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A FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS OF ARTHUR FLECK, "JOKER" (2019)

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Abstract

The present paper discusses Joker's (2019) character Arthur Fleck in the lens of Freud's Psychoanalysis. Arthur Fleck, a failed standup comic in the Gotham city in 1980s, lacks affection from the society. A mentally ill person and having an uncontrollable laughter causes him to suffer a lot. Mistreatment in the society, brutally beaten and medication cut off leads him toward a transformation that makes him violent. Eventually he revolts and involves himself in the game of bloody crime. The path brings him face to face with his alter-ego; the joker. The purpose of the study is to see the portrayal of Arthur Fleck motivated by ego, super-ego and id. Also to see the effect of his unconscious on the mental illness and biased manners. And whether the character is derived by his unconscious mind.

Keywords: Arthur Fleck, Freud, Joker, Psychoanalysis, Unconscious

Introduction

'The motive of human society' says Freud 'is in the last resort economic one'. Repressed elements in human consciousness are the key drive of our lives, and those repressed elements are placed in our unconscious (Eagleton, 1996). In literature, we do not find explicit statements but images, symbols and metaphors and those can be in the writer's unconscious. Our wishes, desires and fears whom we try to repress are buried in our unconscious and they always succeed to come out through any mean. Freud introduced us with many terms of psychoanalysis and he divided model of psyche into id, ego and superego (Barry, 1995). Same unconscious drives play a significant role in Arthur Fleck's life. His suppressed ambitions came out at their worst when they are ignored. His jokes, which according to Freud are largely aggressive or anxious content, give us glimpse of his disturbed psychic process. The awful happenings in past and

continuous mistreatments in the life of Arthur made him a changed personality.

Literature Review

In 1880, Dr. Joseph Breuer while treating a patient came across a new method of treatment, "She had a severe paralysis of both right extremities, with anaesthesia [sic], and at times the same affection of the members of the left side of the body; disturbance of eye-movements, and much impairment of vision; difficulty in maintaining the position of the head, an intense *Tussis nervosa*, nausea when she attempted to take nourishment, and at one time for several weeks a loss of the power to drink, in spite of tormenting thirst. Her power of speech was also diminished, and this progressed so far that she could neither speak nor understand her mother tongue; and, finally, she was subject to states of "absence," of confusion, delirium, alteration of her whole personality" (Freud, 1910) the vital organs(heart, kidney) of the girl were working properly but she was in an

emotional disturbance. The history of the illness coincides with the illness of his father whom she was taking care of. The first thing that helped Dr. Breuer in treatment of the girl was mumbling of her, the doctor repeated those words over and over and all the time when those suppressed words came out the mental condition became better and better. The patient herself named it 'talking cure'. This all continued and every memory or flashback helped in cure with passage of time. So, Breuer concluded that "the emotions developed in pathogenic situation were prevented from escaping normally'. And whenever they escape the patient is again in his normal position. (Freud, 1910)

Though Breuer's investigation was inadequate, Freud credited him for the creation of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1910). In 1895, both of them published *Studies on Hysteria*, it redefined hysteria that was considered womanly. There key point was that memory, and not physiology, was the real cause of hysteria (Thurschwell, 2000). Freud came to the point that there are desires that due to ethical or other reasons cannot be fulfilled and after an inner struggle the idea is repressed in our unconscious. The idea was forgotten and the pain was overwhelmed by repression. Still it remains in the unconscious to find a way out, and finally it succeeds out in the way of unrecognizable and disguised surrogate that is now secure from ego's attack. Sometimes that wish is directed towards higher goal known as sublimation by Freud (Freud, 1910).

He divided psychic model into three, naming it the id, the super ego and the ego each representing a level of personality i.e. the unconscious, the conscious and the consciousness respectively (Barry, 1995). Redirecting the emotions by patient toward the psychoanalyst is called transference while projection is attributing aspects of ourselves in others, both, transference and projection, might be seen as defense mechanisms. And the well-known defense mechanism is Freudian Slip or 'Parapraxis' whereby our unconscious desires or ideas get the way out through our unintended actions, or by the slips of the tongue or pen.

Freud argues that to become a psychoanalyst you should interpret or study your own dreams (Freud, 1910) as they are royal roads to the unconscious. They are the 'symbolic fulfillment' of our repressed wishes while ego still works (Eagleton, 1996). Manifest content and latent content of dreams are what we experience and its hidden meaning respectively, and latent content can only be known through psychoanalytic interpretation. Narration of the dream to analyst is as important as itself dream is. Dream to its final form is brought through condensation (Freud, 1910). It works in a very literary way translating abstract ideas or feelings into concrete images (Barry, 1995).

Freud's theories about sexual drives were not well received, according to him, all children are not merely a blank slate to be written with experience, and they had innate curiosity about sex and with their own origins (Thurschwell, 2000). Sexuality begins in infancy through infant's relation with her mother known as infantile sexuality. Another concept is of Oedipal Complex whereby male child is a rival of his father (Barry, 1995). His seduction theory, published in 1896, states that 'childhood abuse was a necessary precondition for the illness.' These become pathogenic ideas with the onset of puberty. These theories received an outrage, 'A scientific fairy tale' a Viennese physician named it, and maybe discovery of childhood sexuality in himself urged him to make this a universally applied phenomenon (Fancher, 1998).

Application of the Theory

'Everything must go' the billboard, held by Arthur, states (Phillips, 2019). Busy street, and the clown is trying to catch other's attention. A moment later, high school thugs snatch the billboard and run away chased by him. And then we see him being beaten viciously. This is the depiction of the societies attitude towards him, and all this has much to do with his transformation, as 'the unconscious always return' (Eagleton, 1996). He is innocent, underweight, bizarre, mentally ill, and has a pathetic personality. Arthur Fleck lives with her mother, the only person whom he is attached with. His poor communication skills, abnormal facial body

postures and a long held gaze at someone make him unacceptable by others (Letamandi, 2019).

