

Feminism and Psychoanalysis

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In the second half of the present century Psychoanalysis, as a mode of literary analysis has gained wide acceptability among the critical and intellectual circles. The psychologists believe that every individual has an intrinsic nature, which is the outcome of different factors, and it is unique in itself and because of different intrinsic nature individuals, response to various situations is also very different. Some individual remain normal even when the situation is adverse, some of them adopt a different attitude to it, whereas other tend to withdraw themselves into their own imagination ideal world where they consider themselves to be more protected and their ego's more glorified. Psycho analysis studies the behavioral pattern of all the persons and particularly the behavioral pattern of those who deviate from the normal way of living. The deviation from normal pattern of behavior is termed as neurosis. A neurotic is characterized by a rigidity of personality, lack of flexibility in meeting difficult

situation and discrepancy between actual achievement and the potentiality for achievement. Neurosis degenerates into psychosis when mental illness becomes most serious. For e.g. : The fundamental difference between the neurosis and the psychosis lies in the fact that the neurotic person has fundamentally maintains adoption to reality. In psychosis the situation is changed, the person fails to adapt himself to reality.

The second generation of Indian women novelists has shown their interest in the changed psychological realities of life. They have been led to treat the neurotic phenomena in their works consistently. Their natural feminine sensibility and introspection have imparted a human touch and psychological depth to their observation. The major protagonists in the representative works of these novelists find the social values and norms detrimental to their healthy growth and survival. Society's values imperceptibly

enter the unconscious of the characters in these novels and from there they regulate their behavior. The characters grapple with the psychic conflicts of personal origin. These conflicts and traumas become too pronounced at a particular point of time in their lives when a part of their psychic apparatus refuses to submit to repression. In the resultant neurotic struggle against several cathexes they manifestly display three distinct tendencies: some move from neurosis to psychosis, others arrive at a compromise solution for their problems and yet another group sets out to become compulsive idealists because they find the realities of life too harsh or repulsive to put up with.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, acknowledged that poets and philosophers discovered the unconscious long before he did. For that reason he advised aspiring analysis to study literature as part of their training. Meredith Anne Skura goes a step further and argue: “the poets have discovered” not just the unconscious but “psychoanalysis before Freud did, and that at its subtlest and most wide ranging is not the mere presence or expression of primitive and unconsciously apprehended elements but the attempt to come to terms with them and to work them into the texture of conscious experience that makes the poets

the predecessors of Freud” (Skura: 1981 : 4). Peter Brooks views the literary critics job to be not very different from that of the psychoanalysts : “I believe that the persistence against all the odds, of psychoanalytic perspectives in literary study must ultimately derive from the conviction that the materials on which psychoanalysts and literary critics exercise their power of analysis are in some basic sense the same : that the structure of literature is in some sense the structure of mind” (Brooks : 1987 : 336-337). In his later life Freud became more and more sociologically-oriented. He began to treat cultural, religious and philosophical questions from the psychoanalytic standpoint.

Freud wonders “why the regulations made by ourselves should not ... be a protection and benefit for every one of us.” (Freud: 1964: 274) He holds civilization, as it obtains today, responsible for this unhappy state of affairs. Civilization which stands for “the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors” (Ibid: 265) is supposed to serve two purposes. It, while protecting men against nature and adjusting their mutual relationships, manifests in several forms of organized institutions. Each of these forms – religion,

culture, family, and justice – restricts human instinctual life. The most natural reaction to this “killing” of instincts is to direct one’s urge for freedom against civilization as a whole. The restrictions of civilization have reached such a point that man’s two most natural instincts – sexuality and aggressiveness – which are capable of a high yield of pleasure have been thoroughly suppressed. The civilized society is inclined to tolerate sexuality only because no other means of preserving the human species has been found so far. It does not tolerate the direct expression of aggressiveness either. Hence, the ego will direct it against the self, resulting in the return of the organism to the inorganic state. Super-ego has not a little to contribute in interjecting this aggression and destroying the self.

A consideration of the above basic postulates of Freud vis-à-vis neurosis reveals that neurosis is not just a behavioral abnormality but it is invested with great unconscious significance. It is not an accident but a way of relating to the world, however inconvenient.

Recent developments in many later psychoanalytic thinkers have developed in perspective the ideas of self and unconscious and discussed psychic reasons for neurotic reaction. The “discontents” of civilization that go into the formation of

super-ego and watch over the individual’s every mental process like a “garrison in a conquered city” is termed by Karen Horney, a neo-Freudian of non-libido school, as “basic anxiety”.

