

# Psychodynamics of an Author

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**Abstract:** The psychodynamics of the writer, Sudha Murty, have been observed through the discourse. Two of her literary works, *Death Without Grief* and *A Wedding To Remember* have been selected for this purpose from her book “Wise and Otherwise” published in 2002. In one story, the author tries to depict the insignificance of death. The subjective connotation of death varies from one person to another but the universal definition of death is marked by the meaning lent to death through its association with grief and agony. The author, through the course of an event, discovers that death of a person may bear no relevance in other people’s lives when the person becomes incapable of contributing constructively to the lives of significant others. The author feels deeply troubled to discover that love persists only as long as the person is functional and useful to others and can profoundly play his or her stipulated roles in the social context. She makes a harrowing conclusion through the unfolding of the story that we have become so engulfed by our professional and personal commitments that love has become proportionate to the usefulness of a person. Through the other story, author portrays the significance of positive emotions like love and sense of responsibility. She brings out the element of compassion through her narrative. This story draws attention to the glorious act of love against the frugality and futility of physical form of sickness. It is love that fosters self-realization and acceptance of responsibilities leading one to overcome all assumed and real hurdles in the psychological and physical realm.

**Keywords:** Psychodynamics, Literary, Stories, Author

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## 1. Introduction

“A writer is someone who pays attention to the world — a writer is a professional observer,” Susan Sontag had once said. The objective of a writer’s creation is not always about the observation he makes but also, and even perhaps more so, about the exploration and discovery of the inner self. In this regard, a writer can be seen as a reflection of a psychotherapist. That’s precisely what Adam Phillips — UK’s most renowned psychoanalytical writer and the author of immensely motivating reads like *Tickling*, *Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature*, *On Kissing, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, and the particularly wonderful *On Kindness* — explores in his wide-ranging conversation with Paul Holdengräber, part of *The Paris Review*’s notable interview series.

The practice of employing psychoanalytic approaches to the study of literature is going on for years. Many psychologists have attempted to explain literary creations in methodical terms with the help of psychoanalytic approaches that are borrowed from expansive theories of eminent psychoanalysts or psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Carl

Jung etc. In a way, psychological perspectives of the characters are used as tools to study the author’s unconscious. The dynamics created through the personalities of a literary creation provide a support system to the psychoanalytical explanation and subsequent understanding of the author’s work in the literary realm. Many allied theories are also taken into account while developing a functional relationship between fictional portrayal of human beings and topography of the author’s mind. Freud had been very dedicated in literary explanations and interpretations often using the roles and characters used in narrative works to introduce new concepts and theories in psychoanalysis. He explored the motivations and perceptions of narrative essays like “Oedipus”, “Delusion” and “Dream in Jensen’s *Gradiva*” and Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” to create his series of “The Interpretation of Dreams”. By deploying concepts of psychoanalysis, the structure and functions of a particularly interesting character, most often the protagonist of the story, may be brought under the scanner, in accordance with Freudian principle of literary critical analysis.

In order to explore the characters, it is important to know the criteria with reference to which the psychoanalytic

inferences can be drawn from a literary invention. Freud was one of the earliest psychoanalysts to have worked on these ideas (from 1880s) followed by Jung and Lacan.

As Freud had highlighted, the topography of mind is divided into three provinces- conscious, pre-conscious and unconscious. Psychoanalytic viewpoint of Freud revolves mainly around the system of unconscious which allegedly encompasses all our repressed impulses of aggression, fear, insecurity, sex and memories that are particularly threatening to human existence in a civilized society. Most of our behaviours are influenced or motivated by the contents of this unconscious which may be unravelled in a systematic manner using projective tests. He also proposed three divisions of the structure of personality namely the Id (which corresponds to the unconscious), the Ego and the Superego. Id comprises the primitive, animalistic, unacceptable patterns of thinking that direct our behaviour on pleasure seeking principles. The Id may be seen as analogous to Carl Jung's, one of Freud's followers, 'Shadow'. He postulated that the shadow is a form of archetype, which are primordial images or psychic patterns instinctual to a certain species (humans) and are derived from the evolutionary aspect of the ancestral roots of the species. Shadow represents those qualities of a species that are morally objectionable by the society that are, many a times, projected in dreams. Superego is the converse of Id which works as a collective conscience and drives us to behave in ideal and moral manners. This may be analogous to Jung's Persona, the side of personality that people show to the world according to the roles dictated by the society. Ego is the functional balance between these two which executes the personality dynamics in a realistic and norm (rule) appropriate manner.

