

## **A SUCCINCT STUDY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ITS IMPACT ON LITERARY WORKS**

### **Abstract**

**Dr. N. Lakshmi**

M.A.(Psy), M. A(Eng)., M.Phil., PhD. UGC-NET  
Assistant Professor in English & HoD,  
Government Degree College,  
Ramachandrapuram, E.G. Dist., Andhra Pradesh

Literary works are always related to the state of mind of characters which mirror the people in the society. Psychology and literature are closely associated with the relationships between people, their mindsets and social behaviour. Literary criticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has used psychoanalysis to interpret literary works and use it for creative purposes. Psychoanalysis has great usefulness in the recent for understanding and analyzing reading, its meaning and expose the relation of literature to culture. This paper analyses the application of this theory to literary texts to bring about the workings of human mind with reference to a few Shakespearean dramas along with 20<sup>th</sup> century novels. This paper explores the unconscious internal states that exist in an individual which lead to overt, unknown actions. It also unveils the author's affinities to the text conjoined with his/her life.

**Key words: Psychology, Literature, Psychoanalysis, Literary texts.**

### **Introduction**

Psychology and literature are closely associated as the state of mind of the characters are in constant flux in literary works. Psychological theories are drawn upon explication and evaluation of literary works. Literary works can be better understood with a knowledge of relationships between people, their mindsets and social behaviour of people within set frames. Psychological or psychoanalytic criticism is a form of biographical study examining the author's works within the framework of Freudian and Jungian psychology since long. Psychoanalysis is the name given to the procedure for the investigation of mental processes. It is not only a method for the treatment of neurotic disorders, but also a scientific method based on the workings of the mind and the mental processes involved like thoughts, feelings, emotions, fantasies, and dreams.

Psychoanalysis is a system of psychology originated by the Viennese physician Sigmund Freud in 1890s. It consists of three kinds of related activities:

1. A research into the working of the human mind
2. A systematic accumulation of knowledge of the mind &
3. A method for treatment of psychological or emotional disorders.

Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form of the state of mind and the structure of personality of the individual author which emerged in the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Classical psychoanalytical theory**

The classical psychoanalytical theory states that every person is born with two instinctual drives that are constantly active though the person is unaware of them. Libido, the first drive is for sexual pleasure; the second one which motivates human behaviour is aggression. Freud's influence on psychology and literature is immense. Words that have become common in literature like Oedipus Complex, hysteria fixation, etc find a place in every literary work in the contemporary age. Freud was the first to explain the unconscious mind in relation to human behaviour. Psychoanalytical theory bases for its principles on psychoanalysis or the Freudian approach. Psychoanalytical theory considers Freud's division of the human personality into three parts or three levels of consciousness. The first comes the conscious level which deals with awareness of thoughts, feelings, memories, and fantasies at that moment. At the preconscious level the second one is related to thoughts, feelings, memories, and fantasies that can be reproduced or remembered and brought to consciousness and the third one is the unconscious level which holds thoughts, feelings, memories, fantasies not available to the consciousness of the individual.

Freud further elaborates the structure of the mind there are three areas of mental operations the 'Id' – based on the pleasure principle which constitutes the selfish part of our personality and is the area which is present right from our birth. The Ego which develops during the first two years is based on the reality principle. It satisfies Id impulses. Id forms the storehouse of instincts demanding immediate satisfaction regardless of consequences, whereas Id operates at the unconscious level, Ego operates at the conscious and pre-conscious level. Superego starts to form by the age of five which stands for morality and perfection, values, standards, and individual ideals derived from values of family and society. Superego operates both from conscious and unconscious levels and is a source of guilty feelings and fear of punishment. Ego balances Id and Superego. According to Freud, literature and other arts are like dreams and neurotic symptoms and consist of the imagined or fantasied or fulfillment of wishes that are denied in real life. Artists tend to escape into a utopian world searching for fulfillment and are happy in it. The real wishes come into conflict with prescribed modes of behaviour and hence are repressed but when these enter the unconscious realm of the artist's mind, they are transformed into wonderful art forms.

