
A Psychoanalytical Reading of William Somerset Maugham's *The Kite* through the Lens of Lacan

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Abstract

William Somerset Maugham's short story *The Kite* can be interpreted with recourse to various psychoanalytical concepts. The story revolves round the extremely complicated relationship amongst Herbert, his mother Mrs. Sunbury and his wife Betty Bevan. In this story Herbert feels excessive affection for his mother and is sexually drawn towards his mother and vice versa. Herbert's interest in flying kite as well as his marriage with Betty complicates their relationship and it can be noticed that none of these characters is able to maintain healthy relationships. This article aims at making an interpretation of the story by means of various Lacanian concepts. With this aim as its objective this research seeks to make an interpretation of *The Kite* with the help of such Lacanian concepts as the mirror and symbolic stage, gaze of the caregiver, formation of the "ideal-I", split subject, "objet petit a", the lack and the unconscious. So, this paper makes a thorough analysis of the story by means of exploring the intricate dynamics of their psyches through the lens of Lacan.

Keywords: Kite, Lacanian, symbolic stage, gaze, lack.

Introduction:

Quite accurately Edward Albert describes Maugham as "A realist, with an intense interest in human nature, keenly aware of the contradictions and frustrations of life...(Albert and Stone 570)." *The Kite* is not an exception in this regard as it is a story that represents the intricate dynamics of human nature and human relationships. The story concerns the intimate mother-son relationship that is affected by the intervention of another character namely Betty Bevan. Thus, Herbert's relationship with his mother is mediated by his wife Betty. In this story, Herbert feels fascinated by the kite that is also loved by his mother. He has also formed an unnatural affection for his mother. Thus, both the kite as well as his mother become the objects of his obsessions with him that complicates his relationship with Betty. This extremely complicated relationship amongst these three characters can be well interpreted

by

various Lacanian psychoanalytical concepts including the mirror and symbolic stages that are crucial stages in the development of a child.

Literature review:

In *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* of *Écrits* Jacques Lacan introduces and discusses the concept of the mirror stage which is a crucial stage in the development of the humans as it is responsible for the formation of the ego and the shaping of human relationships and can be found in the human child between six and eighteen months. To quote Lacan's words – "Indeed, this act, immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates – namely, the child's own body, and the persons and even things around him (*Ecrits* 75)." Lacan is of the view that the child's sense of self is formed through a reflection in the mirror, but as that image in the mirror is an idealised one and not a real one, the child can recognise the disparity between his ideal self which is coherent and complete and his actual self or body that is essentially fragmented and imperfect.

In his *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* of *Écrits* Lacan discusses the concept of the symbolic order which is the realm of language and social and cultural norms that shapes and affects an individual's experience and sense of identity. He, in this essay lays emphasis upon the importance of language that shapes and modifies individual's inner feelings, thoughts and desires. Lacan says that – "Psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has shaped him in its image. It exploits the poetic function of language to give his desire its symbolic mediation (*Ecrits* 264)." Not only this, it also affects individual's relationship with his/her world along with other people.

In his *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan introduces the idea of the gaze of the caregiver. Lacanian gaze is not seeing in the literal sense, rather it is of profound significance in the formation of identity or relationship with others.

In his various works including *Formations of the Unconscious*, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* and the essay *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious* Lacan explores the concept of the split subject. This concept of split subject or divided subject is associated with the division or split inherent in the human subject. As per Lacan, this split is between the ego i.e. the conscious "I" and the unconscious "Other". In *Formations of the Unconscious* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* he also introduces the concept of "objet petit a" which represents the object-cause of desire that is illusory and unattainable.

Research Gap: While analysing Maugham's *The Kite*, the researchers have focused their studies mainly within Freudian perspectives. Some studies have aimed at Lacanian analysis also, but they have not delved into deep analysis. So, this particular article aims at making a deep analysis of the story relying on various Lacanian concepts.

Research objectives: The aim of the research is to make an analysis of the story *The Kite* by Maugham applying the psychoanalytical concepts of Lacan. To make the points clear it also introduces various quotations including the textual ones.

