A Psychoanalytical study of “The Hole”, “The Iraqi Christ” and “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” by Hassan Blasim, Iraqi conflict writer

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Abstract: Freud’s psychoanalysis theory states that Human personality comprises of the id and the ego. These complexities are intertwined and influence human behavior. The Id is the only component that is instinctive while the ego is responsible for dealing with reality or acting in manners that are socially acceptable. Today in literature, characters are molded in a manner to reflect the background and space that they come from and their “complexes” are an outcome of their environment. Hassan Blasim, is an Iraqi writer who was born Baghdad in 1973. He has based stories on the real-life horrors experienced by family and friends under the Sadaam Hussein regime. His characters become a representation of the trauma the Iraqi people have been subjected to living in the country and in exile. This paper attempts to study select writings of Hassan Blasim, Iraqi conflict writer using the theory of Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis to understand character development and the influence of the environment as a cause for their actions.

Keywords: psychoanalysis theory, human behavior, traumas, psychological instabilities and inconsistencies in literature.

Introduction:

According to Sigmund Freud, “A man should not strive to eliminate his complexes, but get into accord with them; they are legitimately what direct his conduct in this world.” This statement holds true to the positioning and consequential actions of a character that is presented to the reader in a literary text. Characters reflect the background and space that they come from and their “complexes” are an outcome of their environment.

Freud’s psychoanalysis theory states that Human personality comprises of the id, ego and superego. These complexities are intertwined and influence human behavior. The basic belief of the psychoanalysis approach is that understanding that behavior is controlled by the powerful unconscious urges. The Id is the only component that is instinctive and consists of the
primitive innate urges and is totally unconscious. It operates in accordance with the basic desires and aggressive impulses. The ego is responsible for dealing with reality or acting in manners that are socially acceptable. The ego’s task is to hold the Id in place until conditions allow for the satisfaction of its impulses. It operates according to the “reality principle” as it takes into account the external conditions and acts based on socially appropriate behavioral patterns. The ego is partially unconscious. The superego on the other hand, is the part of the personality representing the conscience formed in early life by internalization of the standards of parents and through experience. It functions in a different level of consciousness. There is a constant movement between the memories and impulses. Freud felt that this constant struggle between the Id, Ego and Superego plays a key role in personality which is visible in everyday behavior.

By applying the theories of Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalytic criticism of a literary work may frame the text as a window into the mind of the author-narrator. Interpreting the text, then, becomes an exercise in finding direct and indirect evidence of the author’s or narrator’s childhood traumas, psychological instabilities and inconsistencies. Ultimately, Sigmund Freud’s dream theories especially influence such readings because they examine the literary work that uses dream as an expression of the author-narrator’s hidden desires and anxieties.

This paper attempts to explore the role of Freud’s Psychoanalysis in narrating war and violence in a conflict zone.

Hassan Blasim, is an Iraqi writer who was born in Baghdad in 1973. He has based stories on the real-life horrors experienced by family and friends under the Sadaam Hussein regime. His characters become a representation of the trauma the Iraqi people have been subjected to living in the country and in exile. Blasim takes the function of being the surrogate voice to the people in Iraq in order to expose to the world and testify to the atrocities committed by the powerful. He has been able to do this by using the medium of writing to bear witness and make the reader conscious and question the inside life of the people in Iraq.

“The Hole”, “The Iraqi Christ” and “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” is a part of the “The Corpse Exhibition and other Short stories from Iraq” published on February 5th 2014 by Penguin Books. The stories dramatize the conflict between the Id, ego and superego.

“The Hole” shows the constancy of war that prevails in a conflict prone area as the memories are not forgotten and the powerful look back to the memories to create violence. In the story, the narrator begins by confessing how he fell into the hole and how he meets an old man there. The old man is the first victimizer who is feeding on the dead corpse of a Russian soldier and giving his account of how he landed in the hole and narrates his life there. The story ends with the narrator becoming the victimizer of a girl that falls into the pit. Applying the theory of psychoanalysis, we can read or interpret the pit as the Id. Now, when man falls into this pit, he goes back to being the primitive, savage and bestial self that enjoys the violence and meat of another human. This shows the savage nature of man and war, violence that torments the common man. When man falls into the Id, his ego and superego is erased and it is the cannibalistic Id that dominates by perpetrating violence in order to satisfy its own desires and urges.
“The Iraqi Christ”, talks about a soldier Daniel who has the ability to predict the future finds himself switching places with a suicide bomber in order to spare his blind, deaf and memory-damaged mother. Now, here we see how the common man is weaved into being the oppressor. He has no choice but gives into his Id which is influenced by his superego. The love he has for his mother is what persuades him to switch places with a suicide bomber. Here, the Id and Superego overlap but Daniel is not in a confusion and hence gives in to his Id of being the oppressor and destructor who is ready and prepared to suppress his ego and superego. He lets the Id dominate in order to satisfy his impulses and urges.

