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Interpreting the 'World Within': A Psychoanalytical Study of the Characters from
The God of Small Things and *Cry, the Peacock*

Dr. Sutapa Biswas

Jamshedpur Women's College, Jamshedpur, India

Abstract

The brutality of the outer world and the trauma sustained in the process has deep impact on the psyche of human beings. It has been stated that the childhood experiences that get suppressed and is 'neither remembered nor used in the activities of waking thought' provides the material for the reproduction of dreams. The part of mind that stores the deep secrets and is inaccessible to the conscious mind but affects behavior and emotions is the subconscious mind.

In this paper I propose to interpret and psychoanalyze the main characters and also deliberate on the narrative technique used by the two authors to reveal the inner self (of the characters) to the outer world.

Literary artists have used this complex world of repressed emotions in the subconscious, expressing itself in the form of dreams in their novels while narrating the story. While executing the fictional idea in the novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy uses a highly complex and sophisticated narrative structure that combines digression and anachronism. The recollection of musing the various characters chiefly affect the narration as the lead (the readers) away or back the main events of the story.

Words: Psychoanalysis, Unconscious mind, Trauma, Alienation, Oedipus complex.

"...that literature is a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history. It includes works primarily artistic and also those whose aesthetic qualities are only secondary. The self-defining activity of the community is conducted in the light of the works as its members have come to read them (or criticize them)." McFadden (1978, 56)

A literary artist by virtue of his skill of observation, intertwined with depth of imagination and creativity, mirrors in his works, the beauty and the ugliness of the outside world as well as the world 'enclosed' within the human mind. The challenges and conflicts of the physical or external world leave an indelible mark on the psyche of human beings. It enables a writer to present in his work, the various experiences faced by the characters that he creates or depicts from the so-called real world. Experiences caused by a cruel and

unkind environment, the strange sense of alienation, frustration and desolation have deep psychological impact on the minds of the characters. It is a known fact that human mind is too complex. To understand the 'psyche' of a 'personality', one has to delve deep into his 'inner world' so as to bring out the 'deep embedded secret' that reveals his state of mind, temperament and character. As Pramod K Nayar rightly says: "Today, texts are read for the 'desires' they seem to conceal, the kinds of 'drives' in their

characters and the ‘unconscious’ in them. This critical move to explore the nature of the human psyche by exploring the deeper, hidden meanings of texts and their characters is identifiable as a major critical method today, one that we can define as ‘psychoanalytic’.”(Nayar 63)

According to Freud, the conscious mind includes everything that we are aware of, can think and talk rationally about. It also includes memory (not always part of consciousness) but can be retrieved at any time and brought into our awareness. While the unconscious mind is the reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges and memories that is outside of the conscious awareness, most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant such as feelings of pain, anxiety or conflict. The unconscious continues to influence our behavior and experience even though we are aware of these underlying influences. ‘Freud emphasized that language concealed, revealed or modified hidden desires, anxieties and fears. His point was that desire does not express itself easily because culture does not allow or facilitate it, and we need to pay attention to language and other forms of symbolic expression—gestures, nods, facial expression, writing—to discover it.’(Nayar 64) It needs to be stated, the term ‘subconscious’ is a layperson’s replacement for the unconscious mind esp. used in literature. It is a repository for socially unacceptable ideas, wishes or desires, traumatic memories, and painful emotion put out of mind by the mechanism of psychological repression. Even though the subconscious thoughts are not directly accessible to ordinary introspection, it can be interpreted by special random

association, dream analysis and verbal slips. Carl Jung further divided the unconscious into personal consciousness and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is a reservoir of material that was once conscious but has been forgotten or suppressed.

The mystery and intrigue repressed in the secret ‘inner world’ that unknowingly gets expressed through the behavior of the character, is consciously worked upon by writers like Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai. As Roy writes in *The God of Small Things*, “And the air was full of Thoughts and Things to say, But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said Big Things lurk unsaid inside.” (Roy 173). Indeed Big Things hidden within, cause fear and anxiety and submerges the trivial layers of Small Things that ultimately has its own fallout and repercussions. The unspoken language of fear in human beings, hidden within the unconscious vastness of the inner world, needs expression that inadvertently comes out through the attitude and behaviour of the characters over the years. A novelist tries hard to give words and language that gets signified through the actions of the characters.

