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Traumatic Repercussions: Delving into the Psychological Complexities of the Girl in *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride

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Abstract

Concerning the mental well-being of humans at different times, the indispensable role of the kith and kin of the individuals is quite noticeable. Eimear McBride, a doyen in Irish literature, presents the catastrophic impact of the unhealed trauma through the portrayal of a Girl in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. The Girl in McBride's novel is an epitome of the fatal clutches of trauma and fragile mental stability. The most vulnerable and heartbreaking fact is that this unnamed narrator is affected by trauma not because of other people, but because of her own family members. This source of trauma adds a deep layer of trouble not only to her but also to her entire family. None of her family members takes even a single initiative to address her trauma adequately. This study focuses on dissecting the unhealed mental sickness of the girl through the lens of masochism. The girl, in fact, echoes the stories of many of the rape victims in this contemporary era. The methodology employed for this study is qualitative and descriptive. Along with dissecting the root causes for the suicide of the girl from the selected novel, secondary academic journals and books on the respective area have also been consulted for a better understanding. This study stands as a poignant reminder of the enduring effects of trauma and the timely interventions and assistance for the healing process.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Masochism, Eimear McBride, Therapeutic Approaches.

Introduction

Maintaining healthy mental and physical strength is crucial and vital for the existence and sustenance of every individual. To attain a soothing quality of life, it is important to take the initiative to heal the psychological wounds sustained at a very young age. Psychoanalysis and early detection of

traumatic abuses will assist a human to cope with the unconscious conflicts. A poignant portrayal and a powerful testament of the debilitating grasp of trauma is being served by the Irish literary doyen Eimear McBride in her 2013 novel *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. The disjointed and fragmented words and phrases uttered by the unnamed narrator (girl) of McBride betray the psychological chaos that the girl has gone through.

Psychoanalytic exploration of this girl brings forth the distress related to abuses, trauma, repression and masochism. Masochism is one of the defence mechanisms that the girl is using to get through her trauma. Though several scholarly studies have been done on the mental trauma of the girl, studies emphasising masochism in the girl are limited. Melanie Klein, an Austrian-British psychoanalyst, posits that masochism is the response to the unconscious emotive states of the child towards their parents or other caregivers. These unconscious feelings will be rooted in the unaddressed mental, physical and emotional needs and result in aggressive behaviours including wrath, fury and hostility. Isolation, emotional abandonment, trust issues and insecurity can also trigger a child and an adult to slip and fall into the worries of masochism.

Review of Literature

Scholarship primarily studies trauma and female sexuality in the girl and her social and religious environment. Existing studies give critical attention to the trauma, sexual abuse and female subjectivity of the girl. Embodied subjectivity and the sense of fragmentation affect the girl's sexual identity. The negotiation of trauma in this girl happens through repeated sexual assaults. (Tellez, 2018). Trauma and fragmentation of self are expressed through the novel's language (Antosa, 2025). The use of Stream of consciousness, though, resembles James Joyce and addresses the girl's oppression, sexuality and trauma (Drong, 2019). The trauma fundamentally shapes the girl's thoughts on relationships and intimacy. Her emotional isolation disrupts her identity and mental stability (Hazre, 2017). Researchers explore the restricted sexual awareness of the girl due to her societal and religious factors. The girl's body becomes a site of contradictions due to her unresolved trauma and social oppression (Cahill, 2017). Patriarchal norms prevailing in the family and society affect the girl, her choice, voice and agency (Darling, 2021). She becomes an object of patriarchy, not as a subject of individual identity. Darling blames the patriarchal institution as one of the main causes of the girl's individual pathology. Instead of solely giving attention to psychological illness, the study shifts attention to gendered oppression. Contrarily, Johnson (2020) emphasises the girl's inability to address her mental illness and psychological illness. Since the majority of scholarly research applies the theories of trauma and feminine embodiment, there exists a gap for developing a study on masochism and its effects on the girl.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study done after a thorough evaluation and review of the literature. The study primarily focuses on dissecting the protagonist's psyche in Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* through the lens of psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic theory that has been taken for the analysis is Melanie Klein's masochism.

Discussion and Analysis

Unravelling the psyche of the girl in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* reveals an emotionally fragile and psychologically distressed child who is trying to cope with her trauma in an unhealthy environment. The girl has suffered from physical abuse since her thirteenth birthday onwards. As the child goes through unpleasant events during her childhood, her adulthood becomes problematic, and this eventually persuades the girl to take her own life. Throughout her life, she has been trying to cope with her trauma in different ways. McBride challenges simplistic distinctions between victimisation and agency by demonstrating how trauma reorganises desire, embodiment, and subjectivity.

Phoniness and Pretension

The main reasons for the trauma in the protagonist are the physical abuse, absence of her father, poor attention from her mother and the death of her brother due to a brain tumour. The sexual assault that the girl has gone through impacted her relationships and worldviews. She was raped by her uncle, her mother's sister's husband, when she was just thirteen years old at her home. Her uncle uses an emotional approach to quench his sexual thirst on her. Since the girl suffers from a fatherly affection, the uncle misuses this vulnerability of hers. He approaches her with this fatherly affection, and the girl fails to identify the sexual slake within him.

Melanie Klein, in her book *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, asserts that toddlers and juveniles who are afflicted by trauma become easy prey for masochism. These kids have the tendency to assimilate love in the form of pain and suffering. The improper care and lack of good enough parenting make them too vulnerable to mistake the torments and miseries as fondness and care. This is exactly what happens to the protagonist, also. Since she lacks good enough parenting either from her father or from her mother, she misconceives the care from her uncle as genuine. This prevents her from saying no to her uncle, though he utilises her as a sex toy.

Oh but he did...Caught me...Graze me opening my legs. Take me in...Someone else's house and their daughter taken over. Under his hands... He ram that. Oh God. It hurts take it out. It...Dance with the pain of it and I would do later for many bleeding days. Sting and itch. Not from disease. From new stretched and dapped skin...I cannot fir cannot take this. Pain. Scratch him. Pain of it. Keep clawing at of his skin...I will feel it bruising pains...I must be almost I am dying when he does it. With the pain. Suffocating. And his cheek. My nail my nail. That's it. I've done to him. What's done in me. (McBride 57 - 58)

Whenever the girl becomes emotionally isolated and estranged, the uncle approaches her to show his pretended paternal affection. An instance of this can be cited from an argument that happens between the girl and her mother. The girl overhears a conversation between her mother and her aunt discussing about her brother's matter. The aunt is suggesting that her mom change her brother's school to a specialised one since he is not able to obtain high marks in the present one. As a key financial aid to the family, the aunt's opinions become more vital to her mother. So much so that the mother agrees to whatever judgments the aunt makes. Catching the chatter between aunt and mother raises the girl to react against the stupid idea of school shifting. She responds to her mother in an argumentative manner, but shuts her mouth immediately because of the scolding from her mother.

Feeling disheartened and isolated, she leaves for her room. Her uncle said sorry to her for his wife's behaviour. Uncle is cunning enough to persuade the girl. "What's wrong? Nothing. I start to cry. Don't. There now. Don't. There now. It's been a bad old year for you all I know. A lot's gone on. It'll improve though. You know you can think of me in a father way." (54) From this moment of apology onwards, Uncle becomes her feigned soothing zone, though it is a pretended one. He acts as a 'supportive' friend when her brother is struck with illness. Uncle tries to bridge the gap of detachment that she suffers from her parents.

Whenever she sees or knows her brother's health declines, she thinks of her uncle. He convinces her that she wants him more than anyone else during difficulties. Though he gives her painful and assertive sexual attacks, she needs him as her 'caring' partner. After every sexual collision, she will be gravely injured, but she finds relief within that trauma. At one moment, he uses the girl for his greed and in the next moment, he consoles her with his adorable words.

Reenacting the Trauma

According to masochism, children who go through childhood abuses may show the tendency to revive those childhood traumatic situations if those conflicts are not treated properly. After the

traumatic event, though these affected kids have become grown-ups, they tend to recreate those unresolved complexities and thus try to gain control over themselves. According to Cathy Carol, traumatic experience exceeds the individual's capacity for comprehension; it returns belatedly through intrusive memories, compulsive repetition, and fragmented consciousness (Caruth 4). Sexually and physically abused children draw a parallel between sex and pain. For them, sex connects with the act of violence.

The girl employs sex as a mask to escape from her unresolved trauma. So she uses sex to gain power and control, also. In every unpleasant situation, she hinges on sex. From her school days onwards, she has relied on this method of escapism. A bullying incident at school can be cited as a perfect example of this. Her brother becomes the usual prey for ragging. Both his peers and seniors poke fun at him by calling him handicapped. Watching this humiliation becomes a habitual action for her. She ardently wishes to react against them, but she does not do that. However, when this mocking becomes unbearable, she reacts to these lads in her own way. The only approach she knows is sex. She starts mocking the lads for their poor knowledge of sex. Also, she uses her upper hand in this avenue and controls the other lads from poking her brother.

Girl here correlates her relationships with the act of painful sexual encounters. As her first sexual encounter was a violent abuse and an aggressive attack, she could not connect sex as a source of pleasure throughout her life. Whenever a difficult situation comes, she takes refuge in masochism or painful sexual acts. She escapes from her troubling reality under the shade of aggressive abuse. During all the vulnerable moments, she wanders in search of brutal physical attacks, not only from her uncle but also from anyone else.

