

Unfamiliar becoming Familiar in Human Psyche: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's "The Stone Woman" and O. Henry's "The Last Leaf"

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Abstract

The psychological and psychotherapeutic theories and practices that make-up psychoanalysis were developed by the Austrian physician Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in part thanks to the clinical work of Josef Breuer and others. Since then, psychoanalysis has undergone numerous revisions and developments. Some of Freud's associates and pupils, like Alfred Adler and Carl Gustav Jung, went on to independently develop their theories. According to psychoanalysts, besides the inherited constitution of personality, a person's development is determined by events in early childhood that are often forgotten. Furthermore, human attitudes, mannerisms, experiences, and thoughts are largely influenced by irrational drives, but these irrational drives are unconscious. The attempts to bring these drives into awareness meet psychological resistance in the form of defense mechanisms. These inner workings of the mind and absurd patterns of operating create a lot more dark patches inside. They also involve processes of familiar turning into unfamiliar and unfamiliar turning into familiar resulting in uncanny alterations. This paper aims to take an account of the psychoanalytic assumption of 'unfamiliar becoming familiar' in the context of two short stories i.e. Shashi Deshpande's "The Stone Woman" and O. Henry's "The Last Leaf".

Keywords: Familiar, Unfamiliar, Psychology, and Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a type of therapy that looks at how the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind interact to treat mental problems. The prime concern here is to deal with uneven and irregular patterns of both 'familiar' and 'unfamiliar'. 'Familiarity' is how much the author is conscious of something in the context of the narrative. The reverse is 'unfamiliarity'. Familiar things become unfamiliar, and unfamiliar things become familiar over time. Suppressed memories, repressed emotions, wishes, and desires help one to get acquainted with things and sometimes, in turn, they become obstacles in the process of familiarisation. In both stories,

patterns of unfamiliar things becoming familiar and a few exceptions are identified. This familiarisation is of a kind that leads to deterioration of the physical health, and sometimes a step towards death.

The objectives of this study are –

- (a) To evaluate psychological elements in both stories and to show how the mental world shows various manifestations in the physical world.
- (b) To evaluate the impact of the author's mind in the world of the characters in the selected stories.
- (c) To analyse the connection between the mental world of beings and the physical world of things, how the mind creates familiar out of unfamiliar and unfamiliar out of familiar, and how this transformation leads to certain mental conflicts or complexes.
- (d) To examine the suppressed mental processes or desires that lead to certain abnormal acts in one's life.

STORY NO- 1

a. ("The Stone Woman")

Renowned Indian English novelist and short story writer Shashi Deshpande's *The Stone Woman* appeared in her "Collected Stories". The narrator of this story is a woman who goes with her husband to visit places of historical importance. She visits Chenna Keshava temple and there she sees fabulous architecture. The trilingual guide shows them various stone cuttings and carves, which disturb her too much, especially the women cut on the stone walls makes her feel sick. These disturb her mentally and emotionally. She is taken away from there by her husband to some shade of a tree. There she meets a woman who reminds her of her mother. At home, she feels uncomfortable and impure from the day's experiences, and takes a bath. Her husband remains a bit upset as well as hesitant about her abnormal behavior during the whole day. In the evening, she leaves her body in her husband's arms, and the hesitant man starts feeling easy.

Now, let's name the main characters of the story- M for the wife, and Q for the husband. When M roams around with her husband in and around the temple and the ruins, she feels sick due to the hot weather. She goes inside the shade. But she continues to feel unwell and uncomfortable due to the stone carvings. Those are not normal carves, but stone cuttings in the shape of women: women with attractive physiques, high breasts, and sensuous body structures. These stone-women are presented in various postures- looking at the mirror, making hairstyles, playing some instruments, dancing, hunting, and so on. The speaker says when the guide describes all the minute things; she enjoys all these as if she has been hypnotized. As if the speaker is talking about her. Therefore, the readers are told that she likes what the guide talks about women. She is not supposed to like all the minutest descriptions of a woman's body. This is somewhat an unfamiliar trait or state of mind shown to the readers, as at this instant, the highly expected feeling from hers side is either repulsion or contempt.