Keeping in mind the constant conflict between the outer world and the inner world faced by human beings and the complexities created, literary artists present events and characters, delving deeper into the minds, seeking reason for their behaviour and conduct in life. The traumatic experiences that Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*, face during their childhood and what Maya goes through in *Cry, the Peacock* as a married woman, and its impact on their psyche, compels us to seek and understand the

working of the conscious and the subconscious mind.

In the beginning of the novel *The God of Small Things* a tragic incident is related by the narrator and that is the death of Sophie Mol, the cousin of Estha and Rahel that happened twenty three years ago and the residual burden of which is still carried by the characters. Rahel returns to Aymenem to be with her twin brother Estha, after twenty three years. The novel starts with the present and then reverts back to the past and Estha and Rahel's life as the grand-children of well-known and powerful Ipe family gets revealed. 'They were two-egg twins. 'Dizygotic' doctors called them. Born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs, Estha Esthappen- was the older by eighteen minutes'(Roy 2) Even though as children, physically, 'they never did look much like each other'(Roy 2) The intuitive connection between Rahel and Estha was so strong and profound that Rahel could feel and share Estha's secrets that were embedded in his subconscious. As Roy writes, 'in those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends and Everything was Forever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate but joint identities. -----She remembers, for instance (though she hadn't been there), what the Orangedrink- Lemondrink Man did to Estha in Abhilash Talkies. She remembers the taste of the tomato sandwiches- Estha's sandwiches that Estha ate- on the Madras Mail to Madras'. (Roy 3) Interestingly the connection is felt by Rahel even after twenty three years of

separation. But somewhere Estha is lost. The deep emotional bonding since their birth, privilege them to experience a psychic bonding as well, enabling them to understand each other's thoughts, joy, pain and suffering. Rahel being the lively one is somehow able to take charge of her live assertively, even though all her actions contribute in her isolation and alienation. Meanwhile, Estha stagnates as a person, a social being. He stops communicating with the outer physical world and sinks into the world within. Their way of unconsciously obliterating the past guilt and trauma can be justified in the sense that 'Repression is the hiding away of something in our minds; what is hidden away exists in our unconscious. Guilt-inducing desire and traumatic events as the death of a loved one or abuse are quickly shunted out of the conscious and relegated into the unconscious, to emerge only in particular moments (usually of dreams or stress). The unconscious is the greatest threat to our identity as rational humans.'(Nayar 65)

As per the novel, Rahel and Estha, during their childhood, lead a life of constant fret and fever, stress and anxieties. They are forced by the circumstances to witness the quarrels between their parents in Assam and after their parents' divorce when they return to Aymenem with their mother Ammu, and are unfortunately treated as outsiders. Baby Kochamma who had already lost out on love when young is a bitter and angry old woman and treats Ammu, Rahel and Estha with disdain. They are the victim of morbid stiffness and malice and are constantly reminded of their isolation and their sinfulness.

Reverting back, in 1969, Estha, a seven years old child, idolizing Elvis

Presley (he wears his hair in a puffed up style to imitate him), had an innocent childlike view of the world. Being emotionally close to his mother Ammu and his twin sister Rahel, there was a sense of happiness in his bearing. An embarrassing and deeply humiliating incident happened at that tender age when he had gone to watch a movie with his family in a theatre. That incident seized his childhood, filled his mind trust deficit towards everyone except his mother and sister. He loved 'The Sound of Music' and sang with such gusto and happiness that he was forced to leave the movie theatre all alone. Unfortunately his singing woke up the Orangedrink-Lemondrink Man who was asleep behind the refreshment counter. The man got Estha to come behind the counter and molested him. He also threatened Estha with dire consequences if he revealed it to anyone else. This experience left behind a deep impact on the psyche of Estha as his view of the world changed dramatically. The childish innocence was replaced with guilt and fear. The change in his demeanor could be seen when Estha went into the factory and had Two Thoughts, '(a) Anything can happen to Anyone. And (b) It's best to be prepared' (Roy 194). Life was now filled with fear and anxiety. A sense of realization filters in- that the outside world can be scary and unpredictable and with this his secure and happy inner- world cracks. Further after the death of Sophie Mol, Ammu, Estha and Rahel feel the brunt of the family anger. Estha, the seven year old, is held responsible for her death by Baby Kochamma even though it was an accident. Alongside a well kept secret of forbidden love between Ammu and the Paravan Velutha gets revealed. Alienation, rejection and emotional blackmail by the

