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Understanding Bhuvaneshwari through the Kübler-Ross Model of Grief

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Page No. 1-6

Received: 31/08/2025

Reviewed: 02/09/2025

Accepted: 13/09/2025

Abstract: The intent of this article is to understand the character of Bhuvaneshwari through the Kübler-Ross Model of grief. Bhuvaneshwari has the central role in the Bangla novel *Jalaputra* (2008) by Harishankar Jaladas (b. 1955). She is a phenomenal creation of Jaladas. Set in Chittagong, *Jalaputra* is a notable seaside novel that tells the tale of the weather-beaten widow Bhuvaneshwari. After her husband Chandramani went missing in the sea, her struggles beggared belief as she fell into extreme poverty with her only son Gangapada and old father-in-law Haribandhu. She suffered immensely throughout her life. However, she kept her composure in a calm, disciplined and stoic manner. The author of this paper will analyse the life of Bhuvaneshwari to explain the course of her grief and also to see how she dealt with multiple bereavements.

Keywords: *Jalaputra*, Harishankar Jaladas, Bhuvaneshwari, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle

Introduction

Bhuvaneshwari is a true representative of any traditional fishing community in Bangladesh. Jaladas, through the characterisation of Bhuvaneshwari, brilliantly explored the socioeconomic contexts of fishers and fishing. Being born and raised in a fishing community himself, Jaladas portrayed the life, cultural practices, traditions, and values of his native community with remarkable detail in *Jalaputra*. “Bengali literature is indebted to [Jaladas] for extending its horizon by creating a picture of life that received little attention before” (Billah 12).

The fact that the fishermen are in eternal pain and agony is essentially felt when the character of Bhuvaneshwari is appropriately understood. This article is about the use of a grief model, i.e., the Kübler-Ross Model of grief to fathom out the process of Bhuvaneshwari’s grief. The primary inspiration behind the composition of this paper is Japanese academician Yumiko Kataoka’s research article “Loss and resolution in *Riders to the Sea*: Reflecting on the theory of grief,” in which the Kübler-Ross Model was applied to analyse Maurya’s experience of grief. Maurya is an ill-fated sea-beaten widow in John Millington Synge’s drama *Riders to the Sea* where she lost all but one of her sons to the sea. The application of the Kübler-Ross Model of grief to analyse a character from a Bangla novel is a relatively new approach. Hence, the present study addresses this research gap.

Jalaputra at a Glance

The setting of the story is North Patenga, a coastal village in Chittagong situated along the shores of the Bay of Bengal. “The cup of life does not overflow here but certainly is full to



the brim” (Billah 12). Bhuvaneshwari, the protagonist of the novel, is married to Chandramani at a very young age. Her husband is claimed by the sea when their only son, Gangapada, is merely three. She continues to nurture dreams of a better life with her son. She decides that Ganga will go to school so he can have a better life. However, poverty continually reminds her that, in a fisherman’s household, education remains an unaffordable luxury. She takes up fish-selling to provide financial support for her family. With the passage of time, at the age of 22, Ganga marries Sumitra, a girl considerably younger than him. Sumitra becomes pregnant at an opportune time, and Bhuvaneshwari feels immense joy “contemplating how the seed of her husband would be passed on to the next generation” (Billah 9).

Ganga grows differently from others. He organises the exploited fishermen in the community and raises their awareness that the exploitative creditors, Abdus Shukkur and Shashibhushan Roy, are the cause of their financial distress. The creditors conspire to murder Ganga, fearing that he might one day bring an end to their exploitative enterprise. They ultimately strangle him to death. “[Ganga] pays with his life for trying to free fellow fishermen from the clutches of the money-lenders” (Billah 10).

“Bhuvaneshwari’s life is a story of victimization. Two deaths stand at two ends of her life” (Billah 9). First her husband Chandramani to the sea, and now her only child, Gangapada, to human cruelty. In the end, she envisions Banamali, Gangapada’s soon-to-be-born son, as the one who will man the ship someday. “At heart a modest and gentle woman, with her suffering, resistance and unconquerable optimism she embodies the true spirit of heroism” (Billah 8).

