

Recounting Kavita Kane's Novel *Lanka's Princess* Under the Prism of Object Relation Theory

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Abstract

This research paper examines Kavita Kane's renowned work *Lanka's Princess* under the lens of object relation theory. Object relation theory, a branch of psychoanalysis, originates from the work of Sigmund Freud's drive theory. It explores the concept of 'objects' as representation of people. It is a psychodynamic approach, which emphasises how early childhood experiences particularly their interactions with their parents or caregiver shape an individual self and their relationships in future. It posits that early childhood experiences and interaction are crucial for the development of one's character. Psychoanalysts specify that caregivers and other figures in the infant's life are termed as 'objects'. Meenakshi internalises her father as a good object and her mother Kaikesi as a bad object. Further her ego splits into Surpanakha due to severe,

chronic emotional neglect from her own mother and by the domination of her elder brother Ravan. Meenakshi has been reduced to the state of victim by Ravan who uses his dictatorial dominance as power tool to oppress her dreams. All her life Meenakshi battles and retaliates against her abuser Ravan that leads to depersonalisation and self-inflicted death.

Keywords: Good and bad object, split of self, self-blame, defence mechanism, anti-libidinal ego.

Introduction

This paper offers a deeper understanding of the character development that depends on people's relation with one another. Freud has identified people in a subject's environment with the term 'object' to project people as the object of drive. Freud, in his renowned work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), alludes that object is not anything; it is the thing which is the target of drive. As the drive determines the nature of the object, the concept of object intertwinds with the concept of drive. The object relations refer to individuals' interactions with both real and imagined people and their relationship between their internal and external object world.

The first 'object' in an individual's psyche is usually an internalised image of a mother that happens through the process of introjection. Internal objects are formed by the patterns in one's experience of being taken care as an infant, which may or may not be accurate representation of the actual, external caregivers. Therefore, objects are usually internalised images of one's mother, father, or other primary caregivers.

Pioneers of Object Relation Theory

Object Relation Theory is further developed by Melanie Klein and Ronald Fairbairn who have focused on the impact of early relationships on personality development. Scottish psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Ronald Fairbairn is a central figure and a major contributor to psychoanalytic theory. He is the one who shifts the focus of psychoanalysis away from Freud

and describes how people who are abused as children during their childhood internalise the experience by developing a moral defence which can be seen only in the survivors of abuse. As a part of defence mechanism, the infant takes all the bad upon themselves, each yields the moral evil on themselves so that the caretaker-object can be regarded as good. This splitting helps the infant to maintain an attachment relationship in an unsafe world. Fairbairn further asserts that the infant is born by being prepared to take in experience with its object world.

The Splitting of Self

W.R.D. Fairbairn's notable work *psychoanalytic studies of the personality* (1952) elaborate about the split in the superego that often happens by primitive, harsh, or persecutory internalised objects. It further leads to personality splitting by forcing the ego to divide the self and others into "all-good" or "all-bad" categories to manage anxiety. This splitting prevents the integration of conflicting emotions (love and hate) toward the same object, resulting in a fragmented personality structure. Thus, splitting of the ego has the effect of compromising the progressive development of all these functions in varying degrees. Therefore 'the super-ego' is regarded as an ego-structure capable of distinction from 'the ego' and its very existence itself provides evidence that a schizoid position has been established. The individual cannot reconcile that they can be both loving and aggressive, or that another person can be both caring and disappointing. This leads to a "split personality" (borderline organisation) characterized by rapid shifts (splitting) between idealising and devaluing others, extreme emotional volatility, and a lack of a cohesive, integrated self-identity.

The Three Objects

Fairbairn demonstrates that the infant's relationship to the mother has two fundamental components. They are gratifying component and an ungratifying component. Moreover, infants have three different experiences with caregivers. They are gratifying, enticing and depriving persons. When the infant's original relationship to the real, external mother becomes

unsatisfactory, it is internalised. The three internal objects which are separated out according to Fairbairn's terms are the ideal objects that are the gratifying aspects of the mother, the exciting object that is the promising and enticing aspects of the mother and the rejecting object that is the depriving, withholding aspects of the mother. The gratifying component is internalised as the ideal object representing caring and loving parent and the ungratifying component arises because of inconsistent and tantalising parent and it has been internalised as an exciting object. The hostile, depriving aspects of parent has been internalised as rejecting object. Each of these features of the mother is internalised and established as an internal object.

He has also outlined that external trauma such as physical or emotional abuse or the loss of a parent contributes to the child's inner distortions and modification of outer experience. He further concludes that the splitting as a response to frustration at the hands of the object that is the treatment of the child in the external object relationship. Thus, the interrelationship of splitting and repression is the internal mechanism affecting the ego. This split of Ego in Kavita Kane's character Surpanakha in *Lanka's princess* will be examined under object relation theory, where the main protagonist Surpanakha suffers metamorphosis from Meenakshi to Surpanakha by the neglect of her parents and the domination of her elder brother Ravan who is considered as a bad rejecting object will be scrutinised under theoretical examination.

The Mother-Infants First Object

The recounting starts with Kubja, the handmaid encountering Lord Krishna who evokes the memories of her previous birth as Surpanakha and narrates the story of her transformation from Meenakshi to Surpanakha by the neglect of her mother and the domination of her elder brother Ravan. Kaikesi, the wife of Vishravas gets disappointed because of the birth of girl child as she expects only sons to build her asura empire. She anticipates only sons with a desire that they will become powerful conquerors and the rulers of the three worlds. To achieve her motive, she cunningly marries Rishi Vishravas, the great-grandson of Brahma to beget best

progeny to win back the lost empire of Asura dynasty. When Kaikesi discovers her newborn baby as a girl child, she deliberately rejects and remarks it as ugly as it looks darker. She expresses her bitterness through the following lines, “This girl has cheated me of my plans. She is scrawny, darker and quite ugly!” (*Lanka’s Princess 2*). Kaikesi often spurns to hold the baby when it cries and entrust her husband to tend to its needs.

David E. Scharff’s *Object Relations Theory and practice: An Introduction* (1996) delineates D.W. Winnicott’s analysis on how the initial relationship between mother and the baby is usually conceived as psycho-somatic partnership. This partnership embarks as bodily closeness but the intense psychological partnership is carried throughout the child’s life. Its origin begins as bodily closeness which gives initial power and poignance to characterise the way the primary relationships work. The mother takes care of her task through holding and handling of the infant thereby conveying environmental care so that the infant receives a secure feeling through being swaddle in the security of mother’s arm receiving her responsive concern. He says holding is a form of loving. Thus, the rejection of mother brings insecure feeling within the child. W.R.D. Fairbairn in his concept describes that the first object for the infant is the mother’s breast and it seeks contact with it to ensure its own survival and development, both biologically and emotionally. But when the infant is rejected by its mother that leads to emotional deprivation and longings which in turn transform into physical tensions.

Kaikesi-The Bad Object

Kaikesi often addresses the girl baby as dark monkey as she thinks it will bring only disgrace to their asura clan. But Vishravas feels pitiful for the baby and predicts as follows, “She is our only daughter. This little girl of ours shall wrought what our sons will never be able to do! (*Lanka’s princess 3*). He has named the baby as Meenakshi as her eyes are golden and graceful as a fish. Thus, Meenakshi suffers neglect because of gender discrimination by her own mother. Kaikesi never believes her daughter. She either discards Meenakshi’s explanation

or scolds her by supporting her favorite elder son Ravan. Thus, Meenakshi internalises her father as a good object and her mother Kaikesi as a bad object. British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott affirms that the internal objects are the mental representation of significant others, particularly caregivers, and individuals during early childhood. Formation of good and bad objects depends on the quality of their early relationships and their influences on individuals. Eventhough Vishravas always favours Vibhishan and reprimands Meenakshi for interrupting the studies of her brothers, Meenakshi loves her father. Thus, Meenakshi witnesses the quarrel of her parents over their treasured children. She feels isolated by her own parents and suffers from indifference shown by them. Thus, Meenakshi's mental life is filled with sadistic phantasies concerning her parents.

Splitting of Meenakshi into Surpanakha

Meanwhile Meenakshi screams in terror when she witnesses the death of her pet lamb 'Maya' lying on the ground with its neck twisted at an odd angle. When she finds that her elder brother Ravan has murdered her pet lamb through Som, she has ventured out with blazing rage and springs on Ravan and digs her sharp nails into the tender flesh of his neck. She rips and tears his skin. Meanwhile Kumbhakarnan, the second eldest brother gets hold of her sister and pulls her off from Ravan. Ravan cries in the agony of pain and curses her as Surpanakha, a witch with long, sharp claws. He warns her that he will break her arms if she attempts to hurt him again. Thus, Meenakshi has been called as Surpanakha by her elder brother Ravan for her hysterical attitude. Melanie Klein proclaims that the destructive impulse of individual project outwards through oral aggression. Even Fairbairn affirms that hysteria has its root in schizophrenia which is truly a psychodynamic problem. The word 'Surpanakha' echoes in Meenakshi's ear and she decides to change her demeanor into Surpanakha if it can protect her from enemies. Her demeanor as Surpanakha can be considered as a defensive reaction to protect herself from invading destructive external bad object. Meenakshi's affirmation can be

witnessed through the following words, “If this could protect me, then well, I am Surpanakha” (*Lanka’s Princess* 8). Ravan’s action becomes a cause for the split of Meenakshi into Surpanakha. The above incident proves Ronald Fairbairn emphasises that splitting occurs because of frustration caused by the external object. Thus, Ravan becomes a dominant external object and through his act of killing Meenakshi’s favourite pet instigate Meenakshi to split herself into Surpanakha. She projects her aggression through the hysterical act of tearing the tender flesh of Ravan with her sharp nails.

Kaikesi hears about her daughter’s attack on Ravan, curses her as wild cat, slaps her hard and warns her with an affirmation that the name Surpanakha suits her as she is a monster. Thus, Meenakshi splits into Surpanakha by the attitude of her dominant elder brother and by the neglect of her mother. Meenakshi starts to hate Ravan for teasing her with hateful names and finding bliss in grudging with her. Now their relationship shares a new bond of blood and gore. Meenakshi often finds solace in the company of her asura grandmother Taraka who is well versed in the realm of Sorcery and always scolds Kaikesi for being biased mother towards her own daughter Meenakshi. Taraka often protects Meenakshi from her mother’s remarks. Kaikesi’s neglect proves Fairbairn’s theory that if the infant is separated from its object in its early relations, it becomes bad and depriving. Moreover, it becomes too painful as the infant yearns for the ideal object and depends on the object which is physically or emotionally absent for a good deal of the time. Kaikesi disavows her daughter and scolds her. Therefore, the child internalises the object inside himself/herself, which acts as substitutes and a solution for unsatisfying relationships with real external objects. Thus, Meenakshi substitutes and internalises her father Vishravas as an idealised good object over her own mother Kaikesi.

Meenakshi suffers from inferiority complex as she is born dark with unattractive features and considers herself as an outcast as her family members have good looks. Her longing proves that a child suffers from self-deprecation if he/she is neglected by its own

parents. Eventhough Meenakshi suffers from self-disparagement, her grandmother's empowering words always enlighten Meenakshi, "Never be ashamed of your body, your femininity. Beauty lies in your head and heart. You have to believe it by loving yourself" (*Lanka's Princess* 22).

