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**Problematising Sex and Gender: Reconsideration of Freud concerning the Select
Poem *Home They Brought Her Warrior Dead***

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Gender and sex is not unknown to literary studies, rather it is interdisciplinary. Meaning, in literary studies and specifically with the emergence of critical theory, literary interpretations have gone into sociological approaches. Gender and sex have always been at the center of literary discussions. The present paper highlights both of these notions referring to Freud and attempts to bring some attention to problems in understanding Gender and Sex. The central question is: what is the dominating force which decides human behaviour? If we go for Freud, he emphasizes human sexuality which is the driving force in the human psyche that decides human behaviour. Though Gender is a social construction, can human beings suppress sexuality in the choice of gender foregrounding? With the help of the selected poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, the author has tried to rethink these notions.

Keywords: *Gender, Sex, Feminism, Unconscious, Motherhood, Culture.*

Introduction

The study of gender and sex is adequately discussed carrying a huge number of conceptions and misconceptions. But that does not lessen the degree of its gravity in the current scenario which we fashion as; globalization, digitalization, and technology. Many feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir have argued that gender identity is not natural but it is a socio-cultural construction that is gradually acquired. Another feminist critic Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, criticised Freudian interpretation of gender and sex. According to Butler, Freud suggests there is no natural gender, but backslides into a theory in which gender must be



natural. Butler states that Freud relies on natural "dispositions" in his theory of gender formation. If dispositions are natural and have a part in forming gender, then gender must be, at least in part, natural (Gullickan,08). However, human behaviour and societal interaction have become a more complicated phenomenon. While understanding gender and sex it leads towards subtle understanding and misunderstanding.

The emergence of women's empowerment movements roughly in the nineteenth century accelerated writers and thinkers to raise some vital problems regarding sexual and gender discrimination which caused bitter subjugation of women over centuries. The emergence of feminism and women's studies later on, channelised issues of sex and gender discrimination. In addition to this, in the late twentieth century, LGBT studies added new dimensions to sex and gender studies. This paper is an effort to revisit these two notions by linking them up with Freudian psychoanalysis because Freud is one of the prominent thinkers who have dealt with the male and female psyche. Freud has problematised and interrogated sex and gender equations which have been criticised by many thinkers, particularly feminists like Judith Butler.

The psychology of men and women mostly is determined and controlled by social conventions. There are several behavioral patterns, actions, habits, etc which are strictly categorised as male and female. For instance, bravery has always been associated with men and caring with women. There is neither scientific nor logical reason which supports this very stereotypical formation. This illogicality triggered debates and serious objections over the rudimentary status of gender other than male. In the present project, I shall try to reinterpret a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson in which two opposite genders male and female are projected which fit into this sort of rigid categorization of male and female as fixed binaries.

Literature, Freud, and Discussions on Gender and Sex

The following quite elaborative views of Freud are cited to see literature as an avenue where a creative writer brings (un)consciously trajectories of gender and sex formations. One claims it is, sometimes, biased (fe)male narratives to check the psychology of an author. However, the present research does not aim at any psychological or biological inclination of any male or female writer.



...From what sources that strange beings, the creative writer dreams his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. (Eileen, John ed. 36)

Though Freud has not written primarily on literature and creative writers his curiosity towards creative writing is thought provoking. It is clear that he was quite interested in literature therefore he attempted to analyze some pieces of literature based on psychoanalysis. His famous essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' is a mirror of his views on literature. As per Freud, there is something in creative writers that needs to be analyzed in the context of psychoanalytical mechanisms. As a psychiatrist by profession, his focus was only on studying the human mind and neurotic patients. This organization of his mind naturally led him to relate the poet or writer to an abnormal psyche. The human nature of Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art. In short, the human mind has always been the subject of poetry according to psychoanalysis.

But while tracing the psychology of creative writers Freud says in the same essay that most of the time writers do not know the exact source of their emotional material. Writers do not have a reasonable explanation of it. Hence, Freud makes his opinion – cum – observation on creative writers. In the present essay, Freud goes on to dig out the creative writer's psyche. Freud relates creative writers to ordinary men. As ordinary men can think and imagine so the creative writer possesses. In other words, a creative writer is a human being first and then a writer and this helps to lessen the rule between himself and humanity. A keen observation of this process, especially of creative writers, would give us an explanation of it. Freud says: "...they so after assures us that every man is a poet at heart and that the last poet will not perish till the last man does" (Eileen, John ed. 36).

