

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND THE RESULTANT NEUROSIS: THE HEIGHTS OF CRIMINALITY AND FIXATION IN SHOBHA DE'S *STRANGE OBSESSION*

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ABSTRACT: *The research paper examines the eccentricities and neurotic persona of an abnormal female character in Shobha De's Strange Obsession who is strangely obsessed for an attractive young lady Amrita, travelled from Delhi to pursue a career in modelling. Strange Obsession is a tale of a psychosomatic woman named Meenakshi Iyengar (Minx) who had a miserable and troubled childhood, being a single child of an Inspector General of Police and a social worker mother. Because of her imbalanced development in childhood and being a spoilt child of a powerful Police authority, Minx starts extracting pleasure by exploiting people as a compensation for her own anxieties and insecurities. The heights of alternative homosexuality and criminality are skilfully presented through manipulative strategies and merciless behaviour of neurotic Minx. Moreover the paper emphasizes Simone de Beauvoir and Sigmund Freud' theories of lesbianism and fixation to understand the afflicted psyche and the resultant neurosis with an amalgam of the stark realities of higher-strata modelling world and sadistic homosexual tendencies.*

KEYWORDS: Fixation, Homosexuality, Criminality, Psychosomatic, Neurosis, Sadistic.

INTRODUCTION

Fixation, according to Freud, is a “*term came to mean a persistent attachment, not only to the specific instinctual aims of a particular era, but, instead, to the entire complex of self and object relation*”. (Akhtar: 112) Shobha De’s *Strange Obsession* is a well-built case to study the psychological conduct of an obsessed woman who is projected as neurotic, murderer and criminal etc in the light of “*psychoanalytic theories of criminality, sexual deviancy and aggression*” which have been put forth to analyse the fixation/obsession of many people who had abnormal and troubled childhood. (Brunas: 34) In her novels, Shobha De symbolically highlights the different perception of woman's sovereignty and liberation, “*for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation*”. (Beauvoir: 664) but *Strange Obsession* is different from other novels of Shobha De where she castoffs and de-constructs the traditional figure of a woman made by man and creates an unconventional female identity; a deranged personality of Minx with a distorted view of reality who tries to behave like a man. The main speciality of the story is that the victimizer and victim both are women, the one who exploits and the other who is exploited. In the book *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*, Neeru Tondon says about the novel,

"Shobha De shocks the very ethics and taboos of the society..... which makes her able to stand with Simone de Beauvoir, whose name itself symbolizes the very spirit of feminism". (Tondon: 179)

Strange Obsession puts in the picture the fixation of a neurotic woman, Minx (Meenakshi Iyengar), with Amrita, the daughter of a rich Delhi based businessman, who has an aspiration to become a super model and for fulfilling her desire she comes to Bombay to pursue the career

of modelling. Because of her good looks, very soon she starts making money by grabbing lots of modelling assignments. Minx enters in her life accidentally when she was living happily in her small accommodation at Mrs. Pinto's as a paying guest. At the start it seems that Amrita is the core focus of the novel but the novel mainly confers the psychosexual angst of Minx. It describes how, under the irresistible trauma, she breaks down beyond recuperation. Through her eccentricities she tries to retaliate herself on the background which is the source of her unease. Meenakshi's disturbed and mistreated childhood fills her domineering personality with resentment which turns Amrita's life outlandish. To cope with the anxiety and uncertainty which is the result of her secluded childhood and maltreatment by her own father, Minx takes advantage of people by exploiting them. Dominating others becomes an undeviating game in her behaviour. It is shown clearly when she forces Amrita to submit herself completely under her control. Every time Amrita finds herself helpless before Minx's neurotic behaviour by which she gets gratification as a compensation for her own anxieties. According to Sigmund Freud's theory, Minx's obsession for Amrita is a kind of attachment "*manifested in immature or neurotic behaviour that persists throughout life.*" (Freud: 167)

The Repercussions of Psychological Development at Childhood

Minx's unusual behaviour is the reverberation of her abandoned childhood, indifferent mother and tormenter father. Being the only and spoiled child of Inspector General of Police, V.S. Iyengar, Minx had a miserable upbringing as a result of her father's transfers and her mother's social work:

"...only child, lonely child, boarding schools... you know.... I was thrown out of two schools... expelled. My mother was so ashamed. She didn't know how to face her friends in the Bridge club. My father handled me the only way he knew. By belting me.... He stopped only after he saw the blood." (De: 43)

Her father didn't stop after such brutality and she had to suffer a lot further which affected her persona defectively. Later on she discloses in front of Amrita, the most horrible part of her father's mercilessness by telling her-

"listen....My father... yes... the same man who so powerful, so respected, so feared... is a beast. A beast of the worst kind. He ... he ... raped me." (De: 45)

Minx's father convinces her into assenting for physical relation explaining that her mother has denied having sex with him so if her mother doesn't, she has to make him content by performing her duty to fulfil his sexual desire. Beauvoir says a woman is told to find her dignity only in accepting her vassalage which is bed "*service*" and housework "*service*". (Beauvoir: 485) Consequently Minx also tells that "*...I believed him. I thought that's how it was in other people's homes too...*" (De: 45) These actions generate an abrupt level of uneasiness in Minx who ends up into a fanatic and lesbian. Her mother's reaction on this, gives her a kind of shock which escorts to further worsening of her persona. Freud also assumed that

"these early impressions of sexual life are characterized by an increased pertinacity or susceptibility to fixation in persons who are later to become neurotics or pervers." (Freud: 167)

Likewise, Minx's homosexual actions with Amrita are also the consequences of her sexual exploitation by her own father which directs to the habituation in which heterosexual behaviour becomes an aversive impulse. Minx turns towards lesbianism as a safer sexual passage because of the sexual relationship with her father

"Girls who have been raped by their fathers, find relationships with men either threatening or disgusting and often turn to other girls for the fulfilment of their emotional need for love". (Coleman: 595)

I. The Resultant Neurosis and Fixation

Gregory explained the human phenomenon of fixation is this kind of "*filial imprinting...at a particular stage early in life...a 'sensitive period' in development*". (Gregory: 356) Whether a particularly obsessive attachment is a fixation or defensible expression of love is at times debatable. Obsessive attachment is whether caused by

"an alternation of unusual gratifications and unusual frustrations..... [or] a concurrence of instinctual gratifications with security gratifications". (Fenichel: 305)

Minx's antagonistic behaviour towards those who appear as hazard to her endeavours to conquer safety or safe discharge of her anxiety is her effort to protect her security. Amrita is the main object here. Minx goes beyond limits to do anything in order to confiscate all those who come near Amrita. No guilt, she feels while doing that all, on the contrary, she finds everything significant if it helps her catch Amrita's compassion towards her as it would gratify her neurotic need to be loved and to be in command of other people's lives. This contentment of the want of love and possession brings her sense of fulfilment. Her sadistic tendency also is the demonstration of her efforts to cope with her feelings of remoteness and diffidence. Though Amrita's self-consciousness forbids her to indulge any kind of homosexual relationship with neurotic Minx and that's why she tries to protest being consciously aware of her situation in which Minx had trapped her. Amrita says,

"I'm not going to spend the rest of my life being controlled by a pervert. And forget it I won't come back to Bombay with you. Neither will I stay in your home- what nerve!"
(De: 118)

But being the daughter of an I.G. Police, Minx doesn't have a threat to her safety. The problem was just that the sense of belongingness and being loved never existed in her life. Minx becomes successful in the efforts to get closer to Amrita as she goes all-out to satisfy her need for love and affection being obsessive for Amrita. This obsessive fixation has been compared to a way

"If you walk in front of a little chick at a certain time in the chick's life, he'll follow you.....there's a particular time when he gets 'set'". (Malcolm: 158)

It is just not only the others, Minx makes herself suffer too in order to fulfil her desires, she even tries to get rid of her breasts so that she can have a manly look to be acceptable Amrita as a husband. It is a state of utter anxiety that she is not comfortable with her own sexuality. To realize her impulses of alternative sexuality, Minx is ready to go for a sex-change operation

and justifies it as a sacrifice for Amrita's sake as she claims in the case of reshaping her breasts.

“Ok, hear this then ...I'm planning to undergo a sex-change operation. Yes, darling. I'll do it for you. You want a prick to enter you – I'll go out and get one. Money can buy you anything.” (De: 110)

Meenakshi's tries to justify her obsession and her weird acts are her defensive reactions to defend herself from the depreciation and guiltiness. Her decision to go for surgery in order to reduce her breasts just to get masculine look, is utterly an odd action but she charges her father for everything; she blames her huge breasts for the repeated sexual encounters between her and her father. In *Second Sex*, Beauvoir says, *‘girls see it all first with ‘disgust’*” (Beauvoir: 318) and at the same time they discover sex as a *“phenomenon as painful as weaning”* (Beauvoir: 315) for them. Minx tells Amrita-

“When I was a teenager, I used to try my best to tie them down. But...my father...yes...that pervert...he used to fondle them constantly and tell me how beautiful they were...I began to really hate my breast after that....I used to curse myself and think that had they been smaller this horrible thing would never have happened”. (De: 93)

Freud theorized that some humans may develop psychological fixation due to a lack of a proper gratification during one of the psychosexual stages of development. A person's personality reflects these stages throughout adult life and such behaviour is psychologically termed as protrusion, a self-protective response by means of which others are seen as responsible for one's own misconduct and atypical urges. Freud continues that-

“an excessively strong manifestation of these instincts at a very early age (which) leads to a kind of partial fixation, which then constitute a weak point in the structure of the sexual function”. (Freud: 73)

Minx's projection onto others goes to the level where she becomes obsessed and shows her eccentricities. In obsession/paranoia *“People ... my project their own unacceptable hostile feelings about others into a whole system of thinking in which they feel that others are out to get them.”* (Morgan: 589) By such projection, Minx tries to reduce the neurotic anxiety arising from her inner conflict. Concerning this neurotic apprehension, Morgan says –

“because the id's unconscious demands are instinctual, infantile, and amoral, they must often be blocked by the ego and superego. Because of this conflict and the persistence of unsatisfied demands, anxiety (vague fearfulness) and guilt are aroused. The person then seeks ways to protect the ego from this anxiety and guilt by setting up defences.” (Morgan: 588)

Minx appears normal until something triggers her neurotic mood reminding her early experiences. Psychologists say that most people with such abnormality come from families with *“authoritarian and excessively dominating, suppressive, and critical”* (Coleman: 334) background and their inadequate socialization prevents them from understanding the others' point of view. In their social relations their attitude is hostile, suspicious and dominating. Minx

too is cognisant about her odd sexuality but projects others as incompetent by using words which point towards impotency. Aggressively she scolds Amrita that *"instead of me it could be one of those hijras"*. (De: 134) Incessant distrust on Amrita that she will escape one day leaving her, raises the level of nervousness in her. When Minx watches Amrita talking with others, laughing, even flirting lightly, she retorts aggressively exploiting and condemning Amrita being insecure and fixated. She becomes very protective towards Amrita taking charges of everything in her own hands regarding her modelling assignments, fixing appointments, handling money investments, and even seeing all her rival models whom she fixes up not to succeed in getting better assignments than Amrita. She provides all earthly facilities to Amrita with repelling overture, segregating from other models and young men who felt attracted towards Amrita and wanted to have friendship or affairs. Freud viewed such fixation as

"the manifestation of very early linkages- linkages which it is hard to resolve- between instincts and impressions and the objects involved in those impressions". (Freud: 137-8)

Minx's neurotic instinct and criminal behaviour confirms Freud's notion of *"the relation between the succession of fixation points and the choice of neurosis"* considering the psychosexual stages of her development and the after effects. (Freud: 132) Having a powerful influence in Bombay with her father's super-cop position, she threatens Amrita's apartment partner Sheila; gets Rover beaten up by the police and thrown into the lock-up room; kills a rival model of Amrita named Lola so that maximum modelling assignments falls in Amrita's hands. Moreover she plans for an accident to kill Partha who is a journalist and an acquaintance of Amrita by some illicit means. Karan, one of Amrita's friend, shows pity towards her by explaining about Minx-

"My conduct over the next few minutes may appear strange to you.....I can never hurt you. But this woman is dangerous. I am playing along with her for her sake, I want to protect you. To be there in case she does something crazy, you understand?" (De: 97)

Minx tries to play as husband to Amrita thinking that she can handle masculinity *"as skilfully as man if she has to"*. (Beauvoir: 640) Because of all this trial Amrita undergoes many emotional disturbances but when forced by Minx, she too starts responding to Minx's homosexual activities. She doubts being in a state of emotional disaster whether she will be able to live an acceptable married life with any man or not. Minx tries to brainwash her mind for any chance of a man in her life. In fact, Amrita's implicit surrender to Minx's eccentricities and harassment is the signal of her introjection of Minx's ways of life. She finds it the only way to protect herself against the neurotic fretfulness escalating in her. However, this introjection turns Minx completely a person of distorted and maladaptive behaviour. Minx shoots and makes videos of her intimate scenes with Amrita. On the other hand, Amrita tries to introject the weird ways of Minx so that she can stay away from her neurotic retort and bizarre retribution. However, it only increases her problems as she cannot completely categorize with Minx's abnormal sexuality which Beauvoir believed that society thought was a *"forbidden path"*. (Beauvoir: 48) Beauvoir wrote that *"homosexuality is no more a deliberate perversion than a fatal curse"*. (Beauvoir: 49)

II. Final Disintegration after Criminality's Altitude

Minx's criminal instinct becomes unbearable and goes beyond the limits of humanity when a man enters in the life of Amrita. Initially, Amrita looked as if she had settled herself with Minx's abnormal sexuality but the company of Rakesh Bhatia whom she meets for marriage, poses a big warning to the weird arrangement of Meenakshi's make believe world. The neurotic anxiety produced by this potential threat gives rise to a violent reaction in Minx. In a state of extreme anxiety she attacks Amrita in order to bring her back under her control and obtain the earlier state of protection. She burns Amrita's eyelashes and her other body parts showing all her nastiness. She does not stop at this and shoves some hard and long object into her. She still feels obsessed for Amrita like Tennyson has also been claimed to have a "*fixation.....'a psychic fixation upon the days that are no more'*". (Ledbetter: 52) She follows Amrita and Rakesh even after their marriage and succeeds in kidnapping Rakesh from Nainital during their honeymoon. She keep him in a secluded hut in the forest, when Amrita reaches there, she sets the place on fire in a state of madness and commands Rakesh to make physical love to Amrita. Minx doesn't stop till here and tries to burn them to death in fire. She tries to kill herself also but somehow Rakesh saved Minx from the engulfed flames of fire but both of them got seriously injured and admitted in the hospital.

The final breakdown of Minx's neurotic personality is originated by sadistic enhance in her angst levels as Rakesh appears to her as a continual source of threat. The sensitivity of his threat is so irresistible that she feels the existence of Rakesh in Amrita's body. She no longer finds Amrita sexually eye-catching and pretty. She starts feeling a kind of repulsion for Amrita. Minx had treated Amrita as the safest mean for her struggles to deal with the anxiety consequential from her lonely and unusual childhood. She also considers Amrita as the safest source to fulfil her need to be loved and liked by her immediate environment. But when she feels insecure and threatened by the new developments in her environment, love and possessiveness' desires disappear. In Rakesh who threatens her, she feels the presence of a dominant male figure who symbolizes her commanding father who raped her repeatedly, persuaded her and left her vulnerable. Along with the number of psychiatrists, Beauvoir too believed that "*the repercussions of the first of these experiences, informs a woman's whole life*". (Beauvoir: 383)

Freud explains that these kind of neurotic people are quite intelligent and at good positions in the society appearing to live a normal life, flouting morality in the name of getting love and affection. They can't escape calamities and consequent sufferings because of their eccentricities and anxieties and become patients of obsessive compulsive disorder, by which intentionally they can't be cured as recurring thoughts keep on haunting them in present,

"Now do not imagine you can do anything for such a patient by advising him to distract himself, to pay no attention to these silly ideas, and to do something sensible instead of his/her nonsensical practices". (Freud: 76)

When they realize that they can no longer sustain their revengeful tactics against the world, they die like Minx who dies with all her anxiety and insecurity in her heart, locking a brittle and concise obituary in the newspaper. – "*Iyenger (Meenakshi) passed away on 7th August in Bombay under tragic circumstances. No condolences, please.*" (De: 20)

CONCLUSION

The psychological behaviour of such obsessed people who carry strong impression of their spoilt childhood whole over the life is governed by an anti-social impulse that causes them to commit serious crimes such as torturing, kidnapping and killing others. Shobha De's *Strange Obsession* provides evidence to study such neurotic behaviour and criminal instinct in such people who suffer from this obsessive compulsive disorder. Obsessive compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder in which an individual experiences recurring thoughts that cause irrational fears, anxiety and obsession and sometimes it takes the life of an individual indulging him/her in serious crimes. If their crazy instincts are not catered according to their urges, they feel triggered towards criminality and brutality which is harmful for the betterment of the society and them. The psychopathological aspect of Minx's personality, her witty manoeuvring of her surroundings and her callous actions are the concerns to presume the proportions of criminality. Satisfying her physiological needs of hunger, thirst and sex, she moves on to fulfil her safety needs by the gratification with Amrita. She effectively secures a position of security and constancy through her father's top position and her own governing behaviour. She terrorizes all those people who come into her way to safeguard her homosexual relationship with Amrita. Her effort to fulfil her want of possessiveness, affection and love along with safety need alters her in a neurotic character because of her abnormal childhood. She tries her best to triumph over her insecurity and anxiety but the intensity of her anxiety is so great that she loses her balance under it, which leads to the inclusive disorientation of her individuality. Many lesbians or obsessed people like Minx show signs of low self-esteem, anxiety, insecurity, depression, excessive concern for someone or preconception about physical issues and sex what are labelled as neurotic tendencies. These psychological issues can be the results of childhood's abnormal development, such as abusive parents or parents' ignominy, sexual abuse by father or brother at home, absence of father or mother's infidelity and so on. Although, they struggle against their adverse circumstances trying to fulfil their needs and grow their personality according to hierarchy of needs, but fail to achieve self-actualization. Moreover through the fictional character of Minx and psychologists' theories we understand to take care of children while bringing them up at initial stages of their psychological development so that they turn into good citizens and create a positive identity serving the society at large.

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