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Loneliness as Psychic Injury: Freud, Trauma and Diasporic Subjectivity in The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny

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Abstract

Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* is a narrative of the psychological trauma inflicted on two diasporic subjects who are trying to negotiate cultural dislocation with emotional satisfaction. In this paper I will treat their loneliness as a psychic injury and employ Sigmund Freud's model of trauma, repression and melancholia to analyse their colonised subjecthood. Sonia's self-image of being an inadequate subject and Sunny's debilitating lovelessness are symptoms of what Freud terms as compulsion to repeat - re-visiting the old wounds which were not properly healed. Their inability to communicate, love or feel at home in their new homeland is a manifestation of the conflict between the conscious identity of belonging and the unconscious pull of loss and alienation. Employing the tenets of Freudian trauma theory, in this paper I will read their solitude not only as a social condition but also as a psycho-social expression of diasporic dislocation. Using Desai's subtle narrative, in this paper I will argue that these two diasporic characters are experiencing a form of emotional exile, which is the symptom as well as the consequence of diasporic trauma. Locating Sonia and Sunny in a postcolonial and psychoanalytic discourse, in this paper I will argue that migration further exacerbates the fragile boundaries between self and other, memory and reality. Desai locates loneliness as a site where trauma and identity meet - a silent, deadly wound which is carried by the immigrant in a globalised world, divided and fragmented in terms of emotional experience.

Keywords: Freudian Psychoanalysis; Trauma Theory; Diasporic Identity; Loneliness; Kiran Desai

Introduction

Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* captures the pall of emptiness that hangs over the lives of Indian immigrants who attempt to create an identity, an intimacy, a home in a Western land. Migrant and homelessness are the central concerns in this beautiful story. Sonia and Sunny have it all, money and opportunity, but even here, surrounded by other Indians, they are sharing a life but not a love. "They had everything, and yet the silence between them was like a third person in the room, coughing and sneezing louder than either of them." (Desai 157). This is, as phrases often are, encapsulative. It captures the mood, the theme of the emotional alienation that defines Kiran Desai's novel - a quiet, gentle admonition on the loneliness of diasporic life.

The background of the reference text is about postcolonial displacement and Freudian psychoanalysis. Desai differs from Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in that she is concerned less with the sociopolitical effects of migration than with its psychological impact. While this is also true for Lahiri,

unlike Desai, the latter takes a highly introspective approach in her writings, revealing the internal struggle even as the latter tries to appear absorbed into the society. The story follows the journey of the immigrants who are later on on the journey of repression, guilt and alienation within themselves - a psychosexual journey that resonates with Sigmund Freud's definition of trauma as a "repetition of the unremembered", where the mind continues to relive the old trauma.

The works of Desai have been widely discussed for their treatment of migration, memory and loss. However, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* remains a largely unexplored work of Desai, especially from a psychoanalytic and trauma-theoretical perspective. Most of the available scholarship place Desai in a diasporic or a post-colonial position, thereby failing to recognize the psychological impact of Desai's short fiction. This paper seeks to fill that gap by situating Desai's works in the light of Freud's melancholia, repression and the unconscious, where it explores how Desai's works can be read as a shift from portraying loneliness as a social condition to portraying it as a repressed injury to the psyche, where the subject is in a state of fragmentation.

The aim of this study is to examine how as a symptom and a metaphor of psychological trauma of trauma, loneliness is articulated in the context of diaspora by Desai through Sonia's and Sunny's emotional paralysis. How can this study demonstrate that their condition reveals the intertwined layers of personal loss and cultural otherness? How can Freud's 'divided self'- caught between conscious enjoyment and unconscious trauma- be mapped onto the psyche of the immigrant, striving for wholeness?

This Freudian postcolonial study locates Desai's story in the following discourse: *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* demonstrates that exile is not only a spatial but also a spatialized space in the mind, where memory, repression and desire are in a constant state of tension and loneliness is the voice of the wounded self.

