

Psychoanalysis : Jacques Lacan

The aura created by the Freudian interpretations reached its zenith when the French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (propelled into this arena by his reading of Freud and Salvador Dali) achieved a place in the literary critical canon. The linguistic, philosophical and political scope of his discourse stirred the Western intelligentsia. His oeuvre reveals a great influence of Parisian figures like the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. He suggested a new back-to-Freudianism (Return to Freud) with a novel emphasis on the unconscious, as the nucleus of our being, which is the opus of his works. Lacan's Freudian reading primarily involves the realization that the unconscious is to be understood as intimately tied to the functions and dynamics of language. The central pillar of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is that "the unconscious is structured like a language", which he substantiates in the essay *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*.

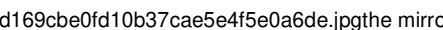
Lacan draws on Saussure and emphasizes that meaning is a network of differences. As there is a perpetual barrier between the signifier and the signified which is demonstrated with a diagram showing two identical lavatory rooms, one headed "Ladies" and "Gentlemen." This purport to show that same signifier may have different signifieds, so that the correlation between signifiers determines the meanings. Thus Lacan suggests an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier.

Further he argues that the two dreamwork mechanisms identified by Freud, condensation and displacement correspond to the basic poles of language identified by the linguist Roman Jakobson, i.e., metaphor and metonymy. In metonymy one thing represents another by means of the part standing for the whole (e.g. twenty sail would mean twenty ships). In Freudian dream interpretation, an element in a dream might stand for something else by displacement (For eg. A lover who is Italian might be represented by an Alfa Romeo car). Lacan says that this is the same as metonymy, the part standing for the whole. In condensation, several things might be compressed into one symbol, just as a metaphor like, "the ship ploughed the waves" condenses onto a single item, two different images, the ship cutting through the sea, and the plough cutting through the soil. The use of these linguistic means of self-expression by the unconscious is part of Lacan's evidence for the claim that the unconscious is structured like a language. The transition section of the essay moves attention, again from the conscious self, which has always been regarded as the primary self, to the unconscious, as the "kernel of our being." Lacan reverses the Cartesian statement, "I think, therefore, I am," as "I am, where I think not" (i.e. true selfhood is in the unconscious), thereby challenging the Western philosophical consciousness. He insists that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious should be followed to its logical conclusion which is the self's radical ex-centricity to itself. Thus he deconstructs the liberal humanist notion of unique, individual selfhood and the idea of the subject as a stable amalgamation of consciousness. Lacan's take on self would reject the conventional view on characterization (as the idea of the character rests on the notion of a unique separate self) and the novelistic characters are seen as "assemblages of signifiers clustering round a proper name.")

Further, Lacan's view of language (language as fundamentally detached from any referent in the world) defies literary realism since in realist novels, is that the text figures forth the real world for us. Thus a poststructuralist Lacan would suggest a fragmented, allusive text, where it plays with itself, alludes to other texts etc. Lacan's interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (reprinted as "The Purloined Poe") in which the unconscious, the process of psychoanalysis, the nature of language etc. come into play, is much pertinent. Poe's story with no in-depth characterization, the character being suggestive of chess pieces (named as the Queen, King, Minister, Chief of Police and Dupin, the detective) has an archetypal air which lends itself well to psychoanalytical interpretation. His foregrounding of the unconscious lends to his speculation of the mechanism whereby an individual emerges into consciousness. Before the sense of self emerges, the young child exists in a realm, which Lacan calls the imaginary (pre-Oedipal), in which there is no distinction between the self and the other and there is an idealized identification with the mother. The child experiences both itself and its environment (in Lacanian terms "innenwelt" and "umwelt" respectively) as a random, fragmented and formless mass.

At some point between six and eight months occurs Mirror Stage (at the formulation of which Lacan was strongly influenced by Heidegger's notions of ex-sistence and "nothingness" and Sartre's distinction between subject and ego (as given in his *Transcendence of Ego*), when the child sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive itself as being, separate from the rest of the world. Lacan's mirror stage correspond with Freud's stage of primary narcissism, when the subject is in love with its own image and its own body, which precedes the love of others. The infant at the same time identifies with and alienates itself from the mirror image. Thus the sense of a unified self is acquired at the price of this self being other, i.e. the mirror image.

