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Confrontation, Denial and Motherhood: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of the Narration of Talat Abbasi's "Mirage"

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Abstract: *The major purpose of this paper is to explore and expose the multi-narrative of Talat Abbasi's short story "Mirage." This paper also aims to analyze the multifaceted forms of psychological issues and internal agony of the Nameless Narrator, who is also a mother of a special child who cannot communicate and walk properly. Mother, in this story, shows a self-pity attitude towards herself and her son. Her distressed narrative, her painful discourses, and her embarrassing expression towards her son in front of others expose her psychological emptiness and spiritual anguish. This paper examines the Narrator's distressing behavior while applying psychoanalytic theory to Abbasi's short story. This paper also focuses on the narrator's/ mother's apologetic attitude at people's long and questioning stares at her special child.*

Key Words: Narration, Distress, Emptiness, Spiritual Anguish, Internal Agony

Introduction

Narratives usually present diverse perspectives on life. An individual's approach toward life varies, yet the major focus of this approach is to understand and analyze the multifaceted forms of existence. Narratives communicate the impression of life and reveal untold stories. These narratives also reveal the psychological and social discourses of the characters' lives. Talat Abbasi, a Karachi-born English short writer, puts forward the same discourse in her story "Mirage" (2001). The major purpose of this paper is to explore and analyze a silent but complicated relationship between the mother and her mentally and physically challenged child, Omar, to understand the psychoanalytic interpretation of their strong but symbolically muted discourse. This paper also aims to expose the psychoanalytic discourse in this short story to help the reader identify a complicated yet strong relationship between the mother and her son.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research methods as different articles, books, and criticism have been used to expound, explore, and analyze the multi-narrative expression of Talat's Abbasi's "Mirage" (2001). This paper also makes use of the literary theory of Psychoanalysis to examine the Narrator's interior struggle and anguish.

Narrator/ Mother and her Spiritual Agony

Talat Abbasi's "Mirage" unravels an intricate relationship between a mother and her adorable son, but a special child, Omar. The story begins with the first-person narration; whatever information the reader receives, he gets from the narrator, who is not only telling the story of a child but also exposing her inner pain and agony. The narrator is a nameless female character who wants to get her son admitted to a Shelter home for special children, and in this whole process, she narrates what she thinks and how people react to her special son Omar. There is an extremely complex mother/son relationship in this short story as a mother is tired, drained, and exhausted, and she is embarrassed to have a son like this. The narrator addresses the reader, communicates with Sister Agnes at the Hope House, observes her surroundings, and at the same time, she feels herself disoriented and psychologically dissipated:

'November twentieth,' says Sister Agnes.

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November 20, I write.

'Nineteen eight,' says Sister Agnes.

1980. I write.

There is something very practiced about the way she says it. Perhaps they all falter at this point. The last thing, after all, is on the last form they'll sign. (Abbasi, 2001, p.149)

The narrator, who is also a mother, is a nameless individual who narrates her story and her son's. A major part of the story has been written in simple present tense, which signifies the perpetuity of their agonizingly painful existence. The Narrator wants to escape from the irksome responsibility of her special child. This does not mean that she does not love her son, but the problem is that she is psychologically and physically tired, and she tries hard to put herself (my italics) together. As she says, "Mind you, I am not faltering, not me. If I'm behaving like a puppet, it's because I'm drained, exhausted. I was exhausted mentally even before we left home today." (Abbasi, 2001, p.149) Due to these dialogues, this story can be perceived as a play where the character on stage delivers dialogue while looking at the audience. The mother (Narrator) shares with the reader the details of her routine and the attitude she faces from the landlord, pedestrians, and the people living in the same building. In this story, there are few dialogues, and the rest of the expression is stated through her thoughts, which manifest her inner malaise.