Freud then compares creative writers with children. According to Freud, a creative writer behaves like a child when he/she is in the process of creation. A child creates his world of playing and forgets the external reality. He [child] takes his game as a reality. He has nothing to do with the external world because he/she is not serious about ordinary events. In this state of his playing reality is not present but the issue of reality becomes subservient. In short, there



is a difference between reality and fantasy. The child gradually turns into a fantasy. Freud States: “The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, he invests with a large amount of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality” (Eileen, John ed. 39). The result of this estrangement from reality lies in the produced art. This is the technique behind creative writing. Most of the time real things do not give pleasure, fantastical work can give. Imaginative groundings are more pleasurable than real. That is what Romantic poet P. B. Shelley said in his poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’: “heard melodies are sweeter but those unheard are sweeter”. This kind of highly imaginative work becomes a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a writer’s work.

By comparing a creative writer with a child Freud asserts that a creative writer’s process of imagination leads him to daydreaming. In his creation of art, the creative writer builds a ‘pleasure dome in air’. In the process of this creation authorial expression takes place. Various types of feelings of an author are repressed. Literature becomes the source of wish fulfillment. The writer has a hero who is the center of the interest. He attaches specific feelings to characters for example; Freud opines women have mostly erotic feelings while men have egoistic feelings. Freud has made a specific amount of characterization, in a sense, he means, that most of the time in writing male characters are portrayed slightly differently from female characters. This opinion of Freud has his research which he observed in his medical profession. It has been criticized by critics Like Gayatri Spivak, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler. In her essay ‘Feminism and Critical Theory’ (1985), Spivak criticises Marx and Freud. While criticising Freud She states: ‘the idea of the womb as a place of production is avoided both in Marx and in Freud’ (7). Certain novels, for instance, of Emile Zola on which Freud made special commentary are eccentric. He thinks it seems to stand in quite a special context to the type of daydream.

The above briefing of Freudian thinking over literature and creative writers regarding male and female projection through creative writing as a ‘wish-fulfillment’ raised some doubts on the formation of gender and sex. It seems that Freud has some problematic inclination toward understanding and defining gender and sex.

Psychology of Women



Freud's opinions on women have always been controversial. Therefore, feminists are antagonistic towards him. His *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* has a certain number of descriptions of women's psychology. Freud calls Women in the present book a 'riddle'. Freud while taking on an activity and passivity in men and women argues women are made passive by convention and society. Women are more aggressive. Let's look at the following quote:

The repression of their aggressiveness, which is imposed upon women by their constitution and by society, favours the development of strong masochistic impulses, which have the effect of binding erotically the destructive tendencies which have been turned into words. (Eileen and Lopes. ed. 152)

According to Freud, a female/ girl is more changeable than a boy. At the initial stage of development, a girl transforms her love object from mother to father but in the case of the boy he remains unchanged. In short, the nature/ psyche of a girl is more transformative than a boy.

Motherhood

Freud also discussed aspects of motherhood in the analysis of the female psyche. He states that the mother is in every sense of the word active in her relations with her child. Freud explains the psychological association between the mother and the child. The researcher will apply these concepts in the analysis of the selected poem.

Death Instinct and Life Instinct

The theory of life and death drives evolved throughout Freud's life and career. Initially, he described a class of drives known as life instincts that he believed were responsible for much of our behaviour. Eventually, however, Freud came to believe that life instincts alone could not explain all human behaviour. With the publication of his book "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in 1920, Freud concluded that all instincts fall into one of two major classes: life drives and death drives—later dubbed Eros and Thanatos by other psychologists.

The Life Drive (Eros) (Combine all the 4 paras below)

Sometimes referred to as sexual instincts, the life drive deals with basic survival, pleasure, and reproduction. While we tend to think of life instincts in terms of sexual procreation, these drives



also include instincts such as thirst, hunger, and pain avoidance. The energy created by the life drive is known as libido.

In early psychoanalytic theory, Freud proposed that the life drive was opposed by the forces of the ego, the organized, logic-driven part of a person's psyche that mediates desires. Later, he maintained that the life drive of Eros was opposed by a self-destructive death instinct, later known as Thanatos.

The life drive is focused on the preservation of life, both of the individual and of the species. This drive compels people to engage in actions that sustain their own lives, such as looking after their health and safety. It also exerts itself through sexual drives, motivating people to create and nurture new life.