family hold its sway. Estha is the one chosen by Baby Kochamma to go to Velutha's cell and condemn him as their abductor, as Estha, is more practical, tractable, responsible and foresighted. This is done to save their family name, more than saving Ammu's reputation. As Roy writes, 'Estha's mouth said yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt.' (Roy 320) 'Silence' that portrays helplessness of a child that unconsciously sears and condemns the 'Subalternized Self', while at the same time rebels against the cruel and prejudiced outside world. Further the pain and sadness he sees in his mother's eyes during the police interrogation, wrecks his heart and mind.

According to Freud, the terrifying experiences involving danger to life can force people to seek personal security and as soon as a child develops self and self concept he seeks social and personal security. W.I Thomas points out four important wishes that arise in mind. They are (1) wish for security (2) wish for new experiences (3) wish for response (4) wish for recognition. As Roy writes, "Not together (but almost) two frightened voices whispered, 'Save Ammu'---- Save Ammu, Save Us, Save our mother." (Roy 319) And Estha is forced to seek security for his world, at the cost of Velutha's life, whom he loved.

The responsibility of ensuring the safety of his Ammu while condemning Velutha to death pushes him towards psychological disorder in the later stage of his life. In addition, the emotional trauma of being separated from his Ammu and twin- sister Rahel and Returned, as a piece of object, to Calcutta to live with his father, whom he has not seen since he was a toddler, changes his personality forever.

His inner- world is shattered, he becomes silent and withdraws from the world.

The pain and trauma of separation, rejection, betrayal and more so the guilt of being held indirectly the cause of Velutha's death slows down the process of individuation and brings in desolation. Just as the sufferer of traumatic experiences unconsciously devises symbolic activities as defense mechanism to overcome and to overrule the disgusting experiences, Estha unconsciously defends his 'Self' and becomes mute. Sadly his silence is not noticed by many. His muteness and passivity are the mechanisms he employs to escape from traumatic journey of life. Silence is frequently read as resistance as he seems to resist connecting with people. He doesn't go to college after finishing school, rather opts to do household chores. Estha is re-Returned to Aymenem by his father after twenty three years and the man we meet is introspective, brooding and lost. At the same time he has acquired habits such as wandering on very long walks and obsessively cleaning his clothes as if trying to wash off the memories of hidden shame and guilt he carries in his heart and mind. His silence and passivity can be seen as rebellion against the vicious corrupt world or is it his escape route, even though his silence speaks of the deeply scarred and wounded ego, subdued in the aftermath of a difficult childhood.

Estha's attainment of passivity and silence can be construed as a shift towards a subjugated feminine behavior, imposed upon by the pressures of an authoritative society while Rahel's rebellious streak seems quite akin to masculine aggressiveness, 'that the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other'. As R.S Sharma observes, "First

of all, she (Rahel) subverts the value system of society by elevating what is considered low and detestable. She decorates a knob of dung with flowers. Her colliding against the other girls in the convent to know whether breasts hurt is an expression of rebellion against the suppression of sexuality in conventional Christian education. Thirdly the burning of false hair of the House mistress is a protest against vanity and artificiality in human relations."(Sharma 72)

