

# FATHOMLESS OCEAN

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# A STUDY OF THE FEMALE PSYCHE WITH REFERENCE TO ABRAHAM MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL*

A. MONIKA

The human 'psyche' is an infinite process with complicated thoughts and flow of changes, challenging the human understanding. It is a mystery, making human relations, a constant balancing process of existence possible. The mystery of the psyche is an enlarged and deepened state in women, who are victims of patriarchal oppression and a marginalisation. Though the marginalisation of women by patriarchy has been discussed for ages, the prevalence of such a discussion cannot be denied even in today's developing modern world, especially through a psychological perspective. It is commonly and widely discussed among both men and women, as their psyches get differed and overlapped with each other. The paper titled 'A Study of the Female Psyche with reference to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Shirley Jackson's "The Possibility of Evil"' aims to bring out the damaged psyche of the female protagonist Miss. Adela Strangeworth, a symbolic representation of the author Shirley Jackson, from the aspect of unfulfilled human needs.

The Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory proposed by Abraham Harold Maslow, an American Psychologist, in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in *Psychological Review*. It is used to study how humans intrinsically partake in behavioural motivation. It is a five-tier model of human needs with the hierarchical order starting with physiological needs leading to safety needs, love and social belongings, self-esteem and finally to self actualisation. Maslow used these five terms to describe the pattern through which human motivations generally evolve, denoting how each level must be satisfied within the individual in order for motivation to occur at the next level. Each of these individual levels contains a certain amount of internal sensation that must be met in order for an individual to complete the hierarchy. The theory is fully expressed in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*. It has created a

popular framework in sociological research, management training and in psychology. While the original hierarchy states a lower level must be completely satisfied and fulfilled before moving onto a higher pursuit, today's scholars prefer to think of these levels as continuously overlapping each other - lower levels may take precedent back over the other levels at any point in time. Maslow has classified the needs into Deficiency needs and Growth needs. The four fundamental needs are considered to be the 'deficiency needs', which includes esteem, friendship and love, security and safety and physical needs. The failure in these levels will make the individual anxious and tense. The final stage of self actualisation is considered to be the growth need.

Maslow coined the term metamotivation, describing the motivation of people who go beyond the scope of the basic needs and strive for constant betterment. The human brain is a complex system with parallel processes running at the same time; many different motivations from various levels of Maslow's hierarchy can occur at the same time. Maslow speaks clearly about these levels and their satisfaction in terms such as 'relative', 'general' and 'primary'. He states that a certain need dominates the human organism, instead of saying that an individual focuses on a certain need at any given time. He acknowledges the likelihood that the different levels of motivation could occur at any time in the human mind.

Maslow identifies the basic types of motivation as follows: physiological needs are considered to be the foundation for motivation. They include the physical requirements such as food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep, sex, etc., that are necessary for human survival. They are followed by the safety needs, which include personal security, emotional security, financial security or job security, health and well-being. The third level of human needs is seen to be interpersonal and involves feelings of belongingness. It is especially strong in childhood. It includes trust, friendship, intimacy, family and love. Many people become susceptible to loneliness, social anxiety and clinical depression in the absence of this love or belonging element.

Self esteem needs are ego needs or status needs. It involves recognition, status and the human desire to be accepted and valued by others. Fame and glory will not help people build their self-esteem until they accept who they are internally. Psychological imbalances such as depression distract the person from obtaining a higher level of self-esteem. Maslow classified self-esteem into two categories: (i) lower version - needs for respect from others and (ii) higher version - involves esteem for oneself, manifesting with strength, competence, mastery, dignity, independence and freedom.

The final stage is self-actualisation, which is the realisation of personal potential, self-fulfilment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences. It is a reward-based system, which is used to intrinsically pursue certain values or goals. Among the above mentioned five, the basic four which are said to be the Deficiency needs/D-needs will move away to the next set of needs once they are more or less satisfied and are thus called as Salient needs. But the final stage of actualisation, which is said to be the growth needs, continues to be felt and may even become stronger once they have been engaged. Maslow's five-stage model is even expanded to an eight-stage model later during 1970s, including cognitive needs, aesthetic needs and transcendence needs.

With reference to Maslow's psychological theory, the paper analyses the psychological reflection of the woman writer Shirley Jackson, who constantly reflects her inner trauma indirectly in her works. Shirley Hardie Jackson is an American novelist and short story writer, known for her works of horror and mystery. She has made use of the gothic techniques and humour, giving a different perspective of her to the world, so that she is not to be taken seriously as a woman writer. She uses supernatural elements to bring out the depths of the human condition or more particularly to explore the psychic damage to which women are especially prone.

Jackson was denied of her basic needs; she was rejected and viewed as an outsider by her conservative country-club parents. Her mother Geraldine was the chief representative of the cruel and foolish world during Jackson's childhood, who used to criticize Jackson about her

bad hair, her weight and her wilful refusal to cultivate feminine charm. Geraldine even told Jackson that she was the product of a failed abortion. Even after Jackson moved away from her mother, Geraldine continued to send letters criticizing her daughter. Jackson's marriage life presented another world of torture, which in the beginning seemed to be an escape from her childhood depression. She was married to a Jewish intellectual Stanley Edgar Hyman, a modern critic, whose main drawback was his principled insistence on sleeping with other women, and Jackson's sexual life became problematic. Though Jackson's creative writing skill was appreciated and encouraged by her husband to meet the financial needs of the family, he claimed the patriarchal position in the family as well as in her writings, claiming her talents as his own, underestimating her to others.

