

Masochism: A Means of Survival in *The Piano Teacher*

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Abstract: Erika Kohut, the protagonist of Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*, experiences certain feelings that reflect her masochistic attitude towards life. Masochism, the activity of getting pleasure from being hurt or controlled by another person, dominates Erika's life and it connects her to the world by releasing utter loneliness and estrangement. Erika's escape from self, motivation to escape, link to sexuality gives a platform to reduce her anguish and to cope with the way of the world. Her inner self behaves the way Freud and Lacan scrutinized the psychoanalytic self. She goes through Durkheimian anomie that is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community. She is entangled between the world of sublime and the world of sexual attention and emotional wickedness. This paper is going to deal with masochistic agendas including masochistic desire of pain, submissiveness, domination, helplessness, embarrassing or humiliating experiences and how it relates with the action and experiences of Erika. It will also relate the sphere of gender and masochism along with the analysis of masochism is dominant in femininity or masculinity. The protagonist's relationship with masochism and estrangement are really assisting her in survival or not.

Keywords: Masochism, masochistic desire, estrangement, anomie, gender and masochism.

1. Introduction

Elfriede Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher* (1983) is centered on the protagonist, Erika Kohut, and her individual self, agony and experiences which are quite opposite to her social self. This paper analytically reads the protagonist's inner reflections of life and how she deals with her inner sufferings. It focuses on what are the means that assist her to survive against all odds of life and whether masochism – the tendency to derive pleasure from one's own pain or humiliation - is one of the ways of her survival. Masochists comprise those individuals who derive gratification from receiving physical and/or psychological pain. (Griffiths 2012) This masochistic tendency reflects in Erika that shows she is in extreme pain, despair, frustration and anguish.

2. General considerations

2.1 Objectives of the study

This paper aims to observe the representation of repressed psyche of the protagonist and her actions are masochistic or not. It also aims to expose inner thoughts of Erika and why she reacts in certain way and how she adapts herself in a close-fisted society and family. As an individual how does she connect with typical set of life and music world and her artistic persuasion really something spiritual or why does she fail as a pianist?

2.2 Rationale of the study

According to Andrea Bandhauer, Erika is literally caught between the world of sublime and the world of sexual attention and emotional depravity. Some critics argued that Erika's desire for pain is a stage of mental disorder. It is necessary to decipher whether is it really mental disorder or its outcome of her exhaustion with the reality. The way Erika is confined by her mother she has led her to divert in masochistic way by which she could relieve her mental agony.

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2.3 Methodology of the study

It is a library research. Data will be collected from various sources including printed books, journals and online resources available in Bangladesh. As it is an analytical research the paper will be focusing on theoretical aspects that include psychoanalytic theories, masochism and its agendas. More importantly, it will cover the protagonist's relevance with masochism and which role it plays in her life.

2.4 Design of the study

This paper consists of five chapters including Introduction, Review and Definition, Theoretical Analysis, Masochism and Erika, and Conclusion. First chapter, Introduction, deals with methodological aspects such as Objectives, Rationale, Methodology, Overview, and Limitations and Delimitations. Second chapter titled Review and Definition covers Literature Review and Definition, principally masochism. Third chapter is named Theoretical Analysis which incorporates psychoanalytic theories of theorists primarily Freud, Lacan and Durkheim. Masochism and Erika is considered as fourth chapter that talk about masochistic agendas and how it's relevant with the protagonist and how it's functioning as survival. It also adds masochism and gender and whether masochism is dominant in any particular gender or its just outburst of individuals' agony and sufferings. Afterwards, chapter five summarizes the theme how masochism is working as a means of survival in the character like Erika and suggests scope for further study.

2.5 Limitations and delimitations

This paper is limited to the character's particular attitude and how she takes masochistic desires and activities. As it is not an extensive research paper on masochism or whole text *The Piano Teacher* this research paper will not include criticism or analysis of all issues of the text. Moreover, shortage of time is another reason for confining this research paper on specific issues.

3. Review and definition

The Piano Teacher is criticized in many ways for its utmost expose of sexual desire and some addresses this desire as "perversion". Here, the views of different authors regarding the text will be discussed. It will also contain the definition, history and characteristics of masochism.

3.1 Literature review

Erika's behaviors are quite different from mass people. And this "difference" is created by her mother as she always falsely praises Erika and claims she is someone whose artistic genius is gifted. Her mother controls her every bits of life from eating, clothing to sleeping. She is caught between the extremes of desperate pretension and self-adulation and a total lack of confidence and self-awareness. (Bandhauer 2006) The way she is captivated in her mother's control it gives her pain and pleasure both. Quite often she finds her mother utterly disgusting when her mother hinders her freedom. Again when her mother accompanies her in as usual daily life she likes it. Her love and hatred both work for her mother. Her mother prohibits her not to involve in any sexual relationship. Can she really avoid sex? It raises questions. The outcome of it is that she visits to booth where she can watch porn movie, she goes to such places where she can voyeur others while others are doing sex. Her repressed desire of sex shifts her attention to different activities of sex. Such as: she approaches one of her students, Herr Klemmer, for sex.

