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Exploration of Malady and Trepidation in Bird Box: A Psychoanalytic Study

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Abstract

This study confronts the dichotomies of exploring psychoanalytical theory in the novel *Bird Box*. It is conducted by using qualitative methods of research. The theoretical framework of psychoanalysis put forward by Sigmund Freud provides a concrete base for this study. The research work scrutinizes data through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis and false societal perceptions. It examines the malignant after-effect of anxiety by observing that this anxiety is orchestrating the origination of some anxiety disorders among the people. The aim of the study is to analyze the origination, sources, and aftermath of malady and trepidation on the main protagonist Malorie and the inhabitants of River bridge. Additionally, the study explores and sensitively tackles the multiple facts of psychoanalysis along a metaphorical path that submerged into the depths of ignorance as forced behavior. Finally, it digs out that regression, repression, and rationalization are some of these defense mechanisms that govern the unconscious of these people which finds an expression through their conscious actions. The study ends up with a concise conclusion, followed by the list of references.

Key words: Malady, Regression, Trepidation, Anxiety, Unconsciousness.

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استكشاف المرض والخوف في رواية صندوق الطير: دراسة تحليلية نفسية

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قسم اللغة الانكليزية _ كلية التربية _ جامعة كرميان / كلار

الملخص: تواجه هذه الدراسة الانقسامات في استكشاف نظرية التحليل النفسي في رواية "صندوق الطير". يتم إجراء الدراسة باستخدام طرق البحث النوعية. يوفر الإطار النظري للتحليل النفسي الذي قدمه سيغموند فرويد أساسًا ملموسًا لهذه الدراسة. يقوم العمل البحثي بفحص البيانات من خلال العدسة النظرية للتحليل النفسي والتصورات المجتمعية الخاطئة. يدرس الآثار الخبيثة للقلق من خلال ملاحظة أن هذا القلق هو الذي ينسق نشأة بعض اضطرابات القلق بين الناس. الهدف من البحث هو تحليل نشأة ومصادر وعواقب المرض والخوف على بطله الرواية الرئيسية مالوري وسكان جسر النهر. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يستكشف البحث ويعالج بحساسية الحقائق المتعددة للتحليل النفسي على طول مسار مجازي يغرق في أعماق الجهل كسلوك قسري. أخيرًا، يتم الاستنتاج بأن التراجع والقمع والعقلنة هي بعض آليات الدفاع هذه التي تحكم اللاوعي لهؤلاء الأشخاص والتي تجد تعبيرًا من خلال أفعالهم الواعية. تنتهي الدراسة بخاتمة موجزة ، تليها قائمة المراجع.

الكلمات الدالة: المرض ، الانحدار ، الخوف ، القلق ، فقدان الوعي.

Introduction

Josh Malerman is an American novelist and short story writer. Horror, psychological thriller, and fiction are the three main genres of his novels and short stories. As far as his contributions to literature are concerned, he has emerged as a contemporary writer with his bone-chilling thriller *Bird Box* in 2014. He has contributed to contemporary literature by creating several pieces of literature mainly in the thriller genre. In addition to literature, his other contributions to contemporary art are lyrical composition and singing.

The protagonist in Josh Malerman's novel, *Bird Box*, is a young woman named Malorie who must come to terms with her motherhood and defend her children referred to as the "boy" and the "girl" by herself in a post-apocalyptic world where otherworldly creatures threaten to kill them. The story is divided into two parts; the first one is set in the present, when Malorie takes her two four-year-old children on a perilous boat ride to a sanctuary. The second part focuses on her previous pregnancy and depicts the progressive disintegration of society as seen from within a stranger's home alongside other survivors.

It is worth noting that the first significant element in this study is malady. It is a term used to describe a disease or disorder. It also refers to a serious problem that requires an immediate solution. The creatures are the main source of malady in *Bird Box*. It takes as much as a mere glimpse of these creatures to drive a person towards madness and ultimately murder everyone in sight including themselves. These malevolent creatures

are shown as the causative agents for mental disorders in people. They are not only immeasurable but also undying and unnamed. The malady spread by these creatures is described as ‘the problem’. The following lines provide evidence to this point: “Online, they are calling it ‘the Problem.’ There exists the widespread communal belief that whatever the problem is, it begins when a person sees something” (Malerman 2014, p. 36).