Psychoanalysis & Narration

There are two major characters in Abbasi's short story: the narrator, the Narrator, the narrator d, Omar, and the other. The mother/narrator's psychological approach towards her existence demonstrates the social reaction she receives from her surroundings and the treatment of her son. Her psychologically damaged narration involves the psychoanalytical approach. According to Roy Schafer, Psychoanalytic is an interpretive discipline whose practitioners aim to develop particular kinds of systematic accounts of human action." (Schafer, 1993, p.189) According to Schafer, the Psychoanalytic approach focuses on the diversity of human behavior and the psychological issues an individual comes across. Abbasi's narrative demonstrates a disconnected relationship between the individual and society. There is a constant confrontation between the nameless Mother and her psychological plight, and at the same time, Mother also comes across a denial to escape from the sickening environment. The Narrator exhibits her actual self through the narrative as Schafer points out, "In telling self-stories to others we may, for most purposes, be said to be performing straightforward narrative actions...we also tell them to ourselves" (Abbasi, 2001, p.194). The nameless Mother tells the story of herself and her son to show what she actually thinks and how others react to her condition. When she mentions her special child in the story, she admits her metaphorical mental inability to absorb the situation in which she is living. She describes her son, "Only ten and strikingly pretty. His black hair which I am stroking to soothe him, keep him quiet on my lap is amazingly still baby...Strangers have always been drawn to him" (Abbasi, 2001, p.152). She depicts Omar as an adorable child who is pretty and draws strangers' attention, but in the very next paragraph, she narrates their feelings and confronts herself (my italics). Schafer points out, "Generally, these narrations focus neither on the past, plain and simple, nor on events currently taking place outside the psychoanalytic situation. They focus much more on the place modification of these tales within the psychoanalytic dialogue" (Schafer, 1993, p.196). According to Schafer, psychoanalytic dialogue emphasizes the situation in which the tale is told within the Psychoanalytical precincts to explore diverse human actions.

Multiple Inner Discourses of the Narrator

The Narrator in Abbasi's story describes strangers' responses after looking at her son, Omar, and gets apologetic as if she is responsible for her fate, "And I understand the disappointment of strangers being thus tricked. I too have been taken in by a mirage" (Abbasi, 2001, p.153). The meaning of the word 'Mirage' is the optical illusion and phantasmagoria, and Abbasi exposes the inner discourse of the characters not only through words but also through feelings. Whatever the information the reader gets, it is through the Narrator. Abbasi does not make the narrator omniscient; she hands her over the mirror to hold up to society. She puts both the conscious and unconscious selves of the Nameless Mother together, and she helps the reader locate the diversity within the narration. Abbasi's narrator experiences the same predicament because of the condition in which she lives. She is apologetic to Sister Agnes; she gets



embarrassed when she takes her son out of the apartment building, and she also gets scared of passersby's long questioning stares at her son. This also demonstrates her fear of people and herself. As Elliot points out:

...a person is 'not himself' is to indicate, implicitly, an awareness of the diversity and complexity of emotional life... this comment does recognize the centrality of conflicting emotions, the interplay of love and hatred, as well as the importance of a person's concrete emotional history in the development of their selfhood. (Elliot, 1994, p.7)

The nameless Narrator fears herself and her surroundings. She demonstrates the complexity of emotional life where she can't even recognize her inconsistent sentiments, "I meant to cut his nails, Sister. I'm sorry Sister. In fact, I'm so about his nails that I am close to tears. She must see that because she comes over and presses my shoulder" (Abbasi, 2000, p.153). These lines expose her vulnerability in front of her circumstances; she is in dire need of emotional help as her actual self has totally collapsed. In this story, the reader does not get to know about the Narrator's husband or Omar's Father, where he has gone, and where he is now, and this absence is crucial to understanding the emotional frustration of the Narrator. The Narrator mentions nothing about her husband and whatever she has experienced in the past. Her main concern is her special son. Due to his abnormal gesticulations, she has received complaints from the apartment landlord. To her, her child is like an imprisoned bird, "just a small, exquisite bird trapped in the room, flying in panic from wall to wall, hurling itself against them, hurting only itself, incapable of harming others. Watch in silence by the mother" (Abbasi, 2001, p.151). The nameless narrator/mother exhibits her frustration, helplessness, and people's failure to understand her son. Omar is like a trapped bird who tries hard to come out of this situation yet is unable to change his circumstances. Omar's deplorable condition is described through her mother, who herself is suffering from chaos and anguish. Both mother and son are like trapped birds who struggle hard to get free but are doomed to fail due to their circumstances.