For Lacan, the ego emerges at this moment of alienation and fascination with one's own image. The ego is both formed by and takes its form from the organizing and constituting properties of the image. Lacan insists that the ego is based on an illusory image of the wholeness and mastery (as the child in the mirror stage cannot wholly gain mastery and control over its body, in spite of its sense of bodily anatomy and in that sense still fragmented) and it is the function of the ego to maintain this illusion of coherence and mastery. The function of the ego is, in other words, one of mis-recognition (*meconnaissance*) of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation.

As the sense of original unity and coherence in  the mirror phase is an illusion, there is a fundamental disharmony regarding the ego. The ego is essentially a terrain of conflict and discord, a site of continual struggle. What Lacan refers to as a "lack of being" (which is considered as a cause of desire and is manipulated well by consumer capitalism) is the ontological gap (a notion critiqued by Deleuze and Guattari in their *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) or the primary loss at the very core of our subjectivity.

The mirror stage played a crucial role in the dissemination of Lacanian ideas in film and cultural studies (formations proposed by Jean Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey's concept of male gaze etc.).

At the "symbolic stage" (based, on which, Kristeva formulated her concept of the "semiotic"), the child enters the language system, concerned with lack and separation, since language names what is not present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it. Within the language, the "subject" (employed by Louis Althusser, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and developed later by Pierre Macherey and Slavoj Žižek) vainly tries to represent itself. The subject is an effect of the signifier put into language. This stage also marks the beginning of socialization, with its prohibitions and restraints, associated with the figure of the father (patriarchy), who disrupts the narcissistic balance between the child and the mother. Thus the phallus in Lacanian theory is not merely the male genital organ, but a privileged signifier (displaced by Judith Butler by the coinage lesbian phallus in *Bodies That Matter*) as it inaugurates the process of signification. The phallus operates in all the three Lacanian registers –the imaginary, the symbolic and the real.

Lacan's distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary is in corollary with the distinction between the small "other" and the big "Other". The little or the semblable other, inscribed in the imaginary order is a reflection and projection of the ego. The mirror stage sets up the image of the ego as an ideal "I" for the subject, and this ideal "I" becomes the "other" within the subject's experience. This other is either the counterpart or the other people in whom the subject perceives a visual likeness and the specular image or the reflection of one's body in the mirror. The big "Other" inscribed in the symbolic order designates a radical alterity, an otherness transcending the illusory otherness of the imaginary as it cannot be assimilated through identification. Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and law. The other is then, another subject and also the symbolic order which mediates the relationship with that other subject.

In terms of the literary polarization between the realist and the anti-realist symbolic realm would have to be seen as the one found in realist literature, a world of patriarchal order and logic. By contrast, the anti-realist gestures represent the realm of the imaginary, a world in which language gestures beyond itself, beyond logic and text, rather in the way that language often does. The contrast between the imaginary and the symbolic can be seen as analogous to that between poetry and prose. The Lacanian outlook will involve a preference for the kind of literary text in which there are constant eruptions of the imaginary into the symbolic, as in the kind of 'metafiction' or 'magic realism' in which the novel undercuts and queries its own realism. A fine example of this kind of work can be seen in the novels of B.S. Johnson, a British writer, whose constant textual inventiveness takes the form, of moments when the characters cross-question the author.

The last stage in the formation of psychic structure according to Lacan is the "real". It is the world as it exists before the mediation of language. The real there can never be truly grasped or engaged with. It is continually mediated through the imaginary and the symbolic.

Though by the late 1970s, psychoanalytic theory had fallen into disrepute owing to its reductionism (reducing all social and cultural phenomena into psycho-sexual explanations), the force of Lacan's "Return to Freud proved to be a fresh impetus to a broad spectrum of critical orientations like social theory, queer, cultural and film studies. The continuing relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis rests in its potential to refuse the ideological closure of a unified, harmonious, conflict-free subject or society as well as to analyze the ways in which desire manifests itself through cultural texts.