Further at the end, when Rahel tries to bring Estha back to the world as a normal being with dreams and memories to share and whispers his name, Estha only notices her mouth and relates it to "Their beautiful mother's mouth". As Roy writes "Estha, sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested takes his fingers to it." (Roy 327) This can be seen as the projection of the Oedipus complex or mother fixation that somehow retards his growth as an individual. The forced separation from his mother at a tender age and subsequently her death, plays a major role in the disintegration of rational self. As, "For Freud the Oedipus complex is the source of all repressed desire, the emblem of all that is repressed because even *love is antagonistic* in nature when triangulated between the boy, the mother and the father. The Oedipus complex enabled Freud to argue that all desire, repression and anxiety are based on the condition of prohibition, or what he termed *taboo*. The child never really overcomes the complex, but merely shuts it away" (Nayar 66). Feeling of loneliness, emptiness and alienation force the twins to find to solace in each other's arms even though "what they shared that night was not happiness but hideous grief." (Roy 328) The insinuation of incest is no

doubt a regressive act, going against the very moral strictures of our cultural ethos but gets justified as it seems to have the potential to heal what has frozen for the time being. Through the shared closeness Rahel tries to initiate Estha towards the retrieval of time lost in the maze of loneliness.

While Roy portrays the plight of children tormented by traumatic experiences in their childhood leading to impeded emotional and spiritual development as adults, Anita Desai depicts the condition of a married woman who had a happy childhood but sad and lonely married life. In the novel *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya the protagonist is seen as a hypersensitive, introvert, and love-famished woman. Pampered daughter of a wealthy, aristocratic, and indulgent father she readily marries Gautama a man much older than herself. Unfortunately, Maya's emotional maturation stagnates as she suffers from father-fixation (Electra complex) due to which she is unable to relate with her husband on an equal basis. Having lived a carefree life under the indulgent attentions of her loving father, Maya wishes to have similar attention from her husband. As it is, there is no compatibility in their temperament. Maya is 'a creature of instinct' 'a wayward and high-strung child' and Gautama is a practical, realistic and ambitious lawyer. Maya feels romantically for everything that is beautiful, colourful and sensuous, whereas Gautama is 'no romantic' and 'has no use for flowers'. She is symbolized by her name that means 'nothing but illusion', whereas Gautama stands for asceticism and detachment from life. Such diametrically different temperaments are bound to have marital disharmony. The

novel begins with the death of Maya's pet dog, Toto. This incident acts like a catalyst that enhances her sense of loneliness and desolation. In her state of grief over her pet's death the repressed childhood memory of a prediction of the albino astrologer suddenly comes back to haunt her. Maya was conscious of this sinister impact on her mind. It is vividly expressed as she tries to recount, "A persistent sense of some disaster I had known, and forgotten, or perhaps never known, only, at one time, feared, and now rediscovered. But what was it? A grain of sand itching, itching upon the tender infant skin of my sorrow. Yet no mere grain. Far more important. Not merely a foreboding, but a distant apprehension of a presence. ---- it was as though I were faced with an important message in a language. I could not read.-----it was a language I had once known, I needed only to remember. But I must do so soon. How? Why? And after that --what? (Desai 28) It is the unbearable traumatic experience for a woman like Maya. She feels the foreboding shadow of destiny doom and death. She feels, '- a longing, a dread, a search for solution, a despair, and my head throbbed and spun---'. (Desai 35) It was prophesized that in the fourth year of her marriage there would be death. Left alone to deal with the loss of her pet, her mind recedes back to her childhood days. She fantasizes about the past and her happy childhood as she is unable to cope with the challenges of the present real world. But at the same time the disastrous thoughts of death suppressed in the initial stages of marriage deeply trouble her. Moreover she is suffering in solitude as she is unable to reveal the prophesy to her insensitive husband. A sense of self-pity slowly grows into anger. Left to her own devices desolation creeps

