



From Unresolved Trauma To Masochistic Relationships: A Study Of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

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Abstract: Trauma, when left unaddressed, can significantly shape the psychological and behavioural patterns of an individual. There exists a strong interlink between trauma and masochism. Individuals exhibiting masochistic tendencies frequently have a traumatic childhood of neglect, abuse, and emotional detachment. This paper examines the unresolved trauma stemming from emotionally and physically abusive family dynamics and how it affects identity formation and relationships, with reference to *Normal People*. Focusing on the character of Marianne, this paper studies how her internalized trauma manifests as psychological masochism, leading her to find solace in toxic, abusive and self-effacing romantic relationships. By situating Marianne's experiences within psychoanalytic and trauma frameworks, the paper argues that her repeated submission to pain is not rooted in desire, but in an unconscious compulsion toward self-punishment and validation.

Index Terms - Internalized Trauma, Masochism, Identity Formation, Toxic Relationships, Sally Rooney, *Normal People*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma is not just an event of the past; it can become a powerful lingering force throughout the life of an individual, if left unattended. It shapes the ways in which an individual perceives themselves, others, and the world around them. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) portrays the lives of two young people, Marianne and Connell, and their struggle to understand themselves. Beneath their romantic tension lies a more psychological narrative, especially of Marianne's life, whose unhealthy family environment forms the basis of her masochistic tendencies. Her emotionally unavailable, abusive familial atmosphere has distorted her sense of worth and fosters a pattern in which pain becomes both familiar and, at times, validating.

The term 'masochism' was coined by the Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his 1886 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*. He named the condition after Leopold Ritter von Sacher-Masoch, whose novel *Venus in Furs* delves into themes of erotic submission. Masochism refers to the psychological condition of deriving pleasure or gratification, sometimes sexual, from the experience of pain, humiliation, or emotional degradation. It was Freud who further developed the concept of masochism beyond its erotic origins and he identified three forms: erotogenic, feminine, and moral masochism.

Erotogenic masochism is rooted in the pleasure derived from pain, often experienced as sexual arousal. Feminine masochism, in contrast, involves a passive and often unconscious desire to be subjected to suffering. Some argue this as a psychological trait while others interpret it as a result of societal pressures and patriarchal structures. Moral masochism, the third type, is driven by a sense of guilt or a need for self-punishment. Among these, and moral masochism is most relevant for analyzing the character of Marianne.

Her behaviour is not rooted in deriving sexual pleasure from her romantic intimacies, but on a deeper compulsion toward self-punishment to confirm the belief that she is undeserving of kindness, care or love. This paper examines how Marianne's unresolved trauma manifests as moral masochism in her adult relationships.

II. EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AND SOCIAL ALIENATION

'I don't know what's wrong with me', says Marianne. 'I don't know why I can't be like normal people'. This line sums up Marianne's perception of herself. Her sense of this abnormality is not something rooted in her psyche; rather, it arises from years of emotional neglect and social alienation, first at home and then at school. Marianne's father used to beat both her and her mother, Denise, before he died when Marianne was thirteen. Denise is emotionally distant and unresponsive towards Marianne. She doesn't show any affection toward her daughter. Marianne's brother Alan, verbally and physically abuses her. Denise doesn't seem to intervene when Alan threatens Marianne. It is also possible that Denise having been emotionally damaged by her abusive husband has become numb and passive to the abuse around her. This silence, neglect and lack of protection from her family itself has made Marianne believe that she doesn't deserve love, care or affection.

Marianne, at school, was considered as an object of disgust by many of her classmates. She has no friends at school and she spends her leisure time sitting alone, reading novels. Her peers made fun of her appearance. Once Eric publically humiliated her by calling her "flat-chested" and told her that she looked like an ironing board. This instance was not only cruel but also silent that no one stepped in to defend her or include her. No one at school tried to show kindness towards Marianne except, Connell. But even Connell, out of fear of damaging his reputation asked Marianne to keep their relationship a secret. Even though Connell loved her sincerely, he considered it awkward in school if anyone came to know about them. It was as if she was being used by him as a kind of private experiment. He even avoided asking Marianne to go to the debs with him. Marianne was deeply saddened that the only person who showed a little affection towards her was unwilling to accept her publicly. This could have reinforced Marianne's internalized belief that she was someone to be hidden, unworthy of affection or respect. Later she never went to school, except to write her exams. By then several stories were made up about her saying she had been in the mental hospital, which she never mattered to her anymore.

In one of the scenes where Marianne reflects on her upcoming move to college, she comes up to the conclusion that even though soon she will move to a different place away from home and meet different people, she will remain the same person, trapped inside her. This reveals a profound truth about her trauma: even physical escape can't provide her with emotional liberation. Her conversations with Alan is always filled with passive threats and verbal intimidation. But Marianne responds with a calm detachment, which is not a matter of her showcasing her strength but it is a matter of her survival. Over the years she has learnt that resistance leads to more violence so, like many trauma victims she adapts by emotionally withdrawing. Denise considers Marianne as a frigid and unlovable person. These layered experiences from her family and school thus intensified the emotional wound of hers that would later manifest as moral masochism in her adult relationships.