Trepidation is also another major element of the main topic of this study. It refers to the fear or anxiety of an event or incident that can bring about some serious changes in a person’s life. This trepidation which is embedded in the unconscious thoughts of the characters plays a crucial role in instigating a chain of events brought about by their conscious actions.

Thea James writes in *Book Review: Bird Box by Josh Malerman*:

“The debut novel from musician and author Josh Malerman. *Bird Box* is a competent, engaging book about the nature of fear, especially fear of the unseen thing that lurks at the corner of one’s vision. It’s this core idea – the unfathomable, psyche-shattering creature – that is so compelling, so frightening, and what makes *Bird Box* work” (2014, p. 56).

The two elements of malady and trepidation are used noticeably in *Bird Box*. A bird box can also be seen as a cage for birds. Birds are naturally free and fly above the heights of the sky with the utmost freedom. Their freedom is curtailed by man-made tools such as a birdcage or a bird box. The curtailment of the freedom of the birds reflects the lost freedom of humanity as an aftermath of malady spread by chaotic entities that are countless. Malerman further plays with the concept of infinity by personifying the creatures as infinity. “They are monsters,” Malorie thinks. But she knows they are more than this. They are *infinity*.” (Malerman 2014, p. 75).

According to Heidi S. Kosonen, “In *Bird Box*, too, the demons are allied with the mentally ill, who are given a ‘less-than-human’ status under the objectifying treatment of bio political institutions” (2020, p. 54). The human mind’s incapability of deciphering infinity is reflected through the incapability of Malorie and other characters to see the creatures. It is ironic how the main character of the novel does not consider these things that have plagued her for years as creatures. This word somehow seems out of place to her because she has never seen what they look like. She does not even know whether these things know what they are doing and what are their intentions behind what they are doing.

The article *Anxiety Disorder in Josh Malerman’s Bird Box* by Iffah Al Hikmah (2022, p. 64) explores the types of anxiety disorders experienced by the characters and the three major defense mechanisms evoked in them as a result of that anxiety and trepidation. The creatures shown are the main causative agents of malady and trepidation. The malady spread by these creatures compels people to annihilate everything in sight and ultimately themselves. Malorie, who is the main protagonist of this novel, raises a boy and a girl indoors by keeping all windows and doors closed and nailing mattresses over the windows to block out all sources of danger. Furthermore, she has trained the children as well as herself to wear a blindfold at all times. The perpetrators of this trepidation are the creatures that roam around the earth unbridled and unencumbered. These creatures do not bear any physical appearance and the mere sight of them is fatal for any living being. “Demon. Devil. Rogue. Maybe they are all these things” (Malerman 2014, p. 70). The constant fear residing in the unconscious of the characters orchestrates and governs their conscious actions.

The novel *Bird Box* poses a question on the future of humanity as it is unable to overcome the crucial happenings in the world. The coming era is at stake as the 'demon' spreads death, but it is totally in human control whether he sees 'the problem' or not. As, Kosonen says,

“Bird Box considers suicide’s threat to the futurity of a human collective – a failed humanity...suicide has been defined as a phenomenon pertinent to the human world...cognitive processes such as reflexive subjectivity, free will, intentionality, and awareness of death” (2020, p. 54).