However, in “The Nightmares of Carlos Feuntes” through the character of Carlos Feuntes, the author gives a parallel and counter application of psychoanalysis. In the story, an Iraqi man, Salim Abdul Husain manages to escape from Iraq and obtains asylum in the Netherland where he takes on a new identity as Carlos Feuntes. His new identity that he wishes to acquire is the need to suppress his past which he perceives to be his Id that has been traumatic and violent. His life in Iraq was primarily concerned with the clearing up the area after the explosions. His friends wanted money to squander it but Feuntes/Abdul Husain wanted money to buy a visa to Holland and escape the horrors of the war. He finally found a finger with a ring which he felt a spiritual connection with and abandoned the idea of selling it. Now, this ring that he has found bridges his past and present as he is found dead in Holland with the ring on his finger. The ring can be interpreted as a symbol of his Iraqi identity and his traumatic past that he wishes to suppress but which remains in the unconscious mind of the character.

According to Freud’s psychoanalytical approach, Feuntes construct the Id as his unconscious past that he wishes to distance himself from which makes him construct the Dutch self as his superego. But, in reality he is self-deluded. He wants to distance himself from the Iraqi identity because of the traumatic and violent past and therefore in order to assimilate with the Dutch society, Feuntes learns Dutch, pays his taxes and even finds a Dutch girlfriend. This could by and large be his ego that functions according to the reality he is.

However, his new life begins to fall apart as his Id/past haunts his present through dreams. The dreams are a consequence of his subconscious mind which he prefers not to reveal to anyone. According to Freud’s dream theory, dream is an expression of the character’s hidden desires and anxieties. They are an indication of the suppressed memories that begin to surface and taunt him. This shows his suppressed and hidden fears and anxieties that surface as dreams to him. It clearly shows how the character has been torn between two identities and is almost grounded in an abyss.

In order to escape his complexes, Feuntes jumps out of the window and commits suicide. Now, the entire sequence of his death is narrated to us through the dreams which highlight to the reader the collapsing between the lines of his Id and Superego. His delusion or the fallacy he creates for himself is that the Id as the Iraqi identity and the Dutch identity as the superego drives him to take away his own life. Now, this is a construct Feuntes creates as he is clueless on what basis he can express his “self”. Due to the chaos, violence and bloodshed that he has been subjected to, he is in a confused in between space wherein he is unable to differentiate between the Id and Superego. The multiple traumatic events he has witnessed have fractured his sense of self and he existed with a fragmented identity. These complexes lead to the untimely and unexpected death of Carlos Feuntes.
We see how the nature of war and trauma can be analyzed using the theory of Psychoanalysis through “The Hole”, “The Iraqi Christ” and “The Nightmares of Carlos Feuntes”. However, it is difficult to understand and comprehend to the consequences of war and the trauma that common individuals are victimized to through the story of Carlos Feuntes. He is unable to break free from the clutches of his past and present and it is that confusion that leads to his self-destruction while in “The Hole” man surrenders to his Id which is barbaric and beastial when he falls into the pit. But, yet there are some people who consciously give into the Id to satisfy their impulses, urges and desires. It is Daniel’s urge and desire to protect his mother that allows him to switch places with the young man. However, Feuntes is unable to do that and hence becomes a victim of his delusion.

We see how applying the theory of Freud has helped the reader to unravel the trauma of war and violence of the common people. Thus, we see through these stories how Blasim has interpolated the elements of psychoanalysis and their functions in order to explicate the complexity of man and his behavior in the world as an outcome of his environment and at the same time he has given an insight into the conflict zone of Iraq which has been forgotten by the mainstream.

Works Cited:


