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The Dynamics of Psyche in Katherine Rundell's *Rooftoppers*: A Freudian Psychoanalytic Perspective

Author's name- Kechegi Khing
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Nagaland University, Kohima Campus,
Meriema, Nagaland, India

Abstract

Katherine Rundell's *Rooftoppers* explores themes of belonging, identity, resilience and maternal longing of a young orphan girl Sophie through her determination to find her biological mother. In the refusal to accept the fact that her mother is dead, she sets out from London to find her mother in Paris. This fictional story can be read as an adventure story which also offers fertile ground for psychoanalytic interpretation. The aim of this paper is to critically examine the novel through the psychoanalytic lens through Sigmund Freud's model of the mind comprising the id, ego and superego. The paper contends that Sophie's persistence on her maternal quest is motivated by the id's desire, mediated by ego's logical strategies and contended by superego's societal and moral constraints. Furthermore, defence mechanisms also help Sophie sustain her psychological resilience enabling her to cope with hardships and uncertainties without giving up hope. Through the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to the novel, this paper attempts to reveal childhood as a continuous psychological process in identity formation rather than just a stage of innocence. In the maternal quest, the impact and importance of genuine help from trusted companions in the context of an external controlling system also gives way to further discussing what is ethically right.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, id, ego, superego, defence mechanism

Introduction

Children's literature has increasingly become a significant field to study children's psychological development through narratives of loss, separation, identity formation, resilience and other themes. The scholarly concerns towards social, philosophical and psychological concerns extend beyond the childhood experiences into exploring the complexities within institutional structures. Katherine Rundell's *Rooftoppers* is a noteworthy example of this development through the portrayal of children negotiating within societal expectations which become a rich site for exploring emotional and psychological experiences. The novel is set with the backdrop of Victorian England and Paris. Sophie, who survived a shipwreck as an infant, grows up under the unconventional care of her guardian Charles Maxim. Refusing to believe her mother died in the shipwreck and convinced that she is still alive, Sophie embarks on an extraordinary journey to Paris guided by fragmented memories and strong determination.

This adventure story following the maternal quest at its center also presents a psychological landscape for psychoanalytic interpretation. The aim of this paper is to critically examine the novel with a psychoanalytic lens through Sigmund Freud's model of the mind comprising the id, ego and superego. The paper contends that Sophie's persistence on her maternal quest is motivated by the id's desire, mediated by ego's logical strategies and contended by superego's societal and moral constraints. This structural model of the psyche provides a framework to understand the symbolic quest which also illuminates the emotional conflicts that help shape Sophie's development unfolded under the constant pressure of adult institutions. Here, that of guardianship law, child welfare authorities and social norms that constantly seeks to determine and control what constitutes a proper healthy childhood. Furthermore, defence mechanisms also help Sophie sustain her psychological resilience enabling her to cope with hardships and uncertainties without giving up hope.

Through the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to the novel, this paper attempts to reveal childhood as a continuous psychological process in identity formation rather than just a stage of innocence. Challenging the conventional notion of family and childhood, this novel demonstrates identity formation as a process of emotional growth not through institutional approval, a fixed condition dictated by society or biological inheritance.

Literature review

Katherine Rundell's novel *Rooftoppers* emphasises Sophie's maternal quest as the emotional central core of the narrative. Driven by the refusal to accept the loss of her mother and also because of the encouragement of her guardian Charles Maxim, she continues to pursue her quest in the belief that there are always possibilities.

Rachel Schwedt and Janice A. DeLong wrote in their book review of the novel that children's desire for freedom and adventure is strongly appealed to by the novel's blend of fantasy and realism. The existence of strong characters like Charles Maxim and Matteo, who are not afraid to follow their own way, helps Sophie through their constant love and effort to realise her dream. (Schwedt & DeLong, 2021)

In a Review of the novel, the story is regarded as "an exquisitely written book, filled with wit and wisdom." and the "feeling of kindness that permeates this story" personified and embodied by the fictional characters makes it a cherished book for young readers. (Veronicaprice, 2019)

