



## **INTANGIBLE CARCINOMA AS A TANGIBLE SUB-PLOT IN ASHALI VARMA'S THE VICTORIA CROSS**

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### **Abstract**

The research article- Impact of Cancer on characters in Ashali Varma's The Victoria Cross reveals the indelible recollection made by the novelist about her trauma over her mother's horrible encounter with cancer. It is perspicuous to arrive at the perspicacity from the novel that one's physiological condition can get aggravated by the growth of malignant tumour. But being with the well-wishers and the beloved, receiving empathetic support from the janitor and accepting the philosophical thought of being poised and fatalist during the moments of both agony and ecstasy are crucial for the terminally ill and their kith and kin. The novelist has made a loyal endeavour in recollecting and presenting her memorable bitter experience in black and white in The Victoria Cross. .

Key words: Illness, cancer, trauma, agony and ecstasy

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Generally, it is possible for seemingly healthy persons to be afflicted with any disease during any stage of life. Writers present the character or characters with any disease in their literary work. As a disease can be cured or not, the presence of disease in any literary work leads to the presence of coherence, excitement, nail biting climax and rapt reading. While presenting the progress of a disease, writers may add reality or imagination, which depends much on the kind of genre which the writers have selected. In fiction, a writer may have the liberty to spread his/her wings of imagination to a reasonable level. But in a literary work based on reality, writers present the facts without any distortion.

Ashali Varma has written a book – **The Victoria Cross** to eulogize her father Lt. Gen Bhagat. The book is a biography of Ashali Varma's parents- Prem Bhagat and Mohini Bhagat. Prem Bhagat was an Indian recipient of the Victoria cross which was the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in England given to the British and common wealth Forces. While presenting her father's glorious career from his early life to his death, the novelist has allotted a few pages for her mother's ordeal with cancer. As a sub-plot, the novelist has inserted the bitter experience of undergoing cancer by her beloved mother throughout the book in a distinctive manner by presenting with sub-titles in the form of boxes.

In her geriatric stage, Mohini Bhagat suffered from cancer. The excruciating back pain experienced by the novelist's mother has led to a series of tests. The novelist has used the medical jargons 'metastases' and 'sacrum' which refer to the 'pathogenic agent's spread from an initial or primary site to a different or secondary site within the host's body' and 'a large, triangular bone at the base of the spine.' Then, the doctor's immediate recommendation for CT scan is for the confirmation of initial diagnosis which has been accepted in the medical world. The availability of medical equipment is a boon to the medical field for perfect diagnosis and prognosis. The bitter fact of discovering cancer has been presented in the novel: "...– my mother had seemed so normal and healthy. She had hardly complained. How could she have been so sick when, apart from that back pain, she had no symptoms? But then cancer is a silent killer and is often discovered too late" (pp.25-26) Despite being an octogenarian, she feels fine and does not want her daughter to return from Hong Kong immediately.

The novelist has become nostalgic when she finds her mother suffering from terminal carcinoma. Mohini Bhagat used to depend on ponds cream and Tabu perfume for adding more external beauty to her pulchritude. Those who suffer from cancer undergo various physical and mental discomforts. Loss of hair is a clear indication of the severity of radiation for cancer. It is highlighted: "Then I used to pray she wouldn't ask for a mirror.... Due to radiation at the back of her head, a clump of hair had fallen off- I did not want her to see it. She never did." (p.41). Hair loss as a common side effect of radiation therapy has been conveyed:

If you have hair in the area being treated, you may lose some or all of it during or just after radiation therapy. The hair will usually grow back a few months after treatment has finished, but sometimes hair loss from one side to the other is permanent. When cancers on one part of the face or head are treated, hair on the other side of the head may be lost due to radiation passing.

[\(http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/cancer-information/cancer-treatment/radiation-therapy/side-effects/hair-loss/\)](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/cancer-information/cancer-treatment/radiation-therapy/side-effects/hair-loss/)

Undergoing chemotherapy for cancer is not preferred by many cancer patients. Many knowledgeable patients or the patients who have observed the cruel side effect and the ordeal experienced by the cancer patients usually abstain themselves from chemotherapy. They do not have the mental as well as physical strength to bear the miseries occurring due to the chemotherapy. They prefer to be away from painful treatment for their horrible sickness, Chemotherapy has been a double-edged sword to both the physicians and the cancer patients. Such view is expressed:

she once told me that if she was struck by cancer, especially in the last stages, she did not want chemo and other interventions because in the end you die and the chemo is terrible. She had seen her closest friends go through it and she told me that they would not even let her visit. It was so bad, she said. This was the one illness that scared her (p.41)

BM Hegde is the writer of a well-known book “ **What Doctors Don’t Get to Study in Medical School.**” He has revolutionized the theories in Medical field despite being a veteran in Allopathic medicine. He has revealed the negative aspect of chemotherapy and radiation:

“Chemotherapy and radiation are again done for the overkill. Both these could kill normal cells as well as cancer cells. In fact, they kill fast growing cells more effectively, resulting in hair loss, oral mucous membrane loss, of testicular function, and the like. There is now a growing feeling that chemotherapy and radiation also should be done just about enough for good palliation, and symptom relief, rather than for radical cure.(p.177).