Literature Review

Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* has very recently received fresh critical attention for its nuanced depiction of how loneliness, identity, and dislocation inform the diasporic condition. Scholars who write about Desai's writing often centre how these dislocations affect individuals

both personally and culturally, and often attend to the emotional and psychological impact of her characters' dislocation. While the critical corpus does present Desai as belonging to the postcolonial and diasporic canon, there is a relative absence of psychoanalytic critiques that explore the psyche of Desai's protagonists. While *The Inheritance of Loss* has been the site of numerous psychoanalytic readings, in which critics have foregrounded the psychic dissonance of the protagonists caught between home and the adopted land (K. S. Sharma 45), his framework is partially transposed onto *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*, as well as other works by Desai, where the social reality of being alienated from social appearances, the need for material comfort, and emotional satisfaction for Sonia and Sunny figure prominently.

Reviews in leading newspapers also bring to the fore the thematic richness of the novel. While the *Washington Post* remarks that this is "a magnificent and mature exploration of love, alienation, and the search for a belonging" (Fisher), *Vulture* also brings Desai's work into the ambit of psychoanalytic exploration of loneliness and identity, though parts of the review suggest that the narrative sometimes has a hard time bringing together the psychological depth of its protagonists in a cohesive narrative (Sathian). These reviews bring to the fore a narrative tension that is also central to Desai's work: while the social reality of the world plays a prominent role in the protagonist's emotional life, a psychoanalytic exploration of her work suggests that this tension needs to be explored in greater depth.

Despite the wealth of scholarship focusing on sociocultural and diasporic elements of the text, there has been little recognition of the psychoanalytic quality of the experience of the characters. Sonia's nagging emotional withdrawal and Sunny's detachment can be seen as expressions of "untethered trauma" which can be illuminated through a Freudian exploration of repression, melancholia and the unconscious. Freud writes, "We cannot imagine that the [traumatic] experience was so happy as to be able to be fully digested and converted into the life of the ego; its place has been taken by a wound which the ego has not coped with adequately and which it has driven out of consciousness... This is followed by repetition, psychic conflict, and a paralysis of emotion" (Freud 248). The quiet and distance which defines Sonia and Sunny's relationship can be read

as the outward expression of inner psychic injury: the unvoiced pain of dislocation and past experience which informs behavior and emotional relation.

Similarly, numerous scholars have explored the broader implications of diasporic existence, arguing that migration results in a “psychic doubling” in which the migrant subject is required to make sense of memory, loss, and alienation (Kothari 78). This conceptualization of the divided self in relation to the psychological impact of trauma resonates with Avtar Brah’s own investigations into diasporic subjectivity: she argues that the cultural othering involved in migration can lead to a dislocation of the self and intensified emotional isolation (112). All of these scholars have explored the potential offered by a Freudian reading of Desai’s work: it can reveal the entanglement of psychological trauma and cultural alienation and provide a more nuanced exploration of the loneliness of the protagonists as something more than a social condition.

Although there is a wide range of discussion about diaspora, identity and emotional alienation in the available research works, there still seems to be a conspicuous absence of Freudian psychoanalytic application to *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. Most of the available studies explain loneliness in descriptive or sociological sense, emphasizing on some factors like migration, cultural conflict or social expectation, and hardly paying attention to those unconscious forces that result in the experience of the two heroines. Therefore, there arises the need for a study that would focus on the psychological aspect of the novel, that is, how loneliness is related to repressed emotional trauma and unresolved psychological trauma. This study uses Freud’s definition of trauma, repression and melancholia for a detailed analysis of how and in what ways Desai depicts the psychological trauma of the two protagonists’ emotional and cultural dislocation as a form of psychic injury, and how their unconscious is revealed in their loneliness, thus exploring the complex relationship between individual psychology and diasporic experience. This study, therefore, not only extends the psychoanalytic reading of Desai’s text, but also makes a contribution to the rich discourse on diasporic trauma, identity crises and its psychological impact, as well as the cultural dislocation and representation in literary texts.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This is a qualitative research study through textual analysis. This research is undertaken in order to explore the psychological and emotional aspect of Kiran Desai’s *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. The purpose of this study is to find out how the loneliness is a symptom of psychic injury in case of Desai characters in diaspora and how Freud’s trauma theory reveals the unconscious mind of the protagonists’ behavior and emotional response. The statement of the problem has been generated out of the following gap in the scholarly literature: Desai’s text has been analyzed widely through postcolonial and diasporic identity, but there is no adequate literature through Freudian psychoanalytic criticism to understand internalized trauma and emotional dislocation of Desai characters.