The novel also consists of orphan and homeless characters who contribute to helping the orphan protagonist Sophie in her quest to find her mother. These characters are almost always regarded as others, and to "place them outside the system of normality or convention to which one belongs oneself". (Hawthorn, 2000, p. 249)

As Sophie grows up, she questions if her mother is alive and why she has not come to find her. Although cared for by Charles, when the authorities declare Charles as an unfit guardian, they travel to Paris on a run from the authorities as well as to find the mother's whereabouts. The impact of music is a great feature as Sophie's only memory of her mother is that she played the cello. In Paris, Sophie meets Matteo and other homeless children who are on the run to avoid orphanages and thus live and roam the rooftops of Paris. A central fantastical element of the novel is Sophie's extraordinary memory, specifically her recollection from infancy of hearing her mother play the cello and how music later guides her journey in Paris. (The Guardian, 2014)

Jeannette Hulick's review of the novel in the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* by John Hopkins University Press, that there is without a doubt that Sophie and Charles bring charm and humour by playfully subverting some of the more rigid Victorian norms or customs. Their manners and dialogue at times tip slightly out of step with the Victorian period. (Hulick, 2013)

Theoretical framework

The selected text *Rooftoppers* is critically analysed through the psychoanalytic lens by applying the key concepts id, ego, superego, and defence mechanisms to understand the fictional characters.

These key concepts were originally introduced by Sigmund Freud and later further developed by his daughter Anna Freud along with others. Although Freud's psychoanalytic theory has evolved in the light of empirical evidence, some of his concepts and terminology continue to be significant for understanding the unconscious mind, examining internal conflicts, early childhood experiences and defences. According to Freud's model of the mind, the id represents the psychic agency of biological instinctual forces that drive the unconscious impulses; ego is the rational logical part which functions as the mediator between id and superego; the superego embodies internalized ideals for perfection based or shaped by parental, familial and cultural influences.

When the constraints of external reality collide, the ego uses the defence mechanism to protect the conscious mind from conflicts or triggered anxiety. These defence mechanisms contribute to maintaining one's emotional stability but may also alter one's perception of realities. Denial refers to the refusal to acknowledge or accept realities. Sublimation takes place when the individual manages to channel unacceptable emotions into constructive behaviour which is socially acceptable.

These concepts together provide a thorough framework for understanding the novel *Rooftoppers* not just as an adventure tale but that of psychological resilience and development. By examining the fictional character's mind, fear, desires, internal conflicts and motivations, one gains an insight to understand human psyche and their behaviour. In the pursuit to uncover the truth of her birth mother, the quest reflects a deeper unconscious search for identity, emotional completeness and a reconnection with a mother figure whose absence continues to influence her sense of self and belonging.

Analysis

Rooftoppers is fundamentally a story of psychological development of the main character Sophie on her quest to find the truth about her biological mother. This search, driven by determination reflects a gradual process of identity formation and belonging, and not an escape from reality. Set in Victorian England and Paris where norms of that period were expected to be followed to be socially acceptable; this creates the superego pressure upon Sophie that drives repression in her. Gender norms for girls to strictly adhere to female codes such as the requirement for lady-like dress; Charles allows Sophie to wear trousers which violates the Victorian gender norms and is regarded as socially unexpected. This also includes the need to wear a corset and learn to attain a respectable feminine behaviour. Miss Eliot from the National Childcare Agency (NCA) regularly keeps a check of Charles Maxim and Sophie in the belief that "A man cannot do this alone." (Rundell, 2020, p. 8) The gender stereotype that a man is not capable of childcare or act as a guardian to a female child persists throughout the novel. Charles' refusal to enforce strict Victorian norms upon Sophie, rather, he continues to encourage curiosity, intellectual freedom, care for her and also give space for her to explore and grow; in understanding and with a positive attitude.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the id seeks immediate fulfillment, unconcerned with external logic or reality. Sophie's conviction that her mother survived the Queen Mary shipwreck shows how the id operates. Despite the fact that every official source says otherwise, Sophie's persistence refuses to accept the loss. Her certainty is based on an unconscious emotional bond that precedes rational cognition. Throughout the novel, Sophie's fragmented memories of warmth, music and her mother's cello drive her longing. Even after physical separation, these memories act as remnants that preserve their emotional tie. Rather than depicting these recollections of an infant as unreliable delusions and mere curiosity, the novel presents the unconscious emotional memory possessing its own authenticity.

