

THE THEME OF DESIRE *IN THE ALCHEMY OF DESIRE*

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Tarun Tejpal's *The Alchemy of Desire* (2005) is a narrative about Desire. The novel opens with the quote: "Love is not the greatest glue between two people, Sex is" and ends with "Sex is not the greatest glue between two people, Love is...." (*The Alchemy of Desire*, 3,518)

Amid the quotes, Tarun Tejpal explores what he calls, "The Alchemy of Desire". The word 'Alchemy' has a scientific origin which means creation, combination or transformation from something very original and base to very valuable. (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*). The main aim is to explore the value of Desire. The desire which can foster jealousy, distraught, truth and hallucination reality. The story of the novel revolves around a young couple from a small town in India, penniless but ingloriously in love with each other, move to the big city, where the man works intensely on a novel, with the support of his wife, stopping only to feed his incessant desire for his beautiful wife. They both left Delhi for an old house in the fog masked Himalayas. They purchased this house from a man called Stephen. While renovating their rickety new home, the young man unearths a chest full of diaries written by Catherine. It revealed a series of intense relationships (sexual and otherwise) with (and between) various Indian men, including prince. The narrator cannot pull himself away from his wife for the first time. His involvement in diary made him to find out the truth of his own desires and passions.

To support the theme of desire, the theory of Hierarchy of needs given by Abraham Maslow is suggested, which suits best to the theme of the novel. He is a famous Psychologist who has given a motivation theory that lays out five growth needs. The desire is a need which we fulfill out of our wish or will. (*Theories of Personalities*, 448-450)

The lower a need is in the hierarchy the more prepotent or dominating that needs is. The needs at the lower tends of the hierarchy entail deficiency motivation, because they are triggered by some deficit or lack within the person, while needs at the highest level growth because they entail the person's striving after goals and personal growth.

The lowest level in Maslow's Hierarchy is the Physiological needs. This includes hunger, thirst and sex. The next sets of needs to emerge are the Safety needs which include security, stability, dependency, protection from fear. Such needs are generally satisfied for most adults living in a hospitable society. The third sets of needs are the Belongingness and Love needs. These represent the need for friends, family and "affectionate relations with people in general."

The fourth level of the hierarchy includes Esteem needs – fame, status, dominance, attention and dignity.

After experiencing all these stages the human mind attains the fifth stage i.e. Self-actualization or Self-realization. We begin from the First stage and move towards the Higher

order needs for the betterment of our lives .Maslow stated that when all four of the basic, deficiency needs have been satisfied, “ a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop , unless the individual is doing what he, individually is fitted for ...what a man can be he must be...” (*Theories of Personalities* , 450)

Similarly Tarun Tejpal has also divided his novel into five parts –Prema : Love, Karma: Action, Artha : Money, Kama : Desire, Satya : Truth . These five parts of the novel acted as the five stages of needs for the narrator .Tarun Tejpal has taken kaleidoscopic view of desire – the desire in men for women , the desire in men for men , the desire for fornication , the connubial desire , the desire in dreams , the incubus desire and the succubus desire , the missing desire , the budding desire , the vicarious desire . (*The Alchemy of Desire* ,)

The narrator has experienced all these stages and finally reached the level of Self –realisation, in other words Satya: Truth.

In the first part, Prema: Love, the narrator himself confesses that earlier he had great love towards Fizz-

There had been occasions when I had fallen over the edge
 just sucking her calves .But now her skin had no taste .

(*The Alchemy of Desire* , 22)

The narrator compares his so-called love for Fizz to a chewing gum which lost its flavour after hours .His nature to explore different themes and ideas is seen when he said “Desire is an unknowable thing.” (*The Alchemy of Desire* , 23)