This study is driven by the following questions: (1) How does Desai portray loneliness as a psychological trauma for Sonia and Sunny? (2) How does psychic injury and identity fragmentation get exacerbated by cultural displacement and diaspora? (3) How might Freud’s ideas of repression, melancholia, and repetition compulsion provide insights into the protagonists’ tendency towards emotional withdrawal and relational failures? The hypothesis of this study is that Sonia and Sunny’s recurring themes of emotional distance and alienation are the result of social and cultural circumstances as much as they are the outcome of internal, unresolved trauma that is triggered by unconscious conflicts and diasporic pressures.

The theoretical basis of this study is Freudian psychoanalysis, and more specifically, Freud’s tenets of trauma, melancholia, and the unconscious. Freud’s assertion that trauma results in a repetitive psychic symptom and that emotional responses are also thus formed offers a useful framework for understanding the characters’ behavior and process. A qualitative textual analysis of the narrative, character interaction, and symbolic imagery reveals how Desai literaryizes emotional and cultural trauma in order to convey her characters’ psychic injury. This approach makes contributions to the fields of psychoanalytic literary criticism and diasporic literature.

Critical Analysis

The following analysis explores the complex relationship between cultural displacement, loneliness, and psychic injury in Kiran Desai’s *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*. Although the latter is concerned with the external conditions of diaspora-migration, cultural adaptation, social expecta-

tion—it is through the inner worlds of Sonia and Sunny that we can see the psychological impact of such experiences. The emotional withdrawal, relationship stress, and repetitive patterns of avoidance exhibited by the main characters can be illuminated through an application of Freudian trauma theory, which claims that trauma that is unresolved or repressed gives rise to repetition, repression, and emotional conflict (Freud 248). The protagonist's inability to place full trust in others and Sunny's self-compulsion shed light on how unprocessed psychic trauma can be manifest in everyday life, influencing behavior and belief. Through an exploration of textual evidence and an understanding of Freudian concepts of melancholia, the unconscious, and repetition compulsion, it becomes clear that Desai portrays loneliness not only as a social or cultural condition, but as a psychoanalyzed one. In this way, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* can be seen as a work simultaneously within the realms of psychoanalytic literary criticism and diaspora studies.

Loneliness as Psychic Injury

Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* is an intense narrative of emotional and psychological alienation. Loneliness here is portrayed as an experienced as well as an unnoticed form of psychic injury. Diaspora and migration for cultural displacement, the novel reveals how loneliness amplifies inner conflicts, dividing self upon self in a situation where the aftermath of earlier traumas are yet to be negotiated. Sonia and Sunny by Desai highlight the external social forces and inner psychological dimensions of emotional alienation. It is clear that emotional alienation is not an outcome of circumstance but an expression of internalized injury. Loneliness in this context is a psychological state of being with a sense of connection to memory, repression and cultural dislocation.

