



English

Explore—Journal of Research for UG and PG Students

ISSN 2278 – 0297 (Print)

ISSN 2278 – 6414 (Online)

© Patna Women's College, Patna, India

<http://www.patnawomenscollege.in/journal>

The application of psychoanalysis on the treatment of children in selected prose works of English

• Vasundhara Shankar • Meghanka Chakravarty • Megha Jha
• Sahar Rahman

Received : November 2011
Accepted : March 2012
Corresponding Author : Sahar Rahman

Abstract : *Children live in the world of innocence. But when their untouched world is shaken by war, slavery and terrorism, they withdraw into themselves and become detached. Their mind is like soft clay. Any imprint on them has a lasting and devastating effect. These strangulating emotions keep getting stored in their unconscious mind, years after years. These 'repressed' emotions are manifested in their personality in various ways like*

depression and insomnia. This suppression and expression of feelings by characters in a prose work is studied through 'Psychoanalytic Theory'.

The memories of David's traumatic childhood hold him so tight that he is not able to cope with it. Anne Frank is just thirteen when she experiences the holocaust. Beloved is killed by her own mother. Can there be anything more pathetic? Denver has no other option but to lead a colourless and lonely life. Amir's guilt of not saving Hassan from being "raped" haunts him all his life. He becomes an insomniac. He is never able to get over his childhood mistake. Such is the impact of Rahel's and Estha's suffocated and isolated childhood that they can never lead a normal life.

Vasundhara Shankar

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2009-2012,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Meghanka Chakravarty

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2009-2012,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Megha Jha

B.A. III year, English (Hons.), Session: 2009-2012,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Sahar Rahman

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna – 800 001, Bihar, India
E-mail : saharr@rediffmail.com

Thus, the psychological impact on a child is sustained throughout his life. It is manifested in their disturbed adult life.

Key words : *Psychoanalysis, childhood, repressed, traumatic, disturbed.*

Introduction and Background :

Children “symbolize formative forces of the unconscious of a beneficent and protective kind.” (Cirlot 45).

The child became the central subject of literary works only with the rise of the novel in the late eighteenth century. These works, according to Margaret Georgieva, “reflected the dichotomy of childhood which was seen as a symbol of growth and development on the one hand and as a symbol of regression and ignorance of the world on the other.” (Web)

Freud’s concepts of psychoanalysis also played a major role in the portrayal of the child figure in literature. Writers like Henry James and David Herbert Lawrence dealt with the innocence of childhood and the possibility of its corruption if the family circle is unbalanced; their works were largely affected by Freudian psychoanalytic concepts.

Simultaneously, a separate line of literature developed for children with the intent of either instruction or entertainment. The modern period also saw a number of writings from the pens of children, the most famous of which is *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1944) written by Anne Frank.

By the middle of the twentieth century portrayal of children and childhood had become an integral part of novels. Therefore, childhood was established as a reference point, vital for the understanding of the character.

Psychoanalytic Theory :

Psychoanalysis is used to study behaviour and formation of individual psyche and personality. Every human being has some traumatic experiences and unresolved conflicts. These strangulating emotions are constantly ‘repressed’ to relieve the conscious mind of tension. These

‘repressed’ emotions keep getting stored in the unconscious mind. This part of mind is very dynamic. It keeps trying to come to the surface. As soon as the conscious mind loses focus the unconscious wishes are manifested in various ways. This aspect of the behaviour is studied through Freud’s ‘Psychoanalytic Theory’. This theory is also applied on literary characters to study their behavioural patterns and its causes.

Here this theory has been applied to the child characters of the following novels-

Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850),
Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947),
Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987),
Arundhati Roy’s *the God of Small Things* (1997),
and Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003).

David Copperfield:

Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* traces the troubles David Copperfield faces in the Victorian England as a child. The very first line of the novel hints at the protagonist’s difficult childhood. His natural instincts and feelings have been suppressed due to the circumstances he has grown up in.

