

Psycho-Sexual Construction of the Subjects in Sudhir Kakar's *The Ascetic of Desire*

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This paper is a study of Kakar's *The Ascetic of Desire* from psychoanalytic perspective. The analyses are based on the psychoanalytic theories and concepts posited by Sigmund Freud. The focus of the study is on the psycho-sexual construction of the subjects in the concerned novel, how a subject develops sexually, how sexuality affects the psychological growth of the subject, the factors that hamper a subject's psycho-sexual growth, and how psycho-sexual growth ultimately transforms a subject both psychologically and socially. As the novel is written by a both psychoanalyst and novelist, Sudhir Kakar, the scope of the study becomes undoubtedly rich.

Keywords: sexuality, Freud, Oedipus-complex, libido, repression, sublimation

Introduction

Sexuality is usually considered as a synonym to heterosexuality. However, in Freudian theory of psychoanalysis, sexuality denotes the concept of polymorphous sexuality. It involves infant sexuality, puberty, adulthood, homosexuality as well as heterosexuality. The psycho-sexual construction of a subject involves the events which lead to the formation of its sexual personality which is a part of its whole personality. Freud propounds that a child develops sexually through three particular stages. First stage is the oral stage in which the child seeks pleasure from mouth and tends to put into mouth whatever he/she comes into contact with, as they assume that it will give them similar pleasure as sipping milk from the mother's breast does. In the second, anal stage, the child enjoys excretory functions. He/she takes pleasure in holding back and letting go of the excrement through anus. The third stage of infantile sexuality is the genital stage, also often referred as the phallic stage. This stage involves pleasures in activities such as masturbation, voyeurism, being fondled by others, and the like.

Polymorphous sexuality refers to the variations of sexual objects and sexual aims discussed by Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality*: "Let us call the person from whom sexual attraction precedes the *sexual object* and the act towards which the instinct tends the *sexual aim*" (Freud, 1953, pp.1-2). Considering sexual variations as component instincts, Freud suggests that these variations in aim entail voyeurism, exhibitionism, sadism, masochism, and oral, anal, or genital intercourse. However, variations in object contain from opposite sex, same sex, younger, older, animals, fetishized objects, and coprophilia. These variations can be regarded as perversions in some cultures but they are universal components of adult genital sexuality. Freud observes that children do imbibe cultural values and symbols but only passively or indirectly and they do not accept all the

symbols and values at all the times. They do reject some of them at times, especially when their pleasures and satisfactions are concerned. While receiving cultural values and principles passively they may also be engaged actively in creating pleasurable situations for themselves. However, Kakar, himself a psychoanalyst beside novelist, views sexuality in the following way:

Sexuality, in psychoanalysis, is a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies, arising from various sources, seeking satisfaction in diverse ways, and involving a range of excitations and activities that aim to achieve pleasure that goes beyond the satisfaction of any basic somatic need. (Kakar, 1990, p. 21)

Freud also examines the effects of social-moral systems on different kinds of people in "Civilised Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness". He takes some postulations for this purpose, such as there is an inborn strength in people to sublimate their sexual instincts. The process of sublimation transforms instinctual human urges into non-instinctual behavior. "This capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is no longer sexual but which is psychically related to the first aim, is called the capacity for sublimation" (Freud, 1953, p. 39). This strength varies in degree from person to person. Therefore, some people can control or repress their sexual instincts better than others and can convert them into socially and culturally acceptable activities. Freud calls this process as sublimation. Another postulation of Freud is taken from his therapeutic work. It is that in some people the strength of sexual drives is so strong that they fail to sublimate all or most of them. This kind of people may give vent to their strong sexual instincts/drives or they may succumb to illness, most probably psychoneuroses. The illness becomes the medium to satisfy or drain off their sexual energies.

