

OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE IN THE 'GHOSTS OF VASU MASTER'

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ABSTRACT

The present article delineates the thoughts of death in the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. The novel has temporary upsurge of philosophy which questions the perennial affect of death on the living. The article tries to demonstrate how Githa Hariharan portrays death using scary metaphors of Crow and Mouse. The Crow and its incessant cawing might draw attention of the reader towards death. On the other hand, the Mouse is understood to be an embodiment of the main character Vasu. The constant battle between Vasu (Mouse) and Death (Crow) is explicated in the article using the literary device objective correlative.

Keywords: Crow, Objective Correlative, death, Vasu and Mouse.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'objective correlative' is a popular term which was first used by The American Painter Washington Allston in 1840 but it was popularized by T.S. Eliot in 1919 in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems." Eliot defines the term as:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Eliot, T.S, 100)

To elaborate it further, objective correlative serves as a device to evoke an emotion in the reader without direct appeal from the writer. He creates the scenes to make the reader comprehend what the writer feels. For instance, to tell the affect of war, a writer may create scene of dilapidated buildings, corpses lying severed, burned skins, vanishing of trees and greenery and trails of blood. The writer need not stress the affect of war on the people but can make the readers understand the ill effects of war.

The concept of "Objective Correlative" can rightly be observed in the novel *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. It is a fine example of self exploration of an individual which strikes relevance between Vasu's loneliness and the readers'. There is a constant reminder, an objective correlative, throughout the novel which compels Vasu to comprehend his existence. "The Objective Correlative" in the novel is a crow which scares and leads the readers into the world of Vasu. His perception of the world and his relationship with his students are only fragments of his memory of death. The crow symbolises death and it's aftermath. Readers assimilate Vasu's thoughts and are constantly lost in quietus. On several occasions, when the crow pesters Vasu Master its cawing at his window, he is reminded of his inevitable death. It is a regular visitor

to him and it befriends him. He has no other hope except death. Albert Camus, In the Myth of Sisyphus, says, "The conscious of death is the call of anxiety and "existence then delivers itself its own summons through the intermediary of consciousness"(24). The summons which Camus meant are anguish and anxiety which are the direct results of consciousness of death.

The blurbs of the book *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* highlight Hariharan's style of narrative. Among such admirers, Gentleman has praised the book reading it with philosophical outlook. It said, " With well-imagined characters and the gentle, humane and philosophical voice of Vasu Master, [the novel] eloquently explores the human condition". The philosophical voice which Hariharan exerts throughout the novel is the stark reality of death.

The consciousness of death triggers Vasu to suffer from diarrhea. The thought of loneliness develops in Vasu after his retirement. His son, Vishnu, asks him to come to him but Vasu denies. Vasu understands that none would accompany him in his last quarter of life. Behind his son's affectionate queries, there is a note of selfishness to seize Vasu's pension and property. There is an existential loneliness in the mind of Vasu and it is evident in his neighbour a crow. It is his only regular, brief visitor . Both the crow and Vasu are similar in loneliness devoid of any familial ties. The Crow doesn't have a nest and even Vasu has no home and family. In the later years, Vasu directs attention towards loss of life. He addresses the crow as a "grabbling creature". This might compel the intuition of a reader to think of the crow as a symbol of death which grabs the souls out of their human bodies.

Initially, there was no thought of death in the mind of Vasu. He is like a common man, an unconscious being, immersed himself with the issues like wife, children and job earnings and forgets about death. Gradually he has happened to be a friend of death. It is clear in the chapter "Why are Grey Mouse and Black Crow Neighbours?" and in the line, " Grey Mouse and Black Crow had never been friends. But they were, in the strange way these things happen, next-door neighbours" (*The Ghost*96). He compares the Mouse and the Crow with death. Death is a wolf which waits on him. He never had given a thought of it until the crow signalled forth the coming doom. Unlike a commoner, he is not afraid to face after life. A reader can suffice by reading the novel that If Vasu is in search of his self (a way of living), black crow was in search of a body an outward look of life. It favours body as Vasu mentions it :

The crow, meanwhile, led a much more hectic, outward -looking life. Like all scavengers, he had to be on the look-out most of the time. He was marked to be a loner and he was learning to like it. Unlike his unknown neighbour, Black Crow was swift, decisive, single-minded. He was partial to things that glittered; or that were stiff and cold, full of stale, swelling pulp.(*The Ghosts*96)

