

MASOCHISTIC TENDENCIES IN “THE WOMAN WHO LOST HER MAN” BY SADEQ HEDAYAT

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ABSTRACT

Writings of Sadeq Hedayat have long been the subject of controversy. In his stories he psychoanalyzes his characters, while criticizing social norms and blind religious beliefs. In this story, too, he portrays his protagonist as a masochist with intricate psychological complexes stemming from her past. The Woman Who Lost Her Man is the story of a helpless woman travelling from Tehran to Mazandaran in search of her sadistic husband. The paper in hand aims to shed some light on the roots of her masochistic attitudes which mostly stem from her childhood. The first part of the paper is allotted to the definition of masochism and an explanation of its subtypes, discussing which type of masochism the protagonist is suffering from. The second part deals with the roots of this disorder while inspecting her childhood, and its development in her personality. In doing so, Freud's theories of psychosexual development and defense mechanism have been utilized.

Keywords: *Hedayat, masochism, mental disorder, childhood, parenting*

Introduction

Do you like to be beaten? What about being choked or whipped? Believe it or not some people answer these questions with a firm YES!

Generally speaking, the desire to be hurt and finding pleasure in pain are symptoms of a personality disorder called masochism. “Although masochism is most popularly associated with a sexual perversion in which sexual pleasure is derived from pain, in a larger sense it simply refers to a personality structure based on submission and dependence” (Charme 221). People with this disorder (i.e. masochists) enjoy receiving pain, and it gives them a sort of satisfaction. Hedayat in his short story *the woman who lost her man* portrays the desires of the protagonist to be beaten, hurt, and humiliated by her husband. The protagonist - Zarrin Kolah - is a country girl travelling to Mazandaran to find her husband - Gol Babu - who has abandoned his wife and their son for no reason. On her way she thinks of her husband, his muscular limbs, and of how charming he would look when he whipped her. Even the reminiscence of his aggressive behavior is pleasing to her. By presenting these desires in her character, Hedayat introduces his protagonist as a masochist. Masochistic tendencies are proved to have roots deep in childhood. Before delving into the discussion, a definition of masochism is provided for better understanding of the issue.

Definition and subtypes

Commonly referred to as a personality disorder, masochism is generally defined as the enjoyment of or at least not avoiding what appears to be painful. In spite of its enigmatic nature masochism prevails in thoughts and acts of our everyday life. Overeating is a manifestation of masochism in our life. We are totally aware of disadvantages of overeating, but we keep doing it until it hurts simply because we find it pleasurable. Masochism is identified as a disorder because it is the opposite of what Freud calls “the pleasure principle”. According to Freud human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain instinctively “to satisfy their biological and psychological needs” (Lopez, Pedrotti, and Synder 140). In fact, it is this very force that shapes our behavior and most of the choices we make. Imagine a person who is on a diet, and he is trying his hardest but can not resist the temptation of eating a juicy hamburger. This person eats the burger because he seeks pleasure, but the pleasure principle does not work out correctly for him because it did not help him avoid the pain to come (e.g. obesity). The same mechanism is applied to masochists due to the malfunction of their pleasure principle. “If pain and unpleasure can be not simply warnings but actually aims, the pleasure principle is paralysed - it is as though the watchman over our mental life were put out of action by a drug” (Freud 274).

Considering the attitude, thoughts, and desires of Zarrin Kolah she seems to be having symptoms of at least two types of masochism with regard to her tough childhood. In his 1924 article *The Economic Problem of Masochism* Freud distinguishes three fundamental types of masochism: erotogenic, feminine, and moral.

Masochism comes under our observation in three forms: as a condition imposed on sexual excitation, as an expression of the feminine nature, and as a norm of behavior. We distinguish an erotogenic, a feminine and a moral masochism (Freud 276).

Erotogenic masochism which Freud called “pleasure in pain” is a precondition for sexual arousal. Erotogenic masochist does not satisfy sexually unless he is bound, choked, gagged, etc. The author implicitly tells the reader that Zarrin Kolah’s masochism is not of this type, otherwise she would not enjoy making love to her husband the usual way. “Two months were passed happily . . . the nights were spent in fondling and love making, . . .” (456). The second type of masochism or feminine masochism which is more common in men than in women, bounds excitement and pleasure to infantilization. The masochist desires to be treated like a naughty child and to be brought back to a childlike state in which he is being punished. “Feminine masochism refers to normal female psychological development of which suffering is the consequence of the pain associated with childbirth, menstruation, and defloration” (Fuller 9). Accordingly, we may call Zarrin Kolah a feminine masochist, because she would obviously enjoy being treated like a helpless child. “She felt herself weak and frail before Gol Babu, and the more she was whipped by him the more she loved him” (457). The third type or moral masochism unlike the other two is non-sexual. The other forms of masochism demand the suffering to be caused by the loved person, but in this type the suffering itself is the main focus. Freud asserts that moral masochism originates from an unconscious sense of guilt. “We were able to translate the expression ‘unconscious sense of guilt’ as meaning a need for punishment at the hands of a parental power” (Freud 282). Zarrin Kolah has always been blamed for the death of his father, and her mother believed it is her fault that her father died. By adding this point to the story the author simultaneously reveals the reason of her mother’s hatred and also

the unconscious sense of guilt which makes Zarrin Kolah think she deserves all the humiliation and beating. "Moreover, her mother favored Zarrin Kolah's sisters because just before Zarrin Kolah had been born her father had died" (451). Thus, beside feminine masochism she suffers from moral masochism too.

Origin and development

Based on Freud's theory, children go through three stages of psychosexual development during their first five years of living, and these years play a determining role in developing their personality in adulthood. Each stage -oral, anal, and phallic- regards one erogenous zone as the source of pleasure for the child who becomes aware of each zone during a specific period of time. Experiencing any frustration or overindulgence in the process of satisfying the libido in each phase manifests itself as a neurosis, sexual deviation, anxiety, etc. which persists into adulthood. "According to Freud, the ways in which parents manage these sexual and aggressive urges in the first few years of their child's life play a major role in shaping their children's personalities" (Kipp, and Shaffer 43). "Freud (1905) first saw masochism as derived from a child's powerful aggressive, sadistic feelings rooted in ambivalence towards the mother in the anal stage which, out of anxiety, were turned back onto the self" (Steyn 865). Vividly, parental misbehavior and poor nursing have destructive effects on shaping the personality of the child. In the case of Zarrin Kolah the author has demonstrated this fact by describing her mother's cruel attitude toward her, and all the humiliation she endures which lead to the formation of her submissive personality and lack of self-esteem. Hedayat perfectly depicts his protagonist as an embodiment of a collection of mental disorders. Through the course of the story the author abundantly makes references to all the bullying and harassment Zarrin Kolah has tolerated in her childhood. By making flashbacks to her childhood Hedayat shows us the causes participating in the formation of her frail disordered personality: "She has been tormented and insulted all through her life. From childhood her mother used to beat her, give her a piece of bread, and send her out to play with the bald and sore-eyed children" (452).

But is there really nothing she could do? Or she preferred not to protest and remain silent on purpose? In *The Psychiatric Interview in Clinical Practice* the origin of this passivity toward misbehavior is illustrated: "As a child, the future masochistic patient overemphasizes passivity and submissiveness, expecting that this will lead to approval and affection from others as well as protection from their wrath" (Buckley, MacKinnon, and Michels 210). Thus, being humiliated and living in degradation becomes a norm for Zarrin Kolah, and she gets used to these manners so much that she cannot even adopt a normal way of life. The misbehavior and humiliation which have been an integral part of her life since her early years, play such a leading role that she is not able to live without them. Her need to be beaten and humiliated resembles an addiction-like tendency. Like an addict who cannot survive without opium more than a few days, Zarrin Kolah, too, does not know how to live a normal life without being hurt and debased. This addiction makes her travel all the way from Tehran to Mazandaran in search of her sadistic husband, no matter what comes her way or what his reaction may be. "She was going to find him at any cost, even if he was married to someone else and would reject her. It was enough for her to be near him" (460).

The author shows the depth of her mental disorder and its severity at the end of the story when her dream castle collapses and she faces the truth. Zarrin Kolah who has spent more than a month dreaming of Gol Babu finds another woman with the brand of whipping on her body clinging to his arms. Although she is jealous of his new wife, she surrenders her husband and immediately finds a surrogate who in her eyes seems to represent Gol Babu's sadistic qualities, and therefore satisfying her masochistic needs: "She did not know why she had asked for a ride or where she was going, but she thought: 'Perhaps this young man also has the habit of whipping and his body has the smell of donkeys and the stable'" (466). This act of Zarrin Kolah could be justified through one of Freud's defense mechanisms called Displacement. Generally speaking, "displacement refers to altering the target of an impulse" (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1093). By asking the young man for a ride in fact Zarrin Kolah has located him in Gol Babu's place as a means of satisfying her masochistic needs. Now that the main means (Gol Babu) is out of her reach, whether due to unavailability or prohibitions, by displacement she finds another substitute. Her only wish is the satisfaction of her needs, even at the cost of leaving her little son who was nothing but a burden to her.

Conclusion

Like most of other mental disorders masochism stems from personality development in childhood. It is a dysfunction of pleasure principle which supposes human beings normally seek pleasure and avoid pain. Masochism, declares Freud, is divided into three subtypes: erotogenic, feminine and moral. He also puts great emphasis on the important role that childhood plays in the formation of personality and mental state of the individual. Based on Freud's theory, experiencing any frustration or overindulgence in the satisfaction of libido during any stage of psychosexual development causes a neurosis in adulthood. In his short story *The Woman Who Lost Her Man* Hedayat demonstrates how childhood incidents affect the life of his protagonist in adulthood. Any deficiency in patterns of parenting has irretrievable effects on the personality of the child; effects that transmit from one generation to another.

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