Analysis

The Ascetic of Desire, written by Kakar, successfully mirrors the notions of sexuality through its subjects, such as Chandrika, Vatsyayana, Malavika, and the pupil. Vatsyayana lives with his mother (Avantika) and aunt (Chandrika) in a brothel-house at Kausambi. His father is a merchant, who visits them occasionally or whenever his caravan passes through Kausambi for trade. Avantika, who has already served as a renowned courtesan, is now at the waning of her youth, however, Avantika's younger sister Chandrika is still blooming with her youthful beauty and is a popular courtesan.

Chandrika

Chandrika's sexual idiosyncrasies are interestingly noteworthy in the novel. The graph of her psycho-sexual development rises passionately through her intense sexual affairs with different suitors, for instance her description of the exceptional affair with Kirtisen:

The feeling would spread through my limbs and for the first time I felt I was experiencing my body as a whole, with life coursing through its each pore. It seemed I had vulvas just about everywhere and could experience pleasure anywhere. (Kakar, 1998, p. 119)

She reaches the summit of her psycho-sexual development by relishing its every juncture and begins to fall with a sense of boredom, as she herself describes in the novel:

In the first few years of my professional life there was a good deal of sexual excitement in seeing and touching men's genitals. Innumerable men wanted me, and I found that exciting. Orgasms were easy. Gradually the mystery wears off. Men's bodies become familiar. (Kakar, 1998, p. 127)

The mystery, here, is actually the mystery of sensual pleasure that has been petered out; what Chandrika

now left with is her insatiable desire, which in Lacanian view can never be satisfied. Having attained the most intense pleasures of sexuality, Chandrika descends to its complete disappearance from her life and becomes a Buddhist nun.

You want me to talk of love and my lovers. They are now but flickers of memory. When I lie at night I gather no one in my arms now, not even in my dreams. And you know, Malli, I prefer this to the euphoria and despair of youth, to the swing I was on for all those years which, pushed hard by fate, rose and fell with a rhythm over which I had little control. (Kakar, 1998, p. 241)

Her metamorphosis is akin to Jung's concept of *Enantiodromia*, in which everything turns into its opposite, such as the transformation of once valued into worthless, and the transformation of want into wont (pleasure into displeasure).

Vatsyayana

It is due to Chandrika that Vatsyayana becomes curious to explore female sexuality. Having born and brought up in a brothel, Vatsyayana's sexuality develops in an apparently different manner for his being exposed to the secrets of female sexuality much more than anyone of his age is supposed to be. Surrounded by females, Vatsyayana often wonders about his being sexually different from others:

From the age of four or five, I was in a state of constant longing, almost unbearable at times, as I watched the women in our house, these creatures whose bodies were not only different but whose each limb was animated by a mysterious female force. And there I was, a little boy, acutely aware that I was not one of them. I pushed myself into the exile of my maleness, wondering if they felt the same sensations and the same emotions I did as a boy, or even whether one could feel the same feeling differently if one was a woman? (Kakar, 1998, pp. 54-55)

Hence, from his very childhood, Vatsyayana has been curious about the difference between male and female sexuality, however, much of his knowledge of the subject is furnished by his aunt, Chandrika, with whom he shares an intimate relation:

...I was an ardent assistant in her toilet for the evening entertainment....I assisted her in the adornment of her breasts... She watched me closely as I first scented them with liquid sandal and then lightly rubbed them with saffron dissolved in water to give them their golden glow. Although I was only a little boy, I noticed her eyes smouldering with that wine-intoxicated look I came to know and remember so well. Her small nipples would harden and her breathing quicken. (Kakar, 1998, p. 52)

Vatsyayana's intimacy with Chandrika lends him a closer perception of female sexuality at an early age. Their intimate relationship is an indication of Freud's notion of "Oedipus-complex", in which a male-child desires to be the sexual partner of his mother or mother-figure. This sign becomes apparent in the incidence when Vatsyayana recounts his sleeping with Chandrika 'masi' (aunt) in the following words:

Lying on my side, with my body moulded into the curve of her back and wrapped in the warmth of her bed, I often woke up during the night, conscious of a strange desire, exhilarating and shameful at once...unable to bear the ache in my loins any longer, I pressed convulsively against her hips. (Kakar, 1998, p.132)

However, the oedipal-desires of Vatsyayana are being suppressed by castration complex, a complex by which a male child suppresses his sexual desires for the mother-figure, fearing castration or 'the name of the father'. Hence, the psycho-sexual development of Vatsyayana is also marked by his Oedipal tendencies. At the age of eleven, Vatsyayana gets the opportunity to join his father on the caravan, during which his meeting with Padmavati, a courtesan, again highlights the development of his sexual tendencies, as he narrates:

When my father introduced me to her, I had a strong impulse to run the tip of my fingers over her flawless, honey-coloured skin. I wished it was not my father but I who could be the sole focus of her charcoal-gray eyes. (Kakar, 1998, p. 141)

Here, Vatsyayana belongs to the genital stage of a child's psycho-sexual development. The object of his pleasure is the opposite sex (female) while its aim is voyeurism and masturbation. Having lost his father in an accident and coming back from the caravan, Vatsyayana is set to leave for Mihirpal Hermitage for studies. His duration at boarding-school marks both the ascending and descending of his sexual growth.

He was of the opinion that in his case the movement from being a boy to becoming a man was decisively shaped by his close physical proximity with other boys and young men, fostered by the everyday life of the hermitage. This was radically different from his childhood experience of intimate contact with women and their bodies. (Kakar, 1998, p. 196)

Thus, having already been acquainted with female sexuality since his childhood, at Mihirpal Hermitage, Vatsyayana gets to know the shades of male sexuality. His fascination with male bodies, especially lingam is crystal clear in the words when he says,

I would have a strong urge to hold it in both my hands. I would begin to feel a warmth in my loins the longer I looked at it, and my own small penis would start to swell. (Kakar, 1998, p. 197)

He also becomes aware of the variations in sexual aims, such as voyeurism, exhibitionism, genital intercourse, and sexual objects, such as same sex, younger, older, effeminate, and even animals (zoophilia). For instance,

Perhaps there were even one or two boys...who sought sexual pleasure from female farm animals.....They told us of the scandalous incident a few years ago when one of the young boys attempted to have intercourse with a bitch who had become very attached to him and happened to be in heat. (Kakar, 1998, p. 194)

Hence, the knowledge of variant sexual aims and objects renders Vatsyayana a diversity of sexual knowledge. The wave of Vatsyayana's sexuality meets its crest through his first sexual intercourse with Gauri, his guru's wife. But it starts descending within a small lapse of time as he falls severely ill in the morning after and could never make love in his life again. "The fever permanently deprived me of all sexual desire. It made me an ascetic even as I was entering the householder stage" (Kakar, 1998, p. 212). What leads Vatsyayana to asceticism is his guilt; the guilt of making love to his guru's wife, as he himself admits in the novel, "I still carry within me the knowledge and consequences of my sinfulness" (Kakar, 1998, p. 201). This hidden guilt in his unconscious mind prevents him from having further sexual desires in his conscious presence. Vatsyayana's having fever after making love to Gauri is not physical but psychological. In Freudian terminology he becomes psychoneurotic as he suppresses his sexual desires out of guilt, as it is evident in the words from the novel: "For whenever he brought the temperature down, Vatsyayana also exhibited the distinct symptoms of mind-fever: apathy, depression and, more specifically, the breathlessness associated with erotic-fever" (Kakar, 1998, p. 211).

Indeed, Vatsyayana has done something for which his super-ego (conscience) would never have given consensus, and it leads to his guilt that eventually makes him an ascetic. After completing his studies and returning home, Vatsyayana gets patronised by the King of Kausambi, Udayana, for composing a treatise on erotic arts. Impressed by Vatsyayana's work and demeanor, Udayana asks him to relocate in one of the guest houses of the palace, where he later becomes the love interest of Malavika.