Freud's theory of trauma, repression, and the unconscious provides an important backdrop for the main characters' ongoing emotional crises. Freud argues that trauma is resistant to incorporation into consciousness, and yields 'compulsion [s], avoidance, and withdrawal' (Freud 248). Sonia and Sunny's compulsions to withdraw and relate failingly to others demonstrate the impact of unresolved trauma on ordinary life. Their hesitancy to commit to others and their overall inability to engage on an emotional level is the expression, respectively, of the unconscious repetition of previously injured emotion. For her, Sunny's obsessive

self-reliance and lack of emotional expressiveness signify the absorption of loss and melancholy. Desai is telling us that it is precisely this sort of psychic injury: here, minor occurrences, unconnected relations, and unexpressed emotion come to take on substantial psychological weight, reinforcing the isolation and guiding the behavior.

Additionally, there is overt reference to loneliness in a wider social and cultural system: no doubt the alienation of diasporic difference compounds psychic vulnerability. The promise of cultural values handed down to them, and the requirements of a new environment, combine to make them 'lonely in the world'. In other words, their alienation is both a social condition and a symptom of psychic injury. That is, trauma and feeling are felt not only physically but also psychologically and are hidden not only within the body but also within the psyche. Through the depiction of the relationship between the estrangement of place and psychic dislocation, Desai situates loneliness not only as a feeling but as a visible symptom of continued trauma within the psyche.

Sonia

Repression and Repetition Compulsion

Sonia is a personification of the struggle between the conscious and the unconscious. She is desperately trying to recreate an intimacy relationship but keeps being blocked by the effects of early emotional deprivations and traumas of betrayal, loss, separation.

The psychic injuries of the early months and years leave a lasting on the young child's psyche and relationship experience. Desai observes, "Every time Sonia reached out, a shadow of memory drew her back, as though her heart had learned to anticipate the absence of warmth" (Desai 34). This line shows the process of the mind repeating trauma unconsciously. Freud defined repetition compulsion as a part of the unconscious mind's strategy for trying to master or work through trauma by re-creating or repeating unresolved trauma in new contexts.

Sonia's issues with trust, especially her relationship with Sunny, demonstrates how repressed emotions impact conscious decisions and prevent us from being truly intimate. Her detachment is not a sign of a lack of interest or affection, but rather a cover for unconscious fears of vulnerability and anticipated rejection. Freud argues that traumatic events leave behind a tension in the mind

that is unresolved, and that the unconscious will attempt to repeat similar emotional states in order to stop the patient from ever resolving the past experience by bringing it into consciousness (Freud 248). Sonia's hesitation and defensiveness are a result of this repetition, because the mind continually fears harm or disappointment.

In addition, her comportment reveals the confluence of individual and cultural factors that constitute psychic injury. Cultural standards regarding the control and expression of emotion and role relations in interactions which serve to sanction and legitimize her internalized trauma of avoidance and self-defense. Sonia's tale demonstrates how trauma can work "unseen" in terms of patterns of emotional response, and attenuates the potential for openness and relatedness. Desai's interpretation demonstrates how, in order to understand Sonia's psychodynamics, the repressed image is essential, and how the compulsion to repetition presents itself in terms of repetition compulsion. She thus demonstrates the difficulties inherent for both the analysand and analyst in the exploration of this aspect of the legacy of trauma.

Sunny: Melancholia and Emotional Withdrawal

Sunny's psycho-pathology is manifest in his emotional withdrawal and compulsive self-reliance. Unlike Sonia, whose trauma is characterised by guardedness and repetition compulsion, Freudian melancholia is an ego's identification with the lost object or the unattainable desire that leads to depression, self-reproach and emotional numbness (Freud 252). His recurrent withdrawal and avoidance of intimacy are not traits of his personality but defences to unresolved emotional trauma and relationship disappointments. Desai depicts this psychological condition: "*Sunny often felt himself gaze into the corners vacant beside her and heard the replay of words they never said, a silence louder than the room*" (Desai 57). Certainly, This depiction brings this intangible feeling called unresolved grief and loss which pollutes his life with Geeta and hinders any possibility of deep bonding.

