

Traces of Self-alienation and Identity Crisis in Peter Shaffer's *The Gift of the Gorgon*

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ABSTRACT The authors of this paper seek to examine the concepts of self-alienation and identity crisis in Peter Shaffer's famous drama- *The Gift of the Gorgon*. The method of the study is chiefly based on Jacques Lacan's theories in terms of alienation and the otherness of individuals. Since, the major characters in this drama suffer from self-alienation and identity crisis, the primary work to do is to first elucidate the definitions of each term, including the Self, the Other and alienation and then examine it according to Lacan's viewpoints.

INTRODUCTION

The function of psychoanalytic doctrine to the study of literature is a moderately fresh phenomenon, initiated primarily by Freud and, in other commands, by Alfred Adler and Carl Jung. The concept of the "unconscious" was not in itself novel, and it can be found in numerous thinkers prior to Freud, remarkably in some of the Romantics such as in Schlegel, in Schopenhauer, and in Nietzsche. Freud's fundamental involvement was to open up the entire dominion of the unconscious to systematic study, and to supply a language and terminology in which the maneuver of the unconscious could be expressed.

The positing of an unconscious as the eventual source and elucidation of human thought and behavior represented a fundamental trouble of the main streams of Western reflection which, since Aristotle, had held that man was in essence a rational being, talented of making free choices in the spheres of intellection and ethics.

To say that the unconscious rules our behavior is to problematize all of the conceptions

on which philosophy, theology, and even literary criticism have typically relied: the ideal of self-knowledge, the aptitude to identify others, the faculty to make moral judgments, the idea that we can take action according to reason, that we can conquer our crazes and instincts, the ideas of ethical and political outfit, intentionality, and the notion that literary creation can be a rational method.

In a sense, Freud assumed that we tolerate a type of 'otherness' within ourselves: we cannot claim fully to comprehend even ourselves, why we act as we do, why we make certain moral and political decisions, why we anchorage given spiritual dispositions and intellectual orientations (Moreira 1998: 689).

Even when one thinks of acting for a given purpose, it may be misleading itself; and much of its contemplation and action is not liberally determined by us but driven by unconscious forces which it can scarcely understand. Moreover, far from being in accordance with reason, the thinking is confidentially reliant upon the body, upon its instincts of survival and violence, as well as resolute features that cannot be dismissed the same as its size, color, gender, and social state. Freud recognized the complex essence of language itself, its openness and materiality, its resistance to clarity and its refusal to be reduced to any one dimensional literal meaning (Kharbe 2009).

Follower psychologists and literary critics, developing Freud's ideas, have extended the field

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of psychoanalytic criticism to encompass: analysis of the motives of an author, of readers and fictional characters, relating a text to features of the author's biography such as childhood memories, relationship to parents; the nature of the creative process; the psychology of reader's responses to literary text explanations of symbols in a text, to unearth dormant meanings; analysis of the connections between different authors in a literary tradition; examination of gender roles and stereotypes; and the operating of language in the constitution of the conscious and unconscious.

What underlies nearly all of these efforts is the perception of a broad analogy, fostered by Freud himself, between the psychoanalytic process and the production of a narrative. In a sense, the psychoanalyst himself creates a fiction: set off by a patient's neurosis and recollection of traumatic events, the psychoanalyst creates a coherent narrative about the patient within which the traumatic event can take its place and be realized.

Indeed, the influence of Freud's ideas was so penetrating that it can be seen in the very conception of character in many modern novelists, such as William Faulkner and James Joyce. "Feminist critics such as Juliet Mitchell have used Freud's vision in their explanations of the operations of patriarchy; others, such as Kristeva, have refined his notions in commitment their analyses of language and gender" (Kharbe 2009: 221).

Members of the Frankfurt School of Marxist thinkers, such as Herbert Marcuse, have engaged Freudian concepts in their analyses of mass culture and ideology. Other significant theorists include Brown (1985), Winnicott (1958), Deleuze (1990) and Guattari (1996), who have explored the ideological basis of psychoanalysis; and Lacan (1977a) whose psychoanalytic ideas had an important impact on critical theory.

