

Actualizing Self In Amulya Malladi's The Copenhagen Affair

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Abstract-

Amulya Malladi is a diasporic Indian writer in English born in Madhya Pradesh, India and currently living in Denmark. She has written seven novels which have got great appreciation from all over the world and her works have been translated into many languages like Dutch, German, Spanish, Danish, Romanian, Serbian and Tamil. Her famous novels include *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002), *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), *The Mango Season* (2003), *The Sound of Language* (2007), *Song of Cuckoo Bird* (2005), *A House for Happy Mothers* (2016), and *The Copenhagen Affair* (2017). She has spent many years of her life in Copenhagen and her most recent novel, *The Copenhagen Affair* is a tribute to the city. She remarks that "I love Copenhagen and I miss the city. I miss the food, the ambience, the outdoor café culture, my friends [...] I miss my life there. This book is my love letter to Copenhagen" (Garcia 2017).

The present research paper attempts to analyze the traces of Neo feminism in *The Copenhagen Affair*. The novel presents the journey of Sanya from depression to enlightenment leading self-identity. As a marked feature of progressive feminism, Neo feminism celebrates the evolution of new woman who is empowered in all walks of life. Women of this category do not demand for equal status with men instead they take pride in womanhood. *The Copenhagen Affair* emphasizes the need for women to focus on themselves. It is Sanya's nature to think of the problems of everybody and make them happy. In course of time, she develops nervous breakdown and finds difficult to cope with her life. The novel balances personal transformation. It is at this Copenhagen she finds her true self and her happiness. This city gives her a new dimension when she searches for happiness, love, balance and the meaning of life.

Keywords - depression, womanhood, optimistic, neo feminism, self-worth, low self-esteem, self-love, self-exploration and transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist ideology has taken a new turn in the recent past. Status of women is reflecting new vigor. They are no more interested in fighting for their rights as they consider themselves as equal to men. Neo feminists question the exaggerated demands of first and second wave feminists.

Set in the capital city of world's happiest country, *The Copenhagen affair* (2017) is a Comedy of Manners depicting the journey of the protagonist Sanya, a dark skinned Indian American in the city of blondes towards rebuilding herself while dealing with psychological crisis which is a result of her low self-esteem. The novel deals with depression, the pressure of marriage, the possibility of falling in love gain and recreating an identity while working with all odds.

Sanya is portrayed as a perfect wife, mother and a career woman in the beginning of the novel. She skillfully manages and balances her life with her job, family and home. She is married to Harry for almost twenty years. Suddenly she develops a nervous breakdown at her office where she has served for fifteen years as the Director of Strategy.

After the implosion she becomes silent and does not speak for a week and rests under her duvet. The loving, caring and optimistic Sanya becomes completely collapsed. She lacks interest in everything and sleeps all day under her duvet, doing nothing and avoids the company of people. Her husband Harry suggests that they move to Copenhagen as a change of place might help to cure her mental condition. The decision has less to do with Sanya and more with Harry himself as his company was buying an IT Foundry in Copenhagen and he is offered to be the CEO. Sanya never takes her own decisions and again leaves the major decision of her life to move to Copenhagen on others.

In *The Copenhagen Affair*, life of Sanya is balanced when her family moves to the city of Copenhagen. It is at this place she finds her true self and her happiness. This city gives her a new dimension on her search for happiness, love, balance and the meaning of life. A critic remarks, "From gossipy coffee shops to gritty blues clubs to the dining rooms of the Danish elite, Sanya's impulsive, exciting, (and) often humorous journey through the

colorful streets of Copenhagen is full of surprises” (Nyhan,2017)

The Struggle with Family

The story focuses on the constant struggle of Sanya during her pre and post psychological breakdown. Amulya Malladi uses the words ‘old Sanya’ and ‘new Sanya’ to describe the change she has undergone and the path she is on. The path of recreating herself, finding her true self and breaking through the darkness while dealing with mental health issues. The two phases of life of the same person are entirely poles apart. After her implosion she is at times a complete person and at other times she is just a caricature of herself.

Sanya is a vivacious and happy person who spreads positive energy. She always tries to please everyone. She succeeds for many years doing so, however people around her also criticize on the qualities she lacked, “Sanya’s parents, both of them successful doctors, who had immigrated from India in the seventies, were disappointed in her as well because they also assumed that she was stronger” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 1”, Para. 30).

Sanya is from well-educated family in which her mother, father and sister are successful doctors, and they are disappointed with Sanya because they think that she lacks ambition and hence unsuccessful in her career. They never bothered to know about her ambitions instead they assume that she is unambitious, “Earlier they used to be disappointed that she was also not getting anywhere in her career. Her lack of ambition was just not what they expected of a Bhargav, and now they felt the size of their disappointment had increased several hundredfold.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 1”, Para. 30)

Sanya’s younger sister Mira is a successful Pediatrician who is married to an Indian doctor while Sanya is marries a corporate white man much to the disappointment of her family. Every time during family dinner time, Sanya is always reminded by Mira and others about the need to maintain a good physique. Sanya welcomes their suggestions positively and starts introspecting herself. She is always criticized for everything by her family members. They thought they were making Sanya a better person, “But Sanya would not challenge her family and never told them that they make her feel small and irrelevant, even though they believed they were being helpful by pushing Sanya to be a better person. She never fought back, and in fact she never acknowledged, even within the confines of her consciousness, that she was playing dead and submerging every negative feeling she had about the people around

her and herself.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 1”, Para. 37)