Histrionic Expressions and Abbasi's Narrative

The mother's attitude towards her son exhibits her disordered life. She admits her powerlessness, "Then as the weeks grew into months, even a year and more, and the frightened bird still found no peaceful way to fly out, I watched in rage and self-pity. And becoming melodramatic at the end likened me bitterly to a Paroah's slave buried alive with him" (Abbasi, 2001, p.151). Her histrionic expression towards her son's condition demonstrates her loss of self. As Elliott talks about the social self, "... repressive social conditions are traced to various pathologies that underlie human relationships and of their impact on psychic life, selfhood, and gender identity" (Elliot, 1994, p.18). Elliott focuses on human relationships and the life individual tries to escape. This seems difficult for individuals whose existence reveals their inner turmoil and morbid circumstances in which they struggle to exist. The nameless Mother is scared of the social attitude towards her special son when she takes him out of the apartment building, and in a way, she demonstrates her own sensitivity towards her physically and psychologically challenged son. Particularly, she finds herself in a situation in which she is feeble and oversensitive. She wants to protect her son, but at the same time, she wants to get rid of him. Throughout the story, her irksome expression reveals her repulsion towards the life she is living right now. She has to hide every kitchen stuff from her son Omar so he could not harm himself. She puts everything in a damaged suitcase to keep herself and her son safe from some unpleasant experience. She has a sinister sense of humor when she wants to write a letter to an imaginary burglar who could break into her apartment and just wants to ask him his opinion after finding a suitcase full of scissors and knives. Mother's narrative is both strong and morbid, reasonable and absurd, and coherent and ambiguous. Her ambiguity represents her denial of the situation, which drains her both psychologically and physically. As Joel Fineman mentions, this representation is essential in the psychoanalytic experience:

Representation, stressing and registering itself as representation, calls up and evokes as something absent the truthful presentation it confesses truly it is not...The "re-" of representation affects the loss of presentation; it is responsible for that loss because representation is not only achieved over the dead body of the presence it repeats but, more actively, this very repetition is what transforms such ideal presence into something of the past. (Fineman, 1986, p.276)

Though Fineman has written this specifically for Shakespearean dramaturgy, this representation can be applied to Abbasi's narrative as well. The Narrator in this short story represents the loss of her real self, and she also makes a connection between the near past and the present. The mother/ Narrator does not repeat her words but the feelings she has towards her deplorable and nerve-shattering condition. The narrative in this short story reveals the multiplicity of expression as the nameless Narrator divulges his roles in many ways and speaks at different levels; at one place, he becomes a mother. On the other hand, she turns into an individual who wants to escape from the situation, and sometimes, her expressions reflect an utter sense of loss. Her discourse represents Bakhtin's multiplicity of expression; as Bakhtin says, "no living word relates to its object in between a word and its object" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.79). The mother in Abbasi's story demonstrates her inner chaos through the disturbing diction she uses throughout the narrative structure. She takes herself and her son as objects that are in absolute commotion in the hands of fate and destiny. As Bakhtin points out:

[Any discourse] finds the object at which it was directed already as it was overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or, on the contrary, by the "light" of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments, and accents. The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment . . . it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue . . . The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. (Bakhtin, 1981, p.276)

Bakhtin's approach towards language is an attempt to explore the multiplicity within the discourse. As Bakhtin states, "Word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is really in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.279). According to Bakhtin, the multiplicity of discourse is prevalent in every narrative, and Mother's narrative in Abbasi's story is a sort of monologue as the other characters in the scenario do not talk to her, and she is the one whose internal and external discourses influence the whole structure of the text, "Pair of loonies!" yelled the driver who had to brake so suddenly, "who let you out?" He meant both of us. And who could blame him? Who could blame them all for staring? Unexpected, let's face it, even for New York" (Abbasi, 2001, p.151). This self-pitied discourse of Mother not only demonstrates her suppressed expression but also people's attitude towards the immigrants in New York. She is living in New York with her son, and in this scenario, her son remains silent as he can only speak two words, "He can speak only two words. One is 'pani' the Urdu word for water, which he learned later as a toddler in Karachi where he was born. The other is 'na' which can mean both no and yes" (Abbasi, 2001, p.153). Through the multiplicity of discourse, which involves both words and silence, Mother purports her situation and her son's life, and they both have a strong interrelationship in their distinct discourses. Abbasi's short story is a combination of multilayered narratives as they present the Protagonist's exhausted expression towards life and the son's silent hatred towards his helpless mother.