The Essence and Analysis of the Novel

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), almost 75% of the world population suffering from mental disorders does not resort to getting proper treatment, especially in developing countries in which almost one million people attempt suicide every year. Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in thirteen people suffer from anxiety globally. Josh Malerman in *Bird Box* (2014) draws a picture of the dismal life of people suffering from anxiety. This anxiety stems from the incessant fear of succumbing to malicious creatures that have curtailed their freedom to roam about freely and minimized their chances of survival. In addition to this, almost all characters can be seen experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Malady and trepidation are the causative agents of mental disorders such as anxiety among people and this can be observed through the theoretical underpinnings of psychoanalysis. “The treatment of mental illnesses poses peculiar dilemmas. In addition to society's handling of them and the ailments themselves, there are particular ethical concerns when it comes to diagnosing and treating mental illnesses” (Rose 1998, p. 67). The term malady is used to refer to a disease or disorder and denotes a significant problem that needs to be resolved immediately. Trepidation, on the other hand, refers to the fear or anxiety of an event or incident that has the potential to cause a person to experience significant changes in his life. The trepidation caused by a malady or a multitude of maladies that is embedded in the unconscious thoughts of the characters plays a crucial role in instigating a chain of events brought about by their conscious actions. The creatures are the main source of malady and trepidation in *Bird Box*. It takes as much as a mere glimpse of these creatures to drive a person towards madness and murder everyone in sight and ultimately himself. These malevolent creatures are shown as the causative agents for mental disorders in people. As Kremmel says, “The haunting, hypnotic, palm-sweating score...By the way, the birds in the box are meant to set off alarms when the monsters approach. They see way more than we do, which is part of the problem” (2019, p. 44).

These creatures are unnamed and cannot be seen without encountering fatalistic consequences. They are infinite in number and in actuality; no one knows what they look like. "Our minds can't understand them they are like infinity; it seems something too complex for us to comprehend" (Malerman 2014, p. 61).

The characters can be divided into three categories in terms of their views about these creatures. People who fall within the first category go insane upon bearing witness to as much as the mere sight of a creature. They lose all sense of morality and are more than capable of killing others and even themselves. The second category of people is obsessed with creatures to such an extent that they are using malicious strategies to manipulate other people into believing that these creatures are a beautiful sight to behold. The final category depicts people who refuse to look at these creatures no matter

what happens. They keep themselves blindfolded at all times in order to prevent an encounter with these baleful monsters.

When the 'creature' attacks human beings, there is no remedy to that endless suffering. No one is able to identify the cause of this pandemic and hence, there is no medicine to stop it. Salvation lies in death and darkness. The survivors are those who are in blindfolds. According to Eugenia Tognotti, "When plague spread, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected persons and contaminated objects" (2013, p. 255).

Malorie, Tom, Olympia, Cheryl, Felix, and Jules fall within the category of people who have experienced a lot many traumas due to these malicious creatures and have finally come to terms with the fact that they need protection against them at all costs. The maladies they have experienced first-hand drive their urge to stay together and looking after each other to fill the void of losing their loved ones and their homes. They have designed a systematic routine and follow a set of rules in order to thrive and survive. For this purpose, they have tools like blindfolds, weaponry, pet animals and birds, etc. There is a multitude of events that are instrumental in validating the inherent fear of the creatures among Malorie and all the people in her life. "Terror", relies on "obscurity or indistinctness... which leaves the imagination to act upon the few hints that truth reveals to it... Obscurity leaves something for the imagination to exaggerate" (Kremmel 2019, p. 44).

The initial sequence depicts Malorie and her two children; a boy and a girl whom she has chosen not to name yet, confined within the four walls of the house for four years. They are incapable of leaving the house without making sure their blindfolds are tightly wrapped around their eyes which is evident from the following lines: "The three of them live this way...they do not go outside...when they do, they are blindfolded" (Malerman 2014, p. 3).

People were bound with fear. "People frequently feel compelled to hide their feelings rather than discuss them freely and honestly due to the stigma associated with mental illness and suicide" (Kremmel 2019, p. 42). The anonymous boy and girl have not seen the inherent beauty of the outside world owing to the fact that it has been marred and tainted with the ugliness of death, disease, and such unceasing maladies. Malorie being the matriarch of her small family feels responsible for supervising every little action of the children. She has conditioned them to listen to even the minutest of sounds to locate the source of danger. For this purpose, she rewards them when they comply without being too inquisitive and punishes them when they get carried away by their innate impish urges. Sometimes, she reaches her breaking point and wants nothing but for her kids to play outside and live a normal life like she has lived for the most part of her life, before the inauspicious and unprecedented arrival of the creatures. "She wants to yell.... She wants to plead...this is unfair...this is cruel" (4). These lines indicate her disillusionment with the claustrophobic environment she is forced to live and survive in.