So, Ashali Varma’s firm decision to suffer from cancer without receiving chemotherapy is justifiable. The importance of golden hour is crucial in the treatment of any serious and sudden ailment. Ashali Varma was very lucky to contact the best doctors in Apollo hospital and anywhere in Delhi by mobile phone. She has mentioned that this kind of advantage is not available to common human being anywhere in the world. Here, the novelist has failed to mention the emergency ambulance service which is available all over India. It is extremely useful to the common people who need emergency medical care. Those who are in need of treatment can dial 108 which responds quickly to the patient by transporting the patient in no time with his/her caretaker to a nearby government hospital by a special ambulance.

A malignant tumour can affect a patient terribly. Any healthy person may get deteriorating health condition by the transformation of a benign tumour into a malignant tumour in a torso which can be detrimental to many organs. This fact is conveyed by the novelist who feels that such sudden transformation is detrimental and inexplicable:

“Just a year ago the doctors had scanned her spine and there was no trace of cancer. So how, in less than a year, did the scans differ so much? How can a healthy-looking spine,

liver and sacrum suddenly be riddled with the last stages of malignancy? A mutating, malignant mass had surreptitiously grown on her liver, pancreas, bones and spine, causing the most mind blowing pain. (pp.57-58)

The above information by the novelist justifies the following views shared by BM Hegde in his book **What Doctors Don't Get To Study in Medical School** : “ There is nothing called early cancer; any cancer even it is discovered “very early” could be decades old biologically and could have had the seedlings in distant organs already.” (p.175)

Palliative care is the best option for the terminally ill. Being knowledgeable and confident of offering best available medical care, Ashali Varma has to accept the following view conveyed candidly by the doctor in the novel: “It’s terminal, it has spread all over. We would like to do some further tests to see the primary cause. But at her age, I would not advise chemo or anything radical. We have to keep her comfortable and go for pain management.”(pp.70-71) The significance of palliative care can be understood in the following lines from the book **Integrated Palliative Care** : “Palliative care concerns the care for patients with a life limiting disease such as cancer and chronic heart failure.” ( p.07)

The inevitable role of palliative care towards the cancer patients is clear from the following lines of the latest web sources: “The Palliative care is an important part of cancer care. For someone with cancer, the goals of palliative care include treating symptoms, managing emotional and social needs, and addressing spiritual and practical concerns.”

([www.cancer.net/blog/2016-09/importance-palliative-care-patients-and-caregivers-news-2016-palliative-care-oncology-symposium](http://www.cancer.net/blog/2016-09/importance-palliative-care-patients-and-caregivers-news-2016-palliative-care-oncology-symposium))

“Palliative care is a medical approach that focuses on improving an individual’s quality of life through pain and symptom management. It seeks to improve a person’s physical, emotional and spiritual well-being and, unlike hospice care, palliative care can be used in conjunction with curative treatment.”

([www.pathwayscaresolutions.com/the-importance-of-palliative-care-in-achieving-better-health-outcomes/](http://www.pathwayscaresolutions.com/the-importance-of-palliative-care-in-achieving-better-health-outcomes/))

The care takers of terminally ill usually find it difficult to adopt themselves to the conundrum as well as the ineluctability. Ashali Varma has been sandwiched between her affectionate mother and the doctors. She shares her sorrowful thoughts about the possibility of missing her mother forever: “I can’t bear the thought of losing her. She has always been there for me. How can I be strong? There is no light at the end of this tunnel, only pain and suffering. I know this. I helped a friend go through this in New York.” (p.71) Ashali Varma has to utter a lie to hide the bitter fact about her mother’s critical condition to her. When Ashali’s mother surmises

the candid negative message from Ashali, she discovers from Ashali's unusual red nose that Ashali has cried. But Ashali has said "No, I am not crying. just an allergy". (p.71)

The role of paramedical nurse especially in palliative care plays a significant part for the terminally ill. A caregiver's succour and challenges are lucid:

A caregiver (carer) in palliative care is a person caring for an individual (patient) who has some physical, emotional, psychosocial or spiritual problems due to advanced disease or old age. The carer's intervention helps to improve the patient's wellbeing. The intervention can be through contributing time, energy and/or money. Caring for a person with advanced illness is demanding work, which often means going through extreme stress and a wide range of emotions. Caregiving without adequate knowledge, skills, support and self-care can cause harm to the patient and also increase the risk of adverse health effects on the carer. (p.08)

Ashali Varma has been a perfect care provider and she has provided all the support to her ailing mother. For the meticulous professional nursing help, she has become fortunate to find a perfect nurse as a caregiver for her ailing mother. She acknowledges the greatness of a dutiful nurse: "Then Sister Joice came into our lives-an incredible nurse and human being. She always had her Bible nearby and when she wasn't attending to Mom she prayed for her. She became my strength." (p.86) The dutiful nurse always comforts the ailing patient and it is spontaneous for the patient and the nurse to maintain rapport with each other. Ashali Varma's mother is considerate and highly indebted to her nurse Sister Joice: "My mother grew attached to her. She worried about whether Sister Joice was getting enough to eat." Darling order something nice for her," she would say, "Sister Joice are you okay? You take such good care of me." (p.86).

Both Ashali Varma and her mother could express their gratitude whole heartedly to the nurse. The importance of the care giver's role in palliative care has been revealed:

"While the process of palliative care begins with each patient's health care team, caregivers are responsible for many of the day-to-day tasks, such as giving medications, providing transportation, assisting with daily activities, offering emotional support, helping with finances, and talking with doctors. This is the reason that providing support for caregivers is another important goal of palliative care."

([www.cancer.net/blog/2016-09/importance-palliative-care-patients-and-caregivers-news-2016-palliative-care-oncology-symposium](http://www.cancer.net/blog/2016-09/importance-palliative-care-patients-and-caregivers-news-2016-palliative-care-oncology-symposium))

Recollecting the halcyon days is the best way to overcome the present-day remorse. It has been done perfectly by the novelist. She is reminded of her mother's resolute attitude on the day her father has passed away: "Today I will not cry, I will be strong for him as he would have wanted, I have the rest of my life to mourn for him." (p.98) Relying on the Fentanyl patches is the comforting factor for the terminally cancer patients. Since cancer can't be cured at the terminal stage, pain alleviation is the only option to the doctors for the cancer patients. Ashali's mother has to be habituated to use narcotics because she is an octogenarian facing the excruciating pain during the completely developed stage of cancer. The inevitability of depending on Fentanyl has been expressed:

This medication is used to help relieve severe ongoing pain (such as due to cancer). Fentanyl belongs to a class of drugs known as opioid (narcotic) analgesics. It works in the brain to change how your body feels and responds to pain. Do not use the patch form of fentanyl to relieve pain that is mild or that will go away in a few days. This medication is not for occasional ("as needed") use.

([www.webmd.com/drugs/2/drug-6253/fentanyl-transdermal/details](http://www.webmd.com/drugs/2/drug-6253/fentanyl-transdermal/details))

Receiving love from kith and kin and having positive thoughts usually lift a patient's morale to overcome both physical and mental discomfort. The author's mother is appreciative of her contentful life: "I have been so lucky in my life, I had a wonderful; childhood and a beautiful marriage and now I have you ". (p.113) The compunction of being a cause of worry to the well-wishers is spontaneous for any patient who receives treatment from a gerontologist. The novelist has expressed such compunction through her mother's utterances: "I am sorry Darling, you are doing everything you can. A daughter should not have to see her mother suffer so." (p. 113) This kind of experience is like adding fuel to fire to both the patient and his/her beloved care takers.

Two kinds of approaches are from the terminally ill to various visitors who visit them to express their solidarity with the patients. One kind of approach is expressing disdain to visitors who may be considered nuisance. The other kind of approach is expressing pleasure to visitors who may be considered grateful and necessary in distress. The novelist acknowledged the fact that the courtesy visit by many visitors to express love and sympathy to the novelist's mother has played a curious role in her mother's positive and satisfactory thoughts and the novelist's mother never feels alienated by their visit. She is gracious to fathom their concern from her. She has never felt like being disturbed. According to the novelist, "... to keep her spirits up, her friends, her family and my father's colleagues and wives visited her. She amazed me by her ability and desire to meet people till the end despite the pain and fatigue." (p.120)