When she communicates her sexual desires to her student by describing how she would like their sexual encounters to unfold, his admiration of and attraction to her turn quickly to disgust. Her fantasy would require the student to inflict a severe amount of pain on the professor and to

continue doing so despite anything she may say during the actual act imploring him to stop. (Dechka 2007)

The way she desires for pain especially sexual pain as if it would give her sexual gratification it raises question why does a lady crave for pain and domination? Erika is actually eager to belong to the heterosexual normality and cannot be further from any form of contemporary gender-as performance-and-reiteration consciousness. Her sexuation keeps failing in spite her ardent will for closure. (Perovic 2005) This dilemma of her brings into such a state where she desperately seeks for relief of mental agony. And that's where masochism works within her and she commences to enjoy pleasure in fantasizing pain.

3.2 Definition of masochism

The sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the term „masochism“ in his 1886 sexology book *Psychopathia Sexualis* deriving the name from the 19th-century novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, whose book *Venus in Furs* (well known as big *Velvet Underground*) depicts a man's humiliation and suffering by a female dominatrix. The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) defines masochism as when the individual experiences “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving the act (real, not simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer” over a six-month period. To distinguish it as a disorder rather than a non-problematic sexual preference, the masochistic sexual urges, fantasies or behaviors have to cause “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning”. (Griffiths 2012) A more recent Finnish study led by Dr Laurence Alison reported in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* reported most interestingly, the research team identified four sadomasochistic sub-groups based on the type of pain given and received. These were: typical pain administration, humiliation, physical restriction, hyper – masculine pain administration.

4. Theoretical analysis

Psychoanalysis as a method of investigation and masochism can be considered. This chapter contains how psychoanalytical interpretation is being given by different critics. It focuses on how the psyche of Erika is being portrayed by the author and how it relates with the interpretation of the psychoanalysts. Primarily the discussion includes psychoanalytic views of Sigmund Freud, Jean Jacques Lacan, and Emile Durkheim.

4.1 Freudian analysis

Freud states that the instincts are the ultimate cause of all behavior. The two basic instincts are Eros (love) and the destructive or death instinct. The purpose of Eros is to establish and preserve unity through relationships. On the other hand, the purpose of the death instinct is to undo connections and unity via destruction (Freud, 1949, p. 18). The two instincts can either operate against each other through repulsion or combine with each other through attraction. (Freud, 1949, p. 19)

The two states of psyche works in Erika but the destructive instinct is more powerful in her which forces her to get pleasure in getting pain. She enjoys pain and cuts her hand or/and vagina that shows how destructive her inner self is!

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, personality develops through a series of stages, each characterized by a certain internal psychological conflict. Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality argues that human behavior is the result of interactions among three component parts of the mind: the id, ego, and superego. This “structural theory” of personality places

great importance on how conflicts among the parts of the mind shape behavior and personality. These conflicts are mostly unconscious. (Boundless)

Similarly, Erika's internal psychological conflict develops a sense of complexity which is expressed through her desire for pain. Her personality traits are formed with conflicts and exhaustion that shaped her behavior and manners.

4.2 Lacanian analysis

Lacan rejected attempts to link psychoanalysis with social theory, saying 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other' -- that human passion is structured by the desire of others and that we express deep feelings through the 'relay' of others. (Changing Minds) He thus saw desire as a social phenomenon and psychoanalysis as a theory of how the human subject is created through social interaction. Desire appears through a combination of language, culture and the spaces between people. Lacanian psychoanalytic include the de-centering of the subject, the loss and impossibility of unified psychic life, the primacy of signifier over what is signified in the unconscious, the fragile and precarious relationship with the other.

We can interpret that impossibility of unified psychic life shatters Erika's psyche and her unconscious mind wrestles to come out of it. Her inner fragile self finds it difficult to deal with the fight between conscious and unconscious and it results in distracting her mind into pain and voyeurism.

According to Lacan, our psyche can be divided into three major structures that control our lives and desires. These are the real, the imaginary order and the symbolic order. The concept of „real“ marks the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language. It is impossible in so far as we cannot express it in language because the very entrance into language marks our irrevocable separation from the real. Still, the real continues to exert its influence throughout our adult lives since it is the rock against which all our fantasies and linguistic structures ultimately fail. (Felluga 2012) The imaginary order concept corresponds to the mirror stage and marks the movement of the subject from primal need to what Lacan terms "demand." As the connection to the mirror stage suggests, the "imaginary" is primarily narcissistic even though it sets the stage for the fantasies of desire. Whereas the Real concerns need and the Imaginary concerns demand, the symbolic is all about desire, according to Lacan. (Felluga 2012)

In case of Erika, we see, the symbolic stage is dominant as it sets the stage for the fantasies of desire. The way she fantasizes desire for pain especially physical and sexual it shows it's her created isolation from real and mental world. The wrestle between real and imaginary stages makes her unrest and she rests herself in the symbolic stage by the shelter of desire and fantasies.