In the very first paragraph, another instance of the unfamiliar becoming familiar in the physical world is seen. Standing under the entrance M gives a gaze outwards, she could not understand what is there outside. It is shining in the sunlight like a carved jewel. After blinking her eyes only, she could see that it is a temple. This transformation in the optical realm marks the beginning of a transformation in the mental world too. This is the beginning of a realisation that proximity and close-view unravel a different side of the chronotope.

M feels awkward when the guide talks about the women in the stones. She starts feeling sick. The reason behind her feeling uneasy may be some incidents that happened to her in the past. She finds no divinity in these women, who used to dance to satisfy the gods. This is an ideological and cultural construct. But our speaker is a well-educated lady, who cannot consider these ladies to be less than whores. She must have some exposure to the lives of prostitutes, to speculate, in the guise of a rival to her mother, or even to herself. Or there may be some prostitutes whom she knows. These ladies who were unfamiliar till the point the guide describes, are now being gradually familiarised as some specimen of women, M harbours in her mind. Women, like these public ladies, may have been M's causes of tension for long, due to which whenever she sees them, she becomes sick. As a typical Indian housewife, she is very much possessive about her husband, therefore whenever she sees Q looking at the statues, she becomes jealous and insecure. M falls ill due to the excruciating heat; but, intuition says, it must be because of jealousy and her husband's importance towards the lifeless things. She may have a certain experience or fear about Q becoming weak towards some other woman, who becomes a rival to her, for which she feels insecure. Therefore, she cannot bear elongated moments with any woman- either living or lifeless. Gradual familiarization invokes certain memories or repressed fears, which lead to depression and insecurity, and then eventually to physical illness along with mental complexities.

Again, at another place, they see a clip of some women dancing densely. The guide says that a Queen used to dance there on the stage under the roof. Moreover, at another place she sees Chenna Keshava standing between both his wives. M could not bear it and she fell ill. She cannot bear a man having relation with two women, even if he is a god. Therefore she does not go to offer veneration or *pooja* to the god. Besides, when Q shows some interest in the abnormal-bodied woman, M starts suspecting him, and every other man she knows. Her husband also becomes unfamiliar to her, which hurts her; and the hurt-tone can be found till the end of the story.

At one point, M is seen recollecting the memory related to her bracelet, about which Q remarked that it was ugly. A man who does not have a keen sense of beauty to appreciate his wife's luxuries is not supposed to have a sense of beauty to have an interest in the descriptions of the guide. The episode is not about some platonic appreciation of beauty. He is interested because it is all about a woman's body. It might be Q's woman fixation, resulting from his psychsexual development during early childhood spent with women, mainly his mother.

Q also cannot take the matter lightly of the queen dancing for the gods. He asks the guide "The king didn't mind?" Here Q is a man, typically possessive about his wife. Even after having a

woman fixation, he desires a woman who is loyal to him. Here, the Freudian speculation as per the norms of Oedipus Complex goes like- it is his experience of not receiving love from his mother during childhood, despite his admiration. He must have sought her love but did not get it. Therefore, he seeks love from his wife as a substitute for his mother's love.

The reaction and visualization of M's mind to the words "She danced for the gods" is the display of a bizarre picture of a woman dancing on that smooth polished floor, a galaxy of gods lolling before her, dressed like the gods in TV serials, in plastic heads and tinsel crowns. Here, M is associating words and ideas with physically visualised figures, a way of turning unfamiliar into familiar. She has been dressing and making up the words to give them the guise of Rambha, Menaka, Urvashi, Indra, Pavan, Varun, and so on.

The impression of the motherly character is evident in the character of M. M finds her mother in the manner of the woman sitting under the Neem tree. The woman with her rude manner in asking questions, her motherly attitude towards a pregnant lady (she thought M to be so), and her tenderness towards the child sleeping on her lap. M associates each one of these activities with her experience with her mother and she attributes motherly characteristics to her. This brings her familiar mother out of the unknown and unfamiliar woman. Every incident or instance of 'unfamiliar becoming familiar' turns meaningful due to their association with past experience and imposition of already existing ideas upon some unfamiliar objects.

