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Representation of Oedipus Complex in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*

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Abstract:

David Herbert Lawrence was the most controversial novelist of the contemporary times. His "*Sons and Lovers*" is the most autobiographical novel published in 1913. It is often called the magnum opus in the realm of literature. The most important element of his writing, apart from the innovations he brought to the English novel, is his own philosophy concerning sex. He used Freudian theories in '*Sons and Lovers*' and have given an essence of Oedipus complex to Paul Morel, the protagonist. The novelist himself experienced such feelings in his life. His theory of life, as it should be lived was strongly influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud. It was from Freud that it derived its two dominant principles – first, that the sources of human conduct, thought and feelings are in unconscious level. Secondly, those sources are predominantly sexual in character. Lawrence examines the effects of the overwhelming affection of a mother on the mature years of her sons. Mrs Gertrude Morel, mother of Paul, was not happy with her family life and hated her husband, Walter Morel. She is pitifully diagnosed with Oedipus complex, which enables her to be a powerful hermaphrodite and gains access to power. So, she shifted her affection on her sons – William, Paul and Arthur. At the beginning, she had a passion for her first son William. After his premature death, she turned to Arthur. Finally, her affection fell on Paul, who lived with his mother. Because of his deepest love for his mother, Paul did not marry anyone. This misplaced affection led Paul to mental suffering in his later life. This paper is an attempt to show the lucid representation of the concept of Oedipus complex in the concerned novel.

Keywords: autobiographical; magnum opus; Freudian; Oedipus complex.

Introduction:

Sigmund Freud, founding father of psychoanalysis, introduced the term 'Oedipus complex' for the first time in his book, 'Interpretation of Dreams' (1899). He opined that the concept is a desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex, which produces a sense of competition with the parent of the same sex and a crucial stage in the normal developmental process (Freud, 1913). In other words, Freud used the term to refer to a stage in the development of young boys. He assumed that in early development, around the age of five, young children wish to have their entire mother's love. This is just the opposite of what was said by C. W. Valentine "...children are free from all sexual feelings." Perhaps jealousy causes them to resent and even unconsciously wish the death of their father.

The term, 'Oedipus complex' was indeed named after the name of Greek mythical figure Oedipus, who was the son of king Laius and queen Jocasta of Thebes, who finally killed his father and married his mother unconsciously which according to the belief of the writer and people of that time, was designed by fate (J E Safra, 1768).

According to Sigmund Freud, the accidents or incidents in the life of Oedipus happened because of sexual complexity between Oedipus and his mother. And on the basis of this story, he invented the concept of 'Oedipus complex' which he attributed to children of about the age of three to five. He viewed that all human behaviour are motivated by sex or by the instincts, which in his opinion are the neurological representations of physical needs. He referred to those as the life instincts which perpetuate the life of the individual, initially by motivating him or her to seek food and water, and secondly by motivating him or her to have sex. The motivational energy of these life instincts, the "oomph" that powers our psyches, he

called libido, from the Latin word for "I desire" (Boeree, 2006). Freud's clinical experience led him to view sex as much more important in the dynamics of the psyche than other needs. We are, after all, social creatures, and sex is the most essential of social needs. Here, we have to remember that Freud put much more importance on sexual desire than on any other thing. "*Sons and Lovers*", Lawrence's masterpiece, is the most reliable and remarkable illustration of Freud's Oedipus complex in modern literature. Hu Junjie, a Freudian psychologist remarked that Lawrence is one of the most original and controversial English writers of twentieth century. The major theme of his writing was the relationship between man and woman (Junjie, 2007). However, Oedipus complex is the dominant theme of "*Sons and Lovers*". The complex here chiefly centers around the relationship between Lawrence's protagonist Paul and his mother. Among the sons of Mrs. Morel, Paul is shown to have most serious Oedipus complex. After the birth of this unhealthy boy Mrs. Morel mysteriously asserts; "With all her face, with all her soul she would make up to it for having brought it into the world unloved", (Lawrence, 2007). The expression vividly exposes her complexity with Paul.

