

Exploring the Maternal Instincts in Ashley Audrain's *The Push*: A Freudian Psychoanalytic Examination

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S. Prathiba

*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*

Abstract

Ashley Audrain's The Push (2021) exposes the psychological intricacies of maternal identity, challenging the conventional view of motherhood as an innate and rewarding vocation. The study looks at how Blythe, the main character, deals with the tension between her unconscious fears, worries, and suppressed trauma and society's expectations of motherhood. The id, ego, and superego, which make up Sigmund Freud's structural model of the mind, provide light on Blythe's battle with maternal impulses, significantly how her unresolved childhood events affect how she views herself as a mother. The paper investigates how Blythe's inability to balance her ingrained worries and concerns with society's expectations of parenting results in a broken sense of self. In the end, The Push emphasises how important it is to recognise maternal mental health and redefine conventional ideas of spontaneous parenting. The present study examines how Audrain employs psychoanalysis to look at the darkest aspects of the human psyche via the prism of Sigmund Freud's core ideas, including the unconscious, repression, the Oedipus complex, and the Thanatos. The paper further examines the novel's critique of idealized motherhood as well as the intergenerational transmission of psychological trauma.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, therapeutic, repression, Oedipus complex, Thanatos, psychological trauma

Introduction

Psychoanalytic criticism offers the interpretative perspective of Literature by applying some techniques of psychoanalysis. During the late nineteenth century, an Austrian Psychologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), propounded a form of therapy to treat the patients of hysteria and neurosis. Throughout the ages, the complexities of the human mind and its functions have been continuously explored by many writers in Literature. Therefore, Literature and psychology go hand in hand. Literature assists psychologists in understanding human experiences throughout history. Freud proposed that the mental processes of the mind largely influence our actions. His groundbreaking theories brought a multitude of ideas related to the unconscious.

On the other hand, Literature also uses psychoanalytical criticism to expand its creative potential. It aids the readers in discovering the

latent content of a literary work. The study also discusses the psychoanalytic theory formulated by Freud in 1897 and the impact it created in the field of Literature. Psychoanalytic therapy serves to re-narrate a person's life; it gives much importance to the unconscious mind. It creates an awareness of a healthy mind, too. Psychoanalysis focuses on the latent or disguised motives, which define Literature on two levels. The first is the level of writing, and the latter is the level of characters' actions within the text. It tries to explain the relationship between meaning and identity behind the psychic and cultural forces. Psychoanalysis is a form of therapy that aims to explore the connection between the conscious and unconscious elements in the mind to cure mental disorders. It is considered one of the reliable sources for uncovering the psychological trauma of fictional characters. In the post-Freudian age, it is impossible to escape how we think about human life differs from how people in the past thought. Psychoanalysis is an enlarging system encompassing the issues vital for human life and existence. Freud's theory extends to the interpretation of dream sequences and neuroses, too. Psychoanalysis offers a therapeutic approach and a lens to comprehend Literature, culture, and social behaviour.

On the levels of theory, psychoanalytic approaches to Literature are of great importance even though they are not considered rich enough. Scholars use it in Literature as a modern theory for two significant reasons. Firstly, it helps to address the psychological trauma of people; then, it aims to establish the significance of the human psyche and its complexities. The author adds depth to her plot by incorporating the psychological ideas of Freudian theories. The essential part of dreams and their significance are also employed as tools to interpret the psychological trauma of the protagonist. Freud first presented his ideas in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). People often consider that the evidential basis for these theories came from his study of dreams. The mind collects, integrates, and coordinates all pleasant and unpleasant experiences, playing a vital role in our lives. Freud's psychoanalytic theory came as a radically new approach to the assessment and treatment of abnormality in the behaviour of adults. Earlier theories ignored the psychological reason and overlooked the physiological explanation of abnormality. Freud's approach was groundbreaking in recognizing that neurotic behaviour is purposeful and intentional rather than random or meaningless. Due to the influence of psychoanalytic concepts, the authors and writers started incorporating them into their works. Freud's major psychoanalytic concepts that impacted the authors are: I. The supremacy of the unconscious. II. The Iceberg Concept of Consciousness. III. The relationship between neurosis and creativity. It aids in the analysis of literary works for several reasons. Firstly, it connects the latent content of a work and the explicit content of a work. Secondly, the repressed emotions directly showcase the characters or the author. Thirdly, the Oedipus complex is essential in gender dynamics and the relationship between men and women.

