

A Psychoanalytic Reading of B.A Paris's *Behind Closed Doors*

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Abstract

The goal of the current paper is to analyze *Behind Closed Doors* by B.A. Paris in terms of psychoanalysis. The theories that have been used to understand the novel are: Freud's and other psychologists' theory of sadism and masochism or (somasochism), Freud's theory of psychopathology, Freud's theory of escape from the self as well as the theory of the re-enactment of trauma. The entire story is based on the life of a psychopath and his instigation to reenact the same incidents in his life.

Keywords: sadomasochism, psychopath, Freud, trauma

Introduction:

Psychoanalysis is a science that concerns itself with the interaction between the unconscious and conscious. Psychoanalysis was founded by Sigmund Freud on the basis that people can be cured by making conscious of their unconscious motivations and thought processes (Wright, 2013, p56). The relation of literature with that of psychoanalysis remains as old as psychoanalysis. The relation between literature and psychoanalysis is traditional in nature based on productive exchange on contents: "In solving the riddle of the Sphinx, Sigmund Freud unknowingly laid the foundations for a new school of literary criticism, for it was he who solved, as well, the riddle of Hamlet, and the riddle of Rebecca Gamvik of Rosmersholm" (Kaplan & Kloss, 1973, p.155).

In *Behind Closed Doors* by B.A. Paris, Grace and Jack Angel had seemed to have a perfect life. Jack is a handsome, successful attorney at Spring Eaton, England. However, appearance can be deceiving as Jack emerges to be a sadistic psychopath. After marriage, the beautiful home of Grace becomes her jail as she is refused to unsupervised contact with the outside world and gets punished cruelly on her escape attempts. Grace would have attempted suicide, but her sister Millie comes to live with them after finishing her school. Grace discovers that she needs to free her self in order to save her sister. The novel progresses to create a sense of suspense in every alternating chapter. Jack as a boy battered his mother to death and when he grows up, he continues to torture his wife. He also kills her dog and plans to murder her sister. The family dog called Molly was purchased by him. Jack reveals himself as a perfect host in parties and social gatherings and also devoted to his wife: "We go downstairs and in the hall, he takes my coat from the cupboard and holds it open while I slip my arms into it. In the drive outside, he holds the car door for me and waits until I'm in. As he closes it behind me, I can't help thinking it's a shame he's such a sadistic bastard, because he has wonderful manners" (Paris, 2017, p.11).

During his legal work, he is seen to defend a battered woman but acts in a contradictory manner at home. He is seen to have built a room at the basement without ventilation, which can be opened from outside. The room is painted in red and made in such a manner that if someone is locked then he or she will die without having anything to eat or drink or without air. In the end, Grace ends up murdering Jack (Fairbairn, 2013, p.208).

Main Text

Behind Closed Doors can be read from a psychoanalytic point of view. Psychoanalytic theory provides the dynamics of personality development (Rank, 2012, p.97).

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There are two prominent Freud's theories of psychoanalysis that include psychosexual development and neo-analytic theory. Freud provides the basis of personal psyche development as occurring through stages of libido. In this theory, he reveals that an individual who does not meet progress of a certain stage becomes fixed onto that stage (Fink, 2009, p. 108). Krafft-Ebing coins the theory of sadism and masochism to refer to sexual perversions by inflicting pain on others for sexual satisfaction (Fedoroff, 2008 p.311). Johann Heinrich Meibom first introduces the theory of masochism in his *Treatise on the Use of Flogging in Medicine and Venery* (1639). Lacan establishes sadism and masochism being related to an invocatory drive (Stark, 2011, p. 78). An integral part of Freud's findings states that sadism and masochism exist often in the same individual. Freud's theory establishes an intrinsic connection between masochism and sadism being active and passive aspects for a single perversion (1905d, pp. 158-159). He emphasized receiving and inflicting pain during intercourse being a common type of perversion and is an outcome of incomplete development in early childhood (Newmahr, 2011, p. 95). The depiction of sadomasochism can be seen in Jack as he inflicts pain upon his wife Grace. Jack has a successful career and a great house to live in. Jack enjoys as he inflicts pain on Grace, his pretty wife, and keeps her confined within the house. He keeps her available to himself only and limits her contact with anyone in the outside world, which reveals his sadomasochism nature: "I can't help thinking it's a shame he's such a sadistic bastard, because he has wonderful manners" (Paris, 2017, p.11).

The sadist Jack in this case drives pleasure by feeling power, authority, and control from the suffering of the victim. He reveals his unconscious desires to punish his wife. "The unconscious is the true physical reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs." (Freud, 1900, p. 613). Jack objectifies Grace whom he makes subhuman and whom he overlooks her mental state. Sadism acts for a replacement for an uncomfortable feeling where as masochism through role of subjugation provides release from stress or a burden (Vickery, 2009, p. 207).

Freud defines psychopath as being someone who inflicts misery, pain and even death on others without empathy or conscience. He assumes psychological problems being rooted deep within the unconscious mind which manifest into symptoms by certain disturbances (Kline, 2013, p. 85). Typical causes of psychopathy involve unresolved issues during early development or any repressed traumas (LaHaye & Jenkins, 2011, p. 64).

