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The Biological Metaphors in the Short Fictions of Nikolai Gogol, Franz Kafka, Philip Roth and O.V. Vijayan: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: Comparative literature is an attempt to understand different languages, culture, art, literature, and attitudes of the people. Russian author Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose*, German novelist Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, American novelist Philip Roth's *The Breast* and Indian novelist O.V. Vijayan's *The Wart* are the classic short fictions in the literary canon, exhibits the similarities and differences in their work by using biological metaphors. The novellas explore the crucial issues such as evil polity, power, prestige, obsession, and 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 study the biological metaphors in various perspectives.

Keywords: biology, World Wars, metaphor, Czar Dynasty, civilization, change, etc.

The comparisons of all the four short fictions are broadly analyzed on the basis of universality, change, union of psychology and biology. In all the short fictions, evil is predominant like negligence in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), sexual disillusionment Roth's *The Breast* (1972), evil polity in Vijayan's *The Wart*, greed for higher rank in Gogol's *The Nose*. These are universal issues 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 novel's narrator. Gregor Samsa, tragic hero of *The Metamorphosis* gets evil treatment in every walk of life, such as working place, family, acquaintances, society, but he forgives all of them. At the end of his life, he remembers his family with 'love and tenderness' and passed away. He is mature person and learned the wisdom of life that forgiveness is the best way to die peacefully. He knew the fact that hate cannot drive out hate, but only humanity, love, kindness, compassion can make a difference in human life. He learnt a piece of wisdom only through his zoological transformation. It is a metaphor of reconciliation, goodness, perpetual hope, at post-metaphorical stage to the protagonist, but to the family it is frustration, constant dilemma, insecurity, lack of faith and so on.

Roth, American novelist, in his *The Breast* [1972] which is a biological metaphor of sexual disillusionment. All the four books shared the concern of craving for pleasure as it is apt to quote what Sigmund Freud says 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 has 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 sad over his sexual potency. He is 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. His 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 Gogol's *The Nose*. Kepesh calls all the destructive elements of American life as "banalities and absurdities."

O.V. Vijayan 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*. 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 selected novelists have used biology, metaphors in their text to connote deep layers of the textual meaning. The bug and the breast are powerful metaphors. Before the insect form of Gregor Samsa, he was leading his life only for the sake of his family. In a similar way Kepesh has transformed into a breast because he is incapable to search the meaning of his life. He is a metaphor of modern decay and degenerated life. Actually the protagonists biologically transformed into another form, but other characters also have transformed. Other characters psychologically transformed. Grete, Gregor's sister throughout the novella is very sensitive, but with the passage of time, she becomes cruel and shows ingratitude towards her brother. It is a psychological transformation which comes through selfishness and lack of understanding.

Kovalev is a Collegiate Assessor (low rank government official) who is condemned. Gregor has suffered from job. That made him to be a passive person. His wish to have a wife is unfulfilled. The portrait describes his intention. Kovalev wants to marry with a girl therefore need high rank. To quote his words from the text:

come to my place; I live in Sadovaya; just ask,
'Where does major Kovalev live?' - Anyone will
show you (*Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, 305).

He expects and wishes to tell any beautiful girl about his venue with a fake title major: "As far as major Kovalev's apartment, sweetie." He even wishes to marry a rich girl so that his image in society may raise to some extent. Such obsession he has for the rank in society. He has a special inclination towards military rank like major as an equivalent to his civilian rank of Collegiate Assessor. His expectations are so high that he could not have any control over it. Especially his

unconscious mind is filled with so much whimsical thought to attract women. This is the main reason he wants to think only of the opposite sex.

Russia was in the dark ages under Czar Dynasty. Gogol uses metaphor to show the darkness under this regime of the Czars. They were not paying attention towards the common people. Kovalev is the representative figure of Russian society as Gregor Samsa in Germany. Gogol shows social reformist role in the form of the nose. Kovalev is alone who suffers a lot. He is incapable to prove himself, but proves through fantasy. Kovalev in disguise lives for fifteen days and enjoyed the fragmentary dream. The nose serves as a metaphor for the hidden libido of the protagonist. His constant psychological trauma is reflected in this short fiction. His natural inclination to sex, sensuality, romanticism, rank, property, money, and materialistic attitude is very aptly exhibited by the novelist. 'The perfect nonsense goes on this world' (*The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, 323) tells the reality of this short fiction. 'Such events rarely happen but do happen' (326) says Gogol symbolically. Gogol made the ground to make this story a realistic one. Here a nose, a protagonist in disguise is metaphorically a reflection of the evil pride and degradable ignorance. Gogol prophesizes the upcoming invisible man who has to fight for his survival.