The Self

The 'self' is a key structure in several schools of psychology. Usages differ between theorists and fields of study; however, in general, the self refers to the conscious, reflective personality of an individual. The study of the self involves important methodological problems, especially, concerning consciousness.

The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how people perceive and think about themselves. Self Concept is an important term for both social psychology and humanism. The self-concept is how we think and judge ourselves. To be aware of oneself is to have a concept of oneself. Baumeister (1999) supplies the following definition for it. "The individual's belief about himself or herself including the person's attributes and who and what the self is" (p. 38).

Self Concept

According to Shweish (2008), "self-concept or self-identity is the mental and conceptual understanding and persistent regard that sentient beings hold for their own existence" (p. 3). The self concept is different from self consciousness, which is an awareness or preoccupation with one's self. Components of the self concept include physical, psychological, and social attributes, which can be influenced by the individual's attitudes, habits, beliefs and ideas. These ingredients and attributes can be summarized to the general concepts of self- image and the self esteem (Shweish 2008: 3).

The Other

Fryer (2005: 72-74) asserts that for Lacan the Other is an unconscious construct, based upon the acts of other human subjects, but ultimately of a different order than the manifest social other. Thus, Lacan distinguishes between the other and the other, the former representing unconscious construct, the later another person.

Alienation

Alienation designated the process through which the subject identifies with the other and is thereafter determined by the other. According to Homer (2004), in the 1950 Lacan elaborated two moments of alienation and suggested that the subject was doubly alienated: first through the infant's misrecognition of itself in the other, during the mirror stage and second, through the subject's accession into the symbolic and language.

Alienation is an inevitable consequence of the formation of the ego and a necessary first

step toward subjectivity (p. 71). According to Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi (2013), it is futile to search for identity in the perpetual world of hesitation and uncertainty. Therefore, alienation is the final outcome of Self's struggle for security (p. 717).

Plot Overview

The Gift of the Gorgon explores the play written by one of the leading characters dead from the very opening lines. Edward has written a play as a letter to his wife, inspired by Ancient Greek myths. It follows the story of the goddess Athena and the famous hero Perseus. This letter is to ask Athena to help him in killing the Gorgon, which is a horrendous snake-haired monster whose appearance turns the beholders to stone. Knowing of Perseus's gentle heart and esurience for truth, Athena gives him her shield of showing so that he can find Gorgon by its reflection, besides, the shoes of Hermos, the messenger of god, to fly across the sea of destiny, the cap of darkness to fly invisibly in Gorgon's eyes, and finally, the sickle of Adamant, the blade to cut Gorgon's neck.

Perseus swears a vow to return all the devices back to their right place and leaves Athena to kill the monster. The story is, in fact, Helen's and Edward's life story. Edward has benefited from Hellen's ideas and fineness in composing his plays. Hellen was a Pacifist brilliant academic girl who studied in Greek mythology. Her father, Jervis, as a professor of literature, rejected Edward's violent ideas in Ancient Greeks. Opposing her father's desire, Helen contacts with Edward, and after leaving America marries him.

When Edward begins to write plays for money, Helen was always trying to balance his widely passionate, explosive and self-absorbing character which autonomously influences his plays. Gradually, Edward becomes famous and finds some fans. Passing sometime, he takes no advantage of Helen's advises and writes his works full of violence and revenge; and this is the fall.

Edward's selfishness had destroyed their life. Just like Edward's hero, Perseus, whose pride and greed caused him to forget his vow and reject Athena's worship, and at last, as Athena had warned, Gorgon's hunted head turned Perseus to stone. At the end of the play the audience witnesses a Clytemenstra's dance of violence and revenge performed in a bath of her husband's

blood. Edward throws himself down on the cliffs from a terrace. Helen hears his voice asking destruction and revenge. He asks to write his biography but Helen rejects by a solely ask of forgiveness.

Darkness: The Main Symbol of Alienation

One of the important issues that may lead the reader, or in terms of the plays, the audience to perceive the purposed concepts, is the setting. In the plays, settings are described in the form of the scene and decoration. In the description of the first act, Peter Shaffer has made use of a type of gloomy scene; the act opens as, "Darkness. A wind blowing; A light comes up on the coffin. Beside it stand Helen veiled in black, Katinia and four Greek villagers all in silhouette" (Shaffer 1993: 1).