Behaviors commonly associated with life instinct include love, cooperation, and other prosocial actions. These behaviours support both individual well-being and the harmonious existence of a cooperative and healthy society.

The Death Drive (Thanatos)

Freud first introduced the concept of the death drive in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." He theorized that humans are driven toward death and destruction, famously declaring that "the aim of all life is death."

Freud believed that people typically channel this death drive outward, which manifests as aggression toward others. People also can direct this drive inward, however, which can result in self-harm or suicide.

Freud based this theory on clinical observations, noting that people who experience a traumatic event often recreate or revisit it. For example, he noted that soldiers returning from World War I tended to revisit their traumatic experiences in dreams that repeatedly took them back to combat.

From these observations, he concluded that people hold an unconscious desire to die but that life instincts largely temper this wish. In Freud's view, the compulsion to repeat was "something that would seem more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides." Thus, Thanatos stands in stark contrast to the drive to survive, procreate, and satisfy desires.

Gender

The term traditionally refers to both the classification of nouns and their modifiers as 'masculine', 'feminine', and 'neuter', second, the sense of being male and female. However,



the distinction between ‘gender and ‘sex’ began to be made in the late 1970s, under the influence of feminism and women’s liberation. Gender can be defined as a social construction to categorise ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. Ann Oakley in England argued that sex is a biological term and gender is a psychological and social construction. Gender is a social and psychological term, but in a cultural sense, it is used to define masculine and feminine through the process of socialization. While Freudian psychoanalysis holds that human beings are innately bisexual and therefore come to adopt gendered ‘attitudes’ or ‘positions’.

Sex

Sex could be defined in terms of biological differences at the level of genital, chromosomes. Further, the term refers to the physiological characteristics that define humans as female and male. These sets are not mutually exclusive as there are individuals who possess both.

Home they brought her warrior dead:

She nor swoon'd nor utter'd cry:

All her maidens, watching, said,

"She must weep or she will die."

Then they praised him, soft and low,

Call'd him worthy to be loved,

Truest friend and noblest foe;

Yet she neither spoke nor moved.

Stole a maiden from her place,

Lightly to the warrior stepped,

Took the face-cloth from the face;

Yet she neither moved nor wept.

Rose a nurse of ninety years,

Set his child upon her knee—

Like summer tempest came her tears—

"Sweet my child, I live for thee." (The Princess 1847)

The poem cited above is a lyrical piece picked up from a long poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson titled ‘The Princess’. The poem is lengthy and divided into seven cantos. There is a major figure named Princess, quite rigid, adamant, and hates men. She has built a university only for women where men are not allowed. Her rigidity towards men has converted that avenue into



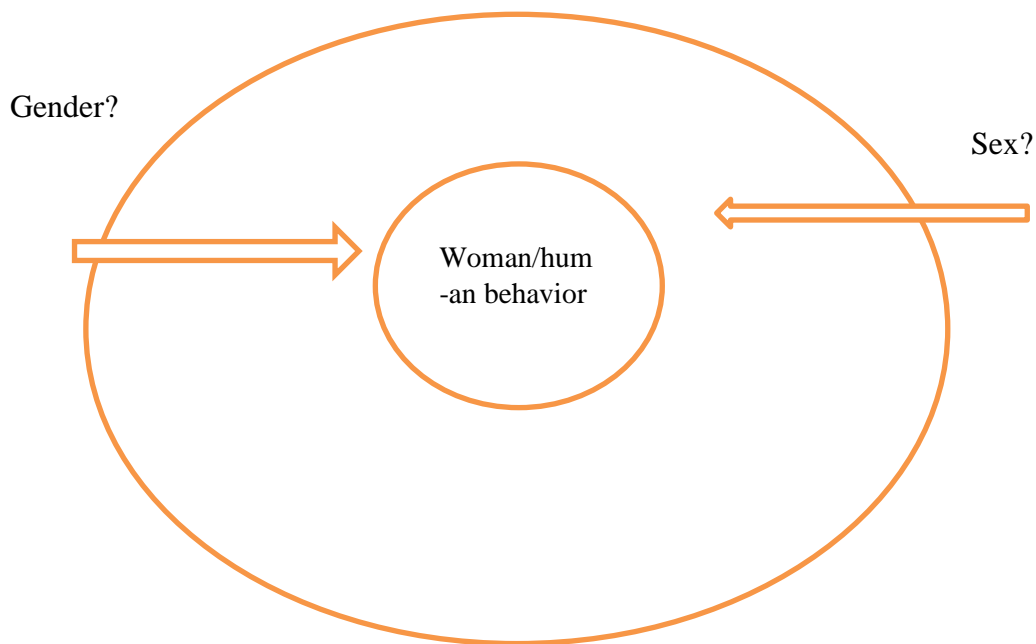
an enclosed, restricted, and controlled place where women and their lives are monitored. However, a prince from the vicinity gets the news regarding the Princess and vows to marry her which is not possible. He takes the challenge and finally succeeds in marrying the princess. With the help of the above lyric, we can investigate the problems of Freudian psychoanalysis in defining gender and sex.