'House of terror for mother and her son' (Phillips, 2019) imprinted on record papers he stealth from Arkham State Hospital. Her mother neglected him and she let other abuse him (Carol, 2019). 'Mother of adoptive child allowed her son's abuse.' So, we also came to know from the letter (written to Thomas Wayne by Penny Fleck) and those papers (Arkham State Hospital) that he was an adoptive child (Phillips, 2019). The childhood abuse and lack of parental love has an immense impact on his personality. According to Freud, "The traumatic events happened in childhood, however, that not seems traumatic at that time. Instead a delayed reaction set in – an event later in life, when the child reached puberty, would set off a series of recollections in the child's mind, and this delayed recognition would become a pathogenic or poisonous idea that would cause hysterical symptoms later in life" (Thurschwell, 2000). Head trauma and childhood injuries lead to the conditions he is facing as an adult (Letamandi, 2019). Despite all this he cared for her and he has a strong bond with her mother. Daily at night, he gives her bath and she is the only person whom he has a social connection and a strong bond. But as voiced by Freud that 'the unconscious always returns' (Eagleton, 1996) is the case of Arthur Fleck, and he under strong influence of those repressed exploitations kills his mother.

Before knowing the truth, from the records of Arkham State Hospital, about his parentage we see that he tries to seek acceptance from Thomas Wayne, that all goes in vain. So, there we see a strong desire for the affection and acceptance or name from his father. His actions show what Freud named as 'parapraxis; mislaying's or misapprehension's' (Eagleton, 1996). Also for him, Murray Franklin appears as a fatherly figure. To him he is father of symbolic. He would hear the words in fantasy "I'd give it up in a heartbreak to have a kid like you" (Phillips, 2019) from Murray, introducing him to audience. Thurschwell elaborates Freud's concept of fantasy in these words, 'Fantasy fulfils the desire in a distorted way. It occurs in different ways like daydreams or it may

reveal unconsciously in primal fantasies (Thurschwell, 2000). Arthur's fantasy about Murray as fatherly figure is his fulfillment of paternal love he lacks.

Unconscious, to come out, sometimes find alternatives like delusional reality. Like one may feel his paralyzed arm as elephant's trunk, or it may show love objects as rival or tyrant. Our conscious mind is flooded by riddling associations and illogicality rather than conceptual links between ideas (Eagleton, 1996). Arthur's relationship with Sophie Dumond is also delusional. We see that this relationship was Arthur's need to fulfill his desire of love, compassion and charm. He dates her, kisses her but all was delusion except chasing her that she did not know (Letamandi, 2019). Another delusion was of her mother who thought that Arthur was his real son and she was impregnated while she was employee at Wayne's Manor, and Thomas Wayne is Arthur's son. But reality was far away from that as revealed in archives of Arkham State Hospital (Phillips, 2019).

When the wishes are repressed in waking life, than the only solution for their exit are dreams. A distorted world, but a stage for our repressed desires to perform (Thurschwell, 2000). Much of there was for Arthur that can't be fulfilled in the real world, so there come his dreams. While sitting in the front of TV, he seems to be the part of Murray's show. Soon he catches the eye of everyone there. He introduce everyone about his life and mother. 'She always say me to smile and put on a happy face' he remarks about her mother and the applause break all around. Gets a warm hug from Murray that he feels inside (Phillips, 2019). This was all he wants in life, to be a central figure, to be listened, to be appreciated but he was fulfilling these desires through dreams.

Arthur's diary is full of jokes, and he see his fame as a standup comedian in his vision. His jokes depict the cruelties of society. "The worst part about having a mental illness is that people expect you to behave as you don't" one of the page demonstrates (Phillips, 2019). 'The occurrence of the unconscious's says Freud 'is also disclosed in jokes.' 'That has largely libidinal or aggressive

content' he further adds (Eagleton, 1996). "When I was a little boy and told people I wanna be a comedian, Everyone laughed at me, No one is laughing now" (Phillips, 2019). And on his on jokes his uncontrollable laughter starts.

He is on seven different medications and there are three episodes of visiting a psychiatrist (Phillips, 2019). In 1890s it was Freud and Breuer who made emphasis on listening and talking and took it to consulting rooms rather than medical theatres (Thurschwell, 2000). Same treatment of talking cure was being carried out by his psychiatrist with other medications. 'You did ask the same questions every week' Arthur asks her. But it's her job to trace those mental illness through talk or by seeing his joke diary. She listens empathically to him but Arthur disagrees and says, 'All I have are negative thoughts but you don't listen' (Phillips, 2019).

Socially isolated, fired from the job, medication cut off and mistreatments in the society all works to transform Arthur Fleck, an innocent, into a wild personality. He murders three of the men at a railway station, two of them in self-defense and third under influence of his ego. Kills her mom and his co-worker and finally he is on the stage at Murray show, asking him, 'Can you introduce me as a Joker'. (Phillips, 2019). Later on killing Murray also. Here in all this he felt that he really do existed. So we can sum up that all the persons around him played a crucial role for bringing him face to face with his alter-ego Joker.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We see an innocent person who remarks 'They were just kids' (Joker 2019) about the ruffians who beat him viciously. He wants to be cured when asks her psychiatrist to increase her medication. But all went in vain, and we see a person for whom murder was nonentity.

People like Arthur are all around us. Just 2 Million people suffer from pseudo bulbar affect in America alone (Carol, 2019). So we should not make fun of those persons having mental illness. Government should take keen steps and take a

good care of them. Further, the movie can be seen in the lens of Marxism and Surrealism.

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