In this description of the setting on the stage, several elements represent loneliness and alienation; the notions that in many terms signify terror. The first issue which may catch the audience's eye is darkness. In general, people who suffer from a type of otherness toward others prefer to live in a dark and gloomy place. On the other hand, the sound of wind is very low; if one is able to hear it, it means that the location is empty and no one other than the character is appearing the scene.

In this regard also it can be concluded that the characters are alone and alienated from others again. There are a couple of characters present on the stage; one is Helen and the other, the dead person in the coffin. The dead person's coffin is put in the darkness that obviously expresses that this person has been alienated in his lifetime, since no group of mourners are present on the stage. On the other hand, his wife, Helen is alone again, not only alienated from other people of the society, but also remained alone in the darkness.

The Major Characters and the Signs of Alienation

In the first act, Phillip has got back for the ceremony of his father Edward. He introduces himself through the mental picture of his father. As a matter of fact, he lives under Edward's influence. As a result, Edward performs the role of an inner identity for Phillip. Both his father and

Theatre are the Others for Phillip, and it finally leads him to self-alienation and following the Other's desires. According to Lacan (1988) "Our is the Other's desire and alienation is destiny" (p. 49).

In Lacanian terms, their desire differs from need. Need, such as hunger or thirst, can be satisfied; however, the desire is far beyond human primary needs and is not satisfied. In his opinion, desire and lack are mingled together inseparably. He defines desire as the result of demand minus need. "Consequently, desire is neither zeal to satisfaction nor demand of love; but rather the result of the second minus the first; it means the phenomena of their separation" (Lacan 1977a: 287). Phillip desires to find his father's identity which is even more valuable for him than for himself. This point is made clear in Phillip's statement to Helen:

Phillip: I'm sorry...I just thought that you might believe I wanted a bit of my own back. That would be absurd if you know what your husband meant to me - what he actually is to me, you couldn't possibly think such a thing; everything I am, everything I do, is because of him, his worship, that's my disease, if you like. Worship of theater. I got it from him even though we never met... (Shaffer 1993: 6)... I meant nothing to him, after all. When did he actually tell about me? Five years later? Ten? (p. 27).

In above quotations, obviously, Phillip is desirous of finding his father's past and identity in order to find his identity. On the other hand, he even feels alienated of his father who shares a similar blood with him. Phillip doubts if his father, as his past and identity, did really remember him. In this drama, Edward possesses a fractured character.

His need to love and zeal to fame and being distinguished results in establishing his life on the basis of vague images created in his mind. He is afraid of being forgotten; in fact, his acquaintance with Helen begins the illustration of his whole identity which he has, for years, concealed.

He always imagines himself, in the ancient Greek myths, a hero whose task is to establish justice according to his personal method; all his internal and external challenges turn around this axis. Anger, the offspring of Edward's self alienation to the real world and his real identity, along with his symbol of justice, that is revenge, make him a distinguished character in this play. He introduces himself to Helen as:

Edward: I'm a wastrel. Ask around. Most of Cambridge disapproves of me. Led by your father... here we're all so oblique. We're sick from *oblique*. Bloody deballed, self-conscious, your-serve-my-serve English oblique! There's nothing oblique about Agamemnon lying cut up in that bath. That's drama— clear and clean; Pure revenge, which means pure justice (Shaffer 1993: 16-17).

Many times things happen that the alienated characters sink deeply into their life's absurdity while remaining unaware about their status; however, in Shaffer's play, one of the leading characters, Edward, talks about his self-alienation as if he is obviously aware of his life's status. In the above quotation, he makes use of the term 'oblique' which means 'deviated'. Edward is completely kept abreast of his self-alienation and, seemingly, he does not feel the responsibility of his lack of identity in that he tries to, at least in play, revenge the meaninglessness of his life.

He goes on his statement in terms of revenge and says, "I told you sometimes you have to clean yourself with blood." (p. 17) He insists on not taking on the responsibility of self-alienation, and prefers to remove any meaningful existence rather than trying to give meaning to his lost identity. The following lines clearly illustrate that Edward distinguishes himself from all people, even from his father.