Vasu tries to decipher death detailing it clearly and honestly. When Vasu tries to comprehend death meticulously , he draws out a comparison between crow's filthy habits to that of injustice or absurdity existent in life. On knowing death, Vasu succumbs to fear. He realizes that he is not what he is. There is a conviction that he is going to share his life with death and obviously, considers the crow as his neighbour. Vasu observes the crow's comings and goings, and he begins to think like the crow. He personifies the Crow's thought saying, "I am tired and old, he thought. Why bother to fly all over the place when I have a meal watching me next door? And why have I been foolish enough to let him be all this time" (97). Vasu comprehends death;

it is ready to hunt him and have him as meal. Vasu finally could figure out that the crow is not a mere bird but death; he is prey to it,

Mouse noticed that Crow's glinting eye was now turned on him. He felt a terrible surge of panic: after all these years of observing and learning, questioning and thinking, was this how he would end up? Had death been his neighbour all his life? (97)

At the thought of absence of life, a strange feeling, disturbs Vasu. At one time he would disdain his death by mere escaping it. Vasu tries to escape from death but he has been successful once but not always. He acknowledges death and waits for it:

So at long last the two neighbours discovered each other. Both realized- Mouse in his own sad way, and Crow in his dim way- what they were to each other. For Crow, Mouse would always be there teasing him: a meal within reach he could not have yet. And for Mouse, Crow was always there, taunting him: the ultimate predator, the supreme creature of action, lying in wait for him. One false move, and the game would be up. Now all Mouse had left to learn: how had he lived so long in such ignorance? And how long could he keep Crow at bay? (The Ghosts98)

Vasu is vulnerable to death and is reprimanded of several fears that comes across. For example, when he is awake, he is afraid of imaginary accidents like slipping, falling and the explosion of stove in his face. He gets pestered by fatality and its effect. He says, "Accidents trip up younger men; when he should be preparing himself for the inevitable accident awaiting him, why exert the will to survive?" (The Ghosts109). Vasu realizes that he is going to die in an inevitable accident;so he doesn't want to defy it rather he wants to follow the tides of death. Vasu realizes that every human is afraid to live. This fear is a rival to the terror of death. Death is the final call for the problems, whereas fear of living is not a final call but an incessant welcome to the struggles of survival. He says, " I turned to a fresh sheet of paper and wrote: We have to realize and admit that we are deeply afraid; to live, to love. This is a fear that rivals our ingrained terror of death"(The Ghosts 67). Vasu is prone to an extreme level of thinking and sinks in to his own kind of existential philosophy. The term that is associated with inner conflicts resulting in comprehending the absurdity of life. Vasu undergoes existential crisis with regard to his death which is often symbolized as the Crow in the novel. The thoughts of death, his own questioning of life are part of this aggressive and sad reality. He says:

I picked up my pen and wrote: The body is always in a peculiar, unstable situation. It is the nucleus and the starting point of the perennial navel-gazing question, who am I? It is also this pathetic object that bears a divided destiny---to be part of both inner and outer worlds. (The Ghosts 71)

He imagines his last years of life. The imagination is an unwitty one. He sleeps very late than the usual sleeping time. Vasu surmounts that it is the late hours and complete silence which has made him walk out of the bed. Another instance of Objective Correlative which can be dissected is the exemplary of a spider and calendar. Vasu considers and imagines himself as a spider which crawls across the wall until it finds its shelter behind a calendar. Vasu however could comprehend the outer body as is the calendar that is impermanent. He, the spider, though presently hidden behind the calendar has to let go off his security and safety. The physique or the body, or the shelter in which one lives is shaggy and flimsy. He ensures that

death is awaiting him and occasionally he could imagine himself as body, void of life. He sees himself a corpse and he could count his own ribs in his body. Vasu could even see teary eyes of his corpse. The condition of the body matches with the growing thickness of his medical file. Vasu is agitated with his sickness and moves on from doctor to doctor for his check-up. Finally, he summarises that these physicians only look for bodily wreckage unmindful of internal cause of the disease.

Vasu has a momentary relaxation from the thought of this loss of death and finds solace in Mani and experiments with varieties of methods in teaching him. On the contrary, the Crow incessantly caws at him hinting that he has a little left to live. He further names death as a shadow which he could hear and see. It is quite visible and audible in the form of the Crow. Vasu on an one afternoon while waiting for his Mani's arrival, empties his table. He feels uncomfortable to do anything as he waits. He was waiting for Mani, even the crow is in wait for its student Vasu. His sense of loneliness has been adjusted or filled with Mani and thus avoid his meandering negative thoughts. In utter loneliness one desires the companionship of death. He compares his loneliness with a marshland which has no end. He says, "To be completely alone is to travel in a marshland. This journey does not take you forward. It is a descent, each milestone achieved when you briefly gain a viable means of support" (TheGhosts89).