The ego in Sophie's journey transforms this desire into a purposeful action. Freud describes the ego as a mediator between instinctive wishes and internalised ideals of accepted norms, operating according to reality principles. Throughout the novel, Sophie demonstrates meticulous reasoning and pragmatic intelligence as she intently observes, gathers evidence, analyses details and pursues Charles

to accompany her to Paris. Other characters in the novel, especially Charles and Matteo, play a crucial role in strengthening Sophie's ego without dismissing her beliefs. They encouraged, guided and helped her to approach her quest realistically rather than recklessly. Towards the close of the novel, her ego develops significantly for a 12 year old girl as she integrates emotional conviction and constructive decision making.

Freud's superego represents the internalized voice conformed to moral standards according to accepted norms, here, that of Victorian norms. In this novel, it is represented by the rigid social conventions of Victorian society and the NCA that repeatedly questions Charles' suitability as Sophie's guardian because of his unconventional parenting which conflicts with the accepted social norms. For the authorities, these freedoms that Charles allows appear to be that of an irresponsible adult and even reminds him of their lack of biological connection that, "This child is your ward. She is not your daughter." (Rundell, 2020, p.7). The external forces also expect Sophie to conform to the accepted norms and to abandon the search for her mother since the police record says that Vivienne Vert, believed to be Sophie's mother, had vanished 13 years ago and did not have a clean record. The Queen Mary also had no record of her boarding the ship nor had records of a woman musician by that name.

Freudian concepts of defence mechanism involve strategies used to protect individuals to cope from anxiety or emotional conflicts. Several mechanisms are unconsciously employed by Sophie which helps her to contain herself from grief, anxiety and uncertainty. Denial is a defence mechanism proposed by Anna Freud which involves refusing to acknowledge reality and thereby concealing external happenings from awareness. Sophie's refusal of accepting the documents declaring her mother's death. This may seem to be a denial of reality, however, it serves as a temporary shield against severe loss and the overwhelming pain of maternal loss. Sophie perseveres and holds on to hope until she investigates and finds out on her own instead of allowing sadness to dominate.

Another defence mechanism which Sophie projects is sublimation as she channels her emotional pain into a focused action- to research, travel to and around Paris and fulfil her quest. This portrays her bravery, resilience and willingness towards socially significant achievement. The psychological development and progress emerges through the interaction of id, ego, superego and defence mechanism towards maturity.

As the novel ends, Sophie reunites with her mother through the power of music while she is playing her cello. Their reunion is symbolic of a profound exploration of the human mind arguing that identity is created through the continuous negotiation of the unconscious desire and the external social realities.

Conclusion

The author Katherine Rundell's *Rooftoppers* captures reality into a fantasy thrilling adventure through the journey of Sophie in her pursuit of her dream. Exploring the psychological dimensions to better understand the contours of the human mind through a fictional character, this paper demonstrates the psychological quest of the young girl while making practical decisions further her emotional development. Rather than surrendering to despair, Sophie, with the help of Matteo and the other children that secretly live in the rooftops, jumps about the rooftops of Paris in the dead of night to finally find the woman that "had hair the colour of lightning" who was playing a cello and "singing in French". (Rundell, 2020, p.321)

Sophie's intrinsic longing for her mother reveals the id's impulse while her practical skills demonstrate the ego. The external agencies' expectations symbolizes the superego's pressure in an attempt to separate Charles and Sophie; to send Sophie to an orphanage for a proper childhood and conform to grow into an expected Victorian woman which was the moral accepted standard. This tension created because of the psychic agencies influences and shapes Sophie's emotional and psychological growth. In addition to revealing the complex psychological processes, her journey serves as an example of her resilience and a quest for her own identity while resisting the social rigidity.

The research gap of this paper still stands with the question of what is ethically correct or acceptable when it comes to childcare, guardianship and existence of social rules. Further research on

analysing the text from an ethical perspective is recommended to better understand the psychological drives that prompts a person's behaviour and decision making.

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