Damisinki (*to Helen*) Damisinki! I salute you, mademoiselle. Helen. (*Looking at Edward amused*) Damsinki? Damsinki. Why not? A good honorable name; It's only my son who is ashamed of it. Edward. It has nothing to do with shame. I want my own name, not anybody Else's. Damson is the right one for me; your damn son (p. 20).

Apparently, he considers himself as a boy who has never been loved by his father, and in response, he has changed his last name and he has chosen a name that represents his far distance to his father who can illustrate his identity. The 'self' that he does introduce to others is completely imaginative, and the result of his illusions and revengeful desires.

According to the following quotation, Edward has found Helen as the meaning of his life, and in no case he is. Edward. Don't leave! Helen. (*Angrily*) I don't need any more of this! Really! Edward. Please! (*He falls impulsively to his knees*) Look, I'm excessive, I'm extreme. I can't stop! Extreme Edward, it's my nickname! It'll be

on my tombstone: Here lies Edward Damson who lives his whole life in Extremis! ... Please stay... (Shaffer 1993: 18).

On the other hand, not only Edward has lived alone, his wife Helen has lost her mother as well; however, the difference appears while they talk about Helen's similarity to her mother that represents the possession of identity:

Edward: You have a mother? Helen: She died four years ago. Edward: I bet she was a professor too. Helen: How can you tell? Edward: Because you're steeped in it; it's obvious. Helen: Is it? Edward: You simply shine with learning. Rays of erudition surround you like a nimbus! (Shaffer 1993: 18).

For Edward, the Other is not the real world's language and religious principle; the Other is theatre that manages and possesses his internal desires and rewards a great mythic symbol to him. Edward. The theatre, of course the religion which can never die... It's quiescent now, like an old fire fallen in on itself, barely smouldering. But at its height centuries ago here in England just as much as Greece, the theatre gave us faith and true astonishment – as religion is supposed to do... (p. 21).

An alienated individual has not even a true religion and faith; in this regard, according to the nature of his humanity, he seeks to worship a supreme power. On the other hand, when Edward is alienated from all his identity, he tries to find it and his nature of a worshipper in the form of drama. On the other hand, he believes that he can regain his lost identity in Greece, the land of ancient myths; consequently, he forces Helen to marry him and move to Greece, when he says, "I know! I can't help myself! It's why we're going to Greece. Greece cures madness" (p. 25).

Accordingly, he believes Helen is the remedy for many of his disappointment; in fact, without Helen, who plays the role of a mother for him, Edward dares not even move to his utopia. Repeatedly, he expresses his need toward Helen during the time when he is not sunk in his imaginative and militant characters. Helen is a small other for Edward, as a mother whose child can consider and do nothing without her help.

Edward:...I'm mad. You got it right. Only you can cure me! Helen: Goodbye, Edward. Edward. For Christ's sake (*he grabs her*) Understand me. If you don't come with me, I'll never go there. I'll never see Greece. Ever! (p. 27).

Edward believes in punishment, and considers purification from sins solely through killing

or being killed. Gorgon is growing in Edward's mirror of mythic imaginations. A monster whose sight changes everything into stone; Edward confirms his fragmented self gradually, while according to Lacanian theories, he does not accept such disruptive in no means.

Edward: (*Seriously*) You see, if you don't truly atone in this world, if you don't make reparation for huge sins, you are eternally ruined. Your soul can't ever prosper in whatever system rules the after world. I believe this. Helen: Do you? Edward: Absolutely, the world is balanced through redress. The man who denies it is damned (Shaffer 1993: 28).

Writing a couple of successive dramas about Perseus, the mythic Greek hero and her worshipping goddess Athena, and putting them beneath Helen's pillow, Edward manifests another piece of his lost identity. Perseus swears to kill Gorgon, and then, by disobedience of Athena, it is transformed to Gorgon. Phillip. He will give you the monster's head- the actual source of paralysis and you will keep it powerless in your shield. (Pause) Which I guess, meant your love (p. 39). Success in play writing was impossible without Helen's assistance. She could control the violence and revenge, which Edward insistently followed for his plays; however, Edward's fame became her other enemy.

