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A PSYCHO-ANALYTICAL APPROACH ON THE CHARACTER OF THANOS: A DESTRUCTIVE IDENTITY

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Abstract: Literature is often understood as the reflection of life. In the world of Literature, there are various types of characters that one can literally identify oneself in reality. Amidst these various characters, there are some characters that are driven by destructive behaviors. Freud calls this destructive force as death instinct, also known as Thanatos. It must be noted that, in the physical world, there are indeed some characters that are also driven by death instinct which often results to violence and destruction.

With reference to the character of Thanos in the comic series, *Thanos Rising*, this research aims to formulate an answer towards the ultimate aim of life for such characters that are driven by Death drive. This research strictly intends to abide by the Qualitative research method and tries to be as original as possible based on the primary text, i.e. *Thanos Rising*. By applying Freud's psychoanalytical theory of death drive, the researcher hypothesize that the growth of destructive behavior in an individual character is shaped as such, due to traumatic experience that an individual faces during childhood days whereby the society itself plays an important role in shaping the identity of an individual.

In conclusion, various factors are responsible for the growth of destructive behavior in an individual. Therefore, the destructive formation of an identity cannot be fully justified basing it on only one factor. Nevertheless, research based on single factor is as important as any other as it makes possible and easy for other researchers to gain deeper insights relating to similar research topics.

Keywords: childhood trauma, death drive, identity, Sigmund Freud, Thanatos.

Introduction

Destiny is a predetermined state that cannot be altered, or changed. All living beings are destined to die one day or the other. But the desire to live and the instinct to survive is something that exists within each and every one of us and therefore, we live our life according to universal human experience, whereby deriving pleasures as long as we are alive. Freud calls this desire, or instinct to live and survive as life drive, also known as Eros. But in the midst of attaining pleasure, we are also opposed by self-destructive thoughts which Freud calls it as death drive, also known as Thanatos- a pattern of behavior that involves destruction, jealousy, hatred, aggression and violence.

Freud supposedly says “If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons- becomes inorganic once again- then we shall be compelled to say that ‘the aim of all life is death’ and, looking backwards, that ‘inanimate things existed before living ones’” (Freud 246). Every living being has an “instinct to return to the inanimate state” (Freud 246). Disregarding the external factors i.e., accidental deaths, intentional deaths, murders, and hence forth, that result to death, our tendency to return to an inanimate form is a predetermined state which we call as death due to an end of life expectancy. Freud further states:

For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *detours* before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts, would thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life. If we firmly maintain the exclusively conservative nature of instincts, we cannot arrive at any other notions as to the origin and aim of life (Freud 246).

Due to external influences, there are some people who diverges themselves into taking detours to achieve the ultimate aim of life which is death. These external influences divert them from their original course of life. In today’s modern world, the various several instances of death due to external factors can very much exemplify the statement of Freud. Thus, one may assume that there are no other notions besides death that we can arrive at with regard to the ultimate aim of life because the aim of the conservative nature of instinct itself is to conserve and preserve life as long as possible before death which then infact points to us that death is the ultimate end.

Meenakshi Faith Paul, a researcher from Himachal Pradesh University in *Eros and Thanatos: A Study of Three American Novelist* says that Eros is displaced in the life of an individual due to the presence of Thanatos. With reference to *The Bluest Eye*, Meenakshi points out a racist society that claims whiteness as the ultimate beauty, and blackness as ugly which is infact responsible for the manifestation of Thanatos and

degradation of Eros in the life of a black girl. Meenakshi writes, “Childhood portends the flowering of a person but *The Bluest Eye* depicts the withering of this promise in the life of the black girl-woman, Pecola Breedlove, because of a hostile environment, weak roots, and the tender fragility of innocence” (Paul 103). Since Pecola is unable to find Eros in reality, she creates her own world of illusion whereby Thanatos works as the driving force in her life. The will to live a happy and beautiful life is subdued and submerged by a racist society that eventually leads her to a state of madness.

Gupta Pallavi, a researcher from University of Jammu in *Eros and Thanatos: A Study of Women in the Selected Works of Girish Karnad* comes up with an interesting approach by stating that “The purpose of Thanatos in Indian context is to destroy and ‘put to death’ all those elements that are causing stagnation in society” (Pallavi 107). Pallavi takes reference of Goddess Kali as the embodiment of Thanatos and points out that the aim of Goddess Kali is to destroy evil, or darkness that are present in the society.