Freud talks of the manifest content as something evident externally and of the latent content as something invisible behind the art form or text. Unconscious wishes in a person are fulfilled in 3 ways:

By condemnation --- Fusion of several unconscious elements and wishes into a single entity by omitting some parts.

By displacement --- Substituting one desire by the fulfillment of another acceptable by the conscious mind.

By symbolism --- Representation of repressed desires by nonsexual objects.

### **Application of psychoanalytical theory to Literary texts**

Literary criticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has used psychoanalysis to interpret literary works and use it for creative purposes. Psychoanalysis has great usefulness in the recent for understanding and analyzing reading, its meaning and expose the relation of literature to culture. This theory has altered cognitions, the attributions of self and alteration in the behaviour of the character became well elaborated through the field of psychoanalytic criticism. According to Monte (1977), "Psychoanalytic theories assume the existence of unconscious internal states that motivate an individual's overt actions". (Beneath the Mask, 8)

The talented author of a text always has a high power of sublimation whereby the energy invested in unwanted or unacceptable sexual impulses are reassigned to the pursuit of socially acceptable achievements such as artistic or scientific endeavours. Psychoanalytical theory offers elaborate views and methods for a prolific approach of culture and literature. A vital part of this approach is based on the observation that a literary text is always, among other things, an expression of inner conflict and of a conscious or unconscious need of the author to control or order this conflict into words in a literary text. This need or desire plays an equal part in the reception of literature; the reader can feel involved because – consciously or unconsciously – he or she recognizes the conflict.

Freud, Adler, Jung and Lacan see the text as if it were a kind of dream. The text hides the real content behind the surface content but indirectly portrays the hidden feelings, emotions and thoughts hidden in the mind of a characters. The painful impulse the writer wishes to convey can be sought forth by a careful reading and recognizing the symbolic importance rather than the literal meaning. As one critic puts it, “a psychological critic notices patterns of language beneath the surface and understands the verbal play as if the text were a patient recalling more than she/he realizes.” The hidden motives of various characters evolve gradually in a text based on psychoanalysis where the text becomes symbolic sometimes of observed actual people in the life of the author or even turns out to reflect the repressed, hidden life of the author or the writer’s psychological struggle itself. Such psychoanalytical masterpieces of literature are portrayed in various literary works. One such text is of Hamlet by Ernest Jones (Hamlet and Oedipus) amplifies, comments, and supports Freud’s theory. Jones argues that Hamlet delays killing Claudius because Claudius has done exactly what Hamlet himself wanted to do. For Hamlet to kill Claudius would be, to kill himself.

A literary work is based mainly on imagination and the truth behind it can be discovered through interpretation. Interpretation of signs/symbols which remain hidden makes one know the truth behind a literary work. Psychoanalysis forces us to pay attention to language and hence is related to literary criticism. Poe’s “Cask of Amontillado” illustrates Freudian theory with emphasis. Poe, an orphan at three, brought up with John Allan family had stormy relation with Allan but better relations with his wife and still better relations with his aunt whose daughter he married. According to psychoanalytical critics, Poe’s life is evident from his works. The hatred for his father is depicted in the character of the murderer in *The Cask of Amontillado* who voices his inner repressions. The wine vault in which the story is set is interpreted as symbolizing Poe’s desire to return to his mother’s womb. Poe’s longing for death in his other works also embody his desire to return to the womb.

The study of two plays – *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* written by William Shakespeare; the great dramatist is an eye opener where Freud’s psychoanalytical theory can be applied in a stronger sense. The repressed wish to possess the parent of the opposite sex and eliminate the same sex parent is termed in Freudian terms as Oedipus Complex. This was named after the mythical Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother unknowingly. Hamlet’s father decides to avenge his father’s death as a dutiful son. Hamlet wishes to fulfil his wishes of Oedipus complex by acting the role of main authority figure. Wish fulfillment is the unconscious motivating factor which brings pleasure although not the best thing done is amplified in wonderful words by Shakespeare:

**Hamlet:** O that this too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! (130)  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter! O God, God  
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
 Fie ou't, ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden  
 That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
 Possess it merely. That it should come to this!