On the other hand, as Paul grows, he also begins to fulfil his mother's wish. He sticks to his mother and trots after her like her shadow. Like an exactly romantic lover he watches every physical movement of his mother, enjoys her dressing up with plenty of delight and sensual pleasure. Lawrence delineates "Paul loved to sleep with his mother, sleep still most perfect in spite of hygienists, when it is shared with a beloved...". "His ambition as far as this world's gear went was quietly to earn his thirty or thirty five shillings, somewhere near home and then when his father died have cottage with his mother" (Lawrence, 1985). As the children grew into adulthood, their relationship with their mother assumed an unhealthy complexion and explicit sexual overtones can be clearly seen in it. Mrs Morel once says, "You know, Paul – I've never had a Husband – not really." (Lawrence; p-87)

It could be estimated that though all the novels of Lawrence are more or less autobiographical, "*Sons and Lovers*" is almost a carbon copy of the author's life. The principal characters of the novel and the central situations are drawn from Lawrence's early life. Like Paul Morel's father, Lawrence's father was a miner, uncultured and drunkard. Like Paul's mother, Lawrence's mother was her husband's direct opposite. A triangular relationship grew between Lawrence, Jessie and his mother and that became the theme of "*Sons and Lovers*" which remains the most compelling account of the Oedipus complex in Literature.

Lawrence used the theories of Sigmund Freud and have given a sense of Oedipus complex to Paul Morel. Lawrence himself experienced such feelings in his life. His theory of life as it should be lived, was strongly influenced by the works of Freud. Indeed, it is not too much to say that Freud formed it. It was from Freud that it derived its two dominant principles – first, that the sources of human conduct, thought and feelings are in unconscious stage. Secondly those sources are predominantly sexual in character.

Although the stories of "*Oedipus*" and "*Sons and Lovers*" are different but they give precise account of the illegal affairs between son and mother. In "*Oedipus*", the love relationship between the king and the mother is quite accidental because they do not know each other. But still Oedipus, the king was seduced by his mother, thus creating the Oedipus complex. In "*Sons and Lovers*", Mrs. Morel takes her sons into her maternal fold and prevents her son developing any kind of emotional attachment with any other woman. The sons, William and Paul had a strong and deep affection for their mother, which was not only uncommon but also unnatural and abnormal.

Paul unconsciously resorted to illness right from his childhood to draw his mother to himself. William never practiced such indecent strategies. When Paul took to illness, his mother slept with him on the same bed locking him in a tight embrace. This act invariably restored him to health. Paul played this trick unconsciously in his youth. He caught pneumonia and was bed ridden. He raved that he was going to die. Mrs. Morel was alarmed. She held him in her arms to assuage his fear. This was D.H. Lawrence's euphemism for the son having sex with his mother. This unprecedented experience cured Paul and at the same time relieved Mrs. Morel of her tension. In order to keep Paul to herself, Mrs. Morel sabotaged all his love affairs. She objected to Paul's first romance with Miriam who led a very lonely life with her parents and brothers on the neighbouring farm. At first, Paul avoided her, but later Paul was too fascinated by her. But he felt shy of personal intimacy with her. His mother cautioned him that Miriam would suck out his soul. To appease his mother, he kissed her and fondled her. When he did this, he completely forgot Miriam. When Miriam touched him later, he resented the touch. Thus, Paul was torn between his mother and Miriam. He tried to approach Miriam through his art and as a teacher and both proved to be self-defensive.

This is a general perception that normally when a boy grows into an adult, he/she will maintain a distance between him/her and his/her mother. But Paul was unnatural and abnormal. He confused his mother's love with sexual desire. His mother also misused her son's affection for her sexual pleasure. She did not allow any of her sons to marry because she thought that marriage would separate them from her. In this sense, we can remark that Mrs Morel was also an abnormal mother too. In Paul's case, the abnormal fixation upon the mother was enhanced by Mrs. Morel abnormally concentrated on her son. Her love which can no longer go towards her husband, turns to Paul for consolation. Paul was never able to make the mature sexual decision away from his mother, as he can never accomplish the physical and emotional transfer. When his mother died, Paul also wanted to die because he felt his soul cannot live without his mother and hence he longed to join her in death. At the end, he realized that man is all alone and must find a way through the labyrinth of life and he turned towards the city with a sense of hope that work would finally give him peace of mind.