in, as she feels, ‘ wherever I laid myself, I could think only of the albino, the magician, his dull opaque eyes, the hand twitching the fold of cloth between the swallowing thighs. It seemed real, I could recall each detail, and yet – God, Gautama, father, surely it is nothing but an hallucination’.(Desai 57) She cannot express her rage and pain openly and hides behind the façade of a loving wife and a selfless individual. She presents herself as a helpless victim of circumstance, a childless woman dealing with the painful death of her pet. Her act of pillow-beating and crying piteously is what is termed ‘shrinking process’ wherein she sees herself as a helpless child. Lack of concern on the part of her husband makes her think of her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle in which one is destined to die. The Prophecy of the past and the painful emotions of the present get intertwined in her mind. She compares her condition with that of a peacock. The dance of the peacock has an intense personal significance as the peacocks destroy each other though madly in love. Maya identifies herself with the peacocks and experiences meaning of life and death to be the same. Rebuffed by her husband, Maya is torn between her love of life and her fear of death. The gradual disintegration of her personality is very powerfully dramatized. She is stricken with the sense of loneliness and insecurity. Maya’s predicament is to come to terms with the astrologer’s prediction and to enjoy the present moments of life with her practical minded husband. But being a creature who feels the world with senses, is unable to control and harmonize the conscious and the manifestation of the subconscious world(which is chaotic and unsystematic).Psychosomatic symptoms

like splitting headaches and fever with delirium holds her ‘self’ hostage and finally the ‘self’ alienates itself from the centre and ‘ self –hate’ takes over . Anita Desai present’s Maya’s conflict using the mirror imagery. As Desai writes, “The silence descended upon me again now, and while I hold my soul, still burning, in my hands, I saw myself detach itself from it and float away to rest upon the dim mirror where I gaze upon it from cool distance.”(Desai 90) For Maya hate was a new emotion and the self hatred turns into vengeance. The memory of the prophesy of someone’s death takes a turn for the worse as for the first time the word ‘murder’ word creeps in and at the end she concretizes the idea. It was a painful realization for her to find: ‘Poor Gautama, poor dear Gautama, who was so intense and yet has never lived, and never would.’(Desai172). And in the fatal hour of reckoning in the presence of the love-starved Maya, Gautama, her husband fell precipitously down from the roof.

In both the novels emotional trauma inflicted from others take its toll on the characters. While Estha goes silent, Maya becomes violent. In both the cases, a sense of detachment and disintegration of ‘Self’ is visible.

It may also be added that the complexity and complications portrayed in the lives Estha and Maya becomes vibrant due to the narrative techniques employed by the respective writers. As far as the plot of *The God of Small Things* is concerned, it develops around a complex and sophisticated narrative structure, which has the combination of digression and anachrony. The narrative is constantly side-tracked from the central story due to the recollections and musings of various

characters. It has been stated time and again that 'Roy's most original contribution in this novel is her portrayal of children, entering into their thinking in a way which does not sentimentalize them but reveals the fierce passions and the terrors which course through them and almost destroy them. Even though Rahel and Estha are victims of circumstances they are, to an equal extent, intelligent evaluators of it.' Cry, The Peacock, is more metaphorical and the vocabulary carries certain wildness and violence, as, it is Maya who records of the journey of her inner- self, in first person. There are philosophical renderings from Bhagwat Gita that merges with the personal belief as in the case of Gautama. With nostalgic flashbacks, both the authors reveal the childhood days of the characters, enabling the readers to relate the present condition of psyche to their past and determine the time when they lost their 'real self'.

In conclusion it can be said that repressed memories of the past buried in the subconscious mind have a strong influence upon the actions and behavior of

the characters. As such Estha and Rahel go through deep sense of desolation due to the rejection, alienation, betrayal during their childhood and Maya goes through the same, albeit after marriage. The conflict between the inner and the outer-world destabilize their lives and thus psychological disturbance of one form or another occurs as the ego and the unconscious change places. When unconscious desires do not find an outlet and seek to force their way out, the ego blocks them off defensively, internal conflict happen. This brings on the psychosomatic disorders like neurosis in its different forms, obsession, hysterical or phobic. Estha could not speak the truth and the guilt and anger turns him neurotically obsessive (as he washes his clothes repeatedly) and Maya haunted by the past prophesy, a sense of isolation and rejection by her husband, turns her neurotically obsessive and finally mad. Unfortunately these characters are unable to harmonize the inner- world and rationalize the conflict with the outer world and thereby falter in life.

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