Manifestation of Thanatos in Thanos

The origin of Thanos is found in the comic series *Thanos Rising* by Jason Aaron. In the planet of Titan, Thanos is born as a deformed baby with purple skinned tone and an abnormal strength unlike any of the inhabitants on the Titan planet. The reason why he was born as a deformed baby was due to the result of genetic mutation.

Life for Thanos as a child was not easy but rather it was hard. Like a child who got lost from his parents, Thanos needed direction and guidance. Instead of being guided with love and care, he was guided by hatred, resentment, and destruction. As a child, Thanos was vulnerable, fragile, and lonely. He needed someone in his life. He was a pacifist who hated death, violence, and war. Like any other child, Thanos loved exploring new things in life. He also developed the feeling of love for a mysterious girl.

Since Thanos was different from his peers, he starts his search for identity from his early childhood days. In order to find out who he truly was and why he was different from other children and his people, Thanos starts to conduct and perform various experiments and research. Eventually, his search for identity drives him mad, whereby he is unable to stop himself from finding out the real truth even if he had to kill his own parents and his people.

Thanos did not get any love from Sui-san who was his mother. His mother tried to kill him the day he was born. His mother despised him because of his appearance and calls him a monster. Sui-san tells A'lars “Look at its eye! Don't you see the death in its eyes!? If we don't kill it now, we're all going to die” (Aaron). She sees Thanos as the reincarnation of death and believes that Thanos would kill all of them in the future.

On the other hand, Thanos's father A'lars was a scientist who had explored far and wide and had performed a lot of experiments throughout his whole life. When Thanos was born, he saved him from being murdered by Sui-san. He called Thanos as "the child who refused to die" (Aaron 1). Although he loved Thanos, he never gave any of his time to spend with Thanos as he was always engaged with his experiments. He neglected his duty as a father to take care of his own son.

As parents, both Sui-san and A'lars fails to be the ideal figures for their son. All that Thanos needed was someone to love and someone to love him back but he did not get it either from his mother or from his father. He was lonely and needed someone in his life but he had no one with whom he could share and spend time with. Thus to free himself from the prison of loneliness, Thanos killed and experimented on others. He says "I killed them because I had too much love in my heart, and no place to put it, no one to give it to. I killed them because I like it. Because killing someone is the only time . . . I don't feel alone" (Aaron).

Inorder to find out his identity, Thanos kills his own mother. He says "I'm sorry, mother. But the key to who I am . . . is somewhere inside you. And once I've found it and cut it out of you... I won't have to be a monster anymore" (Aaron). It must be pointed out that, Sui-san's prediction about Thanos as the destroyer of the Titan planet turns out to be the truth because Thanos infact brings death and destruction in the whole Titan planet.

Inorder to do away with his boredom, and loneliness, Thanos immerses himself in art where he expresses his emotions and feelings. In the comic, he draws a picture of a death beast which was decaying and almost left with only its bones. The picture of the death beast becomes a symbol that represents the nature of who Thanos would truly become in the future. The picture also symbolizes that death has always been there all along with Thanos.

In his childhood days, Thanos was a pacifist who could not stand death, violence and war. Infact during a science class he was unable to look at a death beast being dissected. He runs out from the laboratory and ends up vomiting. He says "I don't ever want to cut open another living thing". But his tendency towards death makes him unable to accept defeat which leads him to an exploration on an underground cave inorder to overcome his fear of death. This results to a catastrophic situation where all of his peers die due to a tremor that occurs during their exploration.

In the midst of searching his identity, Thanos meets a mysterious girl who was none other than death, an embodiment of Thanos himself. Since Thanos had no one with whom he could share his feelings, he starts developing the personality of talking to himself whereby he comforts himself and makes choices according to his will. It must be noted that the mysterious girl that he loves does not exist; rather it is his imagination that creates the mysterious girl. At this point, we must understand that Thanos is now living in a world of imagination created out of his illusion.

Throughout Thanos life, death has always been present within him. From his early childhood days, his tendency towards death is seen in his personality. His parents were never there for him when he needed them. When he was lonely, the only thing that made him feel alive was through killing and experimenting on others. Freud, in his theory talks about how a child creates his own instinctual satisfaction through his play when he is constantly left alone by his parents. Freud says,

“The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related as the child’s great cultural achievement- the instinctual reunification (that is, the reunification of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. It is of course a matter of indifference from the point of view of judging the effective nature of the game whether the child invented it himself or took it over on some outside suggestion” (Freud 225).

Freud says that when a child creates his game or play, it is created because of the child’s instinct to satisfy himself. This allows the child to be free from the thought of being left alone by his parents. The child takes the experience i.e., the experience of being left alone by his parents, and out of instinct; he creates the game of disappearance and return. Thanos’ act of killing and murdering is a play which he creates out of his instinct to satisfy his desire and experience pleasure. As a child, he creates his own play where he starts murdering, dissecting, and experimenting on the Titan people as it made him experience pleasure and took away his loneliness.

In the comic, Thanos says “I killed them because I had too much love in my heart, and no place to put it, no one to give it to. I killed them because I like it. Because killing someone... is the only time I don’t feel alone” (Aaron). He derives pleasure from killing and he does it because he feels lonely. It must be noted that although in the comic, at first we are made to think that the mysterious girl i.e., death is the one who is responsible for Thanos’s invention of play; but at the end of the comic, we come to understand that the mysterious girl is a part of Thanos himself. Thus the act of killing and murdering in Thanos’s life is an invention created by Thanos himself.

For Thanos, dissection takes the form of a game where he is able to derive pleasure. It must also be noted that the reason why Thanos dissects his own beings were due to his madness to search for his identity. Since Thanos was left alone by everyone, it made him feel different, and at the same time, it made him search for his identity. He questioned about his existence and his unique traits that made him different from others. To answer these several questions, Thanos creates the game of killing and dissection. After several killings, his rationality gets overpowered by insanity and at the end it actually make him thrive for more deaths which eventually made him to kill and experiment on his own mother.

Conclusion

In the theory of psycho-analysis, Freud talks about a psychological phenomenon in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* which he terms it as repetition compulsion. Freud's concept of repetition compulsion states that there are some events and situations which keep on repeating in the life of a person. Freud views that this repetition of events can also come in the form of dreams whereby a person may keep on dreaming the same dream repeatedly. Freud says:

The study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes. Now dreams occurring in dramatic neuroses have the characteristics of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. They think the fact that the traumatic experience is constantly forcing itself upon the patient even in his sleep is a proof of the strength of that experience: the patient is, as one might say, fixated to his trauma" (Freud 223).

According to Freud, those people suffering from traumatic neuroses can be investigated with the help of studying their dreams. From his statement, it is also understood that repetition compulsion occurs in the form of dreams on those patients who suffers from traumatic neuroses and it affects their psyche by bringing them back to the same situation or circumstance. With regard to Thanos in *Thanos Rising*, Sui-san tries to murder Thanos with a knife but he is saved by his father. This particular incident becomes Thanos' traumatic experience. This incident haunts him in the form of his dreams. It must be noted that, Thanos who was just a child, had to face this terrifying and frightening situation where his live would be repeatedly threatened.

In the beginning, since Thanos is oblivious of the truth, he explains his dreams to his mother. He says, "I have this strange recurring dream. That I'm a newborn baby, only moments old and that someone is screaming and trying to stab me with a knife" (Aaron1). Thanos is unaware of the fact that the person who is screaming and trying to kill him in his dream was non-other than his mother. The dream that Thanos keeps on dreaming affects him mentally which later forms his personality that tends to thrive towards death. Thanos' dream may also be understood as a symbol of who he will become in the future.

In the same conversation that Thanos talks about his dreams to his mother, he also says "And other times, I see myself all grown up, and I take that same knife, and I... let's just say, it's a rather alarming dream. One that I've had most every night for the last four years" (Aaron 1). By constantly and repeatedly dreaming about his life being threatened, he somehow creates some kind of resistance within himself where he does not feel afraid and scared towards death rather he wants to pursue death and destruction.

Death presented itself in his life at a very young age and it always lingered around him. Infact, Thanos' mother also says that she had given birth to death when she looks at him for the first time after his birth.

This traumatic experience of nearly facing death is like a parasite that never leaves Thanos alone. It affects him mentally and at the same time, it slowly shifts his personality towards death and eventually, he becomes an embodiment of Thanatos itself.

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