The Kübler-Ross Model of Grief

The Swiss-American psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004), very well-known for her pioneering work in Near-Death Studies, developed the five stages of grief in her book *On Death and Dying* (1969). The New York Public Library recognised *On Death and Dying* as one of its “Books of the [20th] Century” (“The New York”). “In 1999, Time Magazine named [Kübler-Ross] one of the 100 most important thinkers of the 20th Century” (Burns). The grief theory she constructed is widely known as the Kübler-Ross Model of grief. It is about how people go through a number of stages when they grieve. “The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (leading to acronym DABDA as used by some)” (Corr 2).

“Kübler-Ross originally applied these stages to people suffering from terminal illness, later to any form of catastrophic personal loss (job, income, freedom). This may also include significant life events such as the death of a loved one, divorce, drug addiction, the onset of a disease or chronic illness, an infertility diagnosis, as well many tragedies and disasters” (“The Kübler-Ross model”).

Elements of Grief in *Jalaputra*

Jaladas couldn’t have been better with the lifelike portrayal of the ill-starred people of his community in the novel. Bhuvaneshwari’s journey from an adolescent girl to a full-fledged mother was marked by hardship, as she repeatedly lost the family’s breadwinners to the sea, and gradually, the burden of responsibility fell upon her shoulders. Grief was her constant companion. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, grief means “very great sadness, especially at the death of someone” (“Grief”).

The purpose of this article is to see how Bhuvaneshwari went through the stages of grief when she grieved. “In interdisciplinary terms, the natural sciences definitely require evidence-based outcomes while liberal arts sciences somehow value metaphysical philosophy” (Kataoka 13). So, from an emotional standpoint, i.e., seeing the suffering of Bhuvaneshwari, the author of this paper will analyse her grief.



1st Stage: Denial and Isolation

The first stage of the Kübler-Ross Model of grief is Denial and Isolation. When terribly bad things happen to people, they find solace in the feeling that “This can't be happening, not to me” (“The Kübler-Ross model”). According to Kübler-Ross, “Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance. Maintained denial does not always bring increased distress if it holds out until the end, which I still consider a rarity” (53).

In *Jalaputra*, upon hearing the rumoured news that several men, including her husband, had drowned in the sea, Bhuvaneshwari responds with denial, as though refusing to believe that anything tragic could have happened to him. “শ্রাবণের সাঁঝ। অব্যবধায় বৃষ্টি ঝরছে। সেই কবে থেকে ভিজছে সে। পাহাড়প্রমাণ ঢেউ কূলে ত্রাস জাগাচ্ছে। এসব দিকে খেয়াল নেই ভুবনেশ্বরীর” (The evening of Shravan. It was pouring endlessly. Rain had been drenching her long since. Mountainous waves were crashing frighteningly on the shore. But she had no thought for them) (Jaladas 7). She keeps on denying that any disaster can befall Chandramani. She tells Gangapada, “অ পুত, আর ইক্কিনি অপেক্ষা কর” (Wait a little bit more, my pet) (Jaladas 8). There isn't much hope that she can see Chandramani again but she wants her son to see strength in her, not weakness. She refuses to let her son view her as a figure of despair.

2nd Stage: Anger

Anger follows Denial and Isolation as the second stage of the grieving process. Besides anger, in this stage “There is also much guilt and a wish to make up for missed past opportunities” (Kataoka 16). Kübler-Ross says, that “[T]his anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random” (64).

Among all her sorrows, the loss of Chandramani stands as the most poignant in Bhuvaneshwari's life. Losing her husband, she falls into extreme poverty. She progressively sells off her husband's assets to support her three-member household. Eventually, she takes up selling fish to prevent the family from facing severe adversity. Having overcome one obstacle, she is immediately confronted by another. Jonab Ali's father, a harasser, prohibits the fisherwomen including Bhuvaneshwari from using a public road, falsely claiming it as his own. As the fisherwomen set out to sell their fishes, he subjects one of them to both verbal and physical abuse. Compelled by conscience, Bhuvaneshwari was unable to remain silent in the face of the harasser. “‘তোর বাপদাদারে লের দিতাম। মাইয়াপোয়ার গাআত্ হাত!’ বলতে বলতে সারাজীবনের নিরীহ ভুবন পেছন থেকে জোনাব আলীর বাপের উপর ঝাঁপিয়ে পড়লো” (Bhuvan, who had always been meek, saying ‘down with your ancestors, how dare you hit a woman,’ sprung from behind upon Jonab Ali's father) (Jaladas 68). Her anger is not directed at any specific individual, but rooted in the broader injustices endured by the fisherfolk in their everyday existence.