Malavika

Malavika, the King's sister in law, is a beautiful girl with artistic interests. She grows curiously in her sexuality due to her lack of interest in men and sexual matters even after attaining adulthood, "The problem was that she found the thought of sexual intercourse with men disgusting" (Kakar, 1998, p. 253). Her sexuality begins to grow suddenly, when she finds herself unable to control her voyeuristic tendencies (watching and enjoying other people's genitals or sexual acts). The instance below marks the inception of her psycho-sexual growth:

...without any warning, she felt the sharp tug of an unseen force lifting her head and directing her eyes to Sudhakara's groin. To her horror, she could not avert her eyes which were focusing on the bulge under the poet's pleated white tunic. (Kakar, 1998, p. 255)

The inexorable growth of her sexuality intensifies through her unwanted fantasies of love-making with Sudhakara, a poet whom she has always despised for having lustful desires towards her. This particular stage of her psycho-sexual development is a harbinger of her suffering from what Freud calls psychoneuroses, as the suppression of her sexual desires lead to her becoming psychologically ill. Though she succeeds in overcoming her unwelcome desires but they are still meant to be grown and gratified. Soon, Malavika falls in love with Vatsyayana and is married to him, despite his being an ascetic. After her unconsummated marriage the tide of her sexuality rises again with a greater force that leads her to commit adultery with Sudhakara. "...Malavika discovered that she was not only a passionate woman but that she craved the sexual act with greed and intensity that surprised her..." (Kakar, 1998, p. 282). The tide comes to a halt only when her immorality is revealed to Vatsyayana and Udayana. She is driven out of Kausambi and the generous Vatsyayana accompanies her to the Seven Leaf Hermitage, at the edge of Varanasi, where they come into contact with the pupil.

The Pupil

The pupil is a young Brahmin boy, who is akin to Vatsyayana in his bewilderment regarding female sexuality, as it is intimated in the words, "I hate the women's invasion of me. I hate what they do to my body without my consent. I resent the unbidden erections they cause" (Kakar, 1998, p. 1). The libido, sexual energy, leads him to his first sexual contact with a prostitute, but, to his dismay, he fails in his first attempt and becomes acutely eager to know the nature of female sexuality. Following is an excerpt from the novel depicting the same: "I knew I had failed her. I wondered what she had felt when we lay intertwined in bed. What is the nature of a woman's pleasure which I should have helped provide?" (Kakar, 1998, p. 5).

However, being a Brahmin, the pupil faces family restrictions in his psycho-sexual development as his father despises eroticism and reproaches his son's vocational interest in it. But, the unconquered interest leads the pupil to approach Vatsyayana, who plays an eminent role in his psycho-sexual development by imparting to him the knowledge of both male and female sexuality. The influence of Vatsyayana's teachings on the sexual growth of the pupil becomes conspicuous in his own words when he says, "Given my strong attraction to her, conflicted and suppressed as it may have been, I would have even found Malavika's toenail irresistible" (Kakar, 1998, p. 61).

In spite of having strong sexual feelings for Malavika, the pupil suppresses them as she is his guru's wife. However, he starts practicing Vatsyayana's lessons on sexuality with Kalavati, a prostitute. It helps to foster the growth of his sexuality, "As I became more comfortable with my dips into the stream of sensuality, I became bolder in my experiments" (Kakar, 1998, p. 209). The climax of his sexual development appears when the

revelation of Vatsyayana's incest induces action in him and he makes love to Malavika, whose psycho-sexual tide has already taken to surge again. The excerpt mentioned below, from the novel, is a harbinger of their union:

We became lovers at the end of spring, on the afternoon of Vatsyayana's revelation, in a secluded spot at the edge of the clearing in the forest, on a grassy carpet hidden from any casual spectator by a depression in the ground and surrounded by the love-mad murmur of wild geese. (Kakar, 1998, pp. 206-207)

