



Return of the Repressed: Manifestation of Freudian Id in the Short Stories of Githa Hariharan

Dr R. M. Vasanthi

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English

Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillaiyanmanai

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.2.108](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.2.108)



Article info

Article Received: 05/04/2024
Article Accepted: 10/05/2024
Published online:17/05/2024

Abstract

This paper examines the manifestation of the Freudian id and the concept of the return of the repressed in Githa Hariharan's short stories "The Remains of the Feast" and "Gajar Halwa." Through a detailed analysis of the characters Rukmini and Chellamma, the study highlights how their suppressed desires and emotions surface in their behaviors and actions, reflecting Freud's theories. Rukmini's indulgence in forbidden foods and concern for her appearance, and Chellamma's sensory pleasures in cooking and small acts of defiance, illustrate the powerful influence of the id and the resurgence of repressed desires.

Keywords: Repressed, Id, Freud, Desire, and Psyche.

Introduction

Sigmund Freud's concept of the id is foundational to his theory of psychoanalysis, representing the most primal part of the human psyche. According to Freud, "the id is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality... a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 105). It operates based on the pleasure principle, striving for "immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 168). The id is driven by instinctual impulses, which are often illogical and irrational, operating unconsciously and without the recognition of time or social constraints. Freud explains, "The id knows no

judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 28). Furthermore, "in the id, there is nothing corresponding to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time, and no alteration of mental processes by the passage of time" (Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 106). This part of the psyche is a reservoir of instinctual energy that includes the aggressive and sexual instincts, exerting constant pressure on the conscious mind. Freud asserts, "The repressed memories and desires in the id exert a constant pressure on the conscious mind, manifesting in dreams and slips of the tongue" (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 452). Freud's exploration of the id reveals the

powerful, often hidden forces that shape human behavior and mental processes.

Sigmund Freud's notion of the "Return of the Repressed" highlights the idea that repressed thoughts, desires, and memories inevitably resurface, often in disguised forms. Freud articulates this in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, stating, "What is forgotten is not extinguished. Rather, it returns in dreams, slips of the tongue, and other unintended actions" (103). This concept is crucial to understanding his theory of psychoanalysis, where repressed content exerts influence over the conscious mind. As Freud further elaborates, "The repressed material, which has not been able to achieve conscious realization, remains in a state of latency and continues to strive for satisfaction" (112). This persistent and unconscious influence underscores the complexity of the human psyche and the perpetual struggle between conscious desires and unconscious forces.

Freud's concept of the return of desires via various outlets is deeply rooted in his theory of the id, which he describes as the reservoir of unconscious psychic energy driven by the pleasure principle. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud explains, "The id, which is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality . . . strives to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs" (74). These instinctual desires, if repressed, find alternative outlets such as dreams, fantasies, and neurotic symptoms. Freud asserts, "The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a repressed, infantile wish" (*Interpretation* 160), indicating how these desires persistently seek expression. Moreover, Freud's analysis in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* shows that these desires can be sublimated into socially acceptable activities, yet the underlying drive remains potent and influential (45). Thus, the id's unrelenting push for gratification manifests in myriad ways, continuously shaping human behavior and experience.

This paper examines the manifestation of the Freudian id and the concept of the return of the repressed in Githa Hariharan's short stories "The Remains of the Feast" and "Gajar Halwa." Through a detailed analysis of the characters Rukmini and Chellamma, the study highlights how their suppressed desires and emotions surface in their behaviors and actions, reflecting Freud's theories. Rukmini's indulgence in forbidden foods and concern for her appearance, and Chellamma's sensory pleasures in cooking and small acts of defiance, illustrate the powerful influence of the id and the resurgence of repressed desires.

