

## **THE CIRCLE OF LOVE**

**Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

“Father Varghese does not read novels,” said my friend Joseph Macwan. Joseph and I were speaking on the occasion of the book release of a friend. Other friends joined us. The conversation turned to the latest Gujarati novel ‘Dariyo’ (Sea) by Joseph Macwan. Then a friend asked, “Has Father Varghese read the novel?” Before I say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ Joseph replied for me, “Father Varghese does not read novels.”

I have read a number of novels and character sketches of Joseph. But now for some years I have stopped reading novels. As a good friend Joseph knew it. But recently I read a novel in English. It is the world-renowned novelist Paulo Coelho’s novel “The Zahir”. Actually I did not read it for the sake of reading a novel, but I read it for the language. The language is simple and straightforward. Short sentences and interesting dialogues make the writer’s style attractive. His way of narrating the story is captivating. The novel “The Zahir” is originally written in Portuguese. But the English translation also shows the author’s mastery of the language and style. So I was not disappointed that I read the novel for its language and style, and I got more.

After writing 30 books in Gujarati I discussed my first book in English “Love, Youth & Family” with its Pauline Publishers, Mumbai who did a good job of copy-editing my manuscript. Now I have realized that my mastery over English is not as good as before.

About three decades ago when I was studying journalism in London both my classmates and the professors admired to the point of envy my mastery over English. It was towards regaining such mastery over the language I chose to read an English novel and got Paulo Coelho’s “The Zahir”. Reading the novel I not only learnt to improve my language and style of English but I also got some understanding and insight into human nature and genuine love.

I can demonstrate my statement with quoting a story narrated in the novel “The Zahir”. The story is about the circle of love.

“One morning, a farmer knocked loudly on the door of a monastery. When Brother Porter opened the door, the farmer held out to him a magnificent bunch of grapes.

‘Dear Brother Porter, these are the finest grapes from my vineyard. Please accept them as a gift from me.’

‘Why, thank you! I’ll take them straight to the Abbot, who will be thrilled with such a gift.’

‘No, no. I brought them for you.’

‘For me? But I don’t deserve such a beautiful gift from nature.’

‘Whenever I knocked on the door, you opened it. When the harvest had been ruined by drought, you gave me a piece of bread and a glass of wine every day. I want this bunch of grapes to bring you a little of the sun’s love, the rain’s beauty and God’s miraculous power.’

“Brother Porter put the grapes down where he could see them and spent the whole morning admiring them: they really were lovely. Because of this, he decided to give the present to the Abbot, whose words of wisdom had always been such a boon to him.

“The Abbot was very pleased with the grapes, but then he remembered that one of the other monks was ill and thought: ‘I’ll give him the grapes. Who knows, they might bring a little joy into his life.’

“But the grapes did not remain for very long in the room of the ailing monk, for he in turn thought: ‘Brother Cook has taken such good care of me, giving me only the very best food to eat. I’m sure these grapes will bring him great happiness.’ And when Brother Cook brought him his lunch, the monk gave him the grapes.

‘These are for you. You are in close touch with the gifts Nature gives us and will know what to do with this, God’s produce.’

“Brother Cook was amazed at the beauty of the grapes and drew his assistant’s attention to their perfection. They were so perfect that no one could possibly appreciate them more than Brother Sacristan, who had charge of the Holy Sacrament, and whom many in the monastery considered to be a truly saintly man.

“Brother Sacristan, in turn, gave the grapes to the youngest of the novices in order to help him understand that God’s work is to be found in the smallest details of the Creation. When the novice received them, his heart was filled with the Glory of God, because he had never before seen such a beautiful bunch of grapes. At the same time, he remembered the day he had arrived at the monastery and the person who had opened the door to him; that gesture of opening the door had allowed him to be there now in that community of people who knew that value of miracles.

“Shortly before dark, he took the bunch of grapes to Brother Porter.

‘Eat and enjoy. You spend most of your time here all alone, and these grapes will do you good.’

“Brother Porter understood then that the gift really was intended for him; he savored every grape and went to sleep a happy man. In this way, the circle of happiness and joy which always wraps around those who are in contact with the energy of love.”

St. Ignatius Loyola in his well-known world classic in spirituality “The Spiritual Exercises” says two things about love. First, “Love ought to manifest itself more by deed than by words.” And second, “Love consists in a mutual communication between the two persons”.

In the story of the circle of love, we can see the actual realization of the two things. First, all the characters in the circle of love express their mutual love for one another through the action of passing on the farmer’s gift of the beautiful bunch of grapes from one to another with great love and appreciation. Second, in their sharing we can clearly see that love consist in concrete action, mutual communication between two persons.

Thus from the story of the circle of love and from Ignatius' saying the two things about love, we may draw five lessons on love.

First, Love is never self-centred. Love always thinks about others. In the words of the English poet William Blake,

“Love seeketh not itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care;  
But for another give its ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair”

Second, True love as St. Ignatius says, consist in action. True love does not consist in staring at one another. But love takes the lovers in the one and the same direction. In the circle of love all the characters go in the same direction – the direction of sharing what one has with the others, namely the beautiful bunch of grapes.

Third, love never sits idle or motionless like a stone. Love is never inactive. Love finds ever new and ever old ways of expression. In the monastery due to the mutual love among all the monks, the delicious bunch of grapes reaches the hands of all of them.

Fourth, there is no selfishness in true love. Love conquers selfishness. In the circle of love each monk who received the beautiful bunch of grapes, could have enjoyed eating them. The bunch of grapes is both beautiful to the sight and delicious to the palates. But with true understanding of love the monks passes it on thinking about the other. They believe that the joy of others enjoying the grapes is their own joy.

Five, Love has only one reason. That reason is love itself. In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “If thou must love me, let it be for naught except for love's sake only.”

Finally as my friend Joseph said, ordinarily I do not read novels. Even then, I feel that reading good novels occasionally can bring us profound understanding of human nature and gain deep insight into love. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

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