Sunny's withdrawal also shows how trauma organizing forces. His self-inflicted isolation and need to control are, in part, defensive against any further injury to his emotions. Freud argues that melancholia involves the loss of self in which the subject transfers guilt onto the self for unacknowledged failures and then withdraws from the guilt and self-loss without resolving his grief (Freud

254). Sunny's relational hesitations and expression of vulnerability are withdrawn shows how trauma can be a mastermind of behavior years after the precipitating events have occurred.

In addition, the diasporic condition complicates Sunny's psychoanalytic malaise. Emigration, cultural exile, and the transmission of identity struggles are additional sources of psychological tension and dislocation in the formless bundle of neuroses and alienation that confronts him. This demonstrates how a tension between global social forces and the ego psychoanalytic life can be expressed psychologically and relationally through trauma that has both unprocessed and processed components. Desai's focus on Sunny illustrates how melancholia, repression, and unprocessed trauma continue to reverberate within relational patterns, affecting not only the quality of feeling but also behavior, self-conception, and object relations.

Diaspora and Psychological Dislocation

The position of diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* makes the psychic wounds of the protagonists deeper and more pronounced. It also highlights how migration and cultural displacement can aggravate pre-existing trauma. Sonia and Sunny's psychic wounds are not purely individual concerns. These get exacerbated by the social and cultural demands of a new world. The collision between cultural expectations inscribed in the body politic of the homeland and those of the new culture of settlement create, as Rita Kothari puts it, a "psychic doubling" where "individuals are at once engaged in negotiating memory, identity and loss as well as surviving in an alien culture" (78). This doubling obviously accentuates the feeling of estrangement and reinforces the isolating experience of the characters, thereby revealing how diasporic life is as much external as it is internal.

The kind of psychological dislocation they undergo can be seen on two levels. Socially, they have to deal with the expectations of their diasporic community while battling with the strange realities of their new world. On an emotional level, the conflict between needing to be closer and the fear of being betrayed or lost hampers intimacy while their psychological yearning to break free of the traumas of the past only to be drawn back into it through their own guilt and helplessness creates a state of repetition and withdrawal. Desai subtly captures this through the use of narrative red-rats:

empty spaces, silences and even cut off dialogues all on the protagonists' inner dissonance and reflect it to the reader on the outside.

Freud's theory of trauma and the unconscious offers one key means of understanding this dynamic. Traumatic events which are repeated or displaced are unable to be integrated into the psyche, and instead continue to influence behavior and perception (Freud 248). Sonia's inability to let herself be cared for and Sunny's obsessive self-mastery reflect both personal trauma and the broader diasporic context in which they feel out of place and threatened to forge a coherent sense of self and place. By locating their loneliness within this context, Desai reveals how trauma is not merely a psychological phenomenon, but how it reveals the impact of migration, cultural negotiation, and alienation on the emotional and psychic lives of its subjects.

Symbolism and Representation of Trauma

Kiran Desai uses symbolic imagery in *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* to make tangible the psychic injury of the protagonists, making the internal emotions of the characters visible to the reader. These objects and spaces serve as surface representations of unresolved trauma for Desai to visually depict the emotional weight of loneliness and emotional disengagement. An inherited amulet is more than a piece of jewelry to Sonia; it is a source of protection and a burden of family memory, one that Desai notes "rested against her chest like a quiet sentinel, reminding her of the lineage of care and caution she had inherited" (Desai 66). This object is a visible representation of the unconscious, a tangible representation of repressed memory and expectations inherited that continue to influence Sonia's emotional reaction. Freud claims that these objects can hold important emotional associations for a subject and that they often act as anchors for internal psychic tension externalized (Freud 252).