The Mirror stage: The story *The Kite* reflects the mirror stage which is a crucial stage in the development of the human psyche and which occurs when his/her age is between 6 and 18 months. Though Herbert is an adult, his mental growth is not like any average individual of his age. His psyche can be interpreted by the Lacanian mirror stage. The kite in the story can be seen as a symbol for Herbert's ideal self or ego. Just as a child tries to form a sense of the self by looking at the reflection on the mirror and wants to endow his/her self with a kind of unity or wholeness, Herbert looks at the kite as he flies it and searches for the unity of his self. Looking at the kite as it soars high in the sky, he strives to give unity and coherence to his self which is essentially fragmented and disjointed. The mirror stage lays emphasis upon the imaginary as the child's identification of the unified self with the reflection on the mirror is illusory and also as the formation of the ego is not based on the internal feelings or experiences, but on the identification or association with an external object. Similarly, Herbert's identification with the kite is a misrecognition as his sense of self is not tied to his internal emotions or experiences but to an external object that is, the kite.

While discussing the mirror stage Lacan also introduces the concept of the gaze of the caregiver who is generally the mother or the primary caregiver. He is of the view that initially the child feels a fragmented sense of self which later becomes modified or to which he tries to give unity and coherence by the gaze of a caregiver who acts like a mirror. So, Herbert finds his individuality through his relationship with his mother (Mrs. Sunbury) who is his caregiver. He values his mother's opinion too much as from her gaze or perceptions of him he deduces his notion of his unified self. Lacanian gaze is not the mere seeing in the literal sense, and so in the case of Herbert, the gaze of his mother acquires a symbolic significance, because his sense of self is not subjective, rather the basis of it remains with the object that is his mother. For him, this gaze is very potential as it induces in him the feeling of satisfaction or anxiety based on the attitude towards or perception of him by his mother and thus it has its impact on the formation of his self. Thus, Herbert seeks the approval from his mother in every step of his life be it regarding the kite-flying [“Mum, can I have a kite? (Maugham, *The Kite* 139)] or his marriage. Here Herbert's mother's gaze can be associated with his scopophilic drive which is the pleasure or satisfaction of looking at or being looked at. In a way he wants his mother's attention and have a feeling of happiness or becomes mentally satisfied if his mother approves of his actions. He is also overwhelmed with a sense of anxiety or feels heart-broken if he senses any disapproval in his mother.

Herbert's association or identification with the kite as well as his mother helps him in the formation of the "ideal-I" or "ideal ego", but in doing so, he becomes involved in self-alienation as his "I" is essentially other, because it is based on some external object that is, his reflection in the kite or his image formed by his mother. For a moment, his self ego is also formed by the perception of Betty, especially when he makes acquaintance with her and wants to marry her. But soon, for him, this image vanishes as unlike his mother Betty is not the Lacanian primary caregiver. Thus, his sense of self and ego is formed by the kite in which he can find an image of his mother whom he cannot think of as a separate one. But, at the same time, he recognises a disconnection between his real self and his image formed through his mother and is tormented by a sense of self doubt and that is why he quarrels with his mother though that is only before his marriage with Betty as ultimately, he succumbs to the image or identity formed through his mother.

The Symbolic stage:

Lacanian symbolic order in Herbert's life begins when he is made to learn various social and cultural norms associated with the sophisticated society through his mother. From his early childhood Herbert's mother makes him learn what he should do and what not. His mother is of the view that as a member of the society he must know from his mother the norms and etiquettes associated with their society without having any chance of questioning. Thus, she teaches him how to drink tea out of a cup properly and when he asks for an explanation she has only to say – "Never you mind. That's how it's done. It shows you know what's what (Maugham, *The Kite* 136)." Not only this, she will have him follow in her footsteps in order to keep Herbert separated from "a lot of riff-raff (Maugham, *The Kite* 137)" – "Now, Herbert, do what I do; keep yourself to yourself and don't have anything more to do with them than you can help (Maugham, *The Kite* 137)."

It is noticeable that though Herbert's mother tries her best to infuse in him the social norms (or, to say self-regulated norms) he cannot fully be trained in these as he is unable to grasp fully the "Other" of the symbolic order i.e. the cultural norms, language and signs associated with his rigid mother. This "Other" (with capital 'O') of the symbolic order can be contrasted with the "other" (with small 'o') of the mirror stage as Herbert now cannot identify himself fully with the cultural norms because now, he is not too young to see through anything consciously while in his infancy he could identify himself (though apparently) with the "other" i.e. the kite or his mother. And so, he cannot absorb the rules and norms formed by his mother and breaks with her to have a relationship with and afterwards marry Betty.

