

Alexander Pope And The Persecutory Delusion

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Abstract:

Persecutory delusion in psychology, is a state of mind where a person perceives that he or she is being hounded or persecuted by almost everyone in the world. There are many causes that lead to this syndrome. Unhappy child hood, bitter personal experiences, inferiority complex and narcissism are some of the known causes. Alexander Pope, the greatest poet of the Augustan age, for all that we know of him, was a victim of this disorder. Pope, at a very young age, fell victim to an illness that led to what one could call a slight deformity. He was not a well-built and handsome man. And he had an awkward gait, too. His peers and contemporaries had always made it a point to look down or frown upon his physical appearance. The derision and frown at the hands of almost every one, turned him into a cynic who went on to depict almost everyone, especially those in his professional circle, as ruthless persecutors. This article makes an honest attempt to study the dissonance found in Pope without prejudice to his greatness and his unique contributions to poetry in general and the genre 'satire' in particular. For specific reference, Pope's immortal work AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT has been chosen!

Keywords: Persecutory delusion, Alexander Pope, Personal experiences, Narcissism, Inferiority Complex, Cynic, Bitter personal experiences, Schizophrenia, Augustan Age, Satire, Dryden and Pope, Derision and frown, An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.

OVERVIEW:

On close perusal of Alexander Pope's famous satire, AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT, it occurs to a discerning critic that he had suffered from a disorder which in psychology and psychiatry is known by the name 'persecutory delusion'. It is a state of mind that deludes a person into a belief that he or she is being persecuted by the whole world. The victims see enemies when there are none or perhaps very few. They generalize that the whole world is out to persecute them. Alexander Pope, one of the best poets of Augustan age, apparently had persecutory delusional syndrome as evident from his writings, especially his satires! One of his satires, AN EPISTLE TO DR .ARBUTHNOT, bears testimony to his state of mind!

PERSECUTORY DELUSION:

Persecutory Delusion is a serious cognitive dissonance of a human mind where in a victim perceives that he or she is being perennially hounded, attacked and victimized by almost

every one. Psychological studies, supported by medical science, have attributed many causes to this dissonance! A victim of persecutory delusion may have had bitter personal experiences in life. The person may have suffered from inferiority complex arising out of his or her physical appearance! The victim may have had some narcissistic personality disorder; a narcissistic personality disorder is a cognitive dissonance where a person indulges in excessive and abundant self-love!

ALEXANDER POPE:

Alexander Pope is easily the greatest poet of the Augustan age. It was an age when poets like Alexander Pope emulated classicists like Ovid, Virgil and Homer. Alexander Pope's contributions to the Augustan age are written in resplendent letters in the annals of English literature. While he had drawn inspiration from all great masters, he had a style of his own; a style quite difficult for any of the poets of the upcoming generations to emulate!

POPE'S EARLY AND PERENNIAL IMPRESSIONS OF THE WORLD:

Alexander Pope was born on May 21, 1688. A severe illness when he was young, undermined his health to the effect of a deformity. He was not a strongly built man. Neither was he handsome and nor was he of an affable nature; he was quite ill-tempered and was easily excited to passionate resentment. He was also denied education in a good school as he had been from a Roman Catholic background. He often grudged the desultory education he had received from an average school!! By the time he grew into a young man, his impressions about the world had been formed! He had grown to loathe the enemies (both real and perceived!) waiting to drive their daggers into his frail and deformed body. They were there everywhere; in his neighbourhood, in the town, in the countryside, in foreign countries and perhaps even among his friends!