Freud was of the view that personality develops through four stages in which the erogenous zones of pleasure shift from mouth (oral) to anus (anal) to genitals (phallic) punctuated with a period of latency (dormant sexuality) and then moving on to genital stage (reawakening of sexual feelings) again. According to him, every stage is marked by a conflict situation, the resolution of which leads to the ultimate shaping of the personality of a child.

Freud first elaborated on the idea of defence mechanisms in 1926, which are used unconsciously to deal with the anxieties accompanying sexual and aggressive urges stored in the unconscious. Some defence mechanisms are very important in this context like reaction formation, projection, regression and sublimation. All these defences protect the ego against anxiety and are universal, often citing good grounds for explaining psychopathological cases.

However, many researchers have argued against the empirical analytical significance of psychoanalytical methods inviting controversies on the meta-theoretical appraisal of psychoanalysis of literary productions. They have put their stand for the radicalism of scientific analysis considering its vehemence and preciseness against the newly developed psychoanalytical method of interpreting scholarly articles to delve into the unconscious of the characters.

In general, some of the following are taken into account

for psychoanalytical literary analysis:

- Author: The author's biographical background is analysed and outlined from cues left in his or literary creation.
- Characters: The psyche of the characters is discovered by uncovering the nature of their behaviours and type of relationships shared, social interaction and person perception of others.
- Readers: The psychological theories are used to examine the appeal of the work to the readers and the way readers relate to the mental and behavioural processes of the characters in question.
- Content: Psychological theories are used to measure the importance of language, symbolism, comparisons and realism of the story.

Henry A Murray had developed a projective technique to dig out the unconscious elements by showing pictures of human figures in an array of contexts and situations. The responses given by the subjects in the form of stories form the crux of the entire investigation. The main theme of the story coupled with analysis of certain other dimensions pertaining to the story teller paves the way for a clear visualization of the story teller's mind. The following are the principal domains that are an integral part of the analysis-

- Main hero including individual traits and abilities
- Main needs of the hero
- Conception of the environment
- Role of parental/ contemporary/ junior figures
- Significant conflicts
- Nature of anxieties
- Main defences against conflicts and fears
- Severity of superego
- Integration of ego

The psychodynamics of the author in this context have been analysed with the respect to the above mentioned domains.

## 2. Analysis

A lucid interpretation of the psychodynamics of the author's personality may be developed by means of psychoanalytic theories as the doctrines of the theories are universal in nature which reduces the risk of generalizing situational behaviours and mental conditions of the characters in terms of time, place or culture.

At the interpretive level, the writer faces conflict with regard to her mother's request, on one hand, and her busy work schedule, on the other, when asked to make a choice between going to pay condolences to the neighbour's family and not. She finally complies with her mother's request which may be interpreted as her intense attachment with or loyalty towards her mother, boldly illustrated in lines like *"I didn't know these neighbours well, but my mother wanted me to visit them to offer our condolences"*. Her relationship with her mother and her direct compliance with her mother's proposal while at the same time not giving any mention about her father's presence

in this context maybe depicted as a growing bond with her mother only. However, it can be also seen that the writer "*felt so guilty*" for not being able to take out time from her erratic working hours. This may be again attributed to the fact that she had intense attachment and emotional dependence on her mother and a parallel functioning force of Super-ego that constantly eggs her on to "*visit my neighbour at any cost*".

As she finally settles her mental conflict and reaches the neighbour's house to represent her mother, she comes to face a harsh truth. She feels estranged to find herself in the "*music and gay atmosphere*" of the house as it was totally unexpected in a family in which a member has expired. The members of the house greet her and give her a warm welcome. This gap between the imagined environment and the atmosphere she sees in reality further increases her mental turmoil. She had been expecting to see a sad and mournful climate in the house keeping with the loss in the family. She perceives the other persons' over-friendly gestures and other signs of curiosity as quite unpleasant and she keeps using phrases like "*I was puzzled*", "*I was surprised*", "*not related to me*" and "*feeling very uncomfortable about the whole thing*". She feels sad and alienated in the environment she experiences in the neighbour's house indicating that she is not able to identify with the people or the feelings of the other persons present in the house. It puts her into greater level of mental conflict about how and when to start with her condolences. This conflict may be viewed as a conflict between autonomy and compliance as she was representing her mother and paid the visit on her mother's insistence, not being able to fully identify who the deceased person was and how she was related to the other members of the family. The author has been experiencing an approach-avoidance conflict at the conscious level right from the beginning but after the family strikes a conversation with her, her conflict increases by a few notches. On one hand, she feels tied down by her instincts of grief and sympathy for the family and, on the other, she is not able to express her emotions or the purpose of the visit. She writes "*it was only when we neared the gate that I hesitantly raised the topic*" which clearly insinuates the state of her anxiety and tension carried all throughout.

It is also evident from her behaviour that she upholds social politeness when she writes "*my instinct told me that it would not be correct for me to eat, but I also realized that it might seem rude of me to refuse*". It is the persona in her unconscious which commands her to be socially courteous and well-behaved without verbalizing her doubts over the entire climate of the house and the over-friendly manners of the family members towards her.

She has also been seen to evade the questions unconsciously during the conversation with the family. This clearly depicts a passive-aggressive trend in the author that may be due to the discomfort caused by the family members. She tends to forget the answers to relevant questions indicating that she expresses her aggressive urges in a passive manner. Like when she "*really did not remember which sari she was talking about*" or "*I do not know, I am not on the*

*admission committee*". As she continues to use isolation as a defence mechanism to deal with the anxiety produced by her situation wherein she sees herself as an observer of the whole incident(not experiencing it directly), she learns that the neighbour's family has been relieved by the death of their mother. The family is rather happy that the death has put an end to all their woes and domestic complaints. The author feels massively depressed about this truth and comes back "*saddened and disturbed by my visit*", an extension of the author's feelings of insecurity and anxiety related to an anticipated loss of her own mother. It may be said that the author has a profound need for love and affiliation and, hence, a profound anxiety of losing her love. The question posed in the final section of the story brings out the uncertainty of relationships experienced by the author at the unconscious level. It corroborates with the author's strong need for attachment, showed by her at the inception of the story, more than ever, when she realizes "*death solved the problem for all of us*".

The author has, however, been focussed on reality and has laid down a reasonably good balance between her drives and commands of her superego on one side and the demands of the reality on the other. She has been realistically inclined in her apperception of the situations. But the author has not given any defined solution to the question raised in the story. She has rather left an open ended question for her readers. Therefore, it may be concluded that though she has presented a structured series of thoughts and feelings, she has not been able to provide completeness to the story. The very concluding line "*my mother was finally relieved from all her suffering*" leaves an element of indecision and pain in the story. Integration of ego has been found to be inadequate with an unhappy and deficient outcome and solution respectively.

The second story unfolds with the author's decision to attend an unknown wedding invitation "*out of curiosity*". With repeated effort, she fails to recall the identity of the person who had sent the invitation. This projects her instinctive tendency to see herself as a loving teacher to her students and a supporter to needy people. Her vested interests, as implied, lie in helping and giving happiness. She is a friendly and accessible teacher who gets "*many wedding invitations from my students*". As an outcome of these unconscious elements, she almost instantly decides to not disappoint the inviters who left a personal note with the invitation saying that they "*will consider it unfortunate*" in her absence.

The duality in her mind regarding the identification of the couple in question keeps disturbing her, "*I wondered if attending some unknown person's wedding was worth the trouble*", even when she reaches the venue as she feels unsure if the couple has been her students. According to the description, every moment of her stay in the wedding function is marked by curiosity coupled with vagueness and hesitation. Another question that keeps urging her is the relation she shares with the couple and why the couple had taken the trouble of sending her a personal note with the

invitation. This may be interpreted as an extension of her need for recognition and acknowledgement. She feels irritated and disgusted when she is taken to the food counter and expresses her hesitation to eat the food. Though she perceives the environment as amiable and nice, she feels threatened by the fact that she has been an unwanted invitee in the function. The nature of anxiety that could be sensed from her behaviour possibly points at a fear of disapproval or rejection. However, when she is finally introduced to the groom, she sees the figure as devoted and respectful towards the bride.

According to the account held by the groom's father, the groom has initially been very hostile and resistant but changed his decision after being strongly influenced by one of the author's book. Through this description, the author sees the son as unsympathetic and hostile projecting her inner dynamic inferences. It shows that she feels threatened and insecure that the boy leaves a woman he claimed to have loved. Anxiety of separation or loss of love is, therefore, evident from the story created with the groom. The groom turns out to be sensitive and responsible that directs at the author's reconciliation and satisfaction in creating a positive ending to the otherwise alarming story. However, severity of superego is also manifested through the groom's behaviour as he "punishes" himself by taking a positive decision to marry the girl suffering from leukoderma. It comes in delayed and just manner indicating that his superego takes the lead in this situation. The author ends the story in a positive note, the outcome being happy, adequate, logical and realistic. This is an indication of the strong integration of the author's ego. Thought processes revealed by the plot show that the author is structured, appropriate and rational in her thoughts. It may be said that the author uses a healthy defence mechanism (called sublimation by Freud) to create motivating stories of love and dedication that may have indirect influences on others' lives. Her creative pursuits have shown to transform the life of the character as well as readers which may be an unconscious attempt on her part to convert her negatives into positives. The author is also known for her explicit altruism towards needy people which corresponds to the defence she uses while creating literary works. The acknowledgement of her influence in the groom's life also begets a sense of reconciliation to her need for appreciation and acknowledgement which was located in the initial phase of the story.

The fact that the author has portrayed herself as an onlooker in both the stories implies that an attempt has been made on part of the author to isolate herself from the emotional content of the story as a defence mechanism. She has narrated the stories in third person and avoided the direct anxiety of facing the odd.

### 3. Summary

On the whole, the author's self image is inadequate, showing herself as forgetful, confused, doubtful and low in

confidence when she refers to herself as "*an ordinary person like myself*". At the working mental plane, she is focussed and persistent. She has tried in every possible way to fulfil the purpose of the task she has taken up in both the stories and keep her ego satisfied. Her main needs have been identified as need for love, affiliation and attachment. The elemental features of the environment conceived in these stories include sadness, non-congeniality, grief, hostility. Her significant conflicts are characterized by autonomy-compliance and approach-avoidance. Passivity-aggression has been found to co-exist as a prominent source of anxiety and isolation and sublimation have been seen to be used as main defences in this case. Ego integration has been adequate and reality-oriented.

### Limitations

1. The analysis drawn from the narratives may not be regarded as foolproof and rather be treated as good "leads" for working hypotheses, to be verified by other methods.
2. No amount of past research has been conducted on the author's biographical life to provide a sound base for judgment or insight about her psychodynamics.
3. The author has narrated some of the stories as collected recounts of experiences from other people that may not bear resemblance to her personal life and experiences.

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