The nuanced reading of the poem unfolds a few doubts. Let us first try to guess who is the speaker in the poem. This question sounds like a very conventional sort of analysis but this itself shoots the problem in the poem. It is problematic to trace the voice in the poem but still, it is also the fact that there is an unknown voice that highlights the functioning of gender and sex. The first line begins with the third person plural pronoun ‘they’ which indicates some other agent, maybe society, family, or friends. These are agencies of regulations. The next common noun ‘warrior’ helps us to fix the gender that someone is dead and that dead is a ‘man’. We get the idea of male as a gender through the very masculine noun ‘warrior’ which is always associated with ‘men’ as superior sex. Then there is again the pronoun ‘her’ which refers to a woman. The woman figure and male figure in the poem are almost silent throughout the poem. Despite their silence, the reader is taken to understand that man is a warrior and woman is a mother or a housewife. No one is speaking in the poem, neither men nor women, still there is clear-cut determination of gender and sex associations with a warrior and a woman. But the problem does not lie here.

An interesting twist in the poem arrives at the end of the poem. The last stanza brings some Freudian ideas of ‘life instinct’ and ‘death instinct’. The last line ‘sweet my child I live for thee’ invigorates some interventions of Freudian psychoanalysis when we try to look at gender and sex. The very last line flashes the notion of ‘motherhood’ which is a very feminine capacity that differentiates male and female. Hence, the questions are, is it that ‘motherhood’ which becomes s in human behaviour? Or again the woman in the poem becomes submissive because she ‘has to live’ for her child and not because she is a separate individual who wishes to live despite her husband’s demise? The second problem is about the category of ‘life instinct’ which ultimately wins over her submissiveness. Does she want to live for her child, being a mother? Does she want to live as an individual gender or sex? What is it there that brings her out of that numbness?

Hence, if we come to her spontaneity there is a sudden transformation in her behaviour which triggers some questions. What is there that causes her to react in a certain manner? If it is gender

inclination as a woman, a rudimentary part of society, pressurised by social formation, then gender becomes a deciding factor. Second, if there is a sexual drive that motivates ‘life instinct’, a pleasure principle asks her to survive, then her sexual orientation becomes significant. We get this sort of predicament in one female figure that eventuates into undecidability of the naming ‘gender dominance or sex dominance’. If both are there then we cannot deny the co-existence of either of these. However, still, the question looms large ‘Which is dominating factor, gender or sex?’ we can understand it with the help of the following frame:



Let me turn to one more notion of Freud called ‘death instinct’ (Thanatos) to problematise the very notions of sex and gender. In the present poem, it seems that life instinct becomes dominant which might have turned a woman from numbness (death instinct) to ‘live for thee’ or live for self as well.

Our relationship with death whether we admit it or not is traumatized in childhood, as a principal organizer of our psychological experience. Death is a subject treated as an abstract entity. That is, to theorize about it in ways that don’t allow us to feel its force intimately-presumably because its force is too frightening. Death is an abstract entity for human beings that operates on a conceptual level to an individual. It is an experience for everyone that brings an end to life, hence, it does not have a connection to the world of experience. Freud calls death a biological process that is concrete reality but it takes our thoughts and feeling out of the

everyday world of action and responsibility, just as abstraction does. Freud calls this biological process ‘death-drive’ or ‘thanatos’. This is exactly what Freud suggests that take death first as a psychological process, an abstraction that is attractive to think and feel. If death has been understood as a psychological process it is found that everybody dies on several occasions. The fear of death is an inseparable drive in human psychology. This psychological feeling of death somehow reduces the fear of biological death. It is a sort of thinking of the duality between mortality and immortality of human life. Thinking and feeling of death many times before the actual biological death makes this notion attractive. And we see that individuals respond to death in various ways because of differences in their psychological makeup. But the first and foremost relation to death is fear. Though we feel death at a psychological level as fear it naturally takes us close to our intimates. We are never in a position to accept the death of our close ones.