All the four novellas, the biological transformation catches the invisible sight of the human psyche. Art finds its expression to reflect such world to realize social concern in prevalent society. All the novellas give shape in its metaphors. Language limits the world of the novelists and given reshape through metaphors. The concept of biology that all the writer use to denote multi-layered meaning of the texts. They use the tools of satire to criticize the world around them. It is a prophecy that shaped after World Wars I and II. The religion lost its concern to humanity. At present times, people are much concerned with their status or rank as Kovalev. He is not a literary production by Gogol. It remains societal production to whom rank, image, self-esteem matters more than to be a good human being.

The Nose is the dream of the novelist, which paves the way to their unconscious mind. Kovalev wants to enjoy bachelorhood until his middle ages. He is a vagabond to lead irresponsible life and doesn't worry about a moral code of conduct. All the writers depict social evils in the world. They highlight the internal confrontation of soul with their conscience. Each person has an internal dilemma which is unspeakable and invisible. The internal trauma of obsession, sexual repression, ego-clashes within human beings, prejudices for ranks, struggle for identity, insecurity, anguish, frustration, isolation, fear, mental disturbance, a sense of respect etc. are internal phenomenon that each human being had within themselves.

Biological transformation is beyond the connotative meaning. There is much logic, which is invisible in his 'missing nose'. The missing nose of Kovalev tells him about independent identity. There is a technique to explore the unexplored area of the human psyche. The nose is pride, dignity, possession, objectivity, and selfishness. Gogol through his short-story *The Nose* look at the future. One may say that Gogol is a precursor of both the movements like absurdity. Kovalev says:

Nose, I said.... You have got it wrong! My nose,
My own nose, disappeared on me, I don't know
where. The devil's decided to make fun of me!(312).

A sense of absurdity is very well evident in the above statement of Kovalev. 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, Gregor Samsa is exhausted with his job as a salesman which is similar to David Kepesh who is also exhausted with his hectic teaching. All the four protagonists are representative figure of the frustrated youth generation. Their concern is a universal one. Change is the central concern of all biological metaphors. It is the change of modern civilization. All of the author's retells the future with their use of metaphor.

Philip Roth has followed the reverse side of presenting the ideas at the beginning itself, which is similar with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. One says 'I am a breast' and other transformed into an 'insect'. Many things are similar with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Both of them shares the views of hopelessness and meaninglessness of life. All four novellas are not only similar in their transformation, but also similar in their characterization. The unnamed protagonist's failure of marriage as Suma leaves her husband with their son is similar to the David Kepesh's failure of marriage with Helen because they divorced after their five years of married life Kovalev is unable to marry because of his excessive concern with rank and status. The thought companion is always in his mind. Gregor Samsa is also failure to get a companion in his life. He is sexually obsessed as we see in his room's wallpaper of a lady in a fur. The concern to have companion is there in the mind of all characters. All are fragmented and scattered human beings. Their inability for emotional attachment to other human beings make the entire books as absurd one. They don't worry about any moral concern with the world. Their belief is shattered because of socio-historical-political-cultural, economic upheavals in the world. They are representative figure of the present generation.

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 for om the profession. Gregor Samsa who is caught in an eternal dilemma between death and life. His concern is ethical as well as questions the ethical principles. It is a similarity with the Indian ethos which has been reflected in O. V. Vijayan's *The Wart*. 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 same 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 flow 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 look 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

The biological metaphor is transcendental signified. All the characters suffer from their identity crisis, cultural phenomenon, socio-political ethos. He considers himself 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 (9).

Each character is surrounded in their same trace of the feeling. Kovalev is also facing an identity crisis. He needs it 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. It is similar when Gregor Samsa died. All members, particularly his father thanked God for his son's death. It means all the characters tell us identity issues. The biological metaphor shows identity crisis not only in the select novellas, but the people who live around us. Their disturbance at past makes us so disturbed that they are fighting for their right in darkness. As the protagonist in *The Wart* says 'darkness dwarf' themes at the beginning. They are representatives of the Twenty-first century generation. At the present time, people have lack of communication and suffers 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.

All 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. Gregor Samsa's past is unsatisfactory, he has to neglect his 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. It is the same case with Kovalev in *The Nose*. He is in his middle age and just wanders as a vagabond in search of young girls and married women to get sensual pleasure. Their past history is pregnant with negative assumptions.

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. Their all protagonist suffers from various problems and becomes 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 metaphors in their works.

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