

A Winnicottian Investigation on Krys Lee's Characters' Self-Fragmentation

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Abstract

The Present research paper attempts at investigating the concepts of 'True self and false self' in the female characters presented by Krys Lee. Despite the fact that much has been carried out theoretically and clinically on the subject of the mother-child relation, the literary works of the Asian writers, in terms of cultural, social, psychological and artistic subjects and issues, have received little attention. Apart from the ordinary meaning of self, Winnicott, one of the 20th century's greatest psychoanalysts and thinkers, believes that it is a more complex term that plays a crucial role in demonstrating one's mental and emotional status. The sense of self is developed in every individual from infancy through the relationship with the mother. The baby's true self or false self depends on how a mother adapts to the baby's needs and desires. This dependency is identified as good-enough mothering, and if it is a successful form of adaptation, the infant begins to believe in external reality leading to the ego or self-development. The selected female characters' actions, reactions and relations in "Drifting House" are symptomatic of their insecure childhoods, and frustrating developments. Their split characters, denial of reality, some sort of aggression and the lack of trust in the environment could be the echo of their childhood's failure in receiving adequate care and attention.

Keywords: True Self, False Self, Anxieties, Psychoanalysis, Recognition, Women

1. Introduction

The psychoanalytical scholarship on character development has shown the involvement of a variety of elements or aspects. This signifies the fact that the human being is a complex phenomenon whose growth does not take place in a linear form or, merely, in a physical way. The grown-up's health, as Winnicott (1971) stated, "is being founded throughout childhood, but the foundation of the human being is laid by" a mother "in the baby's first weeks and months" (p.26). Individuals who are present in the literary works are typifying the people in the real world. Studying world literature increases the opportunities to encounter and familiarize with the social, cultural and psychological influences which have determining roles in an individual's growth of mind and character into adulthood. Such roles, furthermore, emphasize the later functionality of the individuals in their personal and social lives. The present research is an investigation of the selected female characters of Krys Lee's collection of short stories, 'Drifting House', in the light of Donald Wood Winnicott's theory of 'True Self' and 'False Self' in association with the 'Object Relation Theory'. Apart from the character analysis in terms of explaining the root of their self-fragmentation,

anxieties and frustrations and traumatization, the paper delves into exploring the despairing consequence of the constant trauma in their lives.

In various societies, the hegemony of patriarchal norms is prevalent with the related attributions. It is not a choice of the role but it is a system of culture, discourse or even an institution. Women in these communities are marginalized in an accepted way by both men and women. The latter case might sound paradoxical or impossible; but more often than not, chasing the practice and fulfillment of such traditions are carried out by the female characters in the families. It is like when the mothers, despite sensing and suffering from the explicit or implicit violence against themselves, ensure that their daughters are the facsimiles of them. This, from their perspective, is a form of truth and the truth must prevail and be maintained. Within these norms, here comes the notion of growth and development of an individual. When we develop into an adult, we do not press pause on our childhood as if it is a terminated or expired process, or our childhood is not cut off all at once. Whatever which is “wrapped up over there in the cot” of own self is not nothing (Winnicott, 1971, p.15). The memories of our early age do not cease to exist, but they hold on to us in different shapes and forms of revelation. These memories of growing up are certainly influenced by various factors which are connected to the other related individuals and the society. In this way, each individual’s behaviour and interaction are different from the other ones’. These behaviors and interactions are, by nature, symptomatic of what an individual’s unconsciousness embodies. In other words, what sounds like detachment is just an elusive thought. In this regard, in the present study, Lee’s selected female characters are to be examined according to the symptoms that they display in their current status as adults. Winnicott’s theory of the true self and the false self expounds how the development and formation of a false self is leading to understand the true self and how the environment affects this formation because our sense of self is not only and merely fostered by itself. The selfish, aggressive, demanding, intolerant, pretending and sacrificing individual can be analyzed to uproot why he/she is not him/her self.