When Vatsyayana discovers their truth, he leaves Seven Leaf Hermitage and disappears. The pupil and Malavika too leave Varanasi and settle in Ujjayini with their little daughter. Their mutual psycho-sexual development leads their relationship to a sublime accomplishment that is akin to Kakar's idea of sexuality as a satisfaction beyond somatic needs. As it is perceptible in the pupil's words:

Only now, after these many years of living with Malavika, do I sometimes glimpse it in the aftermath of our nightly embrace. Like a rainbow after the passing of a cloudburst, I can see Kama's other face in those rare, blissful moments of ineffable intimacy when our bodies have separated and are lying together side by side, but are not yet two in their responses. (Kakar, 1998, p. 291)

Thus, contrary to Vatsyayana, the pupil's psycho-sexuality develops successfully and is met with consummation rather than asceticism. Beginning with his interest in female sexuality it traverses the growth of his libido, repression of his desires, and finally gets accomplished in a fulfilled relationship with Malavika. Vatsyayana's sexual development also begins with his interest in female sexuality, grows with his libido and sexual knowledge, but suddenly peters out due to the guilt of his first sexual union with his teacher's wife, and end through sublimation in the form of the writing of *Kamasutra*. Chandrika's sexuality rises with her stepping into the profession of a courtesan, enjoys its heyday with the rise and release of her libido, begins to decline with sexual-boredom, and ultimately gets sublimated in her becoming a Buddhist nun. However, in Malavika's case it begins to rise suddenly despite her lack of interest in sex, meets the pinnacle with her untamed libido, and finally gets gratified with the consummation of her love interest. In this way, the psycho-sexual growth of Vatsyayana and Chandrika transforms them from sybarites to the ascetics. However, in the case of pupil and Malavika it leads to consummation from celibacy.

In reference to the subjects of Kakar, discussed above, Hai Lai, a literary critic, comments "His characters sometimes read as aspects of the human psyche rather than individuals" (2000).

Conclusion

The parallels in the subjects can be traced as Vatsyayana and the pupil show similar line of growth though destined for different ends. Most visibly, they indulge in illicit relationship with the wives of their mentors apart from having the same interest in female sexuality. On the other hand, the striking similarity between Chandrika and Malavika can be perceived in their being sexually volatile, for their object of desire keeps on changing. As Kakar says in *Intimate Relations*, "When sexually intoxicated, the woman takes one lover after another without discriminating between young and old, handsome and ugly, rich and poor" (Kakar, 1990, p. 51). Though the tide of sexuality sweeps both of them, yet, they survive it in a different way. In the case of Chandrika the drift is from desire to asceticism whereas in Malavika's case it is from disinterest to desire for men.

In this way, sexual orientations play a significant role in the psychological development and

transformation of a subject. The sexual growth of Vatsyayana, after confronting the guilt of incest, transforms him into an ascetic. Chandrika's sexual adventures lead her from a popular courtesan to a Buddhist nun after confronting sexual boredom and self realization. However, in Malavika's and the pupil's case, the sexual orientations take a different turn. Malavika, initially having no interest in sexual matters, becomes sexually ardent and settles down with the pupil after committing adultery twice. The pupil, in spite of restricting and repressing his attractions towards Malavika, ends up committing incest and leaves home to live an unknown life with Malavika. His sexual interests restrain him from becoming a scholar of Vedas, as a Brahmin is expected to be, and lead him to become a scholar of erotics. The metamorphosis of Vatsyayana, Chandrika, and Malavika are also akin to Jung's idea of "Enantiodromia". In Vatsyayana and Chandrika's case, the turn is from pleasure to displeasure or interest to indifference. However, in Malavika's case, it is the other way round, as her sexual disgust for men turns into her sexual desire for men. Hence, the sexual orientation of each subject lead them to where they could never have imagined themselves, although they end up becoming self-satisfied and mature beings.

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