According to Kay R. Young, “Dickens explores the part of self-identity linked to the beloved need for mothers...” he “...writes about the psychic experience of unattached identity—what it feels like to be an orphan.” (*Young, Web*)

Young David’s closest relationship is with his mother. Because of the absence of a father figure and his mother’s docility David assumes ‘the parent role’. This is evident when David says of her - “She can’t live by herself, you know.” (*Dickens* 38)

David’s mother’s second marriage to Mr. Edward Murdstone brings an end to his carefree childhood.

David's attachment with his mother borders on the oedipal complex. This is evident in David's jealousy of his step-father-

"...I was jealous that his hand should touch my mother's in touching me." (*Dickens, 30*)

Later, his marriage to Dora is a manifestation of this attachment. David seeks to reclaim the image of his lost mother in Dora's resemblance to her.

Mr. Murdstone abuses David and isolates him which makes him reticent. We find that the child who is often described as "sharp" becomes excessively trusting and naive as an adult. The defence mechanism of 'reaction formation' is responsible for this. David was abused by those who are more powerful and fortunate. David associates assertiveness and mistrust with his sufferings in his unconscious mind. He then assumes 'inverse' traits to set himself apart from his offenders.

David Copperfield has been written from the point of view of a child, and captures the sensitivity with which a child experiences his society. This novel represents how adversity elicits different responses from different individuals, especially how it affects children.

Anne Frank :

Anne's diary records the vivid impressions of her experiences during her hiding. In the diary she brings to light the gloomy atmosphere of the victims during the holocaust.

During her stay in the annex she suffers from dullness, depression, dejection and discrimination from people around her.

"I swallow Valerian pills everyday against worry and depression, but it doesn't prevent me from being more miserable the next day." (Frank 109)

She suffers from the fear of being arrested. This along with her depressed state gives her nightmares.

Symptoms of "Psychomotor Retardation" which involves an apparent inhibition or slowing down of all bodily movements and expressive gestures are seen in her. She feels that something is happening to her every day, but she was tired and lazy to write it all down.

She questions anti-Semitism (an attitude or policy of hatred and hostility towards the Jewish people). She takes pride in her Jewish identity.

"...Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now...?" "Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all people learn good, and for that reason and only that reason do we suffer now..." (*Frank, 207*)

Anne also discovers her feminist identity. She wishes not to be an ordinary housewife like other girls later in life.

At the end of the diary, Anne looks very hopeful because the war is going to end. She dreams of a perfect world.

Beloved :

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* depicts the after-effects of several years of suppression faced by the Black community. This psychological damage is so powerful that it passes from generation after generation. Children are the biggest sufferers. Their innocence is lost. They either grow up to be slaves or are killed by their mothers to save them from disgraceful life. *Beloved* is slaughtered and the worse is that her siblings Buglar, Howard and Denver are the witnesses of this dire murder. Moreover, they live under the spell of the Baby ghost. When Howard and Buglar cannot take her anger any more, they run away. Then Denver's life identifies with the house-124, lonely and colourless.

This macabre experience gets so deeply entrenched in her mind (repression) that it comes out in the form of illusion. She sees a white dress around her mother Sethe. Thus her life which could have been very beautiful becomes aimless and stagnant.

The God of Small Things :

The *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a heart rending tale of the twins: Rahel and Estha. They lead a very difficult, suffocated childhood in Ayemenem House. Their mother Ammu dies when they are just eleven. After that, their isolation turns macabre. Whenever Margaret Kochamma has nothing to do, she slaps Estha. He is molested by 'Lemon Drinkman Orange Drinkman'. But he has no one to share his grief with. It remains repressed in him. His unconscious mind which has become the storehouse of pain, detachment, isolation and sorrow, manifests itself as nightmares. His psychological suppression affects his childhood so adversely that he binds himself into his own world, in his own shell. Rahel becomes a rebellious girl. Her personality is very disintegrated. The irreparable harm done to her in her childhood does not let Rahel lead a normal life. Her marriage is broken. The severity of psychological damage done to Rahel and Estha is manifested in their incestuous relationship.