The Remains of the Feast

In Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast," the character of Rukmini, the grandmother, manifests her repressed desires through various actions that can be interpreted as the return of the repressed, a Freudian concept where repressed thoughts and desires resurface in one's behavior. Freud's theory of the id, which represents the unconscious, instinctual drives, is evident in Rukmini's behavior. As she nears the end of her life, Rukmini, a devout Brahmin widow who has adhered strictly to dietary restrictions, begins to crave and consume foods that are forbidden in her culture. She asks her great-granddaughter, Ratna, to smuggle cakes, ice cream, and other non-vegetarian items into her room, savoring these forbidden delights with a sense of childlike wonder and excitement: "She would grab it from my hand, late at night after my parents had gone to sleep . . . Her little pink tongue darted out and licked the frosting" (Hariharan 284). This behavior is a clear manifestation of her id, as she seeks immediate gratification without regard for the moral or social norms she has lived by. Her craving for these foods symbolizes the eruption of suppressed desires: "Her cravings were varied and unpredictable. Laughable and always urgent" (Hariharan 285). The id's dominance is further highlighted in her delirious demands for alcohol-infused cakes and fried foods, even as

her body fails her: "Get me something from the bazaar. Raw onions. Fried bread. Chickens and goats" (Hariharan 285). This illustrates Freud's notion that the id operates based on the pleasure principle, unconcerned with the consequences or societal judgments, driven purely by instinctual desires (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 15).

Another significant instance of Rukmini's manifestation of her id is seen in her request for eyebrow tweezers and hair-removing cream just before her death. Despite her advanced age and the traditional expectations placed upon her as a widow, Rukmini expresses a strong desire to maintain her appearance. She declares, "Bring me your eyebrow tweezers... Bring me that hair-removing cream. I have a moustache and I don't want to be an ugly old woman" (Hariharan 286). This demand reflects her deep-seated desire to assert her femininity and personal vanity, which she had likely repressed due to societal norms.

Freud's theory of the return of the repressed suggests that suppressed desires and thoughts can resurface, often in unexpected ways. In this case, Rukmini's concern with her appearance at the end of her life is a clear example of her id emerging. The id, which "knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 28), drives her to focus on her personal desires and pleasures, regardless of the social expectations for a woman of her age and status. This act of wanting to remove facial hair and look presentable, even on her deathbed, illustrates the power of repressed desires surfacing in her final moments.

Rukmini, who has adhered to strict vegetarianism and dietary rules throughout her life, begins to indulge in cakes and ice cream. She asks Ratna to bring her "small cakes from the Christian shop" and relishes these forbidden treats (Hariharan 284). This behavior exemplifies her id's craving for immediate pleasure and gratification, breaking free from the long-held social and religious constraints.

Freud states that the id is "a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations" (*New Introductory* 105), which is evident in Rukmini's enthusiastic consumption of these foods. Despite her family's disapproval, Rukmini demands Coca-Cola, a drink she finds fascinating because of its "fizzy noise" and "bubbles" (Hariharan 285). Her desire for this drink, which is completely foreign to her traditional lifestyle, indicates her id's powerful influence. The pleasure principle driving the id seeks new and exciting experiences, regardless of their appropriateness or consequences. As Freud notes, "the id does not recognize any social rules or constraints; it seeks only its own fulfillment" (*The Ego and the Id* 19).

Rukmini's demands escalate to include non-vegetarian items like "chickens and goats," which are strictly prohibited in her Brahmin household (Hariharan 285). This extreme shift from her lifelong dietary practices underscores the resurgence of her id, which is characterized by a lack of moral or societal considerations. Freud explains that "the id is the source of all psychic energy, making it the primary component of personality" (*The Ego and the Id* 15), thus illustrating how powerful and overwhelming these repressed desires can be when they resurface.

On her deathbed, Rukmini's id-driven desires become even more pronounced. She demands a "red sari with a big wide border of gold" and "peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop" (Hariharan 286). These requests are significant because they symbolize a departure from her austere lifestyle as a widow. The vibrant red sari and spicy foods represent sensual pleasures and worldly desires that she had suppressed for years. Freud's notion that "the id is driven by the pleasure principle, which strives for immediate gratification of all desires, wants, and needs" (*Introductory Lectures* 168) is clearly illustrated here.

Gajar Halwa

Another story by Githa Hariharan where Freud's theory of the return of the

repressed can be applied is "Gajar Halwa," which is part of her short story collection *The Art of Dying*. In "Gajar Halwa," Chellamma, a servant girl, faces various social and personal constraints. Throughout her life, she has been repressed by the societal expectations and her position within her employer's household. As the story progresses, Chellamma's repressed desires and emotions surface. She experiences moments of intense longing and reflection, which signify the emergence of her id. For example, her fascination with making the titular dessert, "gajar halwa," becomes a symbol of her deeper desires for freedom and self-expression. The act of preparing and savoring the dessert allows her a brief escape from the rigid constraints of her life, showcasing how her repressed needs and desires find an outlet through seemingly mundane activities.

Freud's theory posits that the id operates on the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification of its impulses. Chellamma's indulgence in the sensory pleasure of making and tasting the dessert can be seen as her id manifesting, seeking an outlet for her otherwise suppressed desires. This scenario is similar to how Rukmini's hidden cravings surface in "The Remains of the Feast." Applying Freud's concept to "Gajar Halwa" highlights how the protagonist's actions are driven by repressed desires seeking expression, much like in "The Remains of the Feast." The id's emergence in these stories provides a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and the psychological underpinnings of their actions.

In Githa Hariharan's "Gajar Halwa," the manifestation of repressed desires and the id's influence are evident through the protagonist's experiences and actions. The protagonist's repressed anger and frustration surface as she toils in the kitchen, reflecting her inner turmoil and unfulfilled desires. For instance, as she grates the carrots, she notes, "They are a naked red without their skins, red and angry like blood" (Hariharan 80), symbolizing her own

repressed rage and suffering. Her continuous and mechanical actions, driven by the memsahib's commands, echo her suppressed will and identity. The protagonist's reflection on her past and her mother's struggles also reveals the resurfacing of repressed memories and emotions: "No wonder my father left her, he must have been afraid of going deaf" (Hariharan 81). Additionally, the protagonist's small acts of defiance, such as secretly eating a piece of carrot, signify the id's persistent push for gratification against the oppressive circumstances. These instances underscore the enduring influence of the repressed and the id in shaping the protagonist's behavior and inner life.

Another example of the return of the repressed and the manifestation of the id in Githa Hariharan's "Gajar Halwa" occurs when the protagonist reflects on her life and the small acts of rebellion she engages in. For instance, despite the harshness of her daily life, she finds a brief moment of pleasure by secretly eating a piece of carrot while working: "The carrot in my hand grows shorter and shorter. The last bit is the worst. I frown and frown, my eyes on the grater, daring it to scrape my fingers. Then steal a quick look behind me and pop the last, stubborn bit into my mouth" (Hariharan 83). This act of secretly eating the carrot represents a small but significant expression of her suppressed desires and longing for some control over her life. Furthermore, her struggle with the grater, as she dares it to scrape her fingers, can be seen as a manifestation of her repressed frustration and anger towards her situation. These instances highlight the persistent presence and influence of repressed emotions and desires in her everyday actions.

In "Gajar Halwa," the return of the repressed and the id's manifestation are also evident in the protagonist's memories of her harsh upbringing and her current struggles. Reflecting on her past, she recalls the hardships faced by her family and the relentless work they had to endure: "My mother was always screaming. No wonder my father left her, he

must have been afraid of going deaf" (Hariharan 81). This memory indicates the protagonist's repressed anger and frustration towards her family situation and the abandonment by her father. Additionally, her desire for small luxuries, such as wanting to buy a blue sweater with shiny, beaded flowers, reveals the id's push for gratification amidst her challenging life: "But first I must buy a sweater, a blue one with shiny, beaded flowers, the kind I saw a girl wearing at the milk-booth queue" (Hariharan 82). These instances highlight the protagonist's internal conflict and the persistent influence of her repressed emotions and desires.

In "Gajar Halwa," the return of the repressed and the id's manifestation are also evident in the protagonist's memories of her harsh upbringing and her current struggles. Reflecting on her past, she recalls the hardships faced by her family and the relentless work they had to endure: "My mother was always screaming. No wonder my father left her, he must have been afraid of going deaf" (Hariharan 81). This memory indicates the protagonist's repressed anger and frustration towards her family situation and the abandonment by her father. Additionally, her desire for small luxuries, such as wanting to buy a blue sweater with shiny, beaded flowers, reveals the id's push for gratification amidst her challenging life: "But first I must buy a sweater, a blue one with shiny, beaded flowers, the kind I saw a girl wearing at the milk-booth queue" (Hariharan 82). These instances highlight the protagonist's internal conflict and the persistent influence of her repressed emotions and desires.

The process of making halwa can be seen as a metaphor for the return of the protagonist's repressed desires. As she engages in the laborious task, the sensory experience of cooking stirs up deeply buried emotions and memories. The protagonist describes the scene vividly: "The gajar, absorbing, sucking in like a greedy round red mouth, swallows the sugar, the ghee and the milk. It sucks in everything, and the earlier spluttering becomes a faint but

steady heave of red, like a heartbeat, then gentle sighs" (Hariharan 84). This intense, almost sensual description of the halwa's transformation mirrors her own internal process of confronting and processing repressed desires and frustrations. The act of cooking becomes a conduit for expressing her repressed emotions. As she stirs the mixture, she notes the physical and emotional toll: "Stirring, stirring, round and round, scraping the sides of the pan, round and round again, my cold body bent over the pan on the fire, my arm numb with pain" (Hariharan 84). The repetitive, almost meditative nature of this task allows her suppressed desires and feelings to surface, much like the halwa itself absorbs and transforms the ingredients. The culmination of this process, where "the skin of the halwa breaks open, right in the middle, like a great big yawning mouth" (Hariharan 84), symbolizes the breakthrough of repressed emotions, indicating a moment of catharsis and realization for the protagonist.

Coda

In conclusion, both "Gajar Halwa" and "The Remains of the Feast" by Githa Hariharan effectively illustrate the return of the repressed desires and emotions of their characters. In "Gajar Halwa," the laborious and sensory act of making halwa serves as a metaphor for the protagonist Perumayee's repressed frustrations and longings. Her repetitive and strenuous efforts in the kitchen bring to the surface her deeply buried anger, desires for a better life, and small acts of rebellion, symbolizing a cathartic release of her inner turmoil. Similarly, in "The Remains of the Feast," the character of Rukmini exhibits a resurgence of repressed desires as she nears the end of her life. Her sudden cravings for forbidden foods and her defiance of societal expectations reflect a poignant return of long-suppressed wishes and a final grasp for autonomy and satisfaction. This story underscores how Rukmini's repressed desires, constrained by years of social norms and personal sacrifices, emerge powerfully in her

last days, revealing a complex inner world shaped by unfulfilled aspirations.

Through these narratives, Hariharan deftly portrays how the mundane and the extraordinary moments in the lives of her characters become avenues for the manifestation of repressed emotions and desires. Both stories highlight the profound impact of repression on individual lives and the inevitable return of suppressed elements, thereby offering a deep psychological insight into the human condition. The acts of making halwa and indulging in forbidden foods serve not only as literal events but also as symbolic acts of resistance and self-assertion, bringing to light the hidden depths of the characters' psyches.

Works Cited

- Freud, Sigmund. *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by James Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, 1949.
- _____. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by C.J.M. Hubback, Dover Publications, 1922.
- _____. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey, W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.
- _____. *The Ego and the Id*. Translated by Joan Riviere, The Hogarth Press, 1927.
- _____. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by James Strachey, Basic Books, 1955.
- _____. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Translated by James Strachey, Norton, 1966.
- _____. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. Translated by W. J. H. Sprott, Norton, 1933.
- _____. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Translated by James Strachey, Basic Books, 2000.
- Hariharan, Githa. *The Art of Dying and Other Stories*. Penguin Books India, 1993.
- _____. "The Remains of the Feast." *Kunapipi*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1994, pp. 282-287.