But Freud goes a step ahead and posits two concepts ‘death instinct’ and ‘life instinct’. Both are inseparable instincts but according to Freud later one is stronger than the former. Intensity of life or survival is a very basic tendency of human life. Though we feel fear of death or abandonment of relatives after all life goes as it used to. In short life instinct is dominant and prominent as well. This issue of the relationship between death and life is a focal point of the present discussion in the context of the selected poem.

The way Freud follows to set in his radical need to be understood seriously. The unacceptability of Freud can be lowered by putting Freud in the euphemistic use of language concerning selected poems. Before analysis of the poem the term euphemism should be explained. Euphemism is a use of language through which offensive ideas are replaced with inoffensive use of language. For instance, instead of using the word death the phrase ‘pass way’ is used. In the present poem, the concept of death can be revisited with the help of this typical employment of language.

The selected poem of Tennyson is about extreme fear of death and interestingly the end of the poem is a sudden abandonment of fear and acceptance of life. A woman, the wife of a dead soldier, is shocked by the death of her husband. Her reaction to the death is numbness. She cannot weep nor utter a word. This is a symptom of extreme shock. This is a kind of psychological impasse where a person is not in a position to react. Other women around her

are trying to make her weep. The entire poem except the last line is a description of death. If she does not weep, she may die.

“All her maidens, watching, said,
She must weep or she will die”. (72)

The poem is divided into four stanzas and the language of the poem is euphemistic. The subject of death is put by the poet in a very long, attractive language. This sort of use of language created a possibility of multiple interpretations of the concept like death. A simple and lucid presentation of the notion of death helps to minimize the fear of death. While reading the poem readers may be engrossed. We forget for a while death is a horrible entity. This process of making horrible subjects so fascinating is a psychological turn. Artistic use of language contributory to this psychological process. Freud’s fundamental thinking of death is this. At first, death is a psychological process then it is biological. This psychological acceptance of death reduces the fear of death, moreover, it strengthens the life instinct. In the present poem, the fear of death is turned into acceptance of life. That is why Freud argues that death instinct is subsidiary to life instinct. Interestingly the last line of the poem is a complete twist to the previous theme:

“Like summer tempest came her tears....
‘Sweet my child, I live for thee’”. (72)

A woman who is extremely shocked by the death is suddenly ready to accept the abandonment of her husband. She is ready to live for her child or accepts the fact that life or the feeling of death is temporary, these are multiple interpretations of death. This multiplicity of death has been made possible by the euphemistic employment of language. Freud has attempted the same issue throughout his study. That is why Freud’s notions of ‘life instinct’ and ‘death instinct’ open the possibility of more interpretation.

To sum up, if we try to relate Freudian ideas to very progressive notions of sex and gender, we have to ponder over which is dominating in the human behavioural patterns which affect our daily life. Freud has emphasised sex as a fundamental human tendency which according to him influences our lives. So, in the present poem what is at stake is, how to understand sex and gender which decides our reactions and responses. The question is significant because the last line urges us to rethink it. If the intensity of survival is an outcome of ‘life instinct’ controlled



and determined by the sex’, as Freud states, then what about the pressure of gender identity or it is our gender consciousness that obliges us to live? Is she under the control of ‘sex as a biological construction’ or ‘gender as a social construct’?

If we go to Freud, we have to answer that it is ‘sex’ that makes her a ‘woman’ and under the pressure of it, she has to live. But if we come to gender study, we have to answer it is gender as a social restriction which compels her to live for her child.

The example picked up here takes us back to the basics of human behaviour patterns. Whether male or female, both have to carry the burden of socio-cultural and subjective identity formations. Most of the time the human behavioural system fractures between these two frames of identity. To comprehend the socio-cultural and subjective inclinations we need to admit the impact of gender and sex discourses.

Moreover, the analysis of the poem takes us to the Victorian era of British literature which has been tagged as more socially, ethically, and morally controlled. Writers like Mathew Arnold were advocating the ‘culture’ something associated with morality. However, there were few other writers and thinkers who were countering Arnoldian orthodoxy. The reading of the poem need not be confined to the British or any other geographical or political domain. The purpose of this paper is to just rethink our behavioural patterns about gender and sex in association with Freud. This does not mean the researcher is advocating Freud or any other thinker on gender and sex.

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