Jackson is set to be a woman, denied of her basic needs such as healthy family life, sex, love and belongingness, security and self-esteem. She seems to be the sort of self-actualised woman as a writer, but not a complete one, since her writing is only a reflection of her inner trauma, not enabling her to completely to get relieved from it. Though Jackson's physiological needs such as food and shelter were fulfilled, she was not happy as she felt like an outsider throughout her life. Jackson's sexual fulfillment is not a successful or the happy experience. Jackson's safety is also questioned in the way she always feels insecure during her childhood and also after her marriage. Though she has the job and financial security, she doesn't have an independent hold over her job and money under her husband's supervision. Her insecurity and fears often get reflected through the dark supernatural elements she uses in her writings. Considering Maslow's third stage of need, it is evident in Jackson's life that there was no love, recognition and belongingness. She had not received love even from her mother. She had been criticised of her physical appearance by her mother, which normally other mothers would not do. Her husband also fails to provide her the needed recognition and love. Her recognition and belonging as a wife is shared by other women. Through constant reflection of urge to escape to an unknown place in her writings, it is witnessed that she does not have the hold of belongingness anywhere in the world. Her state of self esteem is also not a true one as she creates a

false image to the world in her writings giving a different perspective of her, hiding her true self. She prefers the estimation of others which in Maslow's theory is stated as lower version, failing to have one herself. The last and final stage of Maslow's theory is Self Actualisation, which is also again a false one in Jackson's life, as she uses her creative skill of writing only as a relief for her outburst of the lack of all her needs but not as a growing process of realising or acknowledging oneself. During her last stage of life, she has started to realise her own self to be independent and self empowering, which she even starts writing in a new book, an incomplete one as she dies in the middle of it, not gaining the result of her change towards self actualisation. Thus the motif of a lonely woman setting out to escape a miserable family or a grimly claustrophobic community and ending up lost recurs throughout Jackson's stories.

*The Possibility of Evil* is a 1965 short story, published in *Saturday Evening Post*, a few months after her death and won the 1966 Edgar Allan Poe Award for best mystery short story. It reflects the author's psyche in a replica named Miss Adela Strangeworth. Miss. Strangeworth, an old woman, who considers herself as the matriarch of the town, lives alone in her ancestral home in a Pleasant Street. In the beginning of the story she seems to be a normal happy woman, who maintains a cordial relationship with everyone in the town. She presents herself as an appealing and a caring person, approaching the people of town regularly with warm greetings and with a sociable conversation. At the end of the story, her inner psyche, gets reflected through her act of writing secret letters to the people of the town stating her susceptible assumptions about the happenings in their families, interfering in others' issues, which she believes to be a process of cleansing the society of evil. This act of hers depicts her inner psyche's need to escape from the world of oppression in which she fails to acquire her needs. Shirley Jackson even expresses her need of escape in her various short stories with the common theme like searching for the daemon lover in the hidden house, where again the evil is lurking in.

Miss. Strangeworth is portrayed as a two-faced person, trying to hide her true inner evil self, reflecting a different appearance to the society. Being a lonely woman, she fails to acquire the basic human needs



, affecting her psyche. Though she seems to possess a good stay in her ancestral home, the symbolic representations of her home being too tidy and neat, her attachment towards the home, the native town and the rose garden, the name of the street, the different coloured letter cards, the unnamed town and her own strange name depict the mysterious feeling of an affected psyche. She does not desire any satisfaction from her provisions and riches; she only uses them to gain the attention of her neighbours. She knows everyone in the town and she is even fond of talking to strangers. She is need of constant attention from the people as she is filled with a feeling of insecurity. Her insecurity only makes her limit herself within her own town and within her ancestral home.

Miss Strangeworth comforts herself in her own zone of roses, home and town. And her act of not giving roses to those who ask for it is even one of her outcomes of her insecurity. She experiences insecurity because she is alone in her home lacking love and safety. But she presents the image of a proud woman who is much safe and happy in her home. She even tries to claim a false sense of belongingness, believing that the town belongs to her. She used to say to the people "My grandfather built the first house of Pleasant Street" and "My grandmother planted these roses and my mother tended them, just as I do" (1). She claims the belongingness falsely and strongly as she lacks it in her life.

Miss Strangeworth's possessions such as her home and rose garden are not products of her work but that of her ancestors. This even shows her lack of individuality which questions her self esteem. Even if she tries to attain self-esteem, it is not a lasting one as she prefers it from others expecting respect and recognition from others. When she walks in the street to post the letters, the children stand back respectfully as Miss. Strangeworth passes and they silence themselves briefly in her presence, greeting her. She has created such an external impact in the outside world which she needs externally not internally. Even her act of writing letters, an impact from author's life, is the forced need for a relief of her inner stress trying to be seemingly self-actualised, as her basic needs are not met. While writing she uses a dull stub of pencil, making childish block prints, which shows her writing is not a matured process leading to growth but is a symbol of her inner flaws.

Miss Strangeworth holds roses as her familial pride, which are destroyed at the end of the story by a neighbour Don Crane, as a return to Miss. Strangeworth's secret letter. The destruction of roses is even interpreted as the symbolic representation of her true self revealed to the society. Thus her secured way of living in her own comfort zone which she has created for herself is banished at last. Analysing the five stage model of Maslow's theory, it is evident that the protagonist Miss. Strangeworth fails to attain a single stage of needs completely. The psychic study of Miss. Strangeworth, as a traumatic person in association with the life of author Shirley Jackson on the basis of Maslow's psychological theory of Hierarchy of needs, brings out the commonly experienced problem of women of all the ages. The study can be applicable to have a constant interpretation on women's day-to-day ordinary life, which paves the scope for an infinite study of a female psyche.

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