Hu Junjie opines that if we accept Freud's claim in "*Sons and Lovers*", then Freud theory also lacks to be a universal one because Lawrence himself describes Mrs. Morel turning her relation to son because of unusual reasons (Junjie, 2007). Lawrence himself finds many unusual factors behind this unusual relationship. Among those factors the most common factor is Mrs. Morel's shifting her attraction or lust from husband to son which was the outcome of the unusual relation or mismatch between she and her husband regarding character, family status, education, intellect etc. She is an exceedingly religious woman while her husband is a hard drunkard, her refined manner also contradicts with his vulgarity. The marriage life of Mrs. Morel is in fact, full of conflicts and frustration as Lawrence himself delineates "Their marriage life has been one carnal bloody flight".

Hu Junjie concludes that "Her personal abnormal emotion is the direct factor for Paul's Oedipus complex". That means mother's abnormal maternity is indeed the basis of Paul's Oedipus complex. If it is so then how come the theory is universal? Because all the mothers of the world are not dissatisfied, wounded, agonized with their husbands not all the fathers of the world are drunkard, characterless, unsympathetic like Mr. Morel. Hence, it becomes clear that Mrs. Morel's case is an exceptional and individual case not universal. A critic says "Most personality theorists, however, consider these examples aberrations rather than universals, exceptions rather than rules. They occur in families that are not working as well as they should, where parents are unhappy with each other, use their children against each other. Where there is no mismatch or bizarre relation between wife and husband and the relationship is typical there may be no possibility of such complexity or unusual acts or relation." Hu Junjie further explains that healthy spiritual states must be based on healthy life

styles and social systems. The problem described in “*Sons and Lovers*” are not only the mental problems but also social factors. So along with psychological factors, the sickly life style and mechanical social system are also responsible for the unhealthy and sickly relation between mother and son. Such relation is not healthy and cannot happen in a healthy natural life.

Contrast between Oedipus and Paul

In order to verify the universality of Freud’s Oedipus complex, we may have a comparative look between Oedipus and Paul. It is recognized that Oedipus married his mother Jocasta totally unconscious. He was so ashamed that on hearing the Delphic oracle, he left his country Corinth to escape from such crime, and finally he plug out his own eyes out of remorse, agony and guilt feelings.

On the contrary, Paul made the love affair with his mother very consciously and felt quite comfortable instead of feeling ashamed or guilty like Oedipus. Besides, it is recognized by every critic that Oedipus was victim of fate. Sophocles’ aim behind the drama was mainly to the dominant power of fate what the whole ancient society even the Shakespearian people or the people of every time from ancient to modern believed. The Greek view Oedipus as guided or motivated by fate. We, here find that Freud is guided by sex what Oedipus nor the Greek nor the writer Sophocles himself imagined by his story.

Contrast between Jocasta and Mrs. Morel

Contradiction between Jocasta and Mrs. Morel also resembles the contradiction between Oedipus and Paul. If Freud’s claim is universal then the feelings of Jocasta and feelings of Mrs. Morel irrespective of their relationship with their sons should be same. But unfortunately, this does not happen. Where Jocasta gets totally unknowingly married with her son and after being informed commits suicide out of her agony and shame. Mrs. Morel gets consciously involved in sexual dealings with her own child and feels quite pleased and gratified for it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let it be said that Oedipus complex is at the very heart of psychoanalysis as presented in “*Sons and Lovers*”. It is true that in the history of psychology, Freud’s view of sexuality has intensive influence upon a number of thinkers. But along with modernization of psychology and psychoanalytical process, Freudian sex theories have been losing their appeal or acceptance. Possibly for that very reason, Joseph Jastrow, being a follower of Freud says that Freud’s Oedipus complex is an indecent and inadequate concept. It is impossible to find any root or origin of this claim. After constant perusal, we have become able merely to know that it is nothing but a consequence of Freud’s imaginative psychoanalysis based on his personal supposition that lacks evidence (Rahim, 2002).

Besides this, if we come to conclude Paul’s case in “*Sons and Lovers*”, his Oedipus complex and its causes are already vivid to us. Paul has not become a normal adult by getting over some problems like other children. That is not only determined by his mother’s abnormal maternity. The reasons are in many ways-some come from the parents; some come from brothers, some even from the society, the mechanical civilization, which leads the family tragedy and distortion of personality and devastates people’s healthy development on spirits. Hence, it is easy to realize and recognize that Paul’ relation with mother is the outcome of many unusual and abnormal causes, which are partial, exceptional and individual rather than universal. Thus, it can be asserted that it is not usual or natural for the people living in a healthy family and environment to have such anomalous and complex emotional problems.

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