene to some, but there is a sense of purpose. The writer explores the issue intensively, and presents it without inhibitions.

"Until we accept that our children have much more of a risk of being sexually abused than drowning in a pool, being struck by a car, stricken with cancer, hurt by a vaccination, or diagnosed with ebola, we contribute to a culture of panic and ignorance."<sup>17</sup>

The story is another contribution to the development of Indian writing in English. It shows how women have to lead a life of both physical and mental tormentation in a male - dominated world, how the victimized woman gradually develops the horrible sense of trauma. She has to undergo torment which she doesn't deserve. There is a realistic portrayal of the women who are suffering. The girl here learns by suffering, and is gradually able to discriminate. Somewhere, there is a streak of rebel.

Anita Balakrishnan comments: "The fictional discourse of Indian women writers has traditionally focused on the tensions and constraints experienced within familial and domestic spaces."<sup>18</sup>

As Nandini Sahu observes in her article, "The Position of Women in Oriya Literature", Pratibha Ray in her novel *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* "depicted through her bold and reformist women characters the declining values and transformative adjustment between tradition and modernity, between desire and decision, with natural psychological stress associated with it."<sup>19</sup>

The culture of violence against women is too hazardous for their development. The heroine, somewhere inside feels that 'he' might come someday which gives her life a sense of purpose. The world sustains on hope.

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