

Psychological Abuse in the poem “The Frog and the Nightingale” by the writer Vikram Seth

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Abstract

Vikram Seth is considered one of the Eminent writers of the modern age born on 20th June 1952. His specialty was that he used to strike the persona of his readers via his personified and allegorical characters. His work probes the psychology of people; which readers find relatable. His writings work as catharsis and generate consciousness in society. Furthermore, most of his works highlight the post-independence period as colonization has changed the living standard of native countries to a great extent. This paper probes into one of his reputed poems “The Frog and the Nightingale”, as it is the epitome of psychological abuse, exploitation, and post-independent society.

Psychological abuse is also referred to as emotional abuse. In Frog and the Nightingale, Frog caused mental harm to the Nightingale by creating self-doubt in her mind. In this paper, this concept is related to the colonisation of India and how Britishers created self-doubt in Indians that Indians are not capable to run the economy and exploited India's resources. Poetry and psychology are much related to each other as both help in the purification of emotions. Although, psychology is an umbrella term. To bring humour and satire together Vikram Seth often used to use the literary device “Anthropomorphism” which attributes human characteristics to non-human living creatures. In “Frog and the Nightingale” also used the technique of “Anthropomorphism”. Prior to colonisation, India used to be considered a “Golden Sparrow” because of being rich in resources. Similarly, in the poem, Nightingale is rich by her voice that was exploited by the Frog, in the same manner as Britishers exploited India's resources. And at last, both, the Nightingale in the poem and the title of India “Golden Sparrow” died.

Keywords: Psychological abuse, exploitation, Art for art's sake, Anthropomorphism, Narcissist.

Introduction

Psychological violence involves the regular and deliberate use of negative words and nonphysical violence used with the agenda of manipulation. This technique is used to hurt, weaken or frighten the victim mentally and emotionally. This results in self-doubt and confusion in the victim's mind. Victims are unable to differentiate between right and wrong and unable to handle daily based situations.

Psychology is the umbrella term. Art is referred to as psychology. Psychology is a branch of science that studies, human behaviour, and conscious and unconscious thoughts in human minds.

Similarly, Poems also reflect imagination, thoughts, and inner feelings via literary devices and techniques. Poetry is always considered a result of unconscious thoughts and as per modern psychologists, unconscious thoughts are the core element to study the human mind. Thus, poetry and psychology go hand in hand.

In the early 19th century, a French poet and play writer “Théophile Gautier” (1811), coined the phrase in French “*J'art pour l'art*” which was translated in English to “Art for Art's Sake”. This expression is utilised to portray a way to deal with writing, verses, visual expressions, music, and different arts.

Poe reused this phrase specifically in terms of poetry. He penned in “*The Poetic Principle*”, (1850):

“[...] the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.”

He replaced the word “art” with “poem” as for him art and poem are synonyms.

Poetry is the way to illustrate the real inner experiences, ideas, and emotions by giving imaginative touch to generate interest among readers. The poetic techniques like metaphors, meter, rhymes, and other figures of speech evoke catharsis among readers i.e. purgation of emotions like joy, grief, anger, self-realisation, etc.

Moreover, Psychology is the study of the psyche, behaviour, thoughts, and ideas. Basically, it is a study based on human and animal behaviour. The main objective is to understand the reason behind the actions of a living being.

Sigmund Freud “the psychologist who inaugurated “the school of medical psychology” interlinked psychology to poetry as poetry brings out the hidden thoughts of a poet on paper.

According to Carl Jung, “the mind of a creative writer is molded by his/ her collective unconsciousness and not by the libido or sexual energy. The poet who responds to the prompting of the unconsciousness is able to take deep emotional sources.”

- (Psychoanalytical Theory by Carl Gustav Jung).

The literature is rich with poets all over the world in all centuries. Whether it was Shakespeare, P.B. Shelley, Elizabeth Barrette Browning, or Sylvia Plath in modern and American poetry. All were poets and everyone's poetry in one or another way, psychological in nature.

Kamala Das's poetry used to be rich with deep latent thoughts in her simple words. She was considered a confessional poet. In every work of hers, there are psychological perspectives.

“poets cannot close their shops like a shop- men and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is his/ her personality.”

- (My story by Kamala Das, 1977, P.no.165).

The main themes of Kamala Das's poetries used to be depression, self-consciousness and flamboyance, and dilemmas, and these are psychological concepts.

Vikram Seth the post-colonial and diasporic writer is also an epitome of psychological writing. He initiated his career in literature as a poet. His poems were to be based on the incidents- he experience around him. He used to use the technique of allegory in creating his characters to bring the interest of readers but the theme and concept used to be non-fictional.

He is also known as the diasporic writer as his family migrated to a number of different cities and countries. However, he was born in India but spent his academic years in London. His family also migrated to post-partition India from West Punjab in Pakistan. That's the reason that his writings are rich with a variety of cultures and languages.

Mappings- his first collection of poetries is the best example of diasporic work. In this book of poetry multiculturalism and post-colonialism are reflected. The main theme of diasporic literature is nostalgia and Mappings' central theme is also nostalgia regarding family and culture.

Exploitation theme in “The Frog and the Nightingale” by Vikram Seth

“The Frog and the Nightingale” written by Vikram Seth is always considered the poem to spread awareness among readers regarding exploitation and to have self-confidence. The poem has two protagonist characters The Frog and The Nightingale. Frog is presented as the epitome of a Narcissist and Nightingale is presented as a victim of psychological abuse by the poet.

The Frog and the Nightingale is the best epitome of “**Anthropomorphism**” a literary device that attributes human characteristics in non-human living creatures like plants and animals. Writers commonly use this technique in fables and fairy tales. On the other hand, “Personification” gives life to abstract ideas and objects in the literature that can even be non-living things.

Other than the Frog and the Nightingale, “Animal Farm” written by George Orwell is considered the best example of Anthropomorphism. In this novella, animals are presented with human-like characteristics.

Anthropomorphised characters are used with the intention to bring out satire with help of humour.

Vikram Seth used the technique of Anthropomorphism to highlight how Britishers exploited Indians by creating self-doubt in their mind that they are not capable to use their God-gifted natural resources effectively and efficiently. And Indians got trapped in their exploitation and became slaves of Britishers. In the poem, the Frog symbolises British Government, and "Nightingale" symbolizes India "the Golden Sparrow".

"Once upon a time a frog
Croaked away in Bingle Bog
Every night from dusk to dawn
He croaked awn and awn and awn
Other creatures loathed his voice,
But, alas, they had no choice,"

(Vikram Seth, lines 1-6)

The poem starts with the Bingle Bog, where the frog used to croak throughout the night from sunset to sunrise. Other creatures in the Bingle Bog used to dislike the harsh croaking of the frog.

"Neither stones nor prayers nor sticks.
Insults or complaints or bricks
Stilled the frogs determination
To display his heart's elation.

(Vikram Seth, lines 11-14)

The creatures of Bingle Bog tried to stop the frog's croaking by disrespecting and throwing stones at it but because of being Narcist, the frog was unable to accept the truth that he has a harsh voice and kept on satisfying his ego.

The same concept can be related to the Britishers who ruled India without the willingness of Indians, and no matter what, even after trying so hard to drag them out of India, they kept on ruling for 100 years. Britishers influenced Indians by saying that India needs an organised economy and they will help India to grow. Making trading a path, they colonised India under their rule. Similar to the frog in Bingle Bog.

But one night a nightingale
In the moonlight cold and pale
Perched upon the sumac tree
Casting forth her melody
Dumbstruck sat the gaping frog
And the whole admiring bog
Stared towards the sumac, rapt,"

(Vikram Seth. Lines 15-21)

One day in Bingle Bog one nightingale came and started to sing melodically. Creatures of Bingle Bog got surprised by listening to such a melody voice, even the Frog got amazed when the nightingale's voice floated in his ears. But because of being Narcist personality frog is unable to bear the praise of the nightingale by the resident animals of Bingle Bog.

"Next night when the Nightingale
Shook her head and twitched her tail,
Closed an eye and fluffed a wing
And had cleared her throat to sing
She was startled by a croak.
"Sorry - was that you who spoke? "
She enquired when the frog
Hopped towards her from the bog.
"Yes," the frog replied. "You see,
I'm the frog who owns this tree

In this bog I've long been known
For my splendid baritone
And, of course, I wield my pen
For Bog Trumpet now and then"

(Vikram Seth, lines 28-41)

"Did you... did you like my song? "
"Not too bad - but far too long.
The technique was fine of course,
But it lacked a certain force".
"Oh! " the nightingale confessed.
Greatly flattered and impressed
That a critic of such note
Had discussed her art and throat:
"I don't think the song's divine.
But - oh, well - at least it's mine".

(Vikram Seth, lines 47-56)

"That's not much to boast about".
Said the heartless frog. "Without
Proper training such as I
- And few others can supply.
You'll remain a mere beginner.
But with me you'll be a winner"

(Vikram Seth, lines 57-62)

"Every day the frog who'd sold her
Songs for silver tried to scold her:
"You must practice even longer"

(Vikram Seth, lines 101-103)

In fact, he used her talent to earn money, he started to host concerts and exploited nightingale by making her sing from dawn to dusk. This is a hidden indication towards the Britishers that how they exploited Indians and their resources.

Conclusion

"Now the frog puffed up with rage.
"Brainless bird - you're on the stage -
Use your wits and follow fashion.
Puff your lungs out with your passion."
Trembling, terrified to fail,
Blind with tears, the nightingale
Heard him out in silence, tried,
Puffed up, burst a vein, and died."

(Vikram Seth, lines 123-130)

"Said the frog: "I tried to teach her,
But she was a stupid creature -
Far too nervous, far too tense.
Far too prone to influence.
Well, poor bird - she should have known
That your song must be your own.
That's why I sing with panache:

"Koo-oh-ah! ko-ash! ko-ash! "
And the foghorn of the frog
Blared unrivalled through the bog."

(Vikram Seth, lines 131-140)

At last, Nightingale died from the harshness and cruel behaviour of the Frog. But Frog didn't feel guilty, he pursued himself by saying that he gave 100% to pass his singing talent to the nightingale but because of being stupid and nervous, the Nightingale unable to learn. Subconsciously, Frog was aware that he is the reason for Nightingale's death because in the concluding stanza of the Poem poet mentioned that Frog commented about Nightingale and that she was a creature who easily got influenced. He was well aware that he was the one who exploited her and destroyed her. The Narcist frog returned and started his business again and annoyed the creatures of Bingle Bog with his harsh singing. His Narcist personality became the reason for the downfall of the Nightingale and the sufferings of the Bingle Bog's creatures.

The poem "The Nightingale and the Frog" is the best epitome of Psychological abuse and exploitation without violence.

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