Helen: Almost immediately it went. Phillip: What? Helen: The health in the situation, overnight it seemed. Phillip: How do you mean? Helen: It was as if an intense light had been switched on - one of those they use to make plants grow quickly. Only what was growing in him was alarming; the wrong side of confidence (p. 47).

In the last scene of the play we witness that Edward forgets about his need in Helen. This results in his fall. He follows his internal beguiling Others and forgets one who played the role of his mother all the time; however, the Other, which is theatre, draws him to the end, because Edward does not obey the symbolic order which, according to Lacan, is the reason for human's honorable improvement.

Phillip: You'd only tried to save him. Helen: Being right was no vindication. I was his betrayer... like every liberal friend, we had who was embarrassed by the play, and sought to avoid us... but worst – much the worst of course, was theatre itself. Phillip: theater? Helen: Because it had let him down (Shaffer 1993: 65-66).

Edward, now, falls into frustration. After his rite and religion, that is theater, conquers him, Edward's internal Perseus breaks her swear and is damned to death. When there is no Other, one suffers from a type of lack. His fate is just similar to that of the Other. Now, he is looking for a lost Other; his son who has been neglected for a long time. Therefore, Edward travels to the Us to visit him; however, visiting his son does not present a remedy for his fragmented character and wandering soul.

Edward: I saw his mouth endlessly opening and shutting, giving artificial respiration to what was obviously extinct. Totally perpetually irrelevant! And I, on the other side of the glass, irrelevant too! Our images fused into one-the dramatist and the professor of drama-both unneeded (p. 76).

As Edward says, his image and that of Phillip are mingled together. As an image that the 18-months infant sees in the mirror as an Other, an unfamiliar Other. In this regard, Lacan (1977b) stated that "the mirror stage is a theatre whose internal forestage currents from lack to preparation; that is, while the matter deals with a special integration appeal, it creates the chain of fantasies that begins from the fragmented body of an image to its whole collected parts. I will call it orthopedic. Finally, through its loin determines the infant's complete mental growth and widens an alienating Other identity."

In accordance to Lacan, from the moment when the integrated image is regarded as proved before the fragmented experience, the subject is established as his own opponent (Homer 2004). In the last scene of act III, Edward punishes himself. He reaches to spontaneous hopelessness in accepting his identity battle and escapes free from his surrounding Others; however, the audience still witnesses an Other who fought against his image in his imaginary mirror to his death and was defeated. His last conversation with Hellen is:

Edward: I have taken for you the revenge you need. This is my gift to you: the sacred gift of vengeance. I have made you the instrument of my retribution- and my atonement. See it. This is the blood that cleans. Accept it. Dear girl, my sins are many and vile. I beg you, my injured lady, my maimed and learned love, accept this maiming in return; so I give up the Gorgon... (Shaffer 1993: 84).

Helen, another major character of this play, deals with a limited communication. Both her relation at first to her father and then, her communication to Edward as her husband clearly manifest this limitation. In both relationships, Helen plays the role of a mother who possesses no dialogue as a character in her play. For both men, that is, Edward and Helen's father Jervis, Helen is the myth and the goddess of love and wisdom, and both are in dire need of her.

Helen knows the ancient Greece myths very well, and while Edward speaks of his strange thoughts about revenge and violence in myths, she is absorbed to his masterly bravery, so that she leaves her father who has ever lived in the frame of laws and honesty. That is because she is in favor of the excitement as the result of having a man deeply in need of her. After her first meeting with Edward, she expresses:

Helen: As I walked home, objects seemed insistently clear, our door knocker in the shape of a fish with smears of Brasso on its head... at dinner, father sat chewing a cutlet, I saw the wrinkles round his mouth. No wife, and soon, perhaps no daughter. And then and there "soon" become "now". The fish jumped on the door, and it was all over for him (p. 23)

Now, Edward's interest as an Other for Helen is Helen's interest in leaving this principled frame. While her father is extremely opposing Edward and his violent ideas, Helen is interested in Edward's need in herself, "That was the wonder, you see, his need, I have never been needed. Depended on yes-not needed" (p. 27)

Helen has always been afraid of the end of Edward's need to her that means death, "my one fear was that his need for me would run out" (p. 27). Through composing theatrical letters to Helen, Edward engages her mind with the Others of his world; the ancient Greece imaginative Others which convey the symbols of real life for Edward.