But two months dead, nay, not so much, not too much. (Act 1, Sc., 2, 138)

Hamlet feels that his mother had committed a crime and wishes death could save him from such thoughts. The world has become stale for him like a garden which has gone to seed symbolizing Gertrude's sexuality. Gertrude's body has become a garden of vile plants and weeds, a thing 'rank and gross in nature' – that is to say her sexuality was unnatural in her old age.

Titus Andronicus, another play by William Shakespeare also has the Freudian interpretation where there are several pieces of imagery that relate to the mouth – a symbol of womb i.e., female sexuality. In the forest scene, the pit ground the subtle hole is referred to as an 'abhorred' pit which Quintus falls into:

“What subtle hole is this,  
 Whose mouth is cover'd with rude-growing briars,  
 Upon whose leaves are drops of new shed blood.” (Act 2, Sc. 3, 198-202)

Titus in the end ends Lavinia's (his daughter's) life who was raped at the hands of Demetrius and Chiron (Tamara's sons) thereby freeing Lavinia from her shame unveiling her. The scene of Titus stabbing Lavinia to death shows making use of sexually potent phallic symbol of the sword or dagger. Psychoanalysis of these plays focusses how a play dramatizes the problems of the unconscious desires and how these desires work in connection with family relationships to give us a deeper understanding of the motives at work behind the characters words and deeds.

Similar subtle examples can be drawn from novels of James Joyce, Joseph Conrad and the romantic Gothic criticism of how psychoanalytical theory can be applied to them. Joyce is a great innovator in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature for his contribution to the 'stream of consciousness' technique. Joyce delves deep into the human consciousness and specializes in recording thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions, memories, recollections, fantasies, speculations, anticipations etc., of the human mind. His novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* describes his own development through the fictional personality of Stephen Dedalus, from early childhood till the time of early manhood. Stephen is shown as passing through a succession of influences which exert claims upon his conscience and outlook: family, academic learning, sex, Catholic faith. The ambition to become a priest is hardest to resist for it offers him secret knowledge and secret power.

This possibility touches something deep in Stephen's personality, but he is able to satisfy the longing to know the hidden truths about life by becoming an artist. His final affirmation is not to serve that in which he no longer believes and to express himself in some mode of life or art as freely as he can and as fully as he can. Repressed desires come forth and he turns into an artist which is the author's own picture. Ulysses, his other novel is a story depicting a day in the lives of three Dubliners: Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom, and latter's wife Molly. Divided into 18 episodes, the thoughts and feelings of main characters are distinctively rendered by the use of interior monologue technique. Leopold Bloom is an advertisement canvasser in Dublin plodding around the city on his trivial and snobby business. By a series of symbolic overtones Joyce relates his hero notably to Ulysses and to Shakespeare as well. The novel opens with three episodes involving Stephen. Stephen is seen at Martello tower at first, then at work teaching, then we see him walking alone with a restless mind along the beach sorting out his observations. He is haunted by feelings of guilt about his dead mother and by Hamlet like thoughts which help to isolate him from his Id.

Guilt complex occupies a part of our unconscious mind according to Freud. A reading of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* portrays the entire complex of guilt and treason which possesses Conrad's own mind. It became a constant obsession not because he accepts the accusation of treason launched against himself but because he was intimately involved in them. Thus, the whole issue penetrated his imagination. Like the novelist, the central character, Jim is haunted by a sense of guilt because he deserted the Patna and his entire career after the betrayal, is an attempt for the atonement for the sin. Jim's fleeing from one Eastern part to another can be interpreted as an attempt to escape from charge of criticism which was frequently leveled at him for the desertion of his country and its people.