Meenakshi's behavioral self-blame

Even though Kaikesi despises and reproaches Meenakshi as monster, Meenakshi always feels bad for complaining her mother to Nani as she thinks snitching about one's family means that the person lacks in family pride and it will be a betrayal. So, she resists painting her mother black in her Nani's eyes. Instead, she blames herself that she has been hated by her mother as she is born with dark skin. This behavioral self-blame has been readily caused by the emotional frustration of the child when it comes to realise that she is not loved herself as a person by her mother, and her own love for her mother is not valued and accepted by her. This highly traumatic situation gives rise to a situation where the child comes to regard its outward expressions of her own love as bad, and in an attempt to keep her love as good as possible, she tends to retain his love inside himself.

Significance of Good Object

Meenakshi has been restrained from reading Vedas and performing austerities because of discrimination of being born as a girl. When Taraka consoles her by assuring to teach sorcery, Meenakshi hesitates as her father resents witchcraft and she feels guilty to deceive her father as she could not bear hurting her good ideal object and vows never to disappoint him. Thus, Meenakshi devotes herself to her father Vishravas whom she considers as good object. In Object Relations Theory, a 'good object' is crucial for healthy development of strong ego that enables them to handle anxiety and promotes the feelings of security, the integration of self, and the formation of a stable self-identity. It fosters empathy, trust, and the ability to form healthy future relationships. But whenever Vishravas dotes Vibhisan, Meenakshi feels a stab

of jealousy coupled with fury as she adores him and wishes to possess him because he is the one who pampers her in her infancy. Meenakshi wishes to prove herself to her father by exceling in sorcery but it has been disapproved by her father. Thus, good object helps to build self-esteem that allows for the development of a "true self".

When Ravan determines to become the king of three worlds, Vishravas forces him to concede to the fact that he is a mere rishi's son. This remark infuriates Ravan and he resolute to defeat his enemy or he will die in the process. Vishravas devastates on hearing Kumbha's resolution to join Ravan. When Meenakshi tries to interfere, Vishravas scolds her for being disrespectful. This enrages Meenakshi to question her father, "Why do you always take their side? Because they are boys? But they are the ones leaving you. And I am here always by your side, but you prefer them to me each time" (*Lanka's Princess* 36). The above words of Meenakshi proves Klein's view that the libidinal impulse/urge to possess all the riches of good object leads to aggression there by separating or destroying the bad object. Moreover, the destruction arises as a consequence of greed and not by any other motive. Thus, whenever Meenakshi's ideal good object is attacked by bad object, her ego splits as Surpanakha thereby exhibiting hysterical, obsessional and anxious symptoms. Therefore, the splitting happens to protect the good object and to create hatred or destruction for the bad object.

The disappointed Vishravas declares that he is returning to his ashram with his first wife Ilavida though Meenakshi begs him to stay with them as they belong to one family. But Vishravas bids farewell with a final note that his place and identity as a rishi must dwell in ashram only not in a palace. This statement evokes Meenakshi's anxiety as she considers his father as her infantile dependence. Meenakshi witnesses how her father forsakes her without a prick of conscience. She weeps as she will no longer enjoys her father's warm embrace, his assuring smile as he wipes her tears away. W.R.D. Fairbairn illustrates that the abandonment

of infantile dependence leads to anxiety and uncontrol impulses in schizoid individuals. Thus, Meenakshi is being abandoned by her own father because of her bad object Ravan.

The Regression

Meenakshi has lost both her beloved Nani and her warm-hearted father who comfort her whenever she has been illtreated by her mother. Now she feels lonely and realises that it is because of Ravan and his ambitious nature, her father has been separated. Her resentment centers around Ravan who has sacrificed his own father to achieve his ambition. Meenakshi concludes that it is Ravan and her own mother are responsible for splintering their family and severance of her father from her. Her anger mounts on Ravan and also on her own mother Kaikesi and she is resolute to take revenge on Ravan. After her father's departure, Meenakshi alienates herself from her own mother and brother. The anxiety caused due to separation manifests itself as a fear of isolation and the individual shuts or isolates himself/herself.

Her father's abandonment creates an impact on her. It instigates her to distance herself from her own family. Just like her father, she too feels herself as an outsider in the family. The above instance of Meenakshi's feeling of not belonging proves Hary Guntrip's words "people who does not have good-enough mothering develops a deep-seated doubt about the reality and viability of their very "self" and they are ultimately found to be suffering from varying degrees of depersonalisation unreality, the dread feeling of not belonging" (*Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy and the self*148). Thus, Meenakshi develops social detachment by being aloof, alienates herself from her own family members because of emotional neglect of her mother that is rejecting bad object and the abandonment of her good object that is her father and her grandmother.

Libidinal ego and Anti-libidinal ego

Kaikesi and Ravan's neglectful and teasing nature discards the ideal object that is her father Vishravas from Meenakshi's life. These circumstances lead Meenakshi into splitting her

psyche into ego parts. They are libidinal ego and anti-libidinal ego. According to Fairbairn's structural system, the ego and object are inseparable. He states that an object must have a piece of ego attached to it. An object with no corresponding portion of ego is emotionally irrelevant. Therefore, ego grows through relations with objects. A piece of the outer-directed, integral ego is split off from its original unity and bound up in an internal object relationship with it. The piece of ego that remains bound to and identified with "the exciting object" termed as "libidinal ego" and the piece of ego that remains bound to and identified with the "rejecting object" (neglectful parent) is termed as "anti-libidinal ego". The libidinal ego is the part of the child's original ego which has not given up the unsatisfied longings and demands of infantile dependence. It is the repository of hope and always longs for union with the exciting and ideal object, as their longing for real gratification from the real mother has become too painful.

The anti-libidinal ego is a part of ego, becomes repository for all hatred and destructiveness which accumulate as a consequence of frustration of libidinal longing. It attaches and identifies with the rejecting object that is the aspect of the mother which can be experienced as depriving and withholding by the infant. The remainder of the original ego termed as central ego remains bound to and identified with the ideal object whereas the central ego strives to live up to the ideals of the ideal object. Thus, Meenakshi's anti-libidinal ego that splits as Surpanakha is full of hatred and destructiveness for her brother Ravan and her mother Kaikesi. This ego always hopes to attack and punish the rejecting object. Thus, all of Fairbairn's 'ego's' have energy of their own and are directed toward and bound up with objects.

When Ravan's intransigence of not allowing Meenakshi to marry Vidyujiva enkindles Meenakshi's rage who has gone to an extent of threatening Ravan. Soon, after marriage, Meenakshi beseeches her husband to return to their Ashma kingdom, but Vidyujiva comforts her that Ravan will not harm them as their enmity comes to a truce because of their marriage. Meenakshi hopes to be away from Ravan fearing that he may disrespect her or destroy her ideal

object Vidyujiva just like her father Vishravas. Moreover, she holds onto the safety of the "ideal object" to maintain hope and a sense of security. W.B.Fairbairn in his theory explicates how a child feels weak, wreckful and overwhelmed by the presence of powerful rejecting object and wishes to avoid it to safeguard its good ideal object.

After twelve years, Meenakshi gives birth to a son named Sambhukumar. When Meenakshi wishes to meet her Nani, Kaikesi discloses the murder of Taraka by Ram and Lakshman, the two princes of Kosala. Eventhough Meenakshi infused with anguish, later she learns that her son Kumar is born right after her grandmother's death and she thinks her grandmother comes back to her in the form of her baby boy Kumar. She pledges to avenge her grandmother's death by killing them. When Meghnad, the son of Ravan returns with glory of his new name 'Indrajit' by defeating Indra and other devas, Meenakshi awaits the arrival of her husband Vidyujiva, who accompanies Ravan to the war. But the disclosure of murder of her husband Vidyujiva shatters Meenakshi's hopes into pieces. She turns cold and questions Ravan about the murderer of her husband. Ravan explains that Vidyujiva has been killed by his own soldier, but Meenakshi finds it deceiving and splits herself into Surpanakha thereby vehemently interrogates her brothers and learns that her own brother has murdered her husband.