His peers and contemporaries had some share of contribution to the plight of young Pope. They derided, frowned upon and even threw hateful glances at him. Many of his contemporaries had also grown green with envy as he was fast becoming an unchallenged craftsman of poetry. Pope indeed had no patrons. He never sought recommendations or endorsements from patrons and the nobles. For, he believed that his art was supreme and it would speak for itself across generations! Contextually, the following lines of Pope would describe his personality:

NOR FORTUNE'S WORSHIPPER, NOR FASHION'S FOOL,
NOT LUIRE'S MADMAN, NOR AMBITION'S TOOL,
NOR PROUD, NOR SERVILE.....
THAT IF HE PLEASED BY MANY WAYS,

THAT FLATTERY,EVEN TO KINGS,HE HELD A SHAME,
AND THOUGH A LIE IN VERSE OR PROSE THE SAME,
THAT NOT IN FANZY A MAZE HE WANDERED LONG,
BUT STOPPED TO TRUTH AND MORALIZED HIS SONG;
THAT NOT FOR FAME,BUT VIRTUE’S BETTER END,
HE STOOD THE FURIOUS FOE,THE TIMID FRIEND.

The lines from AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT,speak volumes of his personality.

POPE AS THE GREATEST SATIRIST OF HIS AGE:

English satire is believed to have taken birth in the twelfth century. It is indeed difficult to imagine any literature entirely devoid of satiric spirit! But it was not till some time after the Norman conquest,one could find compositions deserving the reasonable tag of satire. The masters like Ovid,Cicero and Horace had satirical references made in their works although the chief aim of their works had not been satire. So, it is difficult to bestow any unqualified greatness on these masters as exponents of satire.

English satire rested on the above flimsy foundations till the beginning of the reign of Edward III.The bards of the age were too happy to be singing about the king’s exploits and satirizing the enemies by throwing mockeries at them! The gifted poet, Langland lashed out at the church, the law and the trade through his THE PIERS PLOWMAN. Men like Geoffrey Chaucer contributed to satire, too. He had a style that was subtle and polite! There were a few poets who tried aping Chaucer’s style with little success. At the beginning of the 16th century, Skelton tried his hands at satire. In 1551, Thomas Moore’s UTOPIA took the world by storm. However, across all these eras, satire had only been incidental.

Finally, it all rested on John Dryden to teach how to produce effects through wit without the confusion of violence and vengeance. With his smoothness of style, lucidity of expressions and the choice of message, Dryden discovered a genre for the posterity. His MAC FLECKNOE and ABSALAM and ACHITHOPEL are exquisite examples of his craft.

Alexander Pope’s desperate sojourn looking for inspiration, ended at the libraries that had shelved Dryden’s satires. Burning his mid night oil, Pope diligently and laboriously scanned through Dryden’s works. The diligent endeavour ended with Pope perfecting the art of satire with his classical knowledge and well-earned craftsmanship. Now he had also discovered an opportunity to lambast the world for the wounds it had perceivably inflicted upon him. His basic claims to greatness as a satirist would rest on THE RAPE OF A LOCK, THE DUNCIAD and AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT although his other works too have satirical outlook. Those other works would qualify for another research work on Pope, incidentally. By the time he published the works mentioned above, he had already become the greatest satirist representing his era!

AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT:

This work is primarily chosen to illustrate and establish that Pope had persecutory delusions. This is one piece of writing where Pope spits venom at his detractors as ferociously as a wounded cobra does! The poem opens as a dramatic monologue. It is, however, addressed to Doctor Arbuthnot who had treated Pope for his infirmities of body and mind. As the poem opens, Pope asks his servant, John Searl, not to permit any of the poetasters to see him. They have come knocking at his door seeking appointment. All of them desire his friendship, patronage and intellectual support to enrich their careers. Pope knows, as such that these are men of mediocre quality whose works do not deserve any support or patronage. These men of inferior quality would hound him like dogs. They will tear him apart if he does not favour them. Pope is annoyed. He describes and rather dismisses each poetaster's ugly demand with the intellect only a satirist of exquisite quality could possess!

Pope further explains how innuendos are thrown at him for the ills of others. A person by name James Moore has been licentious and guilty of transgressing morality. And his wife, Lady Walpole elopes with someone. Pope's poetry and wits are held responsible for the above sins. Among the people waiting at the door, there is a person who had learnt to write poems by practising them on the wall with charcoal. Annoyed at their presence, Pope requests his friend, Doctor Arbuthnot to prescribe some medicine to get rid of them!