3rd Stage: Bargaining

Bargaining is the third stage of the Kübler-Ross Model of grief. “The third stage involves the hope that the individual can somehow postpone or delay [unavoidable circumstances]” (“The Kübler-Ross model”). Kübler-Ross explains that, “there is a slim chance that [s/he] may be rewarded for good behavior and be granted a wish for special services” (72).

Determined that Ganga should avoid the hardships his father faced, Bhuvan resolves that Ganga must go to school and gain an education. “হিন্দু-মুসলমানের সন্তানদের মতো সেও শিক্ষিত হয়ে বাপের অপমৃত্যুর দাগ ভুবনেশ্বরীর হৃদয় থেকে মুছে দেবে” (Being educated like Hindu-Muslim children, he would wipe the memory of his father's accidental death from his mother's memory) (Jaladas 13). Bhuvan's act of selling fish also signifies her hope that better days lie ahead. She emerges as a symbol of unwavering hope. She continues to hold on to the



belief that one day her husband will return to her. “স্বামী নিখোঁজ হবার পাঁচ বছর পরেও ভুবন বিধবার বেশ ধরেনি” (She had not taken a widow’s customary dress even five years after her husband’s disappearance) (Jaladas 24). Her resilience becomes evident when she says that she has to keep living. “বাঁচি থাওন পড়িবো, বাঁচাই রাওন পড়িবো” (Have to live, have to support others to live) (Jaladas 26). She stands as a beacon of resilience.

4th Stage: Depression

This stage lays the groundwork for the ultimate stage: acceptance. The individual does not experience any emotional uplift or encouragement. Kübler-Ross says, “When the terminally ill patient can no longer deny his illness, when he is forced to undergo more surgery or hospitalization, when he begins to have more symptoms or becomes weaker and thinner, he cannot smile it off anymore. His numbness or stoicism, his anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss” (Kübler-Ross 97).

If the fishermen go missing at sea, their wives live in constant hope of their eventual return. For twelve long years, Bhuvaneshwari held on to a similar hope. “বারো বছর পর সধবার সকল বেশ - শাঁখা, সিঁদুর, রঙিন শাড়ি সব ত্যাগ করে পাড়হীন ধুতি পরিধান করতে হবে” (After 12 years, abandoning all the accoutrement of a married woman – Shankha, Sindoor on forehead, colored sari – they are to put on white borderless dhoti) (Jaladas 49). According to the local social customs, a wife has to wait twelve years for her husband, who was not declared dead but had been taken away by a storm into the distant sea. Bhuvaneshwari, at this stage, feels a deep sense of loss, and nothing gives her hope or confidence that her husband will return one day.

She was again dispirited when Ganga discontinued his education due to financial difficulties and social pressures. She cried, “আঁর সব আশা আকাঙ্ক্ষা শেষ। গঙ্গা পড়ালেহা ছাড়ি দিএ” (All my hopes are dashed. Ganga has dropped out of school) (Jaladas 76). Nothing could be more dispiriting than when, overcome by discouragement, she began to foresee misfortunes for her only son. “পোয়াউয়ো নো পইল্যো। কিছুদিন পর বাপার মতো দইজ্যাত্ যাইবো। আর ... আর ডুবি মরিবো” (My son dropped out of school. Like his father, he will also go to the sea. And then ... he will also drown) (Jaladas 77).