In Hikmah's view,

"Bird Box will make you feel what it feels to live with no sight. How it's hard to continue with one's daily life without seeing the things they used to see. Removing a thing from someone makes that person similar to someone who has a disability, and this story does it. People should learn to adapt to sudden change, even though it's hard. You'll really get the chance to dive into the characters more, be with them on their hardships. You'll get attached with the characters in here" (2022, p. 68).

This study aims to shed light on the perilous incidents that the main protagonist Malorie and the residents of River bridge had encountered to pinpoint the origination and causes of fear in their unconscious. Freud's 'mental iceberg' theory plays a significant role in the exposition of the concept of the human mind possessing three major compartments namely, conscious, subconscious and the unconscious. The subconscious contains harrowing and traumatic memories of the past while the unconscious possesses trepidations, apprehensions, and immoral urges. In one of his lectures, Freud says: "Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnants and the memory symbols of certain (traumatic) experiences" (1963, p. 87). Malorie, who is a central character of *Bird Box*, is no stranger to hysterical symptoms. She has seen her loved ones succumbing to the malady spread by the creatures and resultantly suffering painful deaths. Her memories of the past make their presence felt and hold her captive most of the time. The following lines indicate the presence of memories of the past: "And between herself and the front door is the living room, silent and dark...where there are too many memories of too many people to digest" (Malerman 2014, p. 5).

The memories in Malorie's subconscious play a prominent role in depicting the terror of the malady among people. Heidi S. Kosonen states, "Suicide's threat is also enhanced when it is, through the lingering shots of untamed nature, given the sense of being a "force of nature"" (2020, p. 55).

There are also some people who choose to protect themselves against this unprecedented malady at all costs. These are also the kind of people who are being plagued by the unceasing trepidation of these malicious creatures residing in their unconscious and an endless commotion of traumatic memories of losing their homes and loved ones evoked in the subconscious part of their mind. The theoretical framework of psychoanalysis plays a vital role in indicating the origination of fears and trepidations. Malady spread by the creatures caused adverse effects on the physical as well as mental health of people. The first noteworthy effect to be observed is stress-induced nightmares.

According to the pioneer of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, our mind is divided into three major portions i.e., conscious, subconscious and the unconscious (2006, p. 76). Our consciousness stores our thoughts and perceptions. The subconscious is responsible for storing memories of the past and knowledge gathered from different sources over the years. And lastly, the unconscious contains fears, trepidations, immoral urges, violent motives, and irrational wishes. Freud suggested that there are three indirect ways for our unconscious to express itself. These three ways are dreams and fantasies, parapraxis or slips of tongue, and jokes.

Keeping this sub-theory of dreams and fantasies in mind, it is safe to say that the diseases spread by the creatures instilled an unceasing fear in the minds of people. This fear found an expression in their nightmares. Tom and Jules took some supplies from River bridge and set out on a mission to retrieve dogs from different houses or on the streets. These dogs might play a vital role in alerting them of the imminent malady as dogs are excellent locators of impending danger due to their heightened sense of smell. Jules also had a dog named Victor whom he treats as a son. When he is in another house looking for other dogs that might prove helpful, Jules and Tom end up spending the night in that house due to darkness and uncertainty about the creatures because they could be anywhere but would remain unseen to them due to them wearing blindfolds. When he is away from home, Jules has a terrible nightmare that leaves him more concerned than ever for his precious dog. "Dreamed that we never found our way back...I never saw Victor again" (Malerman 2014, p. 194). Tom's daughter Robin was terrorized to an extent that she started experiencing horrifying nightmares that kept her

awake at night. She ultimately fell prey to the ongoing malady, leaving her father traumatized. Carl Jung who was also one of the most prominent psychoanalysts who proposed the concept of nightmares being instigated due to collective unconscious. He used his theory of collective unconscious to explain how fears and phobias are imbibed in children at a very young age and these fears find an expression in their nightmares. Memories and nostalgia occupy a prominent position in Freud's theory of the subconscious. The memories of the past residing in the subconscious make their presence felt at every step of a person's life. Similarly, Malorie is often seen diving into a sea of memories. For instance, her sister's death had caused an adverse impact on her life. Shannon was the only family member whom she had within her close vicinity. In fact, she was the first one to find out about her pregnancy. Shannon's death took a toll on Malorie, and she could not hinder herself from drowning in a flood of memories she had with her sister. The next person whom Malorie held closest to her heart was Tom. He was the leader of the people of River bridge and the only person who accepted Malorie with open arms when the other house members were against being allowed to live with them as they had limited supply and minimal resources. Tom's smile and his innovative ideas held a separate place in Malorie's heart. Often times when Malorie found herself in utter solitude, she longed for Tom to guide her as he has always guided her through her difficult times.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) occurs in people who have had first-hand experience of a traumatic event or a chain of traumatic events in a specific period in their lives. This disorder develops in people during as well as after their encounter with trauma. "The treatment of mental illnesses poses peculiar ethical challenges. In addition to society's handling of them and the disorders themselves, there are particular ethical concerns when it comes to diagnosing and treating mental illnesses" (Szalai 2016, p. 54). The residents of River bridge have all suffered greatly from this ongoing malady. They have all lost their homes and their loved ones. Malorie in particular has lost a loved one and abandoned her home to seek protection. She had to live at River bridge with an inexorable fear of falling prey to the malady and killing not only herself but the little life that was growing inside her belly, almost ready to utter his first cry in a world that is now very familiar with peoples' crying and wailing.

Freud's theory of hysteria is linked with his concept of the 'mental iceberg' of the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious in psychoanalysis. He put forward this notion that the fears troubling the unconscious part of our mind and the harrowing memories that occupy a significant portion of our subconscious are directly responsible for causing hysterical symptoms in people. Hysteria is a mental disorder that transforms mental stress and anxiety into physical manifestation. These physical symptoms are indicated by involuntary seizures and even paralysis. In literal terms, hysteria also refers to a state of intractable exhilaration or evocation of anger due to an unfavorable incident. The root cause of hysteria is mainly a traumatic experience and unceasing apprehension regarding the reoccurrence of that traumatic incident (Aaron 2014, p. 89). What is worth noting is the fact that, Freud has mentioned in his lectures: "Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnants and the memory symbols of certain (traumatic) experiences" (Freud 1963, p. 35). Such symptoms of hysteria can easily be observed in Malorie when she is preparing to leave for a journey full of perils in a hope of locating the shelter she had been told about. Her voice and gestures indicate her hysterical state: "All right," she says, her voice revealing a hint of hysteria. "We're going. We're going right now. We're going" (Malerman 2014, p. 45). Malorie's hysterical state is also noticeable when she is rowing the boat on the river to get her children to a safe destination. Even the slightest of sounds plunges

her into a state of hysteria: “Is it a creature? She thinks, hysterical...let it be an animal...Malorie knows...Children were to remove their blindfolds...” (p. 46).

There is a category of people who are already insane and portray psychopathic tendencies. The creatures do not affect people who are already hysterical and psychopathic. One such character is Gary who has spent some time in a prison built for the criminally insane. He was also the one who removed the curtains from the windows of the house he was previously staying at because he wanted all its inhabitants to bear witness to the magnificence and beauty of the creatures lurking outside. Furthermore, he came to River bridge with the sole intention of manipulating its inhabitants into believing that these creatures are harmless to the people who want to see them.

On the other hand, Don was one such inhabitant who had a rather pessimistic and cynical approach towards life. Resultantly, he started believing Gary’s hearsay. Malorie started keeping a watchful eye on their mannerism and noticed that: “Gary and Don are talking about things like hysteria...Don... he has never committed...that the creatures cannot hurt us. Could someone like Gary convince him at last?” (Malerman 2014, p. 243).

The theory of psychoanalysis explains how the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious of the human mind hold specific functions. This concept of Freud is directly linked with his discovery of id, superego, and ego along with the discovery of two principles namely the pleasure principle and reality principle. The pleasure principle enables a person to blindly follow the urges and desires of the unconscious thus orchestrating the conscious actions of a person without taking into consideration the repercussions of those actions. In contrast with this, the reality principle allows a person to assume a moralistic approach and reprimands him when he gravitates towards immoral actions (Rennison 2001, p. 96).

The id is the most primitive structure that follows the pleasure principle (Freud 1961, p. 103). For instance, if a man wants an ice-cream of another person, he will snatch the ice cream from that person to grant satisfaction to his id. Hence, the id of a person compels him to do whatever brings him joy and jubilation by dismissing the moralistic approach. The superego on the other hand, is guided by the reality principle that castigates a person whenever he makes the wrong choice. Following the same example mentioned above, if a man wants an ice cream from a stranger, his superego will never allow him to do so and even if he takes the ice cream, his superego will compel him to feel guilty afterwards. Hence, the superego represents our conscience. The third structure is referred to as the ego. It acts as a moderator between id and superego. It enables the desires of the id to be granted gratification through socially acceptable means. This can be further validated by employing the example of a man seeing another person who is a stranger eating and ice-cream. His id will compel him to get that ice cream, but his ego will find a more socially acceptable method to satisfy the id’s desire. As a result, his ego will compel him to buy an ice cream for himself instead of taking it from the stranger.

Several instances can be traced that provide evidence of Malorie’s conflict between her id and superego. Malorie was trepidatious about losing those whom she holds dearest to her heart. This trepidation restricted her from naming the children and she calls them ‘boy’ and ‘girl’. She had resorted to maintaining a rather cold demeanour in front of the children so that she doesn’t let her motherly instincts overpower her survival instincts. She feared that if she remains soft with them as mothers normally are, they will not follow her instructions.

Malorie had trained them to detect sounds and the directions they were coming from. The most important part of their training was to keep their blindfolds on at all times until they are asked to remove them. "It breaks Malorie's heart. They are only children...They should be asking her why, today, they are going on the river...But, instead, they just do as they are told" (Malerman 2014, p. 7). In a way, Malorie has not only trained the children but herself as well to remain steadfast in her cause and never get too emotionally attached to the children because that would only make her falter and dwindle in her mission of training the children to survive in a world full of maladies. Her castigating remarks reveal her cold attitude towards the children: "Under no circumstances will either one of you remove your blindfold. If you do, I will hurt you. Do you understand?" (Malerman 2014, p. 11). The following lines indicate training strategies of Malorie:

"By the time the children turned three, Malorie had gotten complex with her lessons. The pair was instructed to remember ten, twenty sounds in a row before revealing what they thought they were. Malorie would walk through the house, then outside, then upstairs. Along the way she made noises. Upon returning, the children told her what she had done. Soon, the Girl got all twenty right. But the Boy was reciting forty, fifty sounds, adding the unintentional noises she made on her way to the ones she meant" (p. 146).

Conclusion

1. There are multitude of anxiety disorders in the inhabitants of River bridge which serve as an aftermath of malady and trepidation. Some of these psychological disorders are nightmares, PTSD, and hysteria. The theory of psychoanalysis by Freud has been instrumental in validating these disorders as well as certain defense mechanisms and coping strategies through which these anxiety disorders are being expressed. The three main defense mechanisms described are mainly repression, regression, and rationalization.
2. Everyone feels the grief of lost family members and that is why, they concern for others to feel the warmth of relationships in the times of pandemic. It can be seen that there is trust, friendship, care, and sacrifice. Every character in the novel endeavors from the beginning till the end but meets with his tragic end except Malorie.
3. The origination, sources, and aftermath of malady and trepidation can easily be observed through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theoretical framework of psychoanalysis. His 'mental iceberg theory' that categorized the human mind into three distinguishable portions i.e., conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious is instrumental in indicating fears, trepidations, and anxiety residing in the unconscious being the instigators of harrowing nightmares. Freud's theory of 'hysteria' bears great significance in explaining that the symptoms of hysteria in the inhabitants of River bridge are being originated as a result of traumatic experiences and affrighting memories. In addition to this, Freud's discovery of id, superego, and ego and the conflict between these three structures helps in explaining the evocation of certain defense mechanisms namely regression, repression, and rationalization.

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