

Reinterpreting Kubler-Ross's Grief Theory in R. Chudamani's Short Fiction

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Abstract

R. Chudamani is an Indian writer whose works have been less explored in scientific research. This present research article intends to interpret Chudamani's short fiction "Forgive me if you can" which is taken from her collection of short stories *The Solitary Sprout*. Chudamani's literary works delineate psychological emotions and human values. In the short fiction, "Forgive me if you can", she portrays the inevitable experiences like death, loss, and grief in the lives of human beings. This article focuses on the protagonist's grief over the loss of his beloved. This research article also analyses the psychological emotion, 'grief' which is dominant in the narrative. Kubler-Ross's grief model is taken as a criterion to analyze the protagonist's grief. The research article also scrutinizes the protagonist's grieving process and how it transforms his life for his survival. The research article also traces how the protagonist shifts in the process of grieving through the grief theory of Kubler-Ross.

Keywords: short fiction, grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance

1. Introduction

"Forgive me if you can" is a short story from the anthology *The Solitary Sprout* by R. Chudamani, present an unnamed protagonist, as a husband who bemoans the loss of his wife. The overpowering presence of the unnamed protagonist through pathos, fragility, interior monologues, and confession is dominant in the short story. The introductory notes of C.T. Indira and T. Sriraman in the book *The Solitary Sprout* signify the idea of grief that the protagonist needs to "grieve in solitude". It indicates that 'grief' is the predominant emotion in the protagonist. It is worth investigating the emotion of 'grief' in the unnamed protagonist of "Forgive me if you can" from a physiological perspective. In this article, the psychological emotion of 'grief' is examined through the evidence of how the protagonist endures the loss of his wife. This research article intends to examine the theory of grief, predominantly the Kubler-Ross Model of grief as an appropriate tool to analyze the protagonist's grief and restitution in the short story.

2. Different Models of Grief

Defining the psychological emotion 'grief' has always been arduous because of the other closely related emotions, e.g., sadness, mourning, and bereavement. Kataoka (2017) states that a vivid interpretation of grief has been alternatively gradual to arrive in research, partly because of the extant conceptual hassle regarding its explanation. Stroebe et al., (2017) observe that these emotions are "overlapped" with grief and it, "...refers to the emotional experiencing of a number of psychological, cognitive/behavioural, social and physical reactions that the bereaved person may experience as a result of the death of a loved one; it is considered to be a complex emotional syndrome" (p.584). Thus, the psychological emotion 'grief' is distinguished from the other closely related emotions. Loss and Grief are rudimentary emotions in human beings. Walter and L.M McCoyd (2009) state "Loss is at the heart of life and growth. This seems a bit paradoxical, but the reality is that new life, change, and forward movement only come as a result of losing (changing) a prior lifestyle, behavior pattern, or other functioning of the status quo." (p.1) The defense mechanism towards loss can be termed grief. Within the ambit of grief theories in the early 1920s, some psychology theorists initiated the ideas and models of grief. Sigmund Freud's Mourning and Melancholia (1917) is one of the significant works that shed light on "mourning" for the loss of a spouse nevertheless he didn't give any specific model on grief but the idea of grief theory begins from this work. Secondly, Lindermann in 1944, who has postulated the model of grief that elucidates the reactions of human beings towards grief in five stages. Bowlby, an avant-garde of child development and attachment theories developed the grief model in four phases with the collaboration of Collin Murray Parkes. In the late 1950s, the term "disability" falls under the credence of 'Stage Theory'. Cohn has advanced a model for the adjustment to disability in five stages; later Fink developed a four-stage model; these two prevalent theories constructed on 'mourning' for the disability are referred to as 'Crisis Theory'.