In these theatrical letters, Helen is the wise Athena from whom the life and the meaning come and possesses the supreme power. She assists Perseus to demolish a monster called Gorgon through a shield symbolizing Edward's love toward Helen; in response, Perseus swears either to finish the battle or to die.

Phillip. ...I guess that's what's called dramatic license. He was drawing for you a playwright's picture of the Goddess of Restraint. A cool girl in a helmet who tames all monsters wearing killer

snakes: public furies who hurt people for justice and private Gorgon who turn them into stone (p. 39).

The presence of children as another member in this relation is prohibited. Edward hates children, perhaps because he feels his still need in maternal love; however, he is ignorant of his leaving a child in a few-days-long affair. According to her strong love to Edward, Helen neglects her need in having a child, and Edward's writings replace the child for both of them. In this case, theatre validates its influence upon Helen as a great Other. Helen wishes Edward's hopes. In fact, one's interest and wish are that of the Other, and the Other is always alive in her.

Edward: I can't be doing with all that, learned babies are impossible for me... it's a matter of choice, actually. Phillip. And you chose him? Helen. Of course! What I had with him was irreplaceable. And there (*she points to the growing pile of manuscript*) - that was our parenting! Our unique child... I watched it being born limb by limb. The only kind he would ever love (Shaffer 1993: 45).

In this example, Helen is completely separated from her real self. Whatever is important for Edward is important for her. Even after Edward's fame which is due to Helen's aids and his flirting with other women, Helen preserves her supporting role.

Helen: He is amazing what people accept, when they are needed. I showed nothing. I was his muse, remember. Above jealousy; The Noble presence without which the work couldn't be achieved... I took a role, and stuck to it-till it stuck to me (p. 48).

In act III, the audience witnesses that Edward, again, writes a theatrical letter to Helen, concerning the story of Perseus and Athena. This time, through Perseus's tongue, he tells Athena that there is no more need to her control; as a matter of fact, he rejects his need to the Other, and wants to live solely by his pure desires, "Perseus. I am no puppet to be walked by strings of your instruction!" (p. 47). Edward neglects Helen's aids as Perseus, and regards her attentions and suggestions from scorn and enmity.

As a result, this time he composes a play that, unlike former ones in which, through Helen's guidance, he avoided violence and revenge on the stage, contains hero's dance of championship after revenging her daughter's murderer. This leads to his failure on the stage. He relied upon

theatre as a religion, and this religion, knowing no boundaries, betrayed him, "Female Critic. With this kind of play, the author tells us the theatre can reclaim its moral power. All I witnessed was hysteria" (p. 64).

Helen finds about the secrets that Edward has concealed for a long time: he has a son, and he has visited him. This evokes Helen's hatred. Regarding all her dependence on him, this time Helen composes a theatrical letter to Edward in which Athena punishes Perseus by leaving her alone. In solitude, Perseus's internal Gorgon releases into her physical body, and she completely transformed into a monster.

By the son of her love, who has once demolished the Other, that is, Edward's inward Gorgon; however, at this time, she lets Gorgon to dominate all his existence, for he was not loyal to his swear, "Athena. Hear the truth at last! Unrestrained by the shield, the Gorgon turns her keeper into herself! Paralyzed becomes paralyzed as well. The victim grows vile" (p. 79).

CONCLUSION

The major characters of *The Gift of the Gorgon* manifest their identity and self alienation. Edward, the playwright of the play, has written a drama in which, Gorgon is the symbol of loneliness and alienation. His own alienation from his past is displayed in a play in which, his own character, Perseus loses her identity while separating from Athena, the goddess of love, who is in fact the representative of Helen in his life.

In this play, loneliness and self alienation appears as a monster to which the major character, Edward is constantly fighting, and finally, is defeated by breaking swear, and all his life is surrounded by Gorgon. This absurdity in the lack of identity leads the character to death.

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