4.3 Durkheimian analysis

Durkheim calls anomie, a term that refers to a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups. Anomie does not refer to a state of mind, but to a property of the social structure. It characterizes a condition in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms and where, as a consequence, individuals are left without moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals.

Erika is confined within the structure of the society and she has the knack to go by her own rules which she cannot. As there are hindrances from her mother and society she utterly feels suffocated with the norms and desperately searches for an escape. Fantasy is her platform to escape from the social norms and regulations.

5. Masochism and Erika

This section focuses on the agendas of masochism and its connection with the protagonist. It tries to establish a relationship between the activities of Erika and characteristics of masochism.

5.1 Masochism as escape from self

Masochism is consisted for the quest for failure and suffering in any sphere of life. Three main patterns of masochism are:

- a) Masochists seek out and desire pain whereas most people strive to avoid and minimize pain
- b) Masochists desire to be tied up, given commands, and in other respects put in the position of being helpless and under the control of another person whereas in general people strive to maximize their control over their environment and maintain strong feelings of efficacy
- c) Masochists desire embarrassing or humiliating experiences whereas most people generally seek to maintain high self-esteem and public respect and in other respects try to avoid any sort of embarrassment or humiliation
- d) Many masochists seem to have the specific, particular desire to be rendered helpless, and total submission to the will of someone else is often the central feature of a masochistic experience

Masochism is incompatible with the normal operation of the self. This is not an accident or by product or a mere appearance that can be corrected by seeing things differently. Rather, it is what masochism is all about: a set of techniques for making the ordinary identity temporarily impossible to sustain. (Baumeister 1997)

Erika contains most of the features of masochism such as desire for pain, desire to be tied up, given commands, desire embarrassing or humiliating experiences, desire to be helpless and total submission. She pleads to her student, "Slap me hard, over and over. Ignore my protests. Ignore my cries. Ignore my begging." (Jelinek 1983)

Here, we see Erika's desire to get pain, submission, and pleading. In her, pain operates as a kind of narcotic: it blots out broader, symbolic patterns of thought, including meaningful definitions of self that stretch across time, space and multiple roles.

5.2 Motivation to escape

Masochism works to overcome shortcomings, failures, and Limitations. It also plays the role of self-awareness to be stressful and burdensome. Masochistic sexual activity seemingly provides a valuable, appealing form of such as escape. Masochism makes the maintenance of one's ordinary identity temporarily impossible, and so the masochist is briefly relieved of the burdens of selfhood.

In place of such meanings of self, pain brings attention to the immediate and concrete sphere of physical sensation. Awareness of self is transformed from awareness of a meaningful, symbolically defined identity into a mere physical body.

Masochism works as an escape in Erika's life and she tries to unburden her agonies through it.

5.3 Link to sexuality

The use of pain in masochism is greatly facilitated by sexual stimulation of the submissive person. There are several likely links between masochistic activity and sexuality. Sex therapy and masochism lend plausibility to the claim that masochism enhances sexual pleasure. Some people may be attracted to masochism because their sexuality is not easily simulated.

May be Erika wants to enjoy sexual pleasure through masochistic activity for enhancing sexual pleasure so that she can relief her mental pain.

5.4 Masochism and gender

It's a typical idea that women are masochistic. The counterpart of it is there are plenty of prostitutes and phone sex services for male customers whereas no market for such services among women customers. In a review of the research literature on sexual fantasy, Leitenberg and Henning (1995) found that females were more likely than males to have submissive fantasies. Men are more likely to engage in masochistic sexual activity, whereas women are more likely to fantasize about it. Regarding masochism something about it is that it is feminine. That is devoting oneself to serving a partner, providing another with pleasure, submitting to another's will. These are the traditional ideals of femininity.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows the relationship of the protagonist and masochism and features of masochism works as a mean of survival in the protagonist's life. Erika's survival is quite difficult as she is confined in a life where her every moves are being controlled by her mother. Within the fixed territory she tries her best to get relief of her anguish and fantasizes masochistic ways and attributes. She also takes masochistic actions such as cutting her hand, vagina and shoulder. She gets pleasure by hurting herself. It's visible that masochism works as a means of survival in her life. The research couldn't elaborately include all topics about the text. There is further scope to work about masochism and the text and many more options are there to consider such as how masochism works as self-annihilation on self-assertion in the protagonist's life.

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