The Push by Audrain is a deeper exploration into the darker sides of motherhood. It projects the complex roles of mothers, the pressure society puts on them, and the pressure women carry on themselves as mothers. The story sheds light on the complex parts of motherhood, giving light to the taboos. The narrative, on the whole, critically adopts the protagonist Blythe's perspective. She is not what she wants to be in her career life and struggles with the identity of being a new mother. The author narrates the protagonist's past life in interspersed chapters. Each chapter has a different narrative voice, and they are all even darker than Blythe's story itself. The story revolves around the troublesome past of Blythe's grandmother, Etta, and her mother, Cecilia. Blythe wonders about these women's experiences and is intrigued by how her childhood experiences influence her approach to motherhood. The troublesome past turns her soft nature into an arrogant one. She inadvertently transfers her history of trauma onto her daughter, Violet. Audrain attempts to inform the audience about the deep connections between generations and how our lives are intertwined even before we are born.

The novel beautifully conjures how every woman has been genetically connected to their grandparents and sheds light on motherhood, familial traits, and maternal guilt. Blythe's fear for her daughter's alarming behaviour reflects the unexpressed motherly love buried within her. Even though she deeply loves her daughter, she constantly hides it in front of others and her daughter. The study attempts to figure out how Freud's concepts of the unconscious, repression, the Oedipus complex, and the Thanatos correspond to the psychological themes in the novel.

Blythe feels reluctant to become a mother because of her mother, who abandoned her at the age of 11. However, her grandmother also reflected her mother's abusive nature. She departed in a more gruesome way: by hanging herself from a tree in the front yard. Blythe is programmed genetically for maternal struggle. She firmly believes that her daughter will hate her after giving birth. Their relationship starts facing downfall from there. Even though Blythe's postpartum depression is familiar to the readers, Audrain renders it flawlessly. Blythe struggles to accept her motherhood and notices a seismic shift in her relationship with her husband, Fox. He transfers his attention and love towards his daughter, and these acts fuelled her aggression more. Audrain encourages the readers to decode the main idea of the plot, which is that certain traits of an individual are mostly inherited or shaped by their upbringing. For example, the gradual decline of Violet's character supports the idea that environment and upbringing play a significant role in shaping an individual's behaviour. The novel carefully portrays the truth that every mother, despite their background, experiences insecurities and anxieties during their motherhood.

The Push has received comparatively little scholarly attention through a psychoanalytic lens. Previous studies have relied on the motifs of nature versus nurture debate and maternal failure. However, only a handful of studies have approached the novel in the framework of Freud's concepts of the unconscious and repression. The present study seeks to fill this gap by applying the Freudian psychological theories on the psychological trauma of Blythe's and Violet's characterization. It brings a new dimension to the main narrative of the story. The protagonist consistently falls over Freud's therapeutic techniques to release her pent-up emotions and feelings, and it helps her to get rid of her painful past.

The battle between good and evil is prominently represented in the narrative to convey the moral message. In addition, it conveys that motherhood is not easy for all and sometimes does not come to mothers naturally. According to Freud, in a mentally stable person, the ego plays the most decisive role in fulfilling the id's needs without upsetting the superego. They always prefer the reality of every situation. A person with a strong id always prefers self-gratification and immediate pleasure. Likewise, a person with the strong impulse of the superego follows rigid morals and never bends for worldly pleasure. The ego represents our essential needs within the conscious mind, which works to fulfill the id's demands. When the superego and id are in opposition, the ego involves defense mechanisms for the protection of the mind, which usually leads to anxiety. The superego regulates perfection and stresses an individual to behave in a socially accepted and ethical manner. The different phases of the human psyche include the id, ego, superego, and defense mechanisms that interfere in the life of Blythe and her daughter, Violet. They usually succumbed to the glitches of the id, which lay behind the constant distress in their minds. Blythe's skepticism arises when her ego cannot resolve her overwhelming desire to have a child. Besides that, the sudden death of her baby boy also added an extra burden to her mental trauma, which led her to fall into the glitches of an identity crisis and long-lasting mental traumas, resulting in postpartum depression.