3. Kubler-Ross Theory

This archiving model was again followed by theorist Elisabeth Kubler Ross with a novelty. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is a psychiatrist, thanatologist, and humanitarian. She postulated a model of grief with five stages in the book *On Death and Dying* (1969) that concerns the psychological impact of death and grief in the lives of human beings. On inspecting the theories of grief, Kubler-Ross's model fits well to analyze the protagonist's grief in the selected short story for research. She affirmed that the five stages of grief need not occur in exact order. It also signifies an idea to examine the grief of the unsettled unnamed protagonist in the short story with the Kubler-Ross model of grief. In the present era, even many recent research developments in the theory of grief have shown new perspectives like Strobe, Schut, and Worden but the Kubler-Ross model is the perfect yardstick to analyze the protagonist's grief in the short story "Forgive me if you can."

4. Review of Literature

Giskin Day (2012) investigated a novel, *A Monster Calls* with the Kubler-Ross model and showcased the emotional trajectory and bereavement of the protagonist on the loss of his mother. The researcher has explicated that the Kubler-Ross model serves as an aid to come out of grief and it acts as a catharsis for his bereavement. Wang and Wang (2021) have investigated a film, *Manchester by the Sea* with the theory of Kubler-Ross. The analysis majorly centres on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the characters' psyche on the loss of their close ones, where few characters were in transit from the grief and few were in a state of idleness. Pambayun et.al., (2022) have examined the film *The Girl on the Train*, with a focus on the protagonist, Rachel who lost her loved one. Through the Kubler-Ross model, the researchers have identified the transition of Rachel from grief in the film. Kataoka (2017) evaluated the emotion of 'grief' in J.M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*, where the protagonist Mayura undergoes the process of grieving through the Kubler-Ross theory. The researcher has shown that grief is the prime emotion of the protagonist and her state of restitution in the play. Ellis (2020) has examined Edwidge Danticat's *Untwine* the young adult fiction and has inspected the central character Giselle, who grieves over the loss of her friend and her twin sister in an accident. The researcher has also examined the endured stages of the protagonist in the Kubler-Ross model of grief. Salah et., al (2019) have taken the Kubler-Ross model as a tool to analyze five different movies. The researchers critically examined specific characters and specific scenes from the selected movies. They have also indicated that more than two stages recurred in the selected movies and have concluded that grief transforms the lives of individuals, specifically on the stage of acceptance. Pass (2006), elucidated the grief framework of Kubler-Ross with Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The researcher has focused on the central character, Sethe who undergoes the process of grieving the loss of her daughter and the way she accepts to learn the reality. Previous studies have focused on the Kubler-Ross grief theory and examined the protagonists and central characters in films, novels, and plays. Researchers have predominantly shown their research interests in films and novels but have not explored much in other genres like plays and short stories with this Kubler-Ross model. This present research tries to scrutinize Indian writer, R. Chudamani's short fiction "Forgive me if you can" with the framework of Kubler-Ross's theory of grief.

5. Methodology & Theoretical Framework

Kubler-Ross's theoretical framework serves as the means by which the study's goals might be attained. This Study used a qualitative research design based on exploratory and interpretive methodology. This methodology focuses on the text itself, including its language, characters (specifically the protagonist), story and structure. The researcher has concentrated particularly on the short story "Forgive me if you can", which is viable to Kubler-Ross's grief theory. The following stages of the Kubler-Ross theory are 1. *Denial/Isolation* 2. *Anger* 3. *Bargaining* 4. *Depression* 5. *Acceptance*.

6. Analysis & Discussion

6.1 Chudamani & Short- Fiction "Forgive me if you can"

R. Chudamani is an Indian writer who has begun to do preeminence in the recent past. She has penned several literary pieces in both Tamil and English and almost all her short story collections in English are published posthumously. Chudamani's works divulge the psychological emotions in human beings (Anish & Priya, 2022). She has mastered her short stories with psychological emotions and human values. She has epitomized the psychological torments of men, women and children in her writings. She also makes the readers sympathize with the characters in her fiction. The short story "Forgive me if you can" is taken from one of her collections of short stories *The Solitary Sprout*. In this short story, "Forgive me if you can", Chudamani has demarcated the positive and negative dimensions of men through the unnamed protagonist. In addition to this, the concept of grief has dominated the concept of infidelity in the narrative. Loss and Grief are ineludible experiences in the lives of human beings that are incorporated into various genres of literature, like plays, novels, short stories and poetry. In this narrative, "Forgive me if you can" Chudamani has represented the above factors in the life of the protagonist. Grief is the dominant factor that occurs in the protagonist. Wilks (1999) defines grief "as the natural reaction to loss and is an emotion which requires the profound imagination to resolve" (p.153).

"Forgive me if you can" is the narrative of a man who bewails at the loss of his wife. The narrative begins with the protagonist, who narrates the demise of his beloved. The protagonist seeks to grieve in solitude but the space is denied by himself due to his interior monologues. The obsequies and rituals are done by his son which makes the protagonist feel desperate. He also thinks he has no right to do the funeral rituals. The infidelity toward his wife makes him feel guilty. Besides this, the protagonist also bargains about his behaviour to his dead wife that he is "a little wicked and a little good." He also pleads with his dead wife to forgive him for his extramarital relationship. On the other hand, when he doesn't get any chance to grieve in solitude and to do obsequies, he moves towards the other

woman, Aruna. In the end, the protagonist himself comforts by imagining that Aruna who has taken the form of Mythili forgives him. In addition, the core element in the narrative is the psychological emotion “grief”, where the protagonist searches for a chance to grieve in solitude but unknowingly he arrives in the process of grieving and it can be well identified through the analysis of Kubler-Ross’s theory of grief.

6.2 Denial/Isolation

The short story “Forgive me if you can” begins with the unnamed protagonist, who unfolds his wife’s death. At the inception of the narrative, the protagonist describes the loss of his wife which indicates a kind of repudiation in him but in an implicit manner. This might be because of his affection towards his wife which leads to a kind of denial in his inner self can be observed:

“Look there—that is a corpse.

When that thing was a ‘she’, that ‘she’ was my wife. I mean to say, until dawn today.

Even when her life was ebbing away at the hospital, I did not quite comprehend that this was the end.” (p.40)

The protagonist tries to cope with the excruciating situation which makes him deny the fact that she is dead. This reflects a kind of denial and resistance in the protagonist’s mind which is termed as ‘temporary defense’ by Kubler-Ross. As Ross (2009) puts it, “Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance. (p.32) The protagonist knows that there is no scope for his wife’s survival, but he tries to deny the thought of his wife’s demise by saying that she was alive till that morning. At this juncture, the denial recurs in the mind of the protagonist, and in the interim, the protagonist isolates himself from the crowd and soliloquizes “Keeping myself to a corner, as I were a stranger who could not go near the crowd, I kept craning my neck and peering at Mythili again and again from a distance.” (Chudamani, 2019, p.41) He also wants to isolate himself for a while. The protagonist prompts denial/isolation from the situation and inadvertently gets into the process of healing.

6.3 Anger

Anger is the second stage in the Kubler-Ross model that supersedes the first stage of denial/isolation. In “Forgive me if you can”, the protagonist acknowledges the loss of his wife when obsequies of the protagonist’s wife are propagated by his son, Nanu, and that creates a state of anger in the protagonist. Moreover, the interior monologues reflect the protagonist’s envy towards his son and that can be observed here:

“All the rituals were meant only for him.

No, I shouldn’t say “My Son.” Today he is my adversary, the rival who has snatched my wife away from me.” (Chudamani, 2019, pp.41-43)

The protagonist’s anger is not directed towards his wife but is directed towards his son because the protagonist thinks that he doesn’t get an opportunity to do obsequies for his wife. Ross remarks that individuals are angry at “people and God” in this stage and this anger may be “displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random.” (Ross, 2009, p.40). Secondly, the protagonist shows his anger towards the crowd and his son in the way of interior monologue and questions himself for his solitude.

“How absurd! Why should the entire town make a bee-line and crowd here the moment my wife, who was ‘she’ until this morning, died and became ‘it’?

My wife.

Why does it not strike anyone that I may want to be alone with her for some time? Not even my son!” (Chudamani, 2019, pp.42-43)

Ross and Kessler (2005) point out “Suddenly you have a structure—your anger toward them.” (p.15) and that is well apparent in the protagonist. The protagonist expresses his anger by forming a sudden structure that his son has taken over his rights, then towards the crowd and his son for his solitude which replaces the thought of denial/isolation in him.

6.4 Bargaining

Bargaining is the third and most important stage in the Kubler- Ross model, this particular stage displays a kind of helplessness in the individual. The same is applicable in the narrative, which portrays a state of helplessness in the protagonist. He wishes that his wife should forgive him for his depraved behaviour the wish of the protagonist is to forgive him and to move further for his cosiness. As Ross (2009) advocates that individuals in this stage seek for “extension of life, followed by the wish for a few days without pain or physical discomfort.” (p.66) The protagonist unveils the extramarital relationship to his wife’s corpse to find solace and to avoid the pain of guilt, he agrees.

“Yes, I have another woman. Yes, I am indeed such a person. But I have always loved you, Mythili. You have always been dear to me. I swear on our only child, I love you, Mythili. But I yielded to temptation. Please forgive me for it. Just because I behaved like this, it doesn’t mean I am an entirely wicked man. I am a little wicked and a little good.” (Chudamani, 2019, p.47)

With the above lines, it can be understood that the protagonist negotiates his behaviour with his dead wife, which is well apparent in his confrontations. Ross (2009) affirms “He knows, from past experiences, that there is a slim chance that he may be rewarded for his good behaviour be granted a wish for special services.” (p.66) Here, the protagonist also tries for a chance to be forgiven and accepted by his wife which is impossible and hence his helplessness is reflected in his bargaining in the grieving process.

6.5 Depression

Depression is the fourth stage of response intensely to a great loss. This depression replaces the other stages and facilitates the state of acceptance. The protagonist becomes gloomy and losses his anger at this stage. Ross (2009) describes “His numbness or stoicism, his anger and rage will be soon replaced with a sense of great loss.” (p.69)

“My grief is pure, and so is my memory of Mythili which is the nucleus of my grief and which I carry within me. Therefore, where I take it now is also pure.

The anguish I was carrying within would now have become visible on my face. For there was now no need for me to wear a mask to conceal it from anyone. I could be just myself.” (Chudamani, 2019, pp.47-48)

The above lines in the narrative reflect how the protagonist instigates to look at the actuality of the current situation and how his grief is unavoidable. The protagonist's behaviour is abnormal and takes a different direction. Ross and Kessler (2005) assert “It (depression) takes us to a deeper place in our soul that we would not normally explore.” (p.24). The existing situation of the loss of his wife, his inability to grieve in solitude with his dead wife, and his son taking up the charge of doing the rituals become intolerable in the beginning and then lead to a kind of depression.

6.6 Acceptance

Ross and Kessler (2005) remark “This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and recognizing that this new reality is the permanent reality. (p.25) In the narrative, the protagonist finally accepts reality by recognizing the death of his wife but he cannot grieve in solitude and is in a state of helplessness. So, he moves towards another woman, Aruna for solace. This shows that the protagonist is ready to find a “new reality” that is apparent in the protagonist and can be observed from the following lines,

“Yes, of course, my Mythili. She is no more, my Mythili.”

Before Aruna, I could be my natural self and I could openly say “My Mythili,” melting in agony. In the presence of this beloved, could feel free to talk about my wife lovingly, movingly. I could speak intimately to her of my innermost feelings. That was the measure of Aruna’s nobility and generosity.” (Chudamani, 2019, p.48)

In this stage, the protagonist accepts the past situation and is directed toward the upcoming situation. It shows a kind of serenity in the protagonist. Finally, he feels comfortable and accepts by believing that Mythili is forgiving him in the form of Aruna.