Sanya’s Dilemma

Sanya concealed her true feelings from everyone and accepted everything that came her way without questioning. Although superficially, she always appeared to be a cheerful person internally, she was just unsure and afraid of everything that surrounded her. After her psychological collapse, she is depressed, unresponsive, unemployed, intractable, and always remained passive and unnoticed, “The biggest fraud she committed upon herself and the people around her was to hide the real Sanya, who was not happy or positive but afraid and unsure, and has used the technique of lying down and letting her life and the people in it run all over her so as to not deal with herself or her inadequacies.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 1”, Para. 38). Her frustration is not a result of one or two instances of her life but the constant baggage that had been building inside her for years as her family and the people around her in the workplace have neglected her. Sanya is never appreciated for the hard work that she has put for all the people who are a part of her life. While working for others, all her life she has neglected to think about herself. She has always felt under-confident and never actually realized her self-worth, “when one lives with such kind of low self-esteem, they expect the worst and when it is handed to them, they feel relieved not to wait for it anymore.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 1”). She always thought she is not good enough, she feels that one day the company she was working for will find out that she is not as good as they think her to be. After working for fifteen years for the company when she is offered the partnership, she ends up with a nervous breakdown. She sits there crying for two hours not because she is scared but because she is angry. People in her office who were appointed later were also offered partnership. She develops anger for the person who appoints her for not acknowledging her seniority and service. She feels that she deserves the partnership more than anyone else.

Sanya explains her frustration in terms of physics’ concept of Second Law of Thermodynamics which she learned from her best friend, Alec , who was a physicist. According to her Entropy is the quantitative measure of disorder in a system. In a closed system, Entropy will change, and if marriage is a closed system, then the Entropy or the disorder increases gradually in course of time and then it implodes. When disorder takes completely over the system, a new system is formed which is not better but different. Similarly, Sanya becomes

a completely different person after her implosion. Another aspect that makes her condition worse is the fact that she has become a doormat to her successful husband and this makes her to cringe.

After her series of nervous breakdowns, everything changes for Sanya. She is no more the happy and cheerful Sanya who wanted to please everyone. She is depressed and does not wish to have contact with anyone. She loses interest in everything and remains isolated in her bed all the time doing nothing but sleeping. She is not understood by anyone which makes her take a shelter under her duvet but after moving to Copenhagen she meets Anders Ravn who is the owner of the IT Foundry that Harry and his company are supposed to buy. Harry has always been perfect but Ravn is not. He has a scar on his face which makes her attracted towards him, “[...] it wasn’t Harry’s fault, of course, it was just that Sanya had changed ----she had started to craved jagged lines and disorder. She wanted edges rather than curves. She wanted to say the unsaid things. She wanted to feel everything at a time when she felt nothing.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 5”)

Prioritizing Self

Sanya feels very much connected to Ravn because he sees Sanya’s true self, the way she is, the way nobody has ever seen her, the way she needs to be understood, “one damaged person can see another Sanya ,he said.” (Malladi,2017,” Chapter 12”) He takes her to a museum and after that to a lunch where she realizes that her problem is not as big as others but since she feels all the things that are happening to her so she understands that she is facing emotional crisis. With Ravn she feels peaceful and he is the one who makes her come out of her inhibitions and get acquainted with her true self. This is because he is as scared as she is. He cares for her in a way she needs to be seen, “He puts his hands on hers again, and this time Sanya didn’t pull away. She laughed softly and fell in love with him a little in that moment, because this stranger seemed to have his finger on her pulse and could see her as she wanted... no, as she needed to be seen.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 12”)

When Ravn and Sanya run away with mutual willingness, Harry gets mad instantly and goes in search of her as he senses the danger of losing her forever, “For the first time the fog had lifted, and all it had taken was losing Sanya. Oh, she hadn’t left him or anything as dramatic, but emotionally she had checked out of their marriage, and he couldn’t blame her. He hadn’t checked into their marriage, and they’d been married for over two decades, so he didn’t have any moral ground to

stand on and question her burgeoning attraction to Ravn.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 32”)

Amulya Malladi has used the story from Indian mythology, *Ramayana* (Buck,2021)to contrast the situation of Sanya where Sita was kidnapped by Ravan and Sanya tells Ravn that his name just lacks an article ‘a’, she tells him about the ‘fire test’ that Sita had to give to prove her purity. Ravn asks her if she has to go through a fire test to prove her purity too to which she does not respond. Sanya, very smartly uses Ravn to crawl out of her depression. and at the end of the novel, the readers observe that she has transformed herself into a person who keeps herself beyond everything else whose sole motive in life was to please everyone. “And we will live in separate apartments, to start out at least...Because I want space...I want to be independent again, find out who Sanya is, outside of being your wife and Sara’s mother. And I need time to forgive you, Harry, for cheating on me; and I need to forgive myself as well for allowing it to happen, for not paying attention. We both need to heal and grow.” (Malladi, 2017, “Chapter 40”). Sanya tells Harry that they both need to take some time to get things better in their married life. While they try staying away from each other they continually need to keep examining what they want in their lives.

2. CONCLUSION

Amullya Malladi, through *The Copenhagen Affair* has beautifully presented the need for a person to continually grow in their lives and think about themselves while taking care of others. The need for women to love themselves and to present themselves in the most honest manner in this male centric world is focused upon. As Julie Lawson Timmer, the author of *Five Days Left, Untethered* has said, “*The Copenhagen Affair* reminds us that we must each decide what we are willing to risk to build our fortunes and find our true happiness.(2017)” Harry’s life has always been so busy making money that he neglected his wife realizing the situation only when he has completely lost her. Sanya’s nervous breakdown puts her in a position to think what she needed in her life. That was the beginning of her journey of finding herself and what she really wanted from her life. Malladi has exhibited her ideas, thoughts, themes, and motives in extremely funny and thought-provoking manner in this work of art. *The Copenhagen Affair*(2017) is another milestone in the success story of Amullya Malladi as a novelist deserving all praises.

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