The above instance proves Melanie Klein's declaration that anxieties stimulate the mechanism of splitting that leads to the split of self. Meenakshi's anxiety over the murder of her husband Vidyujiva by her own brother Ravan triggers her to split into Surpanakha which prompts her to shout in frenzied manner. Ravan confesses that he has killed her husband for being a traitor and explains his deed as a noble action of saving his family from a rogue. Ravan's confession is as follows, "I am that brother who made his sister a widow by killing him. I saved my family" (*Lanka's Princess* 169).

Meenakshi feels heartbroken when her own mother Kaikesi and Mandodari condemn and denounce Vidyujiva as a scoundrel who spares no woman in the palace and how he has

whored himself to gain power and crown. But Meenakshi discerns that Vidyujiva is the one who saves her from being annihilated by her family and also showers love, warmth and the sense of belongingness to her which none offers her. Meenakshi curses Ravan for killing all her hopes and her future. Again, her another ideal object Vidyujiva has been killed by Ravan, the bad object. Meenakshi burns with fury and is resolute to see Ravan's death for removing her father and her husband Vidyujiva from her life.

Meenakshi's anti-libidinal ego, which is a repository for all the hatred deeds of Ravan's action of removing her father and murdering her husband Vidyujiva, drives her to attack the bad rejecting object, Ravan. His false promise to defend her has accelerated her to change completely into Surpanakha who pledges to destroy the bad object that is Ravan. She wants to flee from Lanka especially from her brother and family who are threats to her happiness. Meenakshi wants to avenge Ravan for destroying her happiness. It can be evident in the following words of Meenakshi, "I would be Surpanakha and you shall pay dearly-with your life. And your precious Lanka too. I shall bring all this and your beautiful world down, besides your ego" (*Lanka's Princess* 176).

Meenakshi's False Self

Meenakshi decides to train her son Kumar to kill Ravan. She is resolute to be the Surpanakha to protect herself and to ease her vengeance. Meenakshi leaves as Surpanakha with a burning resolution of destroying Lanka and Ravan. In Dandaka, Kumar has been thoroughly trained by his grand-uncles Mareech, Khara and Dushan. But Meenakshi's heart explodes when she hears about the sudden death of her son Kumar. Surpanakha witnesses the dead body of Kumar where she finds her son dead and decapitated on the ground, as his head flung a foot away from his trunk. Her heart contracts and agony torments her heart. She hates Ravan and her whole family as they are responsible for her decision of isolation. She wants to rake them with her sharp nails, gouge their eyes and brains. She wants to kill them for bringing these calamities

on her. She screams in madness for losing her father, her husband and her only son all because of her family estrangement.

Conclusion

Human personality differentiates internally on the basis of good and bad experiences in object-relations. If the early experience is good, it is digested and promotes good ego development and abides as a stable character and pleasant memory. If the early experience is bad, it remains as undigested foreign bodies in one's psyche. Melaine Klein conveys that all psychopathological breakdown can be got through with the help of a good analyst who supports the patient to outgrow the internal disharmony by working through transference relations and developing a steadily more integrated psychic structure through new good-object relations, and thus finds his natural selfhood.

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* has been scrutinised under Object Relation Theory where the protagonist Meenakshi suffers by the neglect of her bad rejecting objects like Kaikesi, and also by the dominance of another bad object Ravan. Meenakshi has lost her beloved father, her husband and son by Ravan. She has been evicted and forced to combat loneliness and splits as Surpanakha because of her tyrant brother Ravan. All her life she battles and retaliates against her abuser Ravan. Thus, women suffer identity crisis and are forced to sacrifice by domineering masculine perpetrator. In the name of protectors and providers, they use dictatorial dominance as power tool to subdue and reduce women to a state of victims. Object relations theory concludes that the individuals must seek to satisfy their interpersonal needs by developing strong ego for gratification of self either through a catalyst or by becoming a self-autonomous person.

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