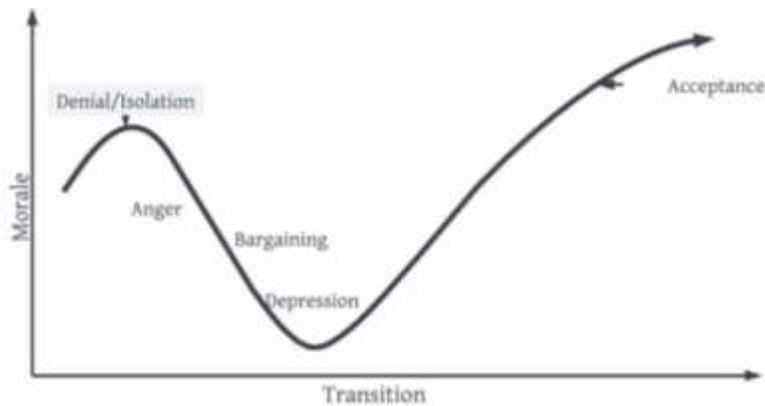


Figure 1. Kubler- Ross Curve (Tracing the Protagonist’s Transition)

The above figure of the Kubler-Ross curve displays how the protagonist shifts from one stage to another for his survival through the grieving process. On the whole, the analysis of the short story depicts the shifting of the protagonist from one stage to another stage in the process of grieving. The loss of his spouse puts him in despair and an intolerable situation. The protagonist expresses his two needs through interior monologues that he wants to grieve in solitude and wants to be forgiven which are dominant in the narrative. But unknowingly he enters into the process of grieving through the Kubler-Ross model of grief which is depicted throughout the story. Initially, the protagonist’s denial/isolation is identified which is implicitly depicted in the narrative. Secondly, the protagonist’s anger is first projected toward the son, then toward the crowd for his solitude. Thirdly, he bargains with his dead wife to forgive him, but he lies in a state of helplessness and then in the fourth stage, the protagonist enters a state of depression by pressurizing himself that he doesn’t get a chance to do anything for the loss. Finally, in the acceptance stage, the protagonist recognizes his wife’s death, accepts reality, and moves toward the future. On examining the narrative, the protagonist longs to grieve for his wife in solitude but he denied himself because he soliloquizes himself, but he thinks that others denied his space. However, unconsciously the protagonist gets into the process of grieving for his survival. Also, the protagonist experiences all stages of the Kubler-Ross model and doesn’t skip any of the stages.

7. Conclusion

Chudamani typified the psychological emotions in her literary works. Specifically in this short story, “Forgive me if you can”, she has highlighted the psychological agony of men. She has displayed that death, loss, and grief are inevitable experiences in the lives of human

beings, and in this narrative, the protagonist experiences loss and grief in his life. Chudamani has presented how men suffer from the loss of their beloved. Contrary to the agony, there is an extramarital relationship in the narrative, but the agony of the protagonist is dominant in the story which makes the readers empathize with the protagonist. With the framework of Kubler-Ross, the psychological emotion of grief of the protagonist as how it shifts from one stage to another, and how the grieving process metamorphoses the protagonist's life in the narrative are analyzed. The present study majorly focuses on the protagonist with Kubler-Ross's grief theory. It can be further explored with other genres of Chudamani and other grief theorists with their theories. The present study directs that the chosen short story has representations of all five stages of grief. In this short story, however, the protagonist experiences stages of denial/isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Hence acceptance is the key to turning grief into something more practicable. This study has a dual aim; first, it examines how the chosen short story implements Kubler-Ross's theory of grief. A second possible advantage is that it may help the readers deal with the loss of a loved one by opening their eyes to the inevitable finality of death and the universality of grief. So, the study intends to present a logical perspective on mourning as a means of altering one's life.

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