The unconscious mind projects itself and surfaces in Jim's surrender to Doramin and his eventual death reflect something parallel to Conrad's own attempt at suicide. The easing of his conscience, through objectively portraying the guilt complex in 'Lord Jim' is just a confession of his unconscious (Id) mind. The autobiographical element surfaces thus in an artist's works. Jim's thoughts standing on the bridge of the Patna (ship) he deserted reveals the inner mind unconsciously through the pen of the writer:

At such times his thoughts would be full of valourous deeds, he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements. They were the best parts of his life, its secret truth, its hidden reality. (17)

Gothic novels also showcase Freudian implications of psychoanalysis. Gothic literature is sometimes referred to as escapist literature. But to escape from reality to an imaginative world is a primitive desire and is in itself good to preserve one from the dangers one encounters in life. The obsession of the themes of the gothic novels with family rivalry and with a satanically ambiguous villain whose self-sufficiency is both his glory and his damnation is better explained by the application of oedipal nature in psychoanalytical theory. The forces of the individual and social repression that have buried the conscious will are revealed by the Gothic novels. The haunting other is a part of the author himself being revealed in the text of the Gothic novels.

In Forster's novels too, one can see the transference of his repressed feelings of frustration, anger, and resentment towards his own mother, let loose on mothers that he portrays in his novels. The mothers in Forster's novels are not truly 'nice' ones among the characters he draws. Even the ones that are supposed to be nice like Mrs. Moore in *A Passage to India* or Mrs. Wilcox in *Howards End* lack some intrinsic motherly quality that makes them a really good mother. They are flawed in some way; some in an overt sense and others in a far more subtle and clothed manner. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, shows how the unconscious mind is responsible to bring one towards totalization in a futile effort to fill the absent center.

Many other writers have considered psychoanalysis as fundamental to literary works. Such works include Edgar Allan Poe in his *The Purloined Letter*; *Sons and Lovers* by D H Lawrence; Albert Camus *The Stranger*; Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman*; Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* etc. Psychoanalysis since its evolution as a science and clinical practice born out of Freud's discovery of the unconscious and his publication of his work *Interpretation of Dreams* in the year 1900 has been creative in bringing a changed perspective of characterization in all genres of literature. It hugely impacted new ways of looking at works of art and how human beings depict mental and psychic life and the reading of works/texts in particular.

## Conclusion

Meaning and effect are two different things and none of these can be ignored. The earlier Freudians failed to recognize this and sought to unfathom only the meaning and intentions. When used with care and understanding psychoanalytical theory and application of it to literature can be rewarding. Psychoanalysis has provided the critic with a more precise language with which to describe the creative process. This theory has enabled the critical study of the interior life of the writers and then to study their works with reference to it. The unconscious repression and drives of the artist are unveiled and this results in more exact interpretations of aesthetic and artistic appeal becoming useful in interpreting fictitious characters in real life symbolic icons. Psychoanalysis has a great impact on literary works of all nations even on the diasporic literature written in the current era which delves into questioning of identity, and social issues.

## References

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Harcourt Publishers. 2000.
- Craig, W.J. ed., *Hamlet (Act I, Sc II)* (1985) Shakespeare: Complete Works, OUP.
- Craig, W.J. ed., *Titus Andronicus (Act I, Sc. III)* (1985) Shakespeare: Complete Works, OUP.
- Conrad, Joseph. Lord Jim < [www.bibliomania.com](http://www.bibliomania.com) > updated 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2005.
- Forster, E. M. *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. < <http://www.bibliomania.com> > updated 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2005.
- Freud, S. *Interpretation of Dreams*. (1913) 3rd edition, Trans. Brill A A. Macmillan.
- McConnel, James.V. (1980) *Understanding Human Behaviour*, Holt.
- Monte, F. Beneath (1877) *The Mask*. Praeger Publishers.
- Potter, Jonathan, Peter Stringer and Margaret Wetherell. (1984). *Social Texts and Contexts: Literature and Social Psychology*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, < <https://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/full.html/> > updated 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2022.
- Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*, < <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/titus-andronicus/read/2/3/> > updated 20<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2023.
- Trilling, Lionel. 'Freud and Literature' *The Kenyon Review*, Spring 1940.
- Wright, Elizabeth. (1982). 'Modern Psychoanalytical Theory,' *Modern Literary Theory* ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey.