



20-2 April - June 2026

Published on 14, April - June 2026

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

## **A Psychoanalytic Approach: Decoding the Human Psyche in Christina Dalcher's *Vox***

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### **Abstract**

*Vox*, authored by Christina Dalcher is an unsettling dystopian narrative that speculates a detrimental state of the United States where, "one hundred years in reverse is actually desirable." Dalcher's account of this dystopic imagination serves both as a cautionary tale and sociopolitical critique that draws attention towards the issues of human agency and identity. This horrifying dystopian construct represents a nation that is governed by religiopolitical regime that involves the systematic confiscation of women's voices, thereby rendering them obsolete. Their extremism towards pure values drives them to the pre-historic era that becomes the worst fear for any woman who imagines their future. In literary criticism, the significance of psychoanalysis originates with the work of Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist whose ideas gives the framework to analyze psychological currents within the text. This study involves a psychoanalytic reading of some of the characters in *Vox* to reveal the submerged anxieties about gender repression that underscore Dalcher's critique. Sigmund Freud offers a framework for understanding the psyche highlighting how repressed desires shape individual behavior. Such approach is utilized to get a deeper comprehension of psychological tension embedded in this novel that aids in the analysis of gender, repression and resistance.

**Key words:** Psychoanalysis, repression, gender, resistance

### **Introduction**

*Vox* depicts a country governed by a fundamentalist organization called the Pure Movement that curtails women's rights. This conservative religious faction demands and forces women to wear electronic metal bracelet that delivers electric shocks when they exceed their limit of one hundred words per day. This novel is described as "a petrifying re-imagining of *The Handmaid's Tale*," (Bausells) that underscores the authoritarian tendencies of Pure Movement and their extreme gender politics. The principal architect of this ultra conservative movement is Reverend Carl who acts as an advisor to President Sam Meyers and institutionalizes patriarchal control.

In an interview, Christina Dalcher emphasizes the central insight of this novel and poses a question: "How easily can our world change while we are not paying attention?" (Dalcher). The fundamental concern of this novel is centered on gender politics, and in parallel it also foregrounds the indispensable role of language in modifying ones' behavior. The Protagonist of this novel, Dr. Jean McClellan, being a cognitive linguist refuses to accept the systemic linguistic exclusion made possible by the metal speech

counter. Reverend Carl's mission to Make America Pure Again is rooted in the conservative resurgence of what Dalcher terms, "the Victorian cult of domesticity" (Dalcher 50). With the implementation of this ideological framework, transgressions such as fornication, adultery and LGBTQIA gender identities are faced with draconian measures. Specifically, the harsh penalties include heads shaving, televised public shaming and exile to North Dakota with zero-word quota. This novel inquires such enforced silence as one of the most dehumanizing forms of punishment. "Language, for them, had become an inescapable labyrinth of non-meaning. It must feel like being lost at sea" (Dalcher 53).

### **Methodology**

Sigmund Freud's work *The Interpretation of Dreams* published in 1899 primarily concentrates on the repressed desires residing in the unconscious mind. Those desires manifest itself through symbolic form especially the dream imagery. He posits that human behaviour is regulated by the unconscious desires rather than by conscious intention. So, he developed psychoanalysis in order to interpret the symbolic material and to uncover the latent content of the dream to bring those repressed desires in to conscious awareness for resolution. Freud recognized and explored the significant parallel between the operations of the unconscious mind and the structure of literary texts. Just as the unconscious discloses itself through symbols and latent meanings, literary works encode the author's preoccupation with the imagery, diction and narrative structure.

His definitive essay introducing the structural model of the psyche, *The Ego and the Id* published in 1923 provides a robust framework for interpreting characters and their conflicts. Freud classifies the human psyche into three distinct principles that are The Id, The Ego and The Super-Ego. He explains Id as a pleasure principle based on our impulses and desires that are illogical and irrational. The Ego is the reality principle based on our self-awareness and focuses on problem solving. The Superego/ Ego-ideal is called morality principle which is the refrained consciousness that focuses much on the spiritual goals. This study engages with Freud's model of id, ego and superego in order to interpret some of the novel characters. It concentrates on how Dalcher constructs these characters as a political allegory of psychic repres-

sion as they embody the psychological nuances mentioned by Freud.

### **Textual analysis**

#### **Jean McClellan as an example of Freud's ID**

Jean McClellan is interpreted through the lens of id-driven force. Many instances highlight her instinctual desire that makes her the locus of Freud's definition of id. Freud highlights the functions of id that was ruled by pleasure principle which are resistant towards societal prohibition. When the entire society is filled with fear due to the ideology of Pure Movement that is known for its harsh punishment, Jean goes by her instinct rather than rational thinking. Numerous actions of Jean McClellan illustrate the predominance of id-driven impulses over ego mediation. Her illicit relationship with Lorenzo in a state where adultery is strictly prohibited, her impulsive decision-making during great crisis of women community and her pregnancy under punitive laws that expects women to be morally pure mark her under id. Her way of acting impulsively without minding the consequences is the act of resistance against the Government that forces women to be silent. Jean's repeated action of anger, passion and desire sets her apart from ego and super-ego. When female bodies are mass disciplined by the Government, her instincts become the political resistance. She always acted out of impulse, when the whole nation passively accepted their fate out of fear.

She having an affair with her Italian lover Lorenzo even being aware of the vicious punishment makes her look irrational. She considers that to be an act of rebellion. Furthermore, she becomes pregnant with Lorenzo knowing the very fact that abortion is illegal in their present state. Acting out of impulse without any logic portrays Jean as an example of Freud's pleasure principle. Further, she secretly stole the top-secret government documents from her husband's drawer who is the science advisor of President Meyers. Despite her explicit knowledge of surveillance systems (front door, back door, and garage camera coverage) and the high probability of immediate apprehension, she deliberately proceeds with the theft of the state secret files.

"My name is thief. Or traitor, I think, and wonder for the moment what sort of punishment Reverend Carl and his pack of Pure Men might have set

aside for subversives. In a world where women are sent to the Siberia of North Dakota for crimes as petty as fornication, where Jackie serves a life sentence in a concentration camp for homosexuals, surely there must be some fresh horror for women who steal state secrets” (Dalcher 199).

The narrative demonstrates the tension between her assessment of risk (the potential punishment of the Pure Police) and her compelling drive to obtain the document. This illustrates her overriding id-driven impulses. In another instance, during the moment of heightened emotional tension, Sonia, her six-year-old daughter murmurs in her sleep that reduces her remaining word quota which places her at the verge of receiving an electric shock, Jean could not do anything for her daughter as she is constrained by her word limit which has expired that day. Her frustration towards her inability to help Sonia burst at the moment and when she gained her next day quota at 12am she screamed repeatedly not worrying about the consequences. “I scream. And again. A light flickers on in the Kings' house, and the vertical blinds twitch and separate. I don't give a damn. I don't care if I wake up the entire subdivision, if they hear me all the way to Capitol Hill. I scream and scream and scream until my throat is dry” (Dalcher 28). Her explosive behavior and her repeated shouting without any regard for herself or the neighbors not even for the authoritative police around her emphasizes her unfiltered release of primal force driven by id. In the moment of acute stress, triggered by her enforced silence and helplessness towards her daughter's distress, the id's intense demand for release marks Jean under id.

On another instance, Jean who found the serum for anti-wernicke while working under the Government's Wernicke project also stole the deadly neuroprotein from the lab. To be cautious of the security she went into the bathroom where she puts that deadly vial into a surgical glove. Later she hides the latex-wrapped vial in her crotch. “What the hell, I think. I've had four baby heads the size of Nerf balls pass through me. I can stand some minor discomfort for the next hour” (V, 261). This action further solidifies the assertion of Jean's behavior dominated by id. The theft of anti-wernicke serum is itself irrational as it may lead up to severe consequences. Further the degree of the functionality of that theft seems fundamentally irrational as she uses surgical glove and hides that in her crotch

to avoid inspection. This self-endangering goal despite the substantial risk suggests an intense internal drive id. These actions of Jean act as a manifestation of her personality which is completely influenced by Freud's pleasure principle.

In explaining id, Freud writes: “To the oldest of these psychical provinces or agencies we give the name of id. It contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is laid down in the constitution - above all, therefore, the instincts, which originate from the somatic organization and which find a first psychical expression here in forms unknown to us” (Ego and the id 192). He classifies id as the oldest of the physical province that is known for instinct-driven nature. Thus, it is not governed by any social codes and conduct rather by somatic impulses that looks for immediate gratification. This psychic province suits well for Jean McClellan where her persistent refusal to internalize moral resistance in a country ruled by religious authoritarianism embodies its pre-rational nature. Her action cannot be merely taken as resistance rather instinctual core that precedes societal structure and order. This precise domain embodied in Jean's desire and anger underscores resistance towards female body disciplining in Dalcher's dystopian narrative.

### **Patrick McClellan as an example of Freud's Ego**

Patrick, Jean's husband on the other hand signifies The Ego. He is a science advisor who works for the President Sam Meyers and Reverend Carl Cobin. Though Patrick seems outwardly compliant with the Pure Movement, he does some insidious job to show his resistance. Patrick mediates between the demands of instinctual desires and the constraints of the external world. He is known for his pragmatic calculation and strictly adheres to the mechanism of reality principle in which he suppresses immediate emotions or feelings towards the oppressive regime. He maintains the façade of true employee of the Pure movement that is necessary for his survival. His actions contrast the impulsive transparency of Jean. Subsequently, he withholds even from his wife, his meticulous plan to subvert the system. This underscores that he is completely grounded in his objective to ensure the safety of his family. Considering his priority towards his strategic outcome than immediate gratification locates his action in the framework of ego's pragmatic approach towards

resistance. “The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions” (Ego and the id 10)

Jean perceives Patrick's outward compliance as a complete submission to the fundamentalist regime. She misreads his psychic function and remains deeply resentful towards Patrick's passive nature to her struggle. This hatred heightens when she is approached by the Pure Government to assist in the Wernicke's project in order to treat Booby Meyer, brother of President Sam Meyers. Patrick insists Jean to take up the offer as it would suspend her word quota temporarily, yet Jean resents Patrick's pressure failing to recognize his strategic positioning. When Patrick presses her to accept the offer as she can be freed from the metal counter, Jean abhors his attitude. She says, “Patrick is the third type of man. He's not a believer and he's not a woman hating asshole; he's just weak” (Dalcher 71). But little did she know about Patrick who is involved in the dangerous anti-social movement to bring down the government. Here Patrick acts as a balancing force who mediates between instinctual refusal of Jean and moral authoritarianism of the Government. Patrick's negotiation between id and super-ego, masking his intent beneath his outward compliance and thereby sustaining both makes him a perfect example of ego.

Freud while explaining ego states: “It (C)lothes the id's unconscious commands with its (ego's) preconscious rationalizations; it (the ego) pretends that the id is showing obedience to the admonitions of reality, even when in fact it is remaining obstinate and unyielding” (Ego and the id 194). This statement offers a comprehensive understanding of Patrick as ego. When Patrick urges his wife to take up the offer even when Jean abruptly refuses to participate in the government's project, he does not burst like id, rather he reframes the situation in rationalistic way and cautions her about the consequences of directly opposing state power. He might have shouted or screamed like Jean did but he operates through the secondary process such as reason and sense. Subsequently, in order to shield Jean's instinctual refusal to the state power, he compels Jean to do what Government asks her to. In Freudian analysis, Patrick's interference in the decision of Jean underscores his awareness of punishment and moral policing. He performs the ego's protective task by a calculative restraint without extinguishing it. Though Patrick's warning seemed

sympathetic, Jean thought that he had no fight in him. Here and there, he always warns her even after knowing she cheated on him, “Someone always catches them babe. Always. Sooner or later, you fuck up... I don't mean ‘you’, like, in the general sense” (Dalcher 237). Though Patrick knows that Jean has a secret lover, he doesn't act out of rage and throw tantrums towards her loyalty instead Patrick asks her to leave this country soon with that Italian guy for her own safety. Lorenzo, who arranged fake passport for her, is ready to get out of this dystopian hell with her as he doesn't want his child to grow up in such disastrous state. Patrick asks only one favor to Jean and that is to take Sonia, their six-year-old daughter with them. As a girl, Sonia has no future in that place, so Patrick says that he would take care of the boys and asks Jean to look after her. Ego filled with rational thought and a clear comprehension of reality is represented here.

Patrick with his political insight has gathered people like Del, the mail man, Poe, the security officer and some other people who have the same motive to put an end to this Pure Movement. Those people from the very beginning are secretly working for it. To implement their faultless plot, they waited for the right moment. Patrick had a plan to mix the dangerous neuroprotein in the water/coffee/champagne in the meeting to be held at the White House where all twelve members who rule the country are about to participate. He succeeds in his plan and kills all the one behind this dystopia. Finally, he ended this dystopia with his rational thought. Patrick is calculative from the start and made meticulous efforts to solve the problem. This shows him as the perfect example of Ego that is self-conscious and rational. When Patrick dies in an effort to save the country, it explains how he has become pitiful caught in between the three dangers that Freud mentions. He has been struck between the Government, his family as well as the external world which is in chaos. “In a famous passage from *The Ego and the Id*, Freud observes that the ego is “a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego” (Edmundson 7).

Freud's formulation of ego with its preconscious rationalization can be best applied to Patrick's action in this novel. Dalcher situates Patrick's char-

acter as a mediating force. He is not too rebellious against the authoritarian reality not fully complaint with Pure Government's ideology, yet he acts as a mediator and involves in a covert sabotage of the present government. While certain people in the novel show their dissent outwardly, he does not articulate any resistance as a way to conceal his insidious plan. This highlights how he accommodates rational thoughts over subversive instincts. Though Patrick in eyes of Jean appears to be the one who is favourable to the Government objectives, he strategically moves to thwart the system from within. His constant negotiation between the state and his family serves as a best example of Freud's ego. Patrick's professional life in the part of Pure Movement and a family man who has a daughter of six with a metal word counter illustrates this dynamic. Behind the mask of Pure Movement's ideology, he begins to create avenues for his wife and daughter to escape this authoritarian society. As an insider, he passes information to other dissents and moves subtly to subvert the entire Government. Freud's claim of ego being id's unconscious commands shows how Patrick tempers Jean's anger and sudden impulses to protect her from dangerous consequences. He does not want Jean's instinctual resistance to end terribly in such disciplinary state and so he negotiates with power to keep her safe. As Freud states that ego is pulled between obedience and defiance, Patrick is pulled between Pure Government and personal feelings. Dalcher's narrative underpins Patrick's character illustrating how authoritarian tendencies make individual to perform rational compliance by repressing their urge for overt transgression. In terms of Patrick, resistance is masked as a way to survive.

### **The Pure Movement as an example of Ego ideal**

The Pure Government led by Reverend Carl which oppresses people by looting their voice stands as Super Ego or Ego Ideal. In *Vox*, the Pure Movement represents the super ego as it enforces high moral order, punitive discipline and a code of virtue based on strong Christian ethics. Freud describes the function of super ego that operates through guilt, fear of punishment and strong authority. These factors are recorded by Dalcher in the novel where the Pure Government uses digitalized word counters, public shaming and state surveillance to control the people. As they want women to stay silent, they introduce word counters

to internalize silence in them. Hence, super ego becomes biopolitical as it enforces obedience among the entire female gender.

The current Government led by President Meyers clings on to the conservative thoughts and forces people to follow the rigid moral values. Half of the country was silenced with an electrical metal counter which restricts women to speak. Women are capable of speaking sixteen thousand words per day, when they snatch their voices, they become weak. The Pure Movement is rooted in the ideological landscape of the American Bible Belt that targets women to promote the vision of morality. As a result, they deny women's bodily autonomy and regulates them as a symbol of purity. This conservative religious doctrine that regulates and controls female bodies through prohibition functions as a collective superego. Moreover, it decides acceptable female behaviour and a code of conduct reducing women to the vessels of moral compliance. In this authoritarian framework, feminism is considered as moral transgression and patriarchal servitude is framed as virtue. These attributes of the Pure Government exemplify superego's punitive function that is underscored by such religious extremism. They state,

"We don't know who men are or who women are anymore. Our children are growing up confused. The culture of family has broken down. We have increases in traffic, pollution, autism rates, drug use, single parents, obesity, consumer debt, female prison populations, school shootings, erectile dysfunction. That's just to name a few." (Dalcher 39-40)

The Pure Movement justifies its authoritarian hold of morality by terming it as a civilizational crisis. It lists autism rates, drug circulation, female prisoners, single parenting and sexual dysfunction are social evils and pins them to moral issue and the erosion of traditional family values. It positions fundamental Christianity as a solution to restore social order. This strategy highlights the strategic operation of the superego that is known for its rigid enforcement of morality. The superego parallels all the societal issues to the individual moral failure and administers bodily regulation as the necessary tool for moral purification. The Pure Movement to make everyone Pure is the perfect proposal of Super Ego. As Mark Edmundson remarks about Super ego, "It scalds us so badly with criticism, persuades us that we have so radically trans-

gressed, that sometimes the only relief we can find is in arranging for ourselves to be punished, so as to dissolve, alas only temporarily, our quotient of guilt” (3-4). Super ego always makes demands that no one can fulfill. It doesn’t care whether they are willful or capable to do such things. The Pure Government demands the state to be conservative. No one is willing to accept this fate, yet it controls all with its might. Further Mark Edmundson explains “The Super ego wants what it wants. It makes demands and if those demands are not met, it exacts punishment. It does this, Freud tells us, even if those demands are impossible to meet” (8). Consequently, the Super Ego, also the ruling party can manipulate both the Id and Ego to do what they want. Either by physical violence or psychological violence. They make them abide by the law.

“In this achievement (of being a cultural subject) a large share is taken by the egoideal (i.e. superego), which indeed is partly a reaction-formation against the instinctual processes of the id” (Id and the ego 205). Freud’s formulation of ego-ideal or super-ego is “partly a reaction-formation against the instinctual processes of the id,” provides the backdrop for Dalcher’s construction of the Pure Government. This movement acts as a disciplinary apparatus that institutionalizes morality as a base and punishes the very impulse it seeks to suppress. Every policy they introduce that include wrist bands, prohibition of sign language, extreme surveillance, public shaming, religious courses, domestic courses meant only for Girl Children reward for silence and punishment for dissent are reaction-formation that tends to enforce moral purity through violent suppression of feminine instinct and expression.

This ego-ideal that presents itself as a national virtue mirror Freudian super-ego, a governing image of perfection. Citizens are treated and measured against states’ ideal family and moral structures. Super-ego condemns psyche which deviates from internalized ideals, Likewise, Pure Movement condemns citizen who fall short of these ideals and frames them as moral failures. Freud also highlights the censorial role of super-ego that monitors the Psyche for disobedience. These surveillance technologies and digital innovation aid in internal monitoring of citizen that result in state violence. The Pure Government not alone modifies the behavior but also represses their desire by regulating

the choice of reproduction, policing illicit choices and insisting familial obedience. The Pure Movement’s obsession with sexual morality, docile femininity and ideal family structure are values designed to oppress any kind of opposing impulse. This extreme restriction deprives women out of their autonomy and desire. In order to establish nation purity, the Government represses the disruptive potential of Jean and other women’s notion of desire and thinking. Freud notes that the pivotal function of super-ego is to transform individual in to cultural subject through the lens of silence and submission whereas men through the lens of policing and regulating. In this novel, the collective super-ego of men community is portrayed as an authoritarian apparatus that enforces silence on women and represses their instinct and desire to fit into the moral code.

### **Discussion**

In essence, Jean’s actions serve as the expression of a powerful id. Further, by considering Patrick McClellan as an example of ego and the Pure Movement run by Reverend Carl as an example of super-ego, Jean’s actions underscore the tension and psychological crisis embedded in the novel. The ego that is known for its rationalization mediates between id and super-ego is overwhelmed. Her engagement in these transgressions create a psychological tension in the narration. The conflict that arises between her id that is driven by her instinctual needs and super-ego that enforces moral constraints highlights the universal conflict between fundamental biological needs and societal restriction.

Dalcher’s depiction of super-ego as the form of societal constraints that is utilized to limit and control female experience emphasizes the gender-based control. This psychological tension when mediated through the lens of gender oppression brings out the patriarchal societal oppression targeted on women. The psychological tension rooted in systemic control is elucidated by the Pure Movement that places prohibition on women that targets their voice, bodies and reproductive rights to limit their autonomy. Jean’s id driven acts like screaming, theft, sexual act and illegal pregnancy can be interpreted as rejection of repression made on female bodies. Jean does not have inhibition or fear towards the Pure movement that attempts to suppress her innate desires. Her ultimate failure to adjust and adhere to super-ego and acting impul-

sively on her own accord accentuates the primal instincts of id. This tension uncovers how the state controls female psyche and body to dominate and exclude women in the society.

In Dalcher's narration, Patrick's character embodies the ego which is contrast to Jean's id-driven impulses. Patrick stands for his pragmatic action that highlights his reality-oriented approach to resistance. The psychological tension arises from the difference in which these two characters handle the pressure of oppressive regime. Unlike Jean whose action demands immediate satisfaction, Patrick's action assesses external reality and mediates between conflicting demands. Their method of resistance vary as Jean acts on raw emotion and Patrick engages in a carefully crafted plot. He harnesses his understanding of political system and deploys a strategic plan with persistent action contrasts sharply with Jean's emotionally charged action. The contrast between id and ego also highlights the gender dynamic in which Patrick is presented as provider and protector and on the other hand, Jean as visceral and emotional within the confines of religiopolitical state. Patrick's resistance towards the Government while staying inside is of controlled subversion. His ability to live a normal life outwardly while secretly orchestrating a coup shows ego's capacity of pragmatic approach. The psychological tension between these two characters reveals how reality principle can be the most effective form of resistance. In this dystopian era, where there is a loss of humanity, human understanding is the need of the hour. When we take the character Patrick, he continues to strike a balance between both the Id and Super-ego. The Id that cannot control its desires and the Super ego which has the authoritarian power and the ego striving to arbitrate between them. Though Patrick sacrificed his own life in the end, as psychoanalysis suggests, it is always crucial to strengthen the ego.

### Conclusion

By portraying Jean as id, Patrick as ego and the Pure Government as superego, this novel underscores how subjects govern themselves internally. Central to Freud theory, the id, ego and superego do not merely present actions of these people but dramatizes the inner-psycho process that regulates their action and resistance. Jean's id underscores the pre-reflective subjectivity that presents unfiltered desire, anger and action. In ordinary life, these impulses are framed irresponsible. People's

impulsive actions in ordinary lives are disciplined quickly by internal voices of shame and fear. In the novel, her actions are always put under question regarding the legitimacy of her own impulses. Patrick's ego represents modern subjects in today's world who are trained to anticipate consequences. His every action represents an appeal to survival. This parallels the lives of contemporary people who internalize the logic of risk management. The Pure Government portraying the internalized moral authority that demands moral alignment are in today's scenario circulated as a cultural narrative. In Freud's framework, *Vox* serves as a narration of psychic exhaustion where id pushes toward impulses, ego delays it and superego condemns it.

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