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TRAUMA, OBSESSION, AND CONTROL: A PSYCHODYNAMIC STUDY OF IDENTITY AND POWER IN *MISERY*

Ms. Malavika S¹

*Ph. D Research Scholar (FT), Department of English, Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College,
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, TN, India*

&

Dr. M. Marimuthu²

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College,
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, TN, India*

Abstract

*This research paper aims to analyse the central characters of the novel *Misery* by Stephen King. There is a concentrated presentation of the psychological dimension of the story characterized by the intersection of elements such as trauma, obsession and domination within a confined space. The plot of the story is defined as a stream of psychological processes caused by captivity, insecurity and deprivation of freedom. The trauma can be considered one of the key themes in the novel and an element dominating the character's actions and thoughts, since its magnitude is determined by the traumatic events in the character's past and current captivity. Control functions as a multidimensional and destructive power that manifests itself through physical coercion, emotional persuasion and psychological manipulation. The processes of trauma, obsession and control function as destabilizing agents of identity, resulting in a fragmented individuality in which the lines between truth and falsehood tend to fade. Therefore, the novel *Misery* is interpreted as an insightful study on the interrelationship between trauma, obsession, and control in undermining one's identity and revealing the weak points of human psychology.*

Keywords

Trauma, Obsession, Domination, Identity, Psychology, etc.

Full Article

Stephen King's *Misery* marks a significant divergence from conventional horror stories centered around supernatural forces. The writer has created a story that uses the human psyche as the source of horror, thus creating a frightening tale that relies on psychological realism. Through the close and torturous connection between the famous writer Paul Sheldon and his kidnapper Annie Wilkes, the author touches upon the issues of trauma, obsession and control. Indeed, the novel takes place in an enclosed domestic space, which becomes a battleground of constant negotiation and struggle between Paul and Annie over power, identity and survival. It is argued that *Misery* should be perceived as a psychological story that discusses how trauma leads to obsessive behaviour and the ways in which the latter results in the formation of control mechanisms. The analysis of Paul and Annie's psychological traits and behaviour reveals the extent to which psychological imbalance driven by traumatic circumstances challenges the limits of the human mind and turns it towards its mad side.

Trauma and Psychodynamic Perspectives:



The combination of trauma and psychodynamics forms an intricate and well-rounded approach to human psychology. By definition, trauma represents any experience which is extremely disturbing to a person and exceeds his or her ability to cope, creating imbalances within one's emotional balance, memory structures and personal integrity. Such experiences can take place after a one-time dramatic incident or a period of consistent psychological strain and lead to such long-term consequences as anxiety, detachment and an overall fragmentation of personality. On the other hand psychodynamics concerns the study of inner mental processes behind human actions and the influence of these experiences including unconscious feelings, emotions and conflicts on the development of an individual's personality. This approach studies the process by which the human mind reconciles conflicting parts of one's personality through various coping techniques. The integration of trauma and psychodynamics shows that the human psyche is capable not only of enduring traumatic experiences but also processing, suppressing or expressing them through certain actions.

The psychological understanding of *Misery* can be best analysed using the principles of trauma theory and psychoanalysis. Trauma theory views trauma as an overpowering event that creates an impact on the victim's perception of identity and continuity. The experience of trauma usually leads to mental issues like dissociation, anxiety and cognitive impairment. In *Misery* trauma is not a one-time occurrence; rather, it develops into a chronic condition influenced by the victim's past and present experiences. Under the framework of trauma theory, the experience of Paul Sheldon's imprisonment is a prolonged and severe trauma. "It wasn't a dream... he was awake and it was real" (King, 35). The physical trauma experienced by Paul due to the car crash is followed by an experience of consistent fear, chaos and dependence at the hands of Annie Wilkes. Such prolonged exposure to danger affects the victim psychologically and generates symptoms associated with trauma such as anxiety, hypervigilance and dissociation. The victim's concept of self becomes fragmented when he loses his independence and control transforming his identity from that of a successful and independent author to that of an insignificant prisoner. On the other hand, one can claim that the trauma experienced by Annie Wilkes is much deeper and has a longer-lasting effect on the way she acts and behaves. Annie tells Paul, "I can do to hurt you if you behave badly or try to trick me. You sit and scream if you want to, because no one can hear you. No one stops here because they all know Annie Wilkes is crazy, they all know what she did, even if they did find me innocent" (King, 85). Using the framework of psychodynamics, it would be possible to interpret her behaviour as a projection of certain inner desires and unfulfilled emotions. The obsession with Paul and his character proves that her identity is fragmented and distorted.

Paul awakens to an overwhelming awareness of pain, his body shattered and immobilized, unable to distinguish between dream and reality. His suffering is not momentary but continuous, consuming both his physical and mental faculties. Confined to the bed and entirely dependent on Annie, he experiences a profound loss of control, where fear, helplessness, and uncertainty dominate his consciousness. The persistence of pain and the unpredictability of his captor create a psychological state in which trauma is not a past event but an ongoing condition that shapes his perception of reality and self (King, 11).

Psychodynamics theory further explains the processes associated with Annie's urge to control. Her obsession to take control of Paul can be explained in terms of her use of a defense mechanism that helps her to cope with internal chaos and anxiety. Annie feels that she gains a sense of control



over herself by exercising control over another individual. But