Generally, an ailing person becomes healthier and normal by being with his/her beloved persons and by doing what he/she loves. So, being a laid-back person with the loved ones can result in healthy physical and mental status. The novelist has stated that her son's presence with her mother has led to significant positive change in her mother's health condition: "While he was there, for the first-time since her illness, my mother's blood pressure and all other health indicators became normal." (p.130) The above volte face in Mohini Bhagat's physical condition has got a patronage from BM Hegde in his book **What Doctors Don't Get to Study in Medical Schools :** "Happiness of the mind is known to kill cancers or suppress their growth, while depression is known to stimulate biologically quiescent cancers to grow very rapidly."(p.179) As the novelist's mother loves her grandson, she feels relieved from her disease by being with him. Though radiation or radiotherapy is the only option to alleviate pain of the cancer patient, it has terrible side effects. The novelist's mother has undergone such side effects of radiation: "After the radiation, other problems occurred. She could not keep anything down, the nausea was terrible and she lay listless and tired all the time." (p.154)

In India, belief in reincarnation usually comforts the people who are about to die, since those people feel united with their beloved members of the family in the next birth. Ashali's mother wants Ashali to be her baby in the next birth too. Accepting the inevitability and the philosophical thoughts about life is common to the fatalists. There is religious harmony among many non-parochial people in India. The mentality to appreciate and follow the value in a religious book has been common among many Indians. The unity in diversity with various religions, languages and others is the enviable feature of our nation. Such broadminded adherence of the religious scripture is apparent when Ashali's mother has asked her son to read her favorite lines from the Bible, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

To every thing, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;....(p.194)

Ashali Varma's mother loves listening music. She relies on music therapy for relaxing herself in her melancholic status. Sonam's mellifluous voice, Andrea Botticelli's "Ave Maria" and bhajans like Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram could offer temporary respite to Ashali's mother. Music has been found to be an effective tool for music therapists to heal the physical and mental status of patients through extensive research. So, it helps patients improve their physical and mental health. This view has been expressed: "Music therapy is an intervention sometimes utilized to promote emotional health, help patients cope with stress, and boost psychological well-being. .... Music can relax the mind, energize the body, and even help people better manage pain."

The novelist's mother is known for her positive thoughts which could have happened due to her strong mind. So, the importance of strong mind with positive thoughts always better one's illness. Hegde has mentioned his candid observation lucidly about mind in a chapter "Matter of the Mind" in his book **What Doctors Don't Get to Study in Medical School** : Recent data on the important role played by the human mind in the causation of major physical illnesses like heart attacks and cancer, have rekindled our interest in the intricacies of the working of the human mind vis-à-vis the human body.(p.75) He has highlighted the greatness of mind in his book **You Can Be Healthy** : "It is the mind that runs the body. A happy mind is the best tonic for good health." (p.164)

Generally, many elderly Indian widows are confident of being united with their deceased husband after death. This thought mitigates anguish in them. It is a blessing in disguise to the novelist who finds comfort in her mother's death with the following views: This Indian ethos is expressed by the novelist, when she mentions about her mother's thought after her husband's death. "And then came the last days when she drifted off away from the sphere of pain and I would wonder if her soul was already with my father. I prayed that she would meet him and they could be together again, as she had wished for every day since his death." (p.207) Ashali Varma has been true to her father's favourite adage: Courage is not momentary valour, it is quite endurance. (p-114)

The novelist has presented the trial and tribulations which she, her mother and her kith and kin have undergone due to her mother's affliction of cancer. Her mother's physical and mental discomfort, and the love which has been showed on her mother and the natural nostalgic thoughts from the novelist have been profusely revealed by the novelist. Hence, the book conveys the unrequited love from a daughter to her mother and vice versa. Though many parts of the book panegyrised the successful life of a great Indian warrior Prem Bhagat, a few parts of the book have been devoted to the novelist's mother by the novelist who has been highly indebted to her beloved mother. Hence, the book **The Victoria Cross** is a perfect adulation of Prem Bhagat and Mohini Bhagat by their faithful daughter – Ashali Varma. It has to be extolled in the present era in which many parents are deserted by their beloved wards who betray the elders when the parents need support, love and care from their wards. It is apparent from the old age homes which are justified by the despicable people that they desert their parents for professional and materialistic reasons. But any person with nous can fathom that the wards' act of deserting the parents in old age is tantamount to the unpardonable sin which is worse than felony. It is avidly yearned as the outcome of the glorification of being ever grateful to our parents in life. This thought may lead to the change



of positive mindset among the wrongly perceived persons about their primary duties to their parents in old age. Such positive thought will result in the reduction of old age homes in future.

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