STORY NO- 2

b. ("The Last Leaf")

Prominent English writer O. Henry's 'The Last Leaf' was published in 1907 in his short story collection *The Trimmed Lamp*. In the story, two painters, Johnsy and Sue live together in Greenwich Village. They are young painters and work hard on their paintings. With winter quickly approaching, Johnsy suffers from pneumonia and becomes very ill. She thinks that she is dying. She looks out of her window and decides that when the last leaf falls from the vine, she will die. Behrman is an old man who lives in the apartment building with Johnsy and Sue. He hears about what has happened to Johnsy and decides to help. He is a gruff man, and no one thinks much about him. He hasn't worked on his painting in over 40 years but paints a vine with a leaf on it. He puts it outside of Johnsy's window and she sees the leaf is still there. Thus she revives. Behrman is caught by pneumonia and dies shortly after finishing his painting. The leaf that he has painted saves Johnsy's life.

Like the previous one, in this story also, patterns of the unfamiliar transforming into the familiar in the physical world are observed. The speaker (author) himself expresses, "In November a cold, unseen stranger, stalked about the colony, touching one here and there with his icy fingers. Over on the east side, this ravager strode boldly, smiting his victims by scores, but his feet trod slowly through the maze of the narrow and moss-grown 'places'." (Henry 1)

The blank space in the sentence is the place for the name pneumonia. Pneumonia has been personified here. The imposition or attribution of all human characters would have given it a vague identity if the name had not been provided there. A person who does not have a good idea of the disease will not be able to recognize Mr. Pneumonia as a disease.

Here the author is very hopeful regarding the duties and responsibilities of a person for his fellow human beings. He shows this through the character of the old painter, Behrman. The author, who cherishes a strong humanitarian sensibility, gives Behrman the responsibility of bringing Johnsy back to life and when the task is performed, he is murdered by the author. From the pages of history, it is known that O. Henry was writing stories in prison to provide his helpless daughter livelihood. This story too presents the same argument by making it clear when something is done with a true will to do good for others, the work proves to be good, a sublime one. Behrman's 'Last Leaf' becomes his masterpiece, like O. Henry's stories.

The noticeable instance of unfamiliar becoming familiar or familiar becoming unfamiliar is found in the association of one's life with a leaf. This is a very strange phenomenon as well as an extraordinary creation. Some instances are there like- a dying person associates his/her life with children or kins. The person dies peacefully whenever he/she gets a glimpse of the person he/she wants to see before dying. The intention of the author here is to confuse the general reader about the workings of the mind, which is depressed and hopeless. Johnsy associates her inner self with the falling leaves of the vine tree in the winter. For a common reader, this association carries no meaning. Every year winter comes and goes, and leaves fall and grow. Johnsy has a firm belief that whoever is attacked by pneumonia, never survives. Therefore, she has left thinking about worldly matters. Besides, while lying down on the sickbed she has got nothing to think or do. The one and only fellow being is the vine tree, which has been losing its glow day by day with the falling of leaves, almost like Johnsy who is losing her glow of youth. To Johnsy, they are the 'same boat brothers'. Therefore, she associates her life with her sole companion, with whom she shares a fate, the vine. She commits that they will continue their journey together. But the doctor, whose treatment Johnsy is undergoing, is no less than a psychiatrist. He understands Johnsy's condition well and allowed Sue to do anything she wants. Sue and Behrman at last manage to make Johnsy revive. The firm and static leaf becomes the boon to her life.

Here, the ideas of unfamiliar becoming familiar and familiar becoming unfamiliar are conflicting. The leaf on the tree is an unfamiliar thing for people because they do not have anything to do with it or know it closely. But when Johnsy integrates it with the life-giving essence, it becomes familiar to her. The last leaf itself becomes the life-giving essence. On the other hand, the leaves are the common familiar thing for everyone. But Johnsy's inner conditioning of it from a common thing to life-giving essence is unfamiliar to the common reader.

The transformation of familiar into unfamiliar or unfamiliar into familiar is totally psychological. “The mind is its own place and, in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven” (Milton). Here, the question is not of making things good or bad, but of the mind creating the things the way it wishes. Unfamiliar things become familiar due to the viewer’s frequent approach and recurrent visits. One’s intention too makes things familiar to him/her. This familiarization of ‘uncanny’ or ‘unheimlich’ things, gives the impression of getting the reality. But it is not so, it is the constructed reality only, perceived through the senses, and built through mental as well as outer agencies.

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