Erich Fromm, who has much in common with Horney, adds a historical dimension to neurosis. He thinks that man’s intellectual attainments have alienated him from the rest of the universe with which he enjoyed a “cosmic unity” for a very long time. The subsequent lopsided social developments, collapse of the ethical and religious values and the modern cut-throat competition, increasing individuation and isolation have contributed to his feeling orphaned in the world. His inability to modify physical laws, though gaining increasing control over nature, has thrown him into an “existential dichotomy” to resolve which he may neurotically develop a destructive attitude and zealously guard himself against all possible threats or tend to offset this “fear of freedom” through automation conformity and thus project a pseudo self or, if he is strong enough, progress in the direction of true love and productive labor and keep his real self intact.

It follows from the above discussion that psychoanalytic theorists of different persuasions from Freud onwards

have given prime place in their theoretical formulations to neurosis and discussed from different angles how it is the most natural result of the friction between the individual and society. We find the pendulum of emphasis swinging between biological and social determinism, but there appears to be a surprising consistency in the advocacy, though not always explicitly stated, of evolving a more humane social order so that man is spared from psychic disorders.

Psychoanalytic formulations on neurosis have been readily assimilated by literary criticism for the study of characters. In literary critical vocabulary character has always been a device to humanize the writer's experience by giving it a solid existence. From the days of Aristotle onwards, character as an object of critical attention has undergone various changes. But it is psychoanalysis psychoanalytic criticisms have added new dimensions to character study. Character is now viewed both as a "product of life and art." (Tennehouse: 1976: 12) Psychoanalysis no more studies character in total isolation, plucking it away from its fictional matrix, but "the nature of the external world which the character encounters and the kinds of demands that the external world makes as the character struggles to deal with the range of his or

her needs" (Ibid: 13) too are viewed in perspective. To put it in an analogy, character can be seen as our own image in a mirror, while the surrounding phenomena, that of necessary gets reflected, as the fictional matrix. One cannot be properly contextualized in the absence of the other.

Psychoanalytic thinkers from Freud onwards have not only viewed religion cynically but dubbed it as an instrument of oppression. Freud thinks religion to be "patently infantile, so foreign to reality." ((Freud: 1973: 107) as one with a friendly attitude to humanity he finds it painful that the great majority of people will continue to believe the falsehoods propagated in the name of religion. He therefore interprets it as a collective childhood neurosis of mankind. Erich Fromm puts it the other way round: "We can interpret neurosis as a private form of religion, more specifically, as a regression to primitive forms of religion conflicting with officially recognized patterns of religious thought" (Freud: 1973: 108). The woman novelists have shown an almost uncanny awareness of the untenable claims of religion and exposed them by creating neurotic characters who seek religious solution. Social-psychologists put emphasis on the role of social and cultural forces in shaping man's responses to his surroundings. Erich

Fromm affirms that even the most beautiful and the ugliest inclinations of man are not a part of his biologically fixed nature, “but result from the social process which creates man.” (Fromm: 1941: 12) Man’s self-consciousness enables him to contemplate himself as a whole and his interaction with other members of society enable him to bring himself within his own experiential purview; “and thus he can consciously integrate and unify the various aspects of his self, to form a single consistent and coherent and organized personality.” (Fromm: 1941: 13) It follows then that the basic human nature is common to the entire species of man, only its expression and satisfaction varies according to cultures. His essential inner nature is both weak and strong. It is weak in the sense, it can be easily suppressed or masked. It is strong as it cannot be fully destroyed. Whether weak or strong, it strives for self-realization.

This style is found in the Indian women novelists of the second generation who have shown awareness to the changed psychological realities of life in the post independence era. The Indian women happen to be the worst sufferers of the social norms and moral codes. This has encouraged the Indian English women novelists to treat the neurotic phenomenon in their works consistently. The women

novelists who have aired the secret wishes of the vast majority of Indian women novelists are-Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and many more. These women writers have dealt with the neurotic phenomenon in the Indian context by creating extremely interesting characters. Their natural feminine sensibility and introspection have imparted a human touch and psychological depth to their observation. (Rajeshwar. 2001: 111) The present study thus, has, identified seven novels of Indian English women writers featuring neurotic characters and attempts at a psychological analysis of the women characters. Thus it may provide remarkable insights into the inner struggles of the literary personages. It was Anita Desai who may be said to have laid the foundation of studying psyche and inner-world of the female protagonists as the result of deprivation, humiliation and marginalization. The women have lost their identity and behave abnormally.

The women novelists in English have very ably treated the neurotic phenomenon in the Indian context by creating extremely interesting personages. They have been able to lay bare the oppressive and anti-human value system of the society. Through the sensitive portrayal

of the psychic conflicts and the psychological contours of helpless people, the novelists seem to underline the importance of subverting the established values and replacing them with values which are more amenable to human nature and which promote happiness. For this purpose the delinquent frame of the social machine, which forges and fosters these values itself needs an overhaul. The women novelists bring home this point by subtly indicating that the society is often indifferent and vindictive towards sensitive and suffering people while actually it should be rushing to their help.

It would suggest that the psychoanalytic approach helps the readers with a better appreciation of the human situation of the characters of these women novelists.

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