Herbert is unable to absorb fully the symbolic order also because he cannot maintain a healthy relationship associated with the order. Instead, he longs for an intimate relationship with his mother thus disobeying the norms of the symbolic order. Both Herbert's mother and his wife represent the law of the father in the symbolic order as they work heavily on/upon his mind. On the other hand, his father does not pose as a threat to him who is very meek by nature. Instead, it is Mrs. Sunbury and Betty who act as a threat to his individual essence as

a whole. So, if Herbert does not follow their steps, he would be mentally castigated for his disobedience.

The character of Herbert can be analysed through the concept of the split subject. It is a Lacanian concept that is associated with the divided nature of the human subject which is torn between the identity formed at the symbolic stage and the repressed, unconscious and fragmented self. Like anyone, this split in Herbert's life can be traced when he enters and experiences the symbolic order and senses a disconnection from his inherent desires (for the kite as well as his mother) and also senses incompleteness as he is unable to fully absorb the language and norms of the symbolic order. Thus, he is unable to grasp his sense of self fully and this inability leads to a lack along with his permanent desire for this lack. Herbert experiences the split of his self when he is grown up and senses incompleteness not only because he cannot maintain properly the symbolic order of relationships (as he feels sexually drawn towards his mother), but also, he cannot completely abide by the rules and etiquettes regulated by his mother (Herbert disobeys his mother by marrying Betty). But the split in Herbert's life can be seen more specifically as he enters the adult life marrying Betty and is deeply stung by his unconscious desire for his mother.

Herbert's desire for the kite also reflects the concept of Lacanian "objet petit a" which is the desire for something that is unattainable. In a way, his desire for the kite is an instance of "objet petit a" as he finds satisfaction from seeing it, but while it promises satisfaction, it is unattainable because his satisfaction comes only when he is at a distance from it. He likes the kite, but at the same time he wants to see it soar higher and higher thus revelling in being away from it and making it unattainable. As the kite soars higher and higher in the sky, he feels much more exalted as in spite of desiring freedom, in a way he fears to have it as freedom involves responsibility and he fears to take responsibility. And this same idea is introduced by Sigmund Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* – "Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility ("A Quote from Civilization and Its Discontents")." The concept of "objet petit a" can also be applied to Herbert's relationship with his mother for whom he has an intense liking and desire, but whom he cannot have as his object of sexual desire. Thus, though the fact remains that he wants sexual freedom by having his mother as his sexual object, he cannot have her or his freedom in this matter as that involves fear from society.

Lacanian symbolic stage is associated with lack and the unconscious. Here in this stage Herbert seeks to find his own place in the symbolic order of existence and is overwhelmed with a sense of lack and limitation. This lack is the absence of the mother as he cannot have her. And here it can be noticed that there is a connection between the mirror stage and symbolic stage as the symbolic stage's desire for completion i.e. desire for the "Other" (i.e. the mother) can be associated with the desire for forming a unified self in the

mirror stage. In the mirror stage Herbert seeks to find unity and wholeness of his self and finds it through his mother while in the symbolic stage he longs for completeness of his self by desiring his mother. Thus, in a way, Herbert's mother assumes the central position in both the mirror and symbolic stages of his life.

Conclusion:

While replete with Freudian concepts, the story *The Kite* by William Somerset Maugham can be interpreted also through various Lacanian concepts. In the mirror stage, Herbert tries to form a sense of self by looking at the kite and also by getting approval from his mother. But he cannot do this, as this sense of the self is imaginary or ideal far removed from the reality. This accounts for his failure at the mirror stage. In the symbolic stage Herbert tries to absorb the signs, the languages, the norms taught to him by his mother, and thus he is in the process of forming his own individual identity (of course, mediated by his mother). In this way he also tries to form his notions of the reality. But ultimately, he fails in his aim as his own individual identity and sense of reality is too much mediated by his mother and afterwards by his wife Betty. Thus, Herbert is a failure in both the stages and so, ultimately, he cannot maintain a proper balance in the Lacanian real stage of his life.

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