The room, the hallway, even people's conversations, all space and environment, also symbolize the minds of the characters. When a room is empty, when the hall is silent, when conversations are interrupted or stopped, when people take deliberate pauses and measured steps, Desai shows us, in painstaking detail, the space within which Sonia and Sunny live. The silence of the apartment, the deliberateness with which movements are made, the breaks and the punctuated ellipses in the dia-

logue – all of this make it possible to discern the buried feelings and the invisible baggage of depression that the characters carry with them. Sometimes the trauma is so strong that it leaves traces not only in behaviour, but also in space and environment as well.

Recurrent motifs such as silence, shadows, and forgotten memories also reinforce the circular movement of trauma. Freud defines these as "elements of [the] mind which remain unintegrated after a traumatic experience, leaving a lasting impact on the mind, causing withdrawal, fear, and compulsion" (Freud 248). By unveiling the psychic conflict inherent in objects, places and recurrent motifs, Desai clearly demonstrates that trauma is at once an inner and outer reality--one that impacts upon the way the protagonists relate to people, objects and places. Such visualization of trauma reinforces my argument that loneliness in the novel is more than social malaise and includes a psychological state of being resulting from an emotional and cultural trauma.

Repetition, Cycles, and the Unconscious

Desai's book reveals this repetition of trauma in cycles. Freud agrees that the mind will repeatedly and unconsciously relegate unresolved experience. Sonia's relationships with secondary characters remind her of her trauma. Sunny's repeated attempts to control and solidify his life and relationships only to be met with relational failure is another example of this unconscious repetition of trauma. Freud writes that the mind will repeatedly and unconsciously relegate unresolved experience. Individuals are forced to keep repeating emotional patterns before the originally traumatic experience is repeated successfully (Freud 248). I think these are beautiful examples of how deep trauma makes itself known in both perception and action, how it shapes relationship and leaves psychic scarring.

Cultural Displacement and Emotional Paralysis

Colonialism and psyche, feel as if their loneliness is not only the result of migration, but also an effect of an underlying psychic injury that traveled down the line of historical trauma, cultural expectations and diasporic consciousness. Sonia and Sunny's attempts to establish an intimate relation are blocked by fear, hesitation and unconscious anxiety, demonstrating the unseparability of internal and external realities. Desai suggests that emotional paralysis is the result of both historical inju-

ry and current displacement; however, she also argues that displacement in diasporic life simply multiplies the previously latent psychic injury, thereby rendering injury an enduring psychological reality.

Conclusion

Kiran Desai's "*The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*" is a narrative which provides us with an insightful view of human psycho-surmountability, trauma and dislocation at personal as well as cultural level. This work based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory has analyzed the impact of repressed trauma, repression and melancholy on the emotional and relational life of protagonists. The recurring pattern of withdrawal, mistrust and emotional hesitation displayed by Sonia and Sunny are the classic examples of Freud's ideas of repetition compulsion and unconscious. The loneliness of the two protagonists is not only evident in the circumstantial level, but it is also visible in the psyche. The psyche of the characters is home to the past relational injuries as well as the internalized pain.

The study also reveals that diasporic experience magnifies the psychological and emotional impact. Migration, process of culture negotiation and alienation lead to a state of psychic dislocation which is responsible for the feeling of estrangement and reinforces the state of emotional withdrawal. Desai objectifies the invisible trauma through the use of symbolic imagery, the house and domestic setting and recurring imagery. The study has answered the research questions in relation to the manifestation of trauma and impact of cultural displacement on identity through textual analysis of Freudian psychoanalytic concepts, the relationship is clear and evident.

Moreover, this research is a gap in the scholarship as no psychoanalytic frameworks are employed on Desai's novels. Her novels are mostly studied for its cultural and diasporic aspects. Hence, in an attempt to fill this gap, I intend to integrate literary analysis and psychological theory to discuss the connectivities of loneliness, trauma and diaspora in contemporary fiction. Therefore, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* is a social and psychic reality. It is the product of the struggle between trauma of the past and the circumstances of the present. At the end of the day, literature helps us understand the human mind and its emotions, the dynamics of relationships, and cultural subjectivities.

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