

Depiction of Child Psychology in J. M. Coetzee's Boyhood

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Abstract

J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) is a fictionalized autobiographical work written in third person narrative. It presents world as a ten year old child sees it. In *Boyhood* Coetzee recollects childhood memories and candidly makes revelations about his experiences of school-life, family, friends, prejudices, discrimination, struggle etc. while expressing his innermost thoughts. Coetzee throws light on the hidden and unexplored mental workings of a young boy through *Boyhood*. The book is famous for its portrayal of racism in South Africa but the strong expression of children psychology in the work cannot be denied. It gives a clear cut idea about a child's deep emotions, anxieties and the way in which those emotions motivate a child's actions. The work attempts to probe into the psychological progress of a young boy belonging to a middle class family.

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One of the most essential part of a child's journey towards adulthood is the desire for independence, which is about, trying new things and making decisions independently. As a growing child he too seeks for independence- "At home he is an irascible despot, at school a lamb, meek and mild, who sits in the second row from the back, the most obscure row, so that he will not be noticed, and goes rigid with fear when the beating starts. By living this double life he has created for himself a burden of imposture."(13) So his innermost desire is to "somehow get beyond childhood, beyond family and school, to a new life where he will not need to pretend anymore."(13) He grows cold towards his mother and "he is steadily growing away from her"(35), however, he confesses "Without her he would be nothing."(35) Not only for himself but he holds the same view for others too. He seeks independence for the other boys of his age, for example, Juan, his cousin. He criticizes the way he obeys all the instructions of his mother, even when she is not present there. And the life that he spends in Worcester "leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring."(14)

A psychological concept, ego ideal, is the inner image of oneself as one wants to become, as mentioned in Salman Akhtar's Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis, can be associated with a description given in the memoir where he praises Horatius in the following words:

“Horatius and his comrades holding the bridge over the Tiber (‘Tiber, Father Tiber, to whom we Roman’s pray’), about Leonidas and his Spartans holding the pass at Thermopylae, about Roland holding the pass against the Saracens. He can think of nothing more heroic than holding a pass, nothing nobler than giving up one’s life to save other people, who will afterwards weep over one’s corpse. That is what he would like to be: a hero.”(25)

Children perceive the things differently than adults and the reason is their lack of knowledge as well as the worldly experience. They see things in a different light. His young mind is unable to understand whether Jews are good or bad. “In a minor way he feels comfortable with the Jews. The Jews are not so bad.”(21) His mind struggles that what should he trust, his own intuition or what his mother holds about Jews- “cunning and heartless”(22), unlike his father who defends Jews because his Jew employer is a kind and generous man. According to New Scientist, “CHILDREN do not see objects in a fully grown-up way until the age of 13”.

Descriptions like, “he wants her always to be in the house”(4), “his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father”(4), “Her hair streams in the wind. She looks young, like a girl, young and fresh and mysterious”(3), “dark-haired, dark-eyed, wary- looking young schoolteacher”(39) and “He does not want her to go”(4) indicate Oedipus Complex as the boy is physically attracted to his mother and several descriptions indicate his rebellious attitude towards his father in the text. His emotional attachment to his mother is clearly noticeable in, “No matter how indistinct the photograph, he can always pick his mother out from the group: the one in whose shy, defensive look he recognizes a feminine version of his own”(39) and “He is too close to his mother, his mother is too close to him”(37). His hatred for his father can be clearly understood from the statement: “he does not want to have a father, or at least does not want a father who stays in the same house”(43). Similarly, he expresses dislike for his father’s personal habits, in words, “He hates them so much that the mere thought of them makes him shudder with distaste”.(43)

He desperately wants to know that who is more loved by her- he or his brother. This feeling of competition with brother to get mother’s attention can be related with a psychological phenomenon called sibling rivalry. “Even his most ingenious questions- what if the house were to catch fire, for instance, and she had time to rescue only one of them?- fail to snare her. ‘Both of you’, she says, ‘I will surely save both of you. But the house won’t catch fire.’”(13)

He keeps school life and home separate. He feels embarrassed after he joins Boy Scout where his performance was too poor and because of sense of self consciousness “he breathes not a word to his mother”(17) about his failures. According to psychologist, Dr. Amber Elliot, in his *The Impact of Shame*, for children, says, “they experience shame every time they are unable to do what is expected of them.” He explains about the teachers and punishments in detail, where he expresses that, though he never got beaten, he wants to join in the conversation with other students regarding “cane”(5). When teachers beat students in school, in his opinion, the pain is

bearable but it is extremely insulting to be called out to be beaten, to an extent that “there will be no way out but to kill himself.”(7) So his mind is in constant struggle, he is neither able to join others nor he can bear the humiliation for being beaten by the teachers. Similarly, there are many descriptions where he emerges as an introvert, an independent individual and a thoughtful boy who keeps secrets that he shares with no one, even to the closest person, his mother.

