

The Potter's Poison

M. Ashraf Rizvi

S. K. E. Haider (2011). *The Potter's Poison*, (Mumbai: Leadstart Publication Pvt Ltd), pp. 160, \$10, ISBN: 9789381115213.

Introduction of the Author: Dr Haider has been living in the UAE since 1993. He used to work at Sharjah College (now Troy University) as a senior lecturer before moving to Al Ghurair University and then to Abu Dhabi University as assistant professor. He joined Preston University in 2004 as a Professor and Head of the Department of English.

An overview of the book: The Potter's Poison is a book based on fantasy, irony, tragedy and some dark humor and spins a fascinating yarn about the pitfalls of rigidity. The book explores various aspects of life in very interesting ways. The genre cannot be pegged down as it is part fantasy, part farcical with ample shades of romance spewed intermittently.

The book starts with the caprices of Mehar and ends on a serious note, where the old potter willingly embraces death by sinking into the sands of Yamuna-his penance for having poisoned Gunjaan and its vicinity with the wrath of his revenge. It's a story about a post-independent imaginary Indian village, Gunjaan situated at the banks of holy river, Yamuna.

Review: One of the best ways to provide key management and leadership insight is using stories or cases and so there are several novels that are used by management teachers to teach management because a few teachers use literature to teach leadership. For example, one of the most popular elective in one of the IIMs is a course on "Leadership through Literature".

In this context, Dr. S K E Haider's book, *The Potter's Poison* published by Leadstart Publication Pvt. Limited can be an excellent resource used to teach contemporary concepts pertaining to leadership in group, organizational, and societal settings. Some of the key aspects of the book and the characterization in the novel may be used for understanding leadership in different settings.

Firstly, the novel can be used to sensitize the participants about a very important component of leadership, the process of experiencing truth in its various facets. The effort for searching meaning and seriousness in the absurd and grotesque way of villagers' life constitutes a great interest in the book on the journey of truth. The purpose of life and the keen interest in bringing out the shades of truth have been discoursed well.

At one of the places the author deals with the process of finding meaning in life: The purpose of life for all is to find out truth or at least to experience it, to work for truth; but truth that is shelled by ego and whim is not truth, it is established as mere pleasure. The reader is warned that if one gives away something to someone and is lost in the pride of being a giver, the reader would have flinched away from the course which could have led him to the doorway of truth. One has failed to contribute and has travelled half way and traversed the route impeded by the conscious ego. "The consciousness kept you away from truth. That's it." (Page 111-112)

The book has a unique way of showcasing human character in its different forms. It doesn't delineate a traditional hero. It makes an attempt to show man with all his gray shades -- a fine blend of right and wrong. The author seems to have broken free from the ideology of stereotypical heroism.

"No man can be right thoroughly. A good man's deeds may not always be right, and a bad man's deeds may not always be wrong. Dedrego is an evil character but his intention is not ignoble; situation propels him to do only what he thinks doable, and under the context of circumstances, he can't do otherwise: adaptability and feasibility for survival must be learnt, until the present is sound and one is not in a position to fit himself in time, mere information of the past would be no guidance." (Page 125)

Leadership is not a linear thought of being obsessed with the idea of being right nor in proving others wrong. This is clearly established through its characters. For instance, the artist, Baiju, by and large, could have been treated as the hero but his obsession to remain always right and true, is dismissed as a great flaw in him. "The flaw... pushes him back to be a wooden character: and this obsession about truth, about projecting himself true, precipitated his tragedy." (Page 94)

The novel explores the dimensions of human life and delves deeper into the layers of serious issues like 'love', 'revenge' and 'truth'. The author's treatment of these classical emotions is astute, amusingly deftly and critically demanding. A weird act sets the context for a revolutionary change in the mind of an ordinary potter...Dedreg's buttock is brushed by a python and he turns out to be a man of ideas followed by excitement tickling over the back of his head. The ideas pave way to wealth, honor and fame for him. The python seems to have blessed him mystically.

What the writer implies is that success pursued through wrong means ultimately ends in repentance. And a larger chunk of Dedreg's life- time is spent in regret: "fretful, he dashed his head against the mansion's old window-wall in an effort to catch hold of the window-rod, which was placed very high on the wall." (Page 78)

Sophia's character is the product of a modern outlook. Matter-of-factness is the hallmark of her mental make-up. She believes that pragmatism eventually dominates philosophy and ideology. Sophia is a lot like her father when she invalidates ideology. Her strong affirmation to pragmatism seems to serve as a guide to Baiju. The human quirk that even a person who professes to be pragmatic, practical and a realist, cannot escape from the throes of love unfolds well in the book. The author seems to campaign that no ideology can make a charismatic change in an individual other than love. If there is anything wholly true, it's an individual's love. True love apparently faces a lot of setbacks but wins finally.

Sophia's character symbolizes an individual's stand for change and forcefully advocates the standpoint. Dynamism is her strength and flexibility in her approach harbingers prosperity and a strong appeal for peace constitutes her essential personality. Sophia decries rigidity of mental make-up, as she blames it as the cause for all clashes. With her arrival in Gunjaan, everything is changed and the old potter brimming with poison in him begs Yamuna to accept him in the dark abyss of eternal sleep. Sophia's arrival is the turning point to the plot and she is the dawn of change who will sweep away all the poisons silted for long in Gunjaan.

The author has driven home his message by carefully weaving around the tapestry of Indian myth on the Yamuna, Ganga and Lord Krishna. Yamuna carries the writer's message and serves as a suitable metaphorical context for the plot. Yamuna is personified as passion while Ganga, represents wisdom and reasoning. The geographical truth that Yamuna dries up in summer is suggestive of the ebb and flow of passion in the society. The transience of passions and the ever-lasting qualities of reasoning and wisdom are juxtaposed well.

'A weak man's revenge is more dangerous than a rich man's animosity,' for he has the ability to disguise--the potter has kept himself disguised throughout his life as a holy priest to shroud his beastly thoughts under the priestly image! Unlike the animosity of a rich person, which is out in the open for all to see, a poor man's revenge keeps popping at odd and unexpected intervals, snapping at the bond of the connecting threads of relationship, thereby gnawing at the very fabric of the social structure. The poor potter nurtures revenge and in order to meet his end, he exhibits chameleon-like colors in different forms and finally faces an ignominious death by drowning himself in Yamuna.

Thus, *The Potter's Poison* by Dr. S K E Haider is a must-read, for several reasons. It just doesn't raise pertinent questions about various aspects of life but provides with satisfactory answers. Additional reasons being: an engaging style, striking illustrations and a powerful and

expressive narration .Dr. Haider is quite successful in his missions of conveying what is atop his mind. He uses a poetic style and has a lyrical approach. The choice of vocabulary is apt and pungent where required. The writer often doesn't state explicitly, perhaps with a view of leaving room for readers to deduce and interpret. The varying mood of prose is rhythmical and lends

effectiveness to the language. Over all, the effort is good and praiseworthy.

I would like to certainly recommend the book to students as well as teachers of management as it is not only a good read but offers insight to help us understand the dimensions of character and leadership.

M. Ashraf Rizvi a faculty in General Management Area at Indian Institute of Management Indore. He has taught courses on business communication, negotiation, leadership and general management in the Institute's PGP, EPGP, and executive programs. Prof. Rizvi's research focuses on communication and professional effectiveness, and his work has been published in national and international journals. He has also written ten books on these topics. Moreover, he has been consultant and trainer with several organizations, and has designed and conducted a large number of executive education courses.