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR 'AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT':

As far as artistry, class, technical finesse are concerned, AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT is incomparable and remains one of the finest masterpieces ever written in the history of English literature. The satire has been a study for research scholars across universities over a century or so, now! The satire has earned the biggest approbation for Pope from men of no less eminence than Samuel Johnson and Lord Byron. In the Indian musical parlance, it is like a well-composed Indian classical song that flows like a smooth rivulet of Hindustani raga!

Pope's rhyme, rhythm and metre are of the highest order. While it is a scathing satire, it appeals to the faculties of the intelligentsia! No wonder, the poem had been discussed, analysed and appreciated at the coffee houses, motels and taverns by the wittiest men of arts and letters! What else could a poet ask for?

Pope's versification follows heroic couplet, a form which had been immortalized by Dryden!

However, he shows remarkable flexibility in addressing the limitations of heroic couplet. As against the traditional style of closed couplet, he allows the sense of one couplet to flow into the next lines so as to achieve the desired impact! And, one can easily conclude that as far as this new form of couplet is concerned, he surpasses his master John Dryden!!!

POPE'S PERSECUTORY DELUSIONS IN 'AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT:

The poem AN EPISTLE TO DR.ARBUTHNOT has been a classical piece prescribed for study in universities across the world. It has also excited passionate research in scholars from many popular universities in the world. However, as for the primary objective of this article, there are unpleasant observations a scholar has to make in regard to the symptoms of persecutory delusion expressively found throughout this great work!

The poem, in its typically classical style, lambasts the world for its maladies. It criticizes people from many walks of life although at the beginning Pope is seen expressing his annoyance at only the poetasters who have thronged in huge numbers to see him.

The narrative insidiously changes and an atmosphere of private quarrel and a brawl soon builds. It is not just the poetasters who have wronged him. It is now the whole world! There is a tenebrous spectacle of men of different social status waiting to pounce on him. Their social status and intellect, notwithstanding, they are bent upon tearing him apart!!!

If one were to be in Pope's shoes, a semblance of justification can be offered to defend his displeasure at the poetasters who have just besieged him. They are men of inferior quality who want an honest gentleman to butcher his conscience and help them earn name and fame. There are men who have shown professional jealousy at him. Pope's indignation at them is well-directed! Here one can defend Pope's reaction as a response precipitated by provocation from the poetasters! It would not be fair to attach any signs of persecutory delusion here!

But, as the narration picks momentum, one can see a different pattern. Persecutory delusion has different layers to it like paranoid schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder and bipolar disorder. Let us see some of these layers here:

PARANOID SCHIZOPPHRENIA:

It is a mental state of mind where a person loses complete touch with reality. The victim feels there are aggressive voices tormenting him or her. There could also be images of enemies waiting to cause physical harm. The victim's reaction to this perceived persecution is loud, boisterous, belligerent and aggressive. Engulfed by a sense of hysteria, the victim would scream out his or her aggression at objects that are in the vicinity or sight!

SCHIZOAFFECTIVE DISORDER:

This is one state characterized by abnormal thought processes and mood swings. Depressed moods, hallucinations, disorganized thinking and maniac behaviour are the explicit symptoms of this disorder!

DELUSIONAL DISORDER:

This is a state when the victim suffers from delusions. A psychiatrist or clinical psychiatrist could find that the victim perennially nurses false beliefs despite there being evidences to the contrary. The treatment of this state has always been a challenge to any medical practitioner. For, the diagnosis of the state has been more challenging than the remedy!

POPE AND THE DELUSIONS:

On close examination of all the couplets, a discerning mind can observe that Pope has been ruthlessly and unscrupulously subjective in his attack. A person with some knowledge of psychology would find some layers of persecutory delusion (already discussed earlier!) in his passages!