Children tend to question about things more than adults. A child’s brain constantly develops and as a result he keeps exploring about things. It is curiosity that brings him to the street where the church was situated, secretly, when he learnt that Roman Catholics go to church every Friday. He “Nonchalantly he cycles past, pretending not to look”(21) and is excited to see the church closely but “he is afraid of stretching his luck, afraid that a priest in black will emerge and wave for him to stop”.(21) He makes all the efforts to find out his mother’s real age when no one seems to answer his curiosity: “In all these photographs, even the photographs with the baby, his mother strikes him as girlish. Her age is a mystery that intrigues him endlessly. She will not tell him, his father pretends not to know, even her brothers and sisters see sworn to secrecy. While she is out of the house he searches through the papers in the bottom drawer of her dressing-table, looking for a birth certificate, but without success.”(48)

His love for his mother is inarguable and this bond tends him to like Russians, secretly, as expressed in chapter five of the memoir. The reason that he gives for this infatuation is, his mother’s name Vera which is a Russian name. Moreover, V seems to be “an arrow plunging downwards”(27) to him. He likes letter R and for this reason he claims to be a Roman Catholic and prefers Russians over Americans. He likes everything which is related with his mother in some or other way, and this is how his mind works. He feels that whatever that is fascinating to him is sooner or later disliked by others. In his opinion, his mother is disliked by his father. His father and mother have contrast opinions regarding things due to which they often argue and he is always his mother’s side. It can be interpreted from the above facts that may be this conflict between his parents is one of the reasons behind his dislike towards his father.

He keeps his school life a secret that he does not share with even his mother. He understands the consequences; he fears about the outcome. He always maintains good score in academics so that “she will have no right to ask questions”(5) and considers it as a “contract he establishes in his mind.”(5) Elliott says, “Everybody, including babies, experiences shame if they feel that they are deserving of disapproval, negative judgement and / or punishment from others.” He never shares his experiences at school; how he is bullied; he is not allowed to join other students for assembly, for reasons that are unknown to him. He is asked at school about his religion and due to innocence; he does not know that what they want to hear from him, he answers ‘Roman Catholic’. This investigation disturbs him from inside. He is asked things of which he is totally ignorant and he suffers, “taunts of the Afrikaners and the interrogations of the real Catholics”(21), for an unknown cause: “Catechism? Confession? Communion? He does not even know what the words mean.”(20) Since he is exposed to such discrimination for the first time so due to ignorance and fear he replies what he assumes to be the best answer as per his knowledge. He understands the seriousness of this issue while his childish imaginary fear is well expressed in, “he blows away the papery red skins of the peanuts, which are reputed to collect in

the appendix and fester there.”(36) According to Better Health, “As a child learns more about the world, the list of things they fear tends to grow. Some fears are real and some are imaginary”.

His growing sexual awareness during adolescence has been vividly presented in the memoir. It portrays child’s sexual behavior by disclosing his feelings, choices and concerns during this phase. He lets his mother do everything except “to come into the bathroom when he is naked”. (34)

His sexual inclination towards Afrikaans is conspicuous in the following lines:

“He prefers tight shorts to loose shorts. The clothes his mother buys for him are always too loose. He likes to gaze at slim, smooth brown legs in tight shorts. Best of all he loves the honey-tan legs of boys with blonde hair. The most beautiful boys, he is surprised to find, are in the Afrikaans classes, as are the ugliest, the ones with hairy legs and Adam’s apples and pustules on their faces. Afrikaans children are almost like Coloured children, he finds, unspoiled and thoughtless, running wild, then suddenly, at a certain age, going bad, their beauty dying within them.”(56)

He is unable to understand the “desire” which arouse in him, “he is disturbed by the feelings that the legs of these boys, blank and perfect and inexpressive, create in him. What is there that can be done with legs beyond devouring them with one’s eyes? What is desire *for*?”(56)

He is curious to know whether it is only he, “in whom this dark erotic current runs”(57) or other boys too feel the same. He pretends to be normal but, still, secretly his mind is constantly haunted by a mysterious and unknown desire.