"Mirage" and Multiple Discourse Structures

In this story, Abbasi creates multiple discourse structures that expose the context both at literal and figurative levels. As Roland Barthes points out:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological meaning' (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture. (Barthes, 1977, p.14,6)

According to Barthes, the text does not offer a single interpretation; rather, it provides the reader an opportunity to explore the text while keeping in view the diversity within the text. The reader has to go beyond the preconceived notions of existing social and cultural systems. Both Abbasi and her protagonist offer her readers to look at the narrative to dismantle the fixity of meaning and to look at the text to fill the gap within the discourses. As Calvino points out:

"Reading," he says, "is always this: There is a thing that is there, a thing made of writing, a solid, material object, which cannot be changed, and through this thing we measure ourselves against something



else that is not present, something else that belongs to the immaterial, invisible world, because it can only be thought, imagined, or because it was once and is no longer, past, lost, unattainable, in the land of the dead” “Or that is not present because it does not yet exist, something desired, feared, possible or impossible. (Calvino, 1979, p.129)

Though the above-mentioned paragraph focuses on reading, it is helpful as this emphasizes the reader's expression and approach toward the text to understand this psychoanalytically. The Nameless Narrator uncovers her character and her surroundings while conveying everything through her one-sided narrative. Her puzzling yet strong narrative explains what she feels. She explains in a shattered way about herself and her son Omar. Nevertheless, she does not mention anything regarding how she came to New York, why she is alone there, and what are the circumstances that have reduced her to such a deplorable condition. She is scared of everything and everyone around her:

That's how far they usually get! Then they all stop, awkward, embarrassed, because close up, they all see something. It's the eyes, of course, under those fantastic long eyelashes they were all set to coo over. They are not blind eyes, seeing nothing. They are seeing as well as you and I, but what they're seeing is nothing you or I can understand. (Abbasi, 2001, p.152)

In Abbasi's story, there is no one who can understand her status and her son's. She narrates the story of her life and her perplexed actions while revealing two different stories, as Ray Schafer points out:

We are forever telling stories about ourselves. In telling these stories to others, we may be said to perform straightforward narrative actions. In saying that, we also tell them to ourselves. However, we are enclosing one story within another... on this view, the self is telling..... (Schafer, 1993, p.69)

From a psychoanalytical point of view, Mother in 'Mirage' tries to put things together in her life together to expose what she thinks and how her son reacts to her. She wants to leave her son at the House of Hope, where he will live. The narrator does not even mention how long her son would stay at the House of Hope. It looks like she is tired, exhausted, and sick of her circumstances. She has a dream to have a peaceful life where she is not tormented by the situation as she is living now as Maud Ellmen in

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asserts: It is impossible to understand analyses or literary texts without participating in their dreams or their delusions. The critic necessarily conspires in the text's imaginings: the act of reading is a process of mutual seduction, whereby the reader and the reader arouse each other's fantasies and expose each other's dreams. It is when we think we penetrate the text's disguises that we are usually most deluded and most ignorant, for what we see is nothing but our unknown selves (Ellmen, 1994, 10).

According to Ellmen, the text represents the delusional self, and the reader experiences his/her unknown self. The narrator of 'Mirage' experiences the same hatred in her son's eyes towards her, which conveys a strong message of disapproval. She is in a mirage in which it is difficult to decide what she should do for herself. Her self (my italics) is mentally mutilated and tired, yet this has become a strong urge to free herself from mental agony and torture. Schafer points out:

Self has become the most powerful figure in modern, innovative psychoanalytic accounts of human development and action. Usually, the self is presented as an active agency. It is a sort of motivation and initiative. It is the self-starter, the origination of action, and it is the first person singular indicative subject, that is, "I" of "I come," "I do" This is the self that exhibits itself, hides itself, and can love and loathe its own reflection, Retelling a Life. (Schafer, 1993, p.21).

The mother in the story both loath and loves her son, and her agony, reluctance, and pity for her autistic but sensitive child has made her narration a constant fight between conflict and avoidance. The inner struggle of an individual is quite prevalent in her perplexed yet strong and significant narration.

Conclusion

Abbasi in 'Mirage' presents her Narrators narration in multi-layered discourses as she provides her an opportunity to explore her inner turmoil and painful self. Abbasi also helps the reader to understand the Narrator's situation while living with her son and after leaving her at the House of Hope, "I have no fear

that the stove will turn itself on. So, in the morning I wake up rested and at peace and yet in pain as you might expect of someone who had an arm amputated to save the rest" (Abbasi, 2001, p.153). Abbasi ends her story by revealing the Narrator's feelings after leaving her son with an organization as she has to save herself from extreme agony and pain. The Narrator has been facing confrontation, denial, and negation of self, and through this, she demonstrates her psychological agony and dejection. This paper has focused on both chameleonic and static expressions of human behavior in general and, in particular, a helpless mother and her special child. This research has concentrated on narrative, discourses, and interior monologues to explore and analyze the Nameless Mother and psychological and spiritual emptiness.

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