Freud made a tremendous impact on psychoanalytic theory by laying the groundwork for understanding the working principle of the human mind. The more nuanced insight of the Oedipus complex and its role in sculpting the characters and the narrative structure were encouraged in contemporary approaches. Freud's Oedipal complex plays a significant role in impacting the

relationship between Blythe and Violet. The complex surged the moment Violet was born. Fox starts shifting his attention to his daughter and behaves in a way that he is happy with his daughter's presence over his wife. Fox's attention and care towards Violet create a sense of insecurity and fear in her psyche. Her desperate yearning for his love and affection eventually leads to her unfulfilled desire. The author traces the Oedipus complex through Violet's warm relationship with her father. Violet reacts more comfortably in her father's presence than her mother. The underlying Oedipus complex shattered Blythe's relationship with her husband and daughter. Throughout the story, Violet reflects a kind of hate towards her mother; she feels her father is the only solace for her misery. She starts enjoying her father's intense love and affection.

Freud's psychological theories provide a robust ground for comprehending Blythe's emotional instability and insensibility toward her daughter's more troubling impulses. The act of nodding at the end of the novel symbolizes Blythe's way of repressing her feelings; she exhibits this kind of gesture throughout the novel when she understands that Violet's behaviour reflects her failures as a mother. Blythe's self-denial mirrors Freud's defense mechanism, which deeply resembles that the repressed feelings will unexpectedly surge back from the unconscious mind with more vigor. Freud claims, "the ego is not master in its own house" (Freud 143). As per Freud's statement, Blythe's repressed emotions override her conscious thoughts by sidelining her conscious attempts to control them. This anxiety displays not only Violet's nature but also Blythe's internal trauma and inability to be a perfect mother. Freud's theory of maternal ambivalence offers insight into how Blythe feels void when trying to embrace her daughter's love and how the irrevocable childhood scar lingered in her mind. Defense mechanisms act as protective armor to shield our psyche; this helps us to cope with the realities. Audrain meticulously incorporated the key defense mechanism of repression in the narrative to project Blythe's psychological landscape. Blythe represses the neglect she experienced with her mother and her inadequacy as a mother by fake strength. According to Freud, sublimation plays a significant role in allowing an individual to behave normally in socially acceptable ways; it always shows a sign of maturity. Blythe sublimates her frustration by involving herself in writing. Freudian therapeutic techniques, such as free association and transference, are considered one of the important treatments to cure mental illness from the ages. The sequences of internal monologues offer a kind of temporary relief from the mental trauma of the protagonist. She spends most of her time in her internal monologues to escape from the harsh reality. However, Blythe always finds someone to whom she can transfer her psychological emotions. Eventually, she transfers her unresolved internal conflicts to her daughter, Violet. This transference of psychological emotions onto others reflects the impact of intergenerational trauma.

Blythe primarily undergoes moral conflict; she starts ill-treating her daughter even though she knows it is wrong. For instance, she purposefully gave the bacteria-infected feeding bottle to her daughter so that she could drink milk. The next type of Blythe's internal conflict is self-perception conflict. Blythe accepts motherhood only to fulfil her husband's wish to have a family. The final one is Love conflict. Blythe keeps making bagels to irritate her husband because he does not like bagels. She does everything to prove that she does not like him anymore. Blythe begins to show resentment toward everything due to these internal conflicts. She realizes that Violet's closeness to her father is unjust even though she spends much time with her. The persistent melancholia left the protagonist with a sense of personal worthlessness and enabled her to have low self-esteem and self-hatred.