Dr. Arbuthnot, who is a physician himself cautions Pope against the far-reaching consequences of his attack on every one irrespective of their intellectual and social status. The physician says that if he has been in Pope's place, he will handle his detractors more modestly and politely. Moreover, he will also be discriminate in his choice of who should be attacked and who should be spared! But, Pope disagrees with him and impudently continues his attack!

Pope informs his readers that he has suffered a lot at the hands of his contemporary writers. They are flatterers who desire his friendship to gain ulterior motives. Some of them pretentiously dedicate their works to Pope. They praise him in pompous language which he abhors!

Pope is in an unforgiving mood. He exhibits abnormal behaviour by using vocabulary which does not befit a dignified communication. He defends his language by saying that his detractors deserve the worse response! The heights of persecutory delusion could be seen in the references of Atticus and Sporus.

SCATHING REFERENCE ON ATTICUS:

Mark Pattison opines that the reference to Atticus is at one hand a master piece of Pope's skill, but on the other, his base disposition as a man. There is a venomous malignity of rancour in the reference! The great writer, Addison is being caricatured as Atticus. Although Pope wrote these lines many years ago, he published it only eight years after the death of Addison.

Addison was a respected literary figure. He had great respect for Pope's work. He considered Pope to be one of the best in the era. On occasions, he had appraised Pope's work as any critic would do! Pope's temperament was such that any minor criticism of his work would be viewed bitterly and personally. This perhaps could be pope's reason to turn his guns at an innocent and innocuous Addison! Here, one can see that Pope is suspicious to the core; a symptom of persecutory delusion.

SCATHING REFERENCE ON SPORUS:

Sporus is the veiled name for Lord Harvey! According to Dr.Johnson, this is the meanest passage in the epistle! The original character, Sporus is a slave under Nero. Pope uses this name to refer to Lord Harvey with malice, hysteria and with bouts of schizophrenia!

Lord Harvey was one of the most accomplished public servants of his time! He was a supple politician and a parliamentary orator par excellence! Harvey was also a writer of some acclaim. His book MEMOIRS OF GEORGE II was well -received! His wife Mary Lepell had always been respected and admired by Pope!

Pope vehemently criticizes Harvey for being effeminate. Pope feels that Harvey(referred to as Sporus) has no public honour, what so ever! Pope's delusion touches a new height when he refers to Harvey as "ill-smelling and blood-sucking bug ".He further calls him a "a painted child of dirt".

In his fit of anger and schizophrenia, he compares Harvey with Satan. He also brings in a comparison of Eve and Queen Caroline. Like Satan tempting Eve, Harvey tempts Queen Caroline with his beguiling words. In his state of uncontrollable mania, he remarks that Harvey's words to the queen are comparable to the excretions of a toad!

UNDIAGNOSED VICTIM OF PERSECUTORY DELUSION:

Available evidences say that in Pope's time, medical science definitely did not have any advanced procedures to diagnose a cognitive impairment as serious as persecutory delusion. The layers of persecutory delusion mentioned earlier would have hardly been diagnosed either!

Today, medical journals explicitly state that the subjectivity of one's writings would throw basic insights on his or her personality. Anecdotal details of one's private life could also throw in evidences to form certain impressions (both clinical and general) on one's personality.

PREMISES FOR CONCLUSION:

Journals and books in psychology(both general and clinical) have been perused to study persecutory delusion in depth! Alexander Pope's specific works and anecdotal accounts of his personal life have also been obtained and analysed with the help of practising psychologists. Incidentally, the author is a practising counsellor and personality therapist, too.

Attempts have also been made to study Pope's relation with his contemporaries. It emerges that Pope had suffered bitter experiences at the hands of contemporaries who were basically inferior craftsmen. However, I have found that most of the men of letters respected Pope's exquisite art. Hence, personal attacks on some of these men of letters could certainly be the result of the persecutory delusion Pope had suffered!

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