“There are hundreds of boys like him, thousands, thousands of girls too in short frocks that show off their slim legs. He wishes he had legs as beautiful as theirs”.(60)

He has several similar questions in his mind related to “softly inviting *s* and its mysterious final *x*” (57) and about how the babies are born. He is convinced by his mother that babies “come out of the mother’s backside, neat and clean and white”(57) and “other children were still being fobbed off with lies”(57) as they “argue for the other hole”. (58)

His curiosity for body and sexual function leads him to gather information about everything which is related with sexuality, “he pores over the pictures, particularly the photographs of marble sculptures, naked men and women with wisps of cloth around their middles. Smooth, slim marble girls fill his erotic dreams.”(107)

These revelations sufficiently present an adolescent’s psychology by depicting the mental conflicts that he experiences as a growing boy.

Not only sexual awareness but he also undergoes emotional development. In Boyhood, right from the beginning it is conspicuous that he learns about the discrimination that prevails in the society. There is a description in the first chapter, where his mother buys a bicycle but finds herself unable to ride it. She is not supported by anyone including his father. He too joins his father in fun seeing her unsuccessful but, “He is well aware what a betrayal this is. Now his

mother is all alone”.(3) Similarly, his sense of guilt is clearly expressed in the words, “he must bear part of the blame”(4) as well, when, she stops riding the bicycle. Further he adds that, bicycle was not his concern but actually “he wants her always to be in the house, waiting for him when he comes home. He does not often gang up with his father against her: his whole inclination is to gang up with her against his father”.(4) His confessions clearly convey that, though he joins others while making his mother’s fun riding bicycle but in actual it is his feeling of possessiveness or attachment to her and not the prejudice that women cannot ride a bicycle that is generally held by the people living there.

He empathizes with his mother when she stays outside in sun while he and his brother watch circus, waiting for them on Saturday afternoon.

“Inside, he is miserable, enjoys nothing; he suspects his brother feels the same way. When they emerge at the end of the show, she is still there. For days afterwards he cannot banish the thought: his mother waiting patiently in the blazing heat of December while he sits in the circus tent being entertained like a king. Her blinding, overwhelming, self-sacrificial love, for both him and his brother but for him in particular, disturbs him. He wishes she did not love him so much. She loves him absolutely, therefore he must love her absolutely: that is the logic she compels upon him. Never will he be able to pay back all the love she pours out upon him.”(47)

In the above passage, it can be noticed that not only he realizes her trouble but feels himself responsible for her condition. He feels it his moral responsibility to reciprocate the equal love that she actually deserves. However, he is totally clueless about his brother’s views regarding that situation. In chapter nine, he feels regret for throwing eggs instead of ball for pleasure,

“Yet his pleasure is tinged with guilt. He cannot forget that it is food they are playing with. By what right does he use eggs as playthings?”(64)

He pities the animals when they are slaughtered: “If buck know that there is nothing worse on earth than falling into the hands of men, and to their last breath struggle to escape, why are sheep so stupid?”(101) – And, he not only feels it inappropriate but takes action by refusing to eat that stuff. Such thoughts show his developing emotional maturity as he sympathizes with mute animals contemplating about their helpless condition. He holds a strong and independent opinion.

To conclude, the boy keeps commenting on the events occurring around him throughout the book and it helps the readers to understand a child’s psychology. As the story advances, a reader experiences the changes that take place in him; he questions; he doubts and tries to quench his thirst to understand the world on his own. He throws light on the nature of relationship among his family members, society, his growing sexual awareness, conflicts in school, and his sense of being isolated. He ponders whether he is the alone who undergoes all such experiences. It accounts a child’s perspective regarding the happenings and his mental struggle in a natural manner. It effectively expresses his various emotions, innocence, curiosity, likes-dislikes, passion, inclination, etc. and thus portrays the overall psychological development taking place in the child.

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