III. SEEKING PAIN FROM LOVE

Marianne's romantic relationships often mirror the emotional neglect and pain that she experienced in her early days. Her relationships are intertwined with pain, suffering, submission and self-erasure. Having grown up in a home where love was absent and abuse was normalized, Marianne internalizes the behaviour that to be loved is to endure pain.

At university, Marianne briefly dates Gareth, a well-liked and social person. They were considered by others as a "power-couple". She was admired and visible in ways she was never in school. Despite the outlook of a successful relationship, she was never fully emotionally satiated with Gareth. She even admits that she doesn't enjoy having sex with him. Everything with him seemed mechanical and performative. Gareth represents a version of herself which she thinks she wants to become, but can't embody. When she sees Connell at the university, she returns to him.

Shifting to her relationship with Jamie, in contrast to the one with Gareth, pain becomes the medium through which she relates. It was emotionally charged, degrading and submissive for Marianne. Their relationship is rooted in domination and humiliation. Marianne says to Connell that Jamie is a sadist, who likes to beat her up during sex. Most strikingly she reveals that it was her idea to submit: "It was my idea... I wanted to submit to him." She seems to be fine with degrading herself for someone if they wanted her to. She allows him to hit her with a belt and choke her at times. When Marianne says: "I mean, I don't enjoy

it. But then, you're not really submitting to someone if you only submit to things you enjoy", she means that all these proclivities are accepted by her not for sexual pleasure rather she sees submission as a sacrifice. According to Freud's theory of moral masochism, people like Marianne unconsciously seek punishment, not for physical pleasure but as a form of guilt-driven self-punishment. For Marianne, this is a way to earn love and to feel worthy of herself. If she enjoyed the submission, it would be about her needs and her trauma tells her she doesn't deserve to have needs met.

With Lukas, the dynamic of pain changed. Submission evolved into silence, obedience, and the slow erosion of self. Lukas was an artist whom Marianne met when in Sweden. Lukas initiated a relationship with her structured around what he calls "the game". Marianne was not allowed to speak or make eye contact in this rigid ritual of romance. If the rules are broken, she is punished. The game doesn't end in sex. He degrades her by telling she is worthless and more. She no longer experiences a sense of ownership over her own body. She has fully submitted it to his cruel little submissive game. In his book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman suggests that trauma can cause dissociation, a sense of not being present in one's own body. Marianne here feels as if she is "floating like mercury," "not really hungry," and "not owning her body". Marianne literally becomes an object to be watched through Lukas's camera—silent, bound, stripped and positioned. Her body is not her own in his studio. She is a passive figure. In the game, her submission is aestheticized as art. Individuals like Marianne, who are victims of childhood trauma unconsciously tend to repeat traumatic experiences in hopes of rewriting them. But these repetitions only help in deepening their original wounds.

Amidst all these mechanical relationships, the one figure who continues to reappear in Marianne's life is Connell. He is not just her first love, but the only person with whom she has ever felt an emotional connection. Connell too has hurt her in the past by asking her to keep their relationship a secret which reinforced her belief that she was someone to be hidden. Despite this she keeps going back to him, as she feels safe and emotionally validated with him. With him she never felt the need to prove her worth through submission. Yet the shadow of trauma never leaves her. In a vulnerable moment during intimacy, she asks Connell if he will hit her. Connell, disturbed by the request, refuses gently. Unlike Jamie or Lukas, Connell refuses to follow her self-destructive patterns. This breaks her cycle of moral masochism. Marianne's trauma has made her equate love with pain and suffering. But Connell's rejection interrupts this thought of hers. Connell's act of resistance against her repetitive compulsion of trauma, can be seen as an opening for her towards healing, even though she cannot fully embrace it.

IV. CONCLUSION

Unresolved childhood trauma can have profound and lasting effects on an individual's emotional, behavioural, and relational patterns. The way people respond to trauma is different. They might not even realise how much it is affecting them because it can lie hidden deep down. This trauma can make people feel bad about themselves and create an image of who they are which they try to use to get validation and acceptance from others. In some cases, it can also lead to behaviours, like masochism and sadism.

Marianne in *Normal People* is an example of someone with moral masochism. Her childhood was really tough with neglect, abuse and emotional pain which made her think that pain is what love feels like. Her relationships with Gareth, Jamie, Lukas and Connell all show sides of this belief. Gareth makes her feel empty inside while Jamie and Lukas are more about control and submission which fits with her tendency to hurt herself.

It is only with Connell that Marianne has the possibility of emotional safety and a form of intimacy not grounded in pain. However, her inability to fully accept this reflects the enduring impact of her trauma. Thus, Marianne's journey portrays how unresolved trauma not only shapes individual identity but also compels the repetition of harmful relational patterns. At the same time, the disruption of these patterns suggests that while trauma exerts a powerful influence, the possibility of change and healing remains.

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