5th Stage: Acceptance

Bhuvan wished for Ganga’s education, hoping that the world might one day say—at least one member from Chandramani’s household emerged into the light of knowledge. But that hope remained unfulfilled, as Ganga abandoned his education midway. However, Bhuvan came to terms with the reality rather easily and chose to move on with life. Ganga feels remorseful for quitting school and for failing to live up to his mother’s expectations. Bhuvan’s response, however, to her son stands as a clear affirmation of her acceptance. “বিয়াগ মাইনষর আশা ভগমানে পূরণ নো গরে। আঁর ইচ্ছা আছিল, ঠাউরে নো চা। আর তোর কোয়ালত্ লেয়াপড়া নো আছিল পান্‌লার। হেতল্লাই তুই পড়ালেহা গরিত্ নো পারচ। আঁর চেষ্টা আঁই গযিলাম। হিয়ান আঁর দায়িত্ব বলি মনে গযিলাম” (God does not fulfil all human wishes. I wished, but God didn’t will it so. May be you don’t have education in your fate. That’s why you dropped out. I tried. I thought it was my duty) (Jaladas 110-111).

“In this last stage, the individual begins to come to terms with their mortality or that of their loved one” (“The Kübler-Ross model”). The novel concludes with the merciless killing of Ganga at the hands of the exploitative creditors, who showed him no mercy. Bhuvaneshwari, at this point, feels nothing, for she has nothing left to lose. Misfortune seems to follow her. “Once the patient dies, I find it cruel and inappropriate to speak of the love of God. When we



lose someone, especially when we have had little if any time to prepare ourselves, we are enraged, angry, in despair; we should be allowed to express these feelings” (Kübler-Ross 183-84). “গঙ্গার শিরের কাছে জল-কাদায় বসে আছে ভুবনেশ্বরী – স্তব্ধ, নিথর, পাথরের মতো। দৃষ্টি তার উঠানে-জড়ো হওয়া অসংখ্য মানুষকে ছাড়িয়ে দূরে – বহুদূরে প্রসারিত। সে দৃষ্টিতে প্রতীক্ষার উজ্জ্বল আলো – অনাগত জলপুত্র বনমালীর জন্য” (Close to Ganga’s head Bhuvaneshwari sat in the mud and water – silent, immobile, like stone. Passing the numerous people gathered in the yard, her sight stretched far, far out. In her sight shone the bright light of expectation for the soon-to-be-born son of the sea, Banamali) (Jaladas 128).

Banamali was the name Ganga believed would be most fitting for his soon-to-be-born son. Bhuvaneshwari’s acceptance is even clearer because she had once predicted she would lose her son. It is as though she had foreseen what was destined to happen to her son. At this point, she might see Banamali as someone who would one day take care of the family, just like his great-grandfather Haribandhu, grandfather Chandramani or his father Gangapada. “[The] heroic part of Bhuvaneshwari is that she refuses to yield to her sorrows” (Billah 10). Thus, the life of a fisherwoman continues in a repetitive cycle.

It is as if she has accepted it all. Chandramani’s untimely death, natural and manmade suffering, Ganga’s quitting school, Ganga’s murder, and whatnot.

Conclusions

Though the title *Jalaputra*—with *jal* meaning water and *putra* meaning son, literally referring to ‘fishermen’—suggests a male-centric narrative, the novel primarily portrays the life of a woman who is unwillingly drawn into a relentless struggle with the sea. Jaladas could have chosen a male protagonist to develop the plot of the story. However, he chose a female protagonist because women often best represent a community’s strength in facing hardship and stress. What makes her the central character of the book is the *marianismo* she embodies – self-sacrifice, endurance, and devotion to her family and community. Through Bhuvaneshwari, we see how fisherwomen live each day facing hardships but still hold on to hope. In *Jalaputra*, she goes through the stages of grief described in Kübler-Ross’ theory. Kübler-Ross, born in Zürich, authored her seminal work *On Death and Dying* during her time in Illinois. Nevertheless, the message she conveys about the nature of grief in her book holds universal relevance as it is highly unlikely that Jaladas wrote his novel with Kübler-Ross’ theory consciously in mind. The author of this paper attempted to apply Kübler-Ross’ theory to analyse the character of Bhuvaneshwari. Applying this grief framework to tragic characters across world literatures could help validate the theory and highlight its usefulness in interpreting tragedy within varied cultural settings.

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