2. Theoretical Framework

D.W. Winnicott (1971) explains that ‘love’ is a vital factor which is the nature of a bond between a mother (or any caregiver) and a baby. It is called the “good start” of the early age if the expectation is a “healthy, independent, and society-minded adult individuals” (p.17). To be a mother is a magnificent grand responsibility which does not get easier in any step of the pregnancy and afterward. Winnicott, who is introduced as “a cultural icon” (Nussbaum, 2006, p.375) rather than an absolute psychoanalyst, refers to the young woman facing pregnancy and the process of which she gradually narrows down her interests into one single object inside her body. It is an object showing “the actual sign of life and liveliness” (Winnicott, 1971, p.20). He emphasized that if a mother is “well enough” (p.21), she will respond to the baby, establishing an “intimate relationship” that if uninterrupted, it will “lay the foundations for the child’s personality” or that “emotional development” (pp.21-22). Within such a situation, the baby will gradually be capable of accepting the shocks and frustrations coming on his way. Observing the baby and perceiving every movement or gesture of him and understanding his reactions are all parts of the caring phenomenon which are both easy and challenging (p.23).

In the Psychoanalytical arena, the Ego is defined by Freud as that part of the human personality that is identified as I or the self. Freud defined three sections of the human personality as having the capability of shaping the behaviors in the society. They are the Id, Ego, and Superego. While the Id is the pleasure-seeking section, the Ego is described as connected to the principles of reality (Freud, 1995). This portion of human psyche is in touch with the outer world and transfers the experiences to the inner world to perform tasks of evaluating, planning, measuring, questioning, etc. This introduces the ego as a subjective quality by which it can express a personal point of view related to not only the present but also the past and future. The development of the ego is a continuous change making it involved within the Psychosocial fields because it is about “self-understanding, social relationships, and mental processes that support connections between the person and his/her social world” (Newman & Newman, 2017, p.114). The changes and development, according to Newman & Newman (2017), are due to an “accumulation of experiences” (p.113), starting from the early age of infancy. Within the theories of Psychoanalysis, the mental life of an individual comprising of fantasies, wishes, motives, and emotions which play the role of an operator and a shaper, so an individual’s life functioning in the later phase of life significantly depends on the way that an individual’s ego develops.

The relationships which an infant start to establish from the early days/age, a part of his/her external encounters, are considered as crucial because if he/she experiences negative connections, he/she may have abnormalities in the development of behavior, emotions, and cognitions. A mother is considered as the primary object that an infant comes to connect with. In other words, the mother is an object that provides support for the development of ego, the self, in the infant. During the infantile age, the infant seeks his/her immediate gratification and the fulfillment of needs and desires, and any delay in responding from the mother would affect the functions of ego across the life span. Winnicott (1971) reaffirms that “The human being’s development is a continuous process” and a baby’s growth of body is parallel to his/her “development of the personality” which makes him/her capable of other relationships (p.87).

What is known as ego or self-fragmentation is the intertanglement of several factors and Object Relations plays a pivotal role in highlighting the symptoms and clarifying the causes and consequences. The self or ego fragmentation in an individual may show itself in the forms of aggression and lack of trust which enters the field of trauma. Also, the individual may doubt and deny the reality in addition to the fear of annihilation. Someone with a splitted personality may fail in his/her social interactions due to the aforementioned attributions. All these mental issues can be the symptoms of a troubled childhood and failure in relation with a mother or a caregiver. In other words, parents’ care of the infant “is not just a pleasure to them and to

the infant, it is also absolutely” crucial and lacking or insufficient amount of it will jeopardize the baby’s growth toward “a healthy or valuable adult” (Winnicott, 1971, p.85). This paper intends to observe and analyze the behaviors and interactions of selected characters in a collection of short stories by Krys Lee who portrayed men and women, originally from Korea, who migrated to America in order to have a better life.

3. Review of Literature

The scholarship on the subject of the mother-child relationship shows its significance, and the psychoanalytical theories have been expanding their domain conceptually and practically. This could include the fact that the women’s role as mothers and members of the family has been changing in terms of influence, practicality, and responsibility. Most of the studies carried out in the field of psychology in association with parental love, affection, and care are mainly and predominantly about the mothers’ influence on the attitude and the behavior of the children “even though fathers are often as strongly implicated as mothers” (Khaleque, 2017, p.2). Mothering and maternal practice has attracted a wide array of attention and the mother-child relationship has been addressed as the most important relationship in any individual’s living experiences (Popov & Ilesanmi, 2015). These studies have provided information and evidence on the activities which are concerned with mainly the psychological issues including understanding the needs and desires of the baby. “Mothering is associated with women because universally, it is women who do the work of mothering” (Arendell, 2000, p.1192). This means that femininity and motherhood are interwoven in terms of both identity and gender. A mother’s physical, social and psychological status affects the child’s life into adulthood.