In the absence of Mani, Vasu usually thinks of the Crow his regular guest. However, this time he has ignored its presence. In Mani's absence, Vasu feels the ache of loneliness. Vasu names the crow as a sentry. Out of curiosity, Vasu goes out and looks at the Crow when it caws. He says:

As I stood there waiting- for Mani, or maybe the crow –I wondered, not for the first time –the face of death: what does it look like? Does it have a predatory beak? A single, unblinking eye and grasping talons ? Or is it something less vivid, a tricky, shifting montage of many faces? I sometimes had a fearful dream where the faces I knew, that I had loved or grown to love, crumbled into featurelessness. Whatever it looks like, death lives in a closed, airless room. It has a musty smell. This was one of the reasons I kept the window of my room wide, wide open. (The Ghosts91)

Vasu is petrified of after life and its nothingness. He looks at the crow with utmost attention and the crow comes to him as it is signal from Vasu. He even dreams of he and the crow being on a deserted road. He dreamt of the Crow hypnotizing him with its challenging stare. Vasu comprehends that he cannot escape its gaze and he cannot counter it.

Vasu once wrote a story about the land of donkeys. One fine day, the land of donkeys has a surprising visit from a stranger. The stranger is a messenger from death. He says that his master is tired of being misunderstood and offers them a bounty. The offer is that the master would show himself to them on one condition. The condition is to live forever without mentioning about life after death. The donkeys accept the condition because they are flattered and excited. The intellectuals among the donkeys deny the offer but are submissive to the opinions of the majority and accept. Some other donkeys tried to dream after life but they are late. Meanwhile, the messenger has been exhausted and travel worn. He tries to fornicate them and says that their time is over. It is to indicate that the life is an unresolvable conflict that is ever discussed.

Hence, Githa Hariharan compares the flattered donkeys with people ignorant of life. Those donkeys are burdened with unknown weight on their shoulders and move forward. They are unaware of the happenings around them. These people stand similar to the Sisyphus who carry boulder which is to the top of a hill. Conscious minds question and study what life is. To tell it more clearly, these are the people who will be in touch with life itself. They are conscious of the happenings around them. They question everything on their way especially with particular regard to stranger things like religion or god. Some other people who are ignorant of death try to analyse death and its happenings. After they come to realize the absurdity of their life, the time flies by leaving them with no solution and finally ends up with no decision making. The people die with this absurdity not knowing after life. This is very clear in the comprehension of Vasu who awaits his death.

The chapter "Blue Bottle Finds Friend" highlights the relationship between Mani and Vasu. Vasu ventures to teach Mani a dumb head. They both see different flies in the room. The chapter might be analysed in terms of allegorical relation between logical human thought and the absurd process of life. They watch flies and a spider. The Spider waits by the mouse hole to catch hold of flies. These flies breed and multiply into more maggots. One of these maggots turns out into a blue bottle fly. It is very distinct from other flies such that it is big blue and buzzes louder than others. The peculiar features of Blue Bottle Fly has made it very distinct that the news of this strangeness has been spread as a rumour of a kind. It is quickly recognized as an abnormal fly. The fly is secluded and it is pitied. One fly says to another fly that it would have been better if Blue Bottle had never been born at all. The other flies feel sorry for Blue Bottle and it is a mechanical. They have been instructed to do so rather than freely sympathize with him. On other occasions, they would tease him and mock him for his buzzing sound. They sing:

Blue, blue, clumsy old shoe.

What can we do?

The spider wants you (105).

These flies treat him with such contempt that he feels that spider won't be much worse than this. He doesn't even feel bad or sad to be taken into the spider's web. Overcome by pity, Vasu (the old mouse) thinks of saving Blue Bottle (Mani). Initially, he didn't want to interfere but his old age and the incessant cawing of the Crow signalled him that the time left for him is so little. Vasu relentlessly preoccupied by the thoughts of death finds solace in Mani. He willingly becomes unconscious to avoid consciousness. This comfortable adjustment which Vasu makes reminds Camus's Sisyphus. Camus ends his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* saying:

This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (123).

Sisyphus understands that despite the life being absurd, one has to be happy. Even Vasu, like Sisyphus carries his boulder of life ignoring his loneliness and the ghosts of memory and horrid imagination. There is a grain of fear and uncertainty of after life but he sets out himself to

help Mani, the Blue Bottle in his life. In taking care of Blue Bottle, Vasu forgets about death and cawing Crow.

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