For instance, when she comes to know about her brother's illness, she loses herself. She immediately calls her so-called soothing agent, i.e., her uncle, for brutal sexual assaults. Her uncle does exactly what she asks for without any hesitation. She wraps herself with blood and sweat. She thus finds relief from the harsh reality of her brother's deteriorating strength. The narrator is, in fact, misunderstanding the pain as relief because of the unresolved trauma that exists within her unconscious.

I wanted you to come I say. My My My brother. I needed to. I close to cry... Throw me. Smash that all up. Do whatever you want. The answer to every single question is Fuck. Stitching up my eyes and sewing up my lips... He. Hurt... I say Don't leave me alone...Please don't stop I say and again. Til I am hurt or am sick. Keep going until I. Then you can let me die. (McBride 131 – 132)

Masochism and Self-reproach

Individuals who struggle with masochism are inclined to punish themselves in order cope with their anxiety and guilt. "The child's feeling of guilt and anxiety, which arise from his aggressive impulses towards his loved objects, are relieved by his masochistic tendencies." (Klein 151) Self-blaming is one of the ways they use to deal with their remorse. Through physical and mental pain that result from their misdeeds, in fact, pangs their psyche. From this penitence, they adapt themselves to find solace.

Throughout her life, the girl has blamed herself and is inclined to punish herself. She makes her believe that the physical pain and the severe wounds are some way to rebuke herself. She has grown up within orthodox Christian beliefs, and she lacks proper sex education. Therefore, the notions that she has learnt from her family and society force her to think that even a single thought on sexuality is punishable. She not only has sexual thoughts but also goes through various sexual encounters. All these ventures give her temporary relief and painful sanctions.

An illustration of this punishment behaviour can be cited from a quarrel between the girl and her brother. The ground for this argument is the laziness of her brother. Their mother complains idleness of her brother to her without knowing the exact reason behind this. The laziness is indeed because of the reappearance of his brain tumour, but nobody could understand this at the initial stage. By hearing those accusations from her mother, the girl starts berating him. Her yelling offended him more, and he started weeping. By seeing this mother turns against her, and this eventually ends up in a heated conflict between mother and daughter. Without saying much, she leaves them and goes back to her flat. She even hesitates to make a call and wishes him his twenty-second birthday.

In contrast, her brother calls her on her nineteenth birthday in the same year. Along with that, he even sends her pocket money for her birthday celebration. This trembles her deeply and induces guilt in her. She is overwhelmed by her brother's token love and her rudeness. This urges her to punish herself in whatever way possible. The only approach that she knows is the aggressive physical and sexual exploitation. Thus, she ends up having cruel abuses even from strangers. "I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed...I met a man who hit me a smack...I met a man who cracked my arm." (McBride 96-97)

The clutches of masochism reach their zenith in the girl during her brother's last days. The blame from her mother, the worsening condition of her brother and the continuous torture from her uncle engulf her and tempt her to lose control of her life. "Traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world." (Herman 51) She believes that her brother's illness is the result of her incestuous relationships. On the day of her brother's death, too, her uncle misuses her and beats her brutally. She is not able to distinguish the pain and pleasure during these moments. She literally becomes helpless, and her mother fumes at her more. Her mother does not take the initiative to ask her even about the bruises she has. By taking advantage of this situation, the uncle continued his savage way of consolation. Her guilty feeling coaxes her to take her own life. The unresolved trauma and the clenches of masochism ultimately take an entire life itself.

Conclusion

Eimear McBride unequivocally voices the impact of childhood trauma and the devastating disposition of masochism through the character of the girl. The psychological abrasions the girl experiences during her formative years echo throughout her life. Masochistic behaviour in the girl is a manifestation of her unsuccessful trauma-recovery attempts. Trauma disrupts her physical, mental and psychological balance, affecting her life itself. If the girl gets proper care and adequate treatment, she will regain the balance and harmony of her life. Unfortunately, she lacks good enough parenting and appropriate healing therapies. This study emphasises the relevance of early detection of trauma and timely interventions of support and care for the affected individuals so that they can enjoy the tranquillity of both body and mind.

Scope for Future Studies

This study limits its scope within the idea of trauma, particularly masochism, with respect to only one character, the girl. The majority of the characters in the selected novel go through identity issues and displacement issues. These research domains will explore different facets of the characters and their psyches. Deteriorating family knots and parental love are yet another field for future analysis. Interdisciplinary approaches incorporating cultural studies are also feasible for further investigations.

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