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Affinity towards dolls in Helen Oyeyemi's Gingerbread: A transitional object

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Abstract---In Helen Oyeyemi's latest novel *Gingerbread* (2019), an object signifies transformation in adult life from a specific angle. The paper studies the transformational Object and its relation to the subject, primarily an ego transformation. Object-seeking, in the case of Perdita, a seventeen-year-old isolated girl, one of three generations of women in the novel, is the cause for the experience of an object transforming the subject's internal and external world. Linking the Object with the subject is the source of transformation. To expand the phenomenon, the unique analytic relationship with the Object is identified with the ego's state, discussed by Christopher Bollas in his book *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known*. (2018)

Keywords---object, transformation, ego, transference, environment, subject, attachment.

Introduction

Donald Winnicott's (1951) coinage, 'transitional object', is further elaborated by Winnicott, Sugarman and Kurash in terms of the role of the transitional object in the child's psychological development. According to Winnicott (1963), the mother is the total environment as she holds the responsibility for the child's growth, and she satisfies the internal needs of the child. According to Bollas, "Mother and child continuously negotiate intersubjective experience that coheres around the rituals of "psychosomatic need" (24).

Mothering, however, may be disturbed for some time. Once Harriet Lee, the protagonist of *Gingerbread* (2019), realises that her present life is merging with her past. Yet, the effect of disturbed mothering will be retained in the formation of the child's ego and maybe remembered and reflected somewhere in future as transference. Thus ego, attitudes, and feelings constitute the grasp of object relation, and it inherits the meaningful interpretation of unthought and existence of predetermined thoughts through the experience of transference. To quote Bollas analysis, "Mother is less significant and identifiable as an object." (24) Mother is not fully identified as Other in a 'process of transformation' (24) where the object is placed for the replacement of the mother. Perdita, the daughter of Harriet Lee, holds dolls as support for her emotional outburst, which she has not received from her mother. Her dolls interject with the lines of reason and objection when Perdita achieves her mother's nostalgic dreams. Oyeyemi portrays the position of dolls in a specific context, "Suppose we're not even character characters but figments of another character's imagination..." (48) Their voices often balance between Harriet's and her daughter's.

Child's attachment towards Dolls

When a child attains maturational pressures, she maintains distance from her mother. Though it is difficult for the child, she also needs a kind of attachment. Perdita has an affinity toward dolls, while she also wishes to maintain her connection to her mother. She explores the environment, and the impossible proposition is required if she is a physical entity. The child is physically moving away, but she needs mental or moral support from her mother. To resolve this, the child catches an object with mother-like properties. The 'transitional object' is usually a soft material that comforts her. The object can perform for the child and provide emotional support as the mother did. Winnicott writes, "A transition object is defined as an orientation toward an object associated with the primary carer (mother) to compensate for or ease anxiety as a result of long term separation of the child from the carer." (Winnicott 1953)

Oyeyemi illustrates the significance of dolls in her novel through Harriet's narration about her relationships with her homeland Druhastrana. Perhaps, the narrative descriptions of her history assimilate Perdita and the dolls that reflect how the foggy details of her mother's past have inspired Perdita to pursue her own. Bowlby writes, "A mother can be physically present but 'emotionally' absent. What this means, of course, is that although present in body, a mother may be unresponsive to her child's desire for mothering." (23)

The child values transitional objects employing her to transfer the required relationship from mother to objects. Then the real object relationship is created between the child and the object. The object can be anything a toy, teddy, doll etc. Winnicott's in his *Transitional Objects, and Transitional Phenomena* (1953) claims that "A need for a specific object or a behaviour pattern that started at a very early date may reappear at a later age when deprivation threatens"(4) This kind of need for a specific object at an early age may also reappear in later days, which gradually extends the behaviour of possessing an object to her family. The self-concept is objectified and relates to different states of sense and feeling

through objects' vantage points. Meanwhile, possession of objects discovers that the transformation object emerged out of the mother's past experience.