The Kite Runner:

"I became what I am today at the age of twelve"
(Hosseini, 1)

The novel, *The Kite Runner*, starts when the protagonist Amir is in his late thirties. However, he is still a young boy peeking into the shadows of his past.

We are taken back in time, to Amir's childhood. Amir has everything but has been sadly left longing for his father's attention. Amir has a love-hate relationship with Baba who sets for him a very difficult standard. For Amir it becomes a matter of necessity to match his father's expectations.

Amir harbours guilt for his mother's death. This guilt aggravated by his father's reticent behaviour becomes the cause of all his actions.

As a child Amir's closest relationship was with Hassan, a 'Hazara' boy. Amir associates Hassan with a kite which connotes joy and innocence to him. As a child reared in a society opinionated against the 'Hazaras' Amir finds himself caught between his own instinctive love for him and the communal norms of the society .

"I never thought of Hassan and me as friends..." (Hosseini, 22)

Baba treats Hassan kindly, which makes Amir jealous. Amir asserts himself by attacking Hassan 'passive-aggressively' by mocking Hassan.

"Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba." (Hosseini, 68)

When Assef abuses Hassan, Amir does not defend him. Amir is afraid of Assef, however, he consciously decides not to intervene and let Hassan be a sacrifice.

"He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (Hosseini, 68)

Amir dreams of a sacrificial sheep for weeks after Hassan's rape. Hassan has to (metaphorically) die so that Amir might win Baba's appreciation. This association of Hassan's fate with the sheep's is a result of the social construction of the 'Hazaras' as inferior to the 'Pashtuns'. Amir, later, dreams of Hassan's death in which he recognises himself as responsible for it. Amir unsuccessfully tries to repress these memories. His need for self-expression is 'sublimated' into writing skill since he is not able to express himself physically. He becomes a writer in later life.

The Kite Runner illustrates how childhood experiences reconfigure the aspects of one's psyche, personality and actions as an adult.

Conclusion :

Childhood is a very important stage of human development. Representation of childhood forms an important part of literary history. Child psychology focuses on the mind and behaviour of children. It deals not only with how children grow physically but also their mental and social development.

The culture the child lives in, his socio-economic status and the relationships the child forms at an early age have a profound effect on how he thinks, learns and develops. They contribute to the set of values, customs, shared assumptions and ways of living that influence his personality.

Literature has often portrayed children and oftener children growing up in difficult circumstances.

David Copperfield captures the sensitivity with which a child experiences his society, its positive aspects as well as its negative aspects.

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl throws light on the sufferings of Jews during Holocaust and depicts the psychology of the victims, especially children as can be seen in Anne's character.

Beloved, through the murder of Beloved, explores the psychological damage done to the Blacks through suppression.

The God of Small Things depicts the suffocation, isolation and insecurity of Rahel and Estha who grow into psychologically affected adults.

In *The Kite Runner* Amir's emotional awareness of his circumstances as a child shapes his personality and thinking when he grows up.

Therefore it is evident from these works that the harsh experience of life at a tender age adversely affects the psyche of a child and results in loss of innocence, precociousness and stunted growth.

References:

Books:

- Barry, Peter. (2010). *Beginning Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books.
- Cirlot, J.E. (2001). *A Dictionary of Symbols*: London; Routledge.
- Dickens, Charles. (2004). *David Copperfield*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Frank, Anne. (2010). *The Diary of a Young Girl*: Noida, Maple Press.
- Hosseini, Khaled. (2003). *The Kite Runner*: London, Bloomsbury.
- Morrison, Toni. (2005). *Beloved*: London, Vintage.
- Roy, Arundhati. (2002). *The God of Small Things*: New Delhi, Penguin Books.

Websites:

- <http://www.academia.org/dickens-and-psychoanalysis/>; Kay R. Young, January 27, 2011.
- http://www.hal-unice.archives-ouvertes.fr/.../Childhood_-_Margarita_Georgieva/; Margaret Georgieva, September 20, 2011.