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PSYCHOANALYSIS AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Psychoanalysis and American literature

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Abstract – This focus on unconscious had an optimistic slant in America. Americans were not mistaken in seeing Freud as an optimist because Freud had hinted at the positive effect of psychological study. There were various questions related to psychoanalysis in America – why did America welcome psychoanalysis more warmly than any other country? What was the reason which created an affinity between psychoanalysis and American condition? To find out the answers of the above mentioned questions, one has to survey the whole field of psychoanalysis which Freud used for the practical Americans.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Clark lectures, Freud's synthesis and elements were presented in his system up to 1914, and there were appropriate emphasis on American environment. These lectures emphasized practicality, optimism and sublimation. So Freud came so near in understanding the cause of American problems and suggested a cure too. In this conference William James, the pioneer of psychoanalysis in United States met Freud and Jung, and appreciated as well as condemned the views of European psychologists on various grounds.

Americans modified psychoanalysis to solve a conflict between the radical implication of foreign psychologists' views and the pulls of American culture. Americans, in order to simplify psychoanalysis, took interest in Freud's system as a coherent theory. Freud and the Americans held a number of similar intellectual as well as moral assumptions, such as history and cause were equivalent, to trace origins in the past is to discover the causes of the present, development of the individual reflects in microcosm the development of the race. Psychoanalytic study and American literature were going on the same track as the purpose of both, in one way or the other, was same. But a large number of American psychologists differ from Freud on the ground of biology and sexuality because they are more concerned with other ideas such as – confrontations of reality, psychic imbalances, individuals not from biological point-of-view but from collective consciousness (social). Nathan G. Hale rightly remarks, "Most of the Americans developed psychoanalysis into an ethical system. Its first commandment was to face 'reality', to know one's own inner desires and better to control and sublime them" (346). The same purpose is of American literature as well. Thus psychoanalytic study and literature together can cure the society and civilization from some heart-rending diseases.

The first American novel which combined all the psychoanalytic elements together is *Mrs. Marden's Ordeal*. The main elements of the novel are – traumatic childhood experiences, the detective story, the miraculous cure, an upper class neurotic, a wise psychologist and the fulfillment of social roles. The author James Hay, a Washington D C journalist, accepts that there is psychoanalytic touch in the novel. The structure of the novel makes it clear that writers and thinkers have been deeply interested in psychology at that time. In the novel *Mrs. Marden* – a sensitive and young society matron – strikes dumb after witnessing the murder of a friend. A famous psychologist as well as family confidant undertakes to cure her. The analyst, with his convincing way of discussing things, delves deep into Mrs. Marden's psyche, and finally she tells him about her dreams. Towards the end, she as well as the audience come to know that Mrs. Marden has strangled the girl in a fit of jealousy because she thought that her husband loved that girl. But after murdering the girl she blots out all the memory of the hideous act and is troubled by her subconscious because the blots of her acts remain there. This novel presents the popular images of psychoanalytic process and by confining psychoanalysis to catharsis, Hay assimilates psychoanalysis and literature. C G Jung also points out the togetherness of psychology and literature, and in his essay *Psychology and Literature* remarks, "It is obvious enough that psychology, being the study of psychic process, can be brought to bear upon the study of literature, for the human psyche is the womb of all sciences and all arts" (175).

Both psychology and literature deal with materials which are drawn from the realm of human consciousness – with the lessons of life, emotional shocks, experience of passion and crisis of human life. Edward Albee's work is an epitome of this type of art because it deals with the aesthetic problems. As a work of psychological education the works of realistic

writers destroy the previous aesthetic views of art which is only entertaining and their work moves to what is beautiful in form and meaningful in content. Such works help us to find out and to accept the new ground of reality. Thus, the juxtaposition of literature and psychology has turned literature into a tool to find out the answers of some bewildering questions.

Any study of psychoanalysis in the United States must begin with the myths – first created by the founders of America who believe in the over optimism of American Dream, and second by the non-believers of the dream. Most of the psychologists agree that, “America” as a civilization has its own “share of truth as well as illusions” (Hale xiii). In the first chapter this has already been discussed that the truth and illusions which Americans believe in are the truths and illusions related to the history of American civilization. It is well known that American Dream and ‘Life-Lies’ are the two sides of the same coin, so one should accept both in order to lead a blissful life. But as it has been noticed that the civilization is more inclined to illusions than reality, thus psychoanalytic study helps to understand and to accept the realities of life.

The psychoanalytic study and the American literature of twentieth century both try to find out the truth hidden beneath the American success myth, so the bond between psychoanalysis and American literature became strong. Robert A Segal's book *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* talks about various classical, Biblical and social myths and indicates that these myths influence the life of the people. He relates myth with psychology as well as literature because “myth provides the ideal kind of fulfillment” (Segal 93). With the point of time various layers of myths hide its true meaning, and thereby only a blocked and generalized meaning of myth is accepted by common masses. Thus, there are two levels of myth – the level above and the level below. The level above partly reveals as it partly hides the meaning hidden below and the true meaning often lies at the level below. Myth, in this way, is constituted to satisfy the desires. Segal rightly asserts, “In all these ways myths parallel dreams, which, like science for Taylor and Frazer, provide the modal by which Freud and Jung analyze myths” (94). Though myths and dreams are similar, yet there is a big difference between myths and dreams – myths are public and dreams are private. For Freud and Jung similarities are more significant.

The American success myth, better known as American Dream, fills in the gap between myth and dream for it is both, public and private – public because it is the success myth of whole America and private in the sense that it fulfills a number of unfulfilled desires of every individual in America. In the previous chapter it has been discussed that American Dream is a lie, for it is just an attempt to attain through their illusions what Americans were lacking in reality, and finally this became a habit of this civilization. Jacques Lacan's concept of ‘subject as lack or the lacking subject’ can be related to this success myth. Usually in

the process of dreaming, we enter into a complex relationship with the dream in which we allow it to master us or to fill our lack. The roots of this conception of subjectivity can be traced back to the Freudian idea of ‘spaltung’ (splitting). Lacan points out that the subject of psychoanalysis is not the self-sufficient subject of knowledge as it is constructed in the tradition of philosophy, but the ex-centric subject – one structured around a radical split, a radical lack.

The idea of American Dream is also structured around the radical split or lack which American civilization tried to fulfill through this psychological belief. The reason, thus, of having faith in American Dream lies deep in Lacanian conception of a lacking subject. This conception can also be related to the idea of ‘Life-Lies’ because it permits a thorough grasping of the socio-symbolic dependence of subjectivity.

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