Freud's death instinct (Thanatos) holds a prominent role throughout the narrative. Violet constantly reflects Thanatos' manifestation through her sinister and cruel actions towards animals and also her psychological and physiological disconnection from others. Moreover, how she behaves with her relatives and closest implicitly mirrors these self-destructive unconscious

instincts. Thanatos provides a vivid backdrop for apprehending Freudian psychoanalytic theory. This instinct stresses that an individual who possesses a strong drive toward death always tries to project this aggression onto others. Blythe slowly understands that her daughter's violent actions are the reflection of her inherited psychological trauma. According to Freud, the ultimate purpose of life is death, and Violet's behaviour makes this idea more comprehensible. Her weird actions resemble an embodiment of the death instinct and also exhibit its coexistence with the life instinct (Eros). Freudian psychology states that unresolved psychological traumas have the power to transmit across generations. The author beautifully penned down the intergenerational trauma through the portrayal of her characters. The author reflects on Blythe's conflicted past in her relationship with her daughter, Violet, in many instances throughout the novel. It facilitates introspection into the multifaceted psychological depths of the novel. Many key uncanny elements are featured in the narrative structure to uncover the complexity of the plot. The perpetual doubling of internal conflicts of the protagonist with her daughter creates an eerie repetition of generational trauma. It left the readers with a blurry vision between the animate and inanimate things. As well as the recurrent spooky set-up in the narrative represents the home as unhomely; the conventional setting of home with comfort and protection becomes a place of eerie atmosphere.

Overall, these uncanny elements aid the narrative in retaining the psychological tension. Freud mentioned the importance of dreams and their impact on human life in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*. he believed that dreams act as a coping mechanism and happen for a reason. Dreams usually refer to Freudian therapy, in which an individual's hidden desires are revealed. Freud believed that dreams are related to pathology by which an important aspect of a personality is understood. Audrain revealed the significant meaning behind the dreams through her symbolic representations. Dreams are the indirect outlet for people who have unfulfilled wishes and desires. The author intricately weaves the traditional expectation of gender roles and sexuality into the intrinsic narrative of the novel. The nuanced portrayal of characters and their relationship boldly challenges traditional gender stereotypes and sexual expectations. The conventional stereotypes of gender expectations in a society constantly push the protagonist towards repression. She feels disconnected the moment after delivering her baby, and she undergoes a deep sense of alienation and inadequacy instead of love and joy. Blythe's life turns upside down the moment she delivers her baby. Fox loses interest in her and stops spending quality time with her. These strange emotions led her to suffer silently amidst the traditional gender role imposed by society that expects inherent nurturing qualities from a woman. It is believed that any traumatic experience that happened in childhood could directly impact the personality traits of an individual. The novel's emotional depth readily indulges the readers not only in the psychological path of the story but also caters them to connect the incidents with their personal lives. Through a psychoanalytic reading of Audrain's masterpiece, the readers comprehend all the characters' struggle to create a space for themselves. Also, it is observed that the unseen fear complex of each character emerges predominantly from their psyche.

Conclusion

Freud's core issues are interdependent; one issue is a result or reason for the emergence of another core issue. These core issues usually come back as a defense, leaving an individual isolated and void. They only define our personality by staying with us throughout our lives. The unaddressed desires will eventually lead to destruction. The novel delineates the intricate layers of motherhood and repression through the prism of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The historical background of each character inevitably contributes to his or her present state of mind. Moreover, the psychoanalytic understanding predominantly makes the reader more sympathetic to

the characters despite their extreme behavior. Freud's theory of personality structure significantly explains that one must be cautious about one's inner world rather than the physical one because our inner world is much more complicated than the physical one. Using Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the research offers a critical analysis of the psychological realities of motherhood via a Freudian perspective, highlighting the need for a more thorough comprehension of postpartum mental health and the emotional nuances that influence maternal relationships.

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