Harriet says: "I think it was more like what Sago was saying about being a figment of someone else's imagination. I thought I was part of her story and not part of his, and there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it. (56)

Harriet reveals that the entanglements grant her a self and identity and attempt to explain her connection with her husband since they were separated. The activities of the dolls reminded her relationship with her parents and Perdita's alignment with her father, which is proved by one of the dolls Bonnie,

Thinking about it little by little, over time, it now seems to Mother-of – Perdita that almost exactly the same suggestion and rejection and deal would have been made regardless of the order in which father and daughter spoke. (Oyeyemi 127)

Mother's pre-conceived attachment to the past detached her from the present, yet this is why Perdita's affinity towards dolls. Although, the mother's moment of significance in the past reflected precisely in the form of struggle engaging within herself. Therefore, "the child brings magical solutions to the anxiety caused by awareness of the mother's absence" (Gulerce 190). Dolls in *Gingerbread* function as a supplement for Harriet Lee's mother, where Perdita assumes it as a transitional object. The transitional Object [Doll] omit the idea of the mother's loss, entertaining the idea of communication with an object. It is the creation of the child, which supports the child during the loss of the mother environment. According to Bollas, in adult life, it is appreciable that Perdita's 'actual potential to transform the total environment' (5) continues her relationship with the Object yearn, an experience that "generate hope, even a sense of confidence and vision" (5) Thus [Object] has the potential for modelling both conflictful and harmonious (growth-inducing) relationships. (Rogers 25)

The is thus "envirosomatic transformer of the subject" (Rogers 25) even before the mother is identified as the other. She attempts to maintain a balanced and predictable life by teaching classes and participating in her daughter's education and life. Her relationship with her daughter proves more complex, and her inability to effectively communicate with her frustrates and disappoints her. Perdita is the recipient of envirosomatic caring, her quest is not to possess the object, but the object serves as the medium of altering the self. Perdita's emotional support come to terms with the objects inflicted upon her. To put in the words of Oyeyemi, "It's true that Prim, Sago, Bonnie, and Lollipop have not been brought up in the usual way, but they are old enough to know better." (32) In the context of Perdita's kinship with dolls, Greenberg and Mitchell's analysis would fit in, "the unit of study of psychoanalysis is not the individual, but the relational matrix constituted by the individual in interaction with significant others." (220)

Perdita's dolls identified with specific names are transformative achievements it alters the nature of her internal psyche. It also results in ego change, and she

recognises her mother's failure of treating her in the environment owing to her extending absence which can "evoke ego collapse and precipitate psychic pain." (Bollas 4) Though Perdita lost her environment, mother Harriet rejoiced with the Object that acted as dolls in the novel, experiencing the freedom of transitional objects. Bolla's phenomenon of searching an object is identified with the "metamorphosis of the self." (Bollas 26) Thus, object-seeking is an aesthetic moment for Perdita prevailed in her adult life has a deep rapport with dolls as "Ontogenetic process." (Bollas 5) Harriet's tale is meant to be a bedtime story, relaying Perdita's entrance into ethereal and fantastic objects seemingly supposed to interact with those dolls as humans. Perhaps, the narrative fabrication between the two allures a liaison between warped elements and the reality.

The dolls recognise the figure- this is where he lay down with her daughter as the gingerbread began to take effect he lay down with her in a manner that was irresistible illicit, his attentions somewhere between those of a father and those of a lover. (Oyeyemi 33)

The child has reverence towards her objects and considers them sacred objects. "Although Bollas emphasis is on the positive aesthetic experience, a subject [Perdita] may seek a negative aesthetic experience, during such occasion a subject [Perdita] 'prints' her early ego experiences and registers the structure of the unthought known." (Bollas 5) Such borderline reminds the subject of her traumatic situations that recognise her origin existentially. Lundy and Potts (1987) reported that object-attached children showed high need for intimacy and some need for affiliation. Oyeyemi depicts Perdita's interaction with the dolls gradually embracing regret and longing. Her internal shift is released from the emotional turmoil of witnessing her mother's physical and emotional journey towards reconciliation. And even Perdita inherit her mother's journey to achieve her aspiration.

According to Gulerce, "... the separation anxiety eases, and as object constancy develops, then the attachment object is a transitional object." (190) However, the author illustrates how Perdita maintains familial intimacy and allows her to perceive her worth and capability.

Conclusion

Thus the transitional Object is a unique process that proceeds to enable the subject's transference to the self as an object. Those objects family relations; objects like dolls evolved with a past and a history. Perdita's eagerness has led her on an emotional and surreal psychological journey to learn about her familial history. The representation of the Object is enigmatic, but the function is identified by the way the subject holds an interpretive caretaking. Thus Oyeyemi created a space for the discourse between the dolls and the child, perhaps the two essential contributions determined with the proper transference. The child's affinity towards idealized objects is great omnipotence; remarkably the sense of the existence of objects in *Gingerbread* restores the genuine relationship between the subject and the object. To conclude with the Bollas statement, "the subject is the object of the ego's representational formation of needs, memories, desires, and

daily experiences, and for this reason, we may say that as the subject is the object of the ego's transformation into play of memory and desire..." (60).

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