This shows that the narrator is an Explorer. He is an explorer of Desire. He believes in doing lot many things in search of pleasure. He does not know what he desire in his life? For him the marriage is not an emotional but physical bondage .Like an insect he was caught in the web of his desire . Like every ordinary man he also want name and fame and stability in society therefore he chose writing as his profession and thought of writing a book on the period before partition . He started working feverishly on novel. He stops only to feed his ceaseless desire for his beautiful wife. To fulfill his aim he left his job, and for livelihood his wife Fizz started working so that he can concentration in writing .Fizz proved to be a real life partner for the narrator. She made time Table for him which was called –“The Manual of the Artist as a Young Man.”(*The Alchemy of Dseire* ,56)

But as the narrator said that “Desire is an unknowable thing”. He started loosing interest in his writing . “One by one the injunctions of the Manual began to fall by wayside.”(6) Initially he feels overwhelming in trying out different themes but later on he looses his concentration and magnetism. He could not resist his temptation hence his desire is interrupted in other activities too. This shows that he has not found real goal and real fervor of his life as the real passion keeps you engage throughout. It is everlasting.

Considering Maslow’s Physiological needs which says that if these needs are unsatisfied, they came to dominate person. Such needs are preemptive in the sense that they push all other needs into the background.

For full human potential growth one has to pass through all these stages. In the novel the growth is captured in the First order. It should not be captured at the First order; otherwise the growth will hamper. To reach to the level of Self actualization, a person should gratify all these Desire .The desire should be nurtured. It should be healthy. You must act on desire before you

renounce it. As people don't know their real desire, so they must feel desire, as every desire is very important in life.

Similarly, the narrator neither identified his love for Fizz nor his passion for writing.

However, when the couple abandons the city for an old house in the mist-shrouded Himalayas. In refurbishing their ramshackle new house, the young man found out some diaries. The narrator found a great attachment towards Diaries. Thrust into another world and time he found his own mirror image in the characters of the diary, the characters who don't know what they desire in their life. The diary episode reveals narrator's another desire- his desire to know about different people and personality, again he is an Explorer.

He read the story of a young girl Catherine, who fell in love with Syed. Like her father, John, she was seized by the false moments of the instant love. Without giving time to their relationship she got married to Syed. Syed was the first born son of the Nawab of Jagdevpur. Syed's presence always undermines his younger brother, Zafar's authority, the nawab-to-be. Catherine realized that Syed maintains some kind of distance with his family. Later she came to know that when Syed was only thirteen he had deep sexual love with the handsome young who taught him Mathematics. Syed discovered that there is no joy to the world beyond men. Catherine felt very lonesome, in this critical time she was accompanied by a faithful servant, Banno, who later changed her religion and became Bannomary. Considering Maslow's theory, Syed's desire was captured in the lowest level of Hierarchy; hence it affected his wife, Catherine too. Syed has never identified his relationship with Catherine. There was no intimacy in their relationship. Their relationship did not grow. They could not reach to the level of Safety needs or Love and Belongingness needs.

Tarun Tejpal explores again a new definition of desire –

Desire conjures death, destruction, distress. But also creates love, beauty, art. Thus it forgives even those who desire intemperately. It is the greatest desire undoing. And the only reason for all doing. (*The Alchemy of Desire*, 193-194)

The author probably means to say that both Catherine and Syed were responsible for their destruction as they never comprehend the assessment and the motive of desire.

In the closing stages the narrator goes to many places in quest of truth. Again he is an explorer of Satya. He is trying to reach the higher order, trying to realize his goals and aims. Now he wants to know the real meaning of his desire. In search of truth of diary, he came to know that Stephen, was the son of Bannomary, and also that Catherine was murdered. The narrator felt himself burdened with sins; so he went to an astrologer for salvation. Although it was too late for the narrator to realize 'the Alchemy of Desire',

Yet he has understood that desire brings love, harmony and peace in life. The narrator has understood self-realization which Maslow describes as a person needs to be and do that which the person was "born to do". A musician must make music, an artist must paint, and a writer must write. He started with physical, moved to Karma, and reached to Satya. Since he has understood the motive of his life and also that desire creates love, beauty and art. He took his pen and wrote:

Sex is not the greatest glue between the two people, Love is

(*The Alchemy of Desire*, 518)

But in the end the readers are left to an unreciprocated question, "What drives the human soul, desire for love or love for desire?"

Workcited

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