Holt (2007) explored the attitude of harshness and its negative effect on the behavior of the child. “Maternal harshness” implies an “insecure attachment” to the mother which influences the child-teacher relationship as well (p.5). These problems according to the researcher included the externalized problems and internalized ones. This direct influence of “the quality of mother-child interaction” was also investigated in association with “the religious identity” of the mother (Karimi et al., 2019). The writers referred to the religious identity “as a supporting and protecting resource” (Karimi et al., 2019, p.68), which helps the girls have a less stressful life and develop their sense of identity. The religious concern is not the only factor affecting the mother-child relationship. The “socio-economic status” of the whole family is named as a risk factor which “directly influence” the child “through parenting” (Cabera et al., 2011, p.3). One of the psychological damages or risks that the children may experience in their adolescence is called a low level of self-esteem (McAdams et al., 2016). These adolescents experienced less happiness and their well-being and life satisfaction were affected to the extent that anxiety and depression for their future were anticipated (McAdams et al. 2016; Kovacs, 2010). “Cognitive abilities”, said by Popov (2015, p.258), are among the crucial proportion of any child’s development and growth which is also connected to the sort of the relationship a child experiences.

The world of literary works has exhibited such relationships and the consequences as well. Nweke (2009) discussed the mother-daughter relationship in ‘Beloved’ written by Toni Morrison. Recalling the time of slavery, the humiliations and the unbearable conditions and the inappropriate white-black circumstances pushed women as mothers to have a strange relationship with their daughters. Utilizing Melanie Klein’s Object Relations Theory, the researcher has analyzed the “psychological motivations for the behavior of the protagonists” (Nweke, 2009, p.198). Emphasizing Morrison’s excellent characterization, the writer mentioned how women “terminated their babies’ lives” so that they would not encounter their own dark fate (p.201). The mother’s love relationship is described as deadly, pathological, tough and distorted ending in infanticides. In other words, this type of love is sick and unsafe. So the good mother here in the novel is affected by the social condition of horror and tension in terms of an eerie kind of protections so she is not the source of life and bond (p.208).

The mother-daughter relationship is said to begin at birth and never stops because this bond is defined as both emotional and biological. Fischbach (1987) claimed that a daughter learns three aspects from her mother which are self-definition, sexual attitudes, and her role in connection with others. The bond may be unhealthy if their dependency is inclined to be excessive and any other forms of motherhood can influence the teenagers’ lives. The writer examined the “adolescent fiction” in which the social background of American fiction of the 60s and 70s called for an emergency in creating works dealing with “the subject of mother-daughter relationships” (p.19). Teenage daughters seek not only a role model in their mothers, but also a pattern of self-esteem because of the amount of trust, connectivity and interdependency that they have toward their mothers (Onayli & Erdur-Baker, 2013). This early relationship, if loving, would result in a sense of satisfaction and self-perception contributing to their better choices in life and career (Sholomskas & Axelrod, 1986).

Nevertheless, the insufficient amount of that bond or relation may lead to some serious consequences which can be traumatic until the end of the children’s lives. The Postmodern, sociocultural and postcolonial theories have been espoused by the psychoanalytical theories to scrutinize the individuals in order to understand the sources of disruptions and to comprehend the shapers of such a relationship. The disruption in the relation and connection among the family members can include imprisonment with the physical separation. Dehart et al. (2018) investigated this matter focusing on a number of men and women prisoners and their families and referred to a high proportion of stress in their relationships. Fragmentation and splitting of the character of Crime and Punishment’s Raskolnikov were shown through his emotions which were the indications of his internal conflicts. Matijašević (2020), using Lacan’s perspective regarding the I, ego and the subject, has reviewed “the most complex articulation of psychic dynamics” (p.65). Dostoevsky’s character shows the birth of a new self in the course of the novel which is achieved by the alienation of self and the integration of the new one. According to the researcher, the character’s sense of good and bad affected his thoughts on the notion of death. This loss of sense of distinction is related to the concept of

identity and “definition of self” which is “constructed by the force of the surrounding culture” (Mehrabani & Maleki, 2010, p.103). Silverio et al (2021) affirming the role of a mother’s love as a psychological bond, mentioned that the modern time motherhood is beyond mere nourishment and protection which has increased a mother’s stress level within the discourse of the good mother.

The presentation of self has been also the focus of researchers because issues related to it are relevant to a variety of subjects. In a 2015-study, the Facebook as a social media is stated to be representing a false self of a user. “As a gateway behavior to more problematic behaviors”, the Facebook is a platform for social interactions which “deviates from true selves” (Gil-or et al., 2015, p.1). Although the users on Facebook are generally friends, some individuals who have low level of confidence or self-esteem may be at risk of psychologically unhealthy encounters. The pictures, images, activities and post may be falsely indicating preferences. The writers demonstrate that this false self creating is, in fact, ideal self creating which can be a defensive mechanism of protecting the true self. Swaby (2020) calls this living upside down. Some individuals highly avoid criticisms so creating a false self is an escape to “hide vulnerabilities and self-doubt from superiors” (Swaby, 2020, p.1), indicating that such a self functions as a masque by means of which an individual can avoid confronting others.

4. The Fragmentation of Self of the Three Female Characters

Krys Lee is a South Korean author, raised in the United States, who has created a collection of short stories entitled ‘Drifting House’ in 2012. The stories are set in the United States and are the people’s accounts of living away from home, experiencing a different culture, being caught in the pain and agony of being addressed as outsiders, frightened of and anxious about their differences, and drowned in their intense emotions of not belonging. The haunting characters selected are Mrs. Shin, Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Min. These female characters, once children and now mothers, exhibited particular features whose roots rested in what they experienced as children and in their relationship with their mother. According to the narration, they spent their childhood in their motherland, Korea, highlighting the socio-cultural effects of such a relation. Traditionally speaking, the senses of responsibility and authority are palpably strong in Korean parents especially due to “a higher level of collectivism that emphasizes relationships between family members” (Kim et al., 2020, p.586). It is considered normal to be practically involved in the children’s lives, affairs and decisions even if the children are in their adulthood, as explored by Jang et al. (2016).

Mrs. Shin, in the first story entitled ‘A Temporary Marriage’, laboriously saved money and came to America based on a marriage agreement, in search of her husband and her daughter. She called her “living arrangement” as “dangerous” (Lee, 2012, p.2), because of the probable encounter with Mr. Rhee. The suspicious feeling that is expressed by her is the result of the traumatic incidents having happened in her early life. “surveillance and criticism” of her in-laws after her marriage to the husband who deserted her, and “all blame” that she received from his family removed her every shred of confidence and trust (p.4). There is a reference to a constant nightmare that she had which made her wake up “trembling with excitement, her arms filmy with sweat and the residual scent of sex” (p.5). Seeing Mr. Rhee meant failure for her as every time that he appeared, she felt “mortified” due to the fact that her memories of a loving object had always reflected her frustration (p.7). The feeling that her daughter was in the same city as her, kept her composed that highlighted the bond she has had as a caregiver despite even though she realized her daughter’s strangeness. Finding out that she had been forgotten as a mother and that there was a new mother, shattered the little residue of strength and brought about a high level of anxiety. The final part of the story presents the sense of aggression that Mrs. Shin showed: she picked up the scissors, cut her hair violently, saying that she hated herself, and injured herself as if there would arise a new self. Then “she was becoming herself again, loving herself...” (p.23). This quotation psychoanalytically suggests a pivotal point in association with the notion of the self. Mrs. Shin had lived her whole life in the shadow of definitions imposed on her self and these definitions, coming from her family and society, hid her true self because she desired acceptance from others. Thus when she realized that everything that had defined her, was taken away, she found out another version of her self.

The second female character, presented in ‘At The Edge of the World’, is Mrs. Lee who lived with her husband and her nine-year-old son. As a loving mother, she maintained and managed the quality of a family in a sense that they always looked collected and perfect getting along well with the new environment. This adjustability means finding or creating a particular sense of self which can receive less disapproval. “Nothing scared her but the past” is the hint for the frustrating past whose ignoring can protect her (p.27). She played the role of a caring mother to both of other members of the family. These two cases made her fail in any social interactions, highlighting her feelings of doubt and distrust. Haunted and traumatized by the past, she was reluctant to discuss issues and matters of Korea and she had done her best to adhere to the American principles so that the whole family as refugees could receive the permission to stay in the United States. “Your problem is you live in the past” reflects her fear of even uttering words that might have the power of annihilation over them and their new life (p.27). Mrs. Lee is reported to experience traumatic adolescence as she had been sold to a farmer who became her son’s father. Being treated by her supposedly true caregivers, her family, as a financial gain could be regarded extremely inhuman, not to mention the fact that its traumatization can be haunting consistently. Indisputably, expressing her happiness for the dissimilarity of her son to that farmer is the manifestation of the amount and depth of her experience of aggression. Once what is supposed to mean love and attachment disappears, the self is fragmented and she failed to be a whole love object. This can be figured out from the son’s sense of encounter with the new girl. He “looked for a limp, a missing finger, a wig” (p.27). It indicates that he internalized defectiveness, and this originated from his relationship with his mother due to the fact that she was unable to freely be a loving guardian. The residue of her past made her avoid any emotional connection since she unconsciously anticipated failure in each.

“she was not going to let her son be infected by his inability to live in the present. There were more” (p.42). The feeling of insecurities and unwillingness to socialize are symptoms revealing her self-fragmentation.

Mrs. Hyeseon Min, the third female character of ‘The Pastor’s Son’ is introduced as a strange woman, who has lived with her parents and supported “her life by giving piano lessons to rich children” (p.51). She appeared to be quiet even if she felt rejected or humiliated. The Ego is supposed to build the sense of wholeness and identity in an individual, so that the person can have a picture of self and some values. The “New Mother”, a name used and called by the stepson, was unable to connect and to socialize with others which was presented in the manner of her uncommunicativeness. Her marriage to the narrator’s father was because of a promise made by the father to his late wife. Her lack of a firm position and a convincing disposition places her vulnerable. Also the proportions of disrespect that she received from the family were the signs that reverberate her sheer sense of fear. When she uttered: “that all was well”, her fear of annihilation sounded magnified; for, she did not experience a loving relationship with her husband and step-son, and evading conflicts meant easier and more convenient. Her husband’s comment on her face that God had punished the New Mother by making her face despicable can be named as another attack on the increasing of her feelings of distrust and anxiety. When she married the narrator’s father, she was fifty years old and her marriage with the father had been of convenience- for money. Her attempt at creating and preserving love based on money showed that during her childhood, the love relation to her caregiver, to her mother, had been based on external criteria rather than natural love. There were a few instances when the New Mother either played or bit her fingernails which indicated the amount of anxiety and frustration that she carried with herself. The conflicts which are witnessed in the final part of the story is drastically tragic for Mrs. Min (pp. 67-68). Her splitted personality and the trauma that the father encountered in his life ignited the ultimate scene leading to her extreme disappointment with the marital life and his committing suicide. Mrs. Min did not learn the good-enough mothering and she was unable to make a connection with her new people and to be good enough, herself.

5. Conclusion

The three female characters in Kryss Lee’s selected stories, were analyzed according to the notion of self-fragmentation. This notion was introduced as the consequence of not good enough mothering which is assumed to be an essential factor in the growth and development of an infant to his/her adulthood. Its absence leads to the fragmentation of the self which is the I and I is in contact with the outside world. Each of the mentioned female characters displayed particular symptoms in their adult life which were rooted in their childhood. Not experiencing love from a caregiver continued to their adulthood. Being a woman in their traditional societies facilitated such lacking and their adjustment and adaptation to the tradition appeared to be at the expense of losing self. Doubting people and reality and distrusting people, even friends and families, traumatic encounters and thoughts, failing in social interactions and aggression are the so-called traces of such incidents.

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