Freud analyzes a psychopath's behaviour from biological and clinical grounds. His understanding of the psychopath reveals that "there are two traits that are essential for a criminal, boundless egoism and a strong destructive urge. Along with these two traits exists a common expression of absence of love and lack of emotional appreciation" (1928, p.178). A psychopath's personality can be defined as a character affected by the absence of emotional attachment to others. Freud's definition of the psychopath's concept is focused on no attachment, no love, and no mercy. In the novel, Jack had been seen to kill his mother at an early stage:

Tuned, I sat down on the bed, reading the message over and over again; convinced I had misunderstood it in some way. I couldn't believe that Jack would have written something so cruel or been so cutting. He had never spoken to me in such a way before; he had never even raised his voice to me. I felt as if I'd been slapped in the face. Surely I deserved some explanation and, at the very least, an apology? I needed to talk to someone, badly, so it was sobering to realize there was no one I could call. My parents and I didn't have the sort of relationship that would allow me to sob down the phone that he had left me by myself and for some reason I felt too ashamed to tell any of my friends. Where had the perfect gentleman I'd thought him to be gone? Had it all been a facade, had he covered his true self with a cloak of geniality and good humour to impress me? (Paris, 2017, p.33)

The novel reveals that Jack spent his childhood in a house where his father used to imprison and beat his mother. So, he lived in a house devoid of love. The result is that there is no emotional attachment that has been seen in Jack's character towards his parents. Attachment is biologically-based behavioral system that provides survival since infancy by maintaining closeness to the caretaker (Felthous & Sass, 2008, p.336).

This is a pre-requisite of human characteristics to be biologically dependable and lovable which is able to provide secure attachment in the lifespan (Eysenck & Wilson, 2013, p. 116). As an adult and married, Jack continues to feel no attachment towards his wife upon whom he inflicts pain and misery. He also plans to kill his sister-in-law to inflict further pain upon his wife.

The concept of the self has a high place in psychology as it includes familiar and colloquial meaning (Mannoni, 2015, p. 46). The meaning comprises of one's physical body and one's identity (Ewen & Ewen, 2014, p. 31).

Masochism has a paradoxical nature especially from the perspective of psychology of the self. Masochism reflects an unusual probable and powerful effective means of escape from self (Fuss, 2013, p. 178). Escape from the self includes motivated loss of self-awareness as during masochistic episode a person forgets one's own identity. According to Freud, during escape from self, the ongoing activity and reality from the self remains suspended (Boothby, 2014, p. 200). The sense of self is reduced to bare minimum and is deconstructed when being a sadomasochist. It includes an engrossing game or drama where normal activities remain suspended as masochists cease to be their normal selves and become someone else (Lacan, 2013, p. 66). This depiction can be seen in Jack's character too as he reacts in a different manner when he is playing the host and becomes someone else when he is alone with his wife. The theory does not state that a masochist removes all characteristics from self-awareness altogether. Also some features of masochism such as embarrassment in the presence of audience to promote self-awareness has been seen in Jack's character.

In psychoanalysis, it has been said that a victim experiencing trauma often experiences a wide range of psychiatric symptoms. These include intrusive recollections of trauma, avoidance, numbing of stimuli that can be seen associated with hyper vigilance, anxiety and other symptoms which can indicate enhanced arousal (Covels & Galloway, 2009, p. 121). In psychoanalysis, it can be seen that traumatized individuals recreate such traumas in their lives, and that is referred to as reenactments (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008, p. 107). In Jack's life, he recreates such traumas that he faced earlier in his childhood and reinforces them on his wife. Freud in his theories states that individuals who have experienced trauma in their past are more likely to repeat their repressed emotions as their contemporary experience (Daud, Klinteberg & Rydelius, 2008, p. 225). In some cases, obligatory repetitions of past experiences might have several impacts. Trauma survivors are often psychologically vulnerable. In the current novel, it can be said that Jack had faced some past stigmas which he becomes prone to repeat during his current life events with his beautiful wife as well. He inflicts pain and even plans murder of his sister-in-law as a reenactment of trauma. He tries to inflict as much physical and mental pain as possible on others, reconstructing possibly from his past experiences.

The psychology of the wife in the novel can be seen to have been affected negatively in a deep manner. When married, she saw her life differently as she saw a well-settled life with a loving husband with a stable career at a posh location in England. She started off her life with some of the greatest promises and with a great future only to end up in misery that Jack was a psychopath. When she was locked up in the room with thick curtains and was physically abused with her calls being overheard, her entire dreams shattered. She felt imprisoned within her own life. She saw her life being trapped inside a house and not being able to do anything in free will and this caused her greatest pain. At every step, she was monitored and found all her freedom to be curbed. She was battered almost regularly in case she failed to abide by Jack's orders. From the psychological trauma that she received, her entire mental framework changed and she wanted to undertake reenactment herself. Having faced so many traumas, Jack's wife at the end can be seen to plan the murder of Jack, which can be seen to be an act of reenactment. She wanted to recreate her past experiences and recreate the same punishment for Jack.

Conclusion

Behind Closed Doors reveals the spin-chilling psychological experiences of Jack and Grace. The story starts off quite normally reflecting the normal life of a couple well settled at a posh location. But the turning point in the novel arises when Jack's wife discovers his psychopath nature. The entire story is based on the life of a psychopath and his desire to inflict pain on others. Various psychoanalytic theories have been applied to understand the situation of each character within the novel. To apply psychoanalytic theory to *Behind Closed Doors*, it means applying specific theories originating from the work of Freud, and theorists who have followed him. This paper attempts to analyze *Behind Closed Doors* as psychic phenomena. Some of these theories are Freud's and other psychologists' theories of sadism and masochism or (sadomasochism), Freud's theory of psychopathology, Freud's theory of escape from the self as well as the theory of the re-enactment of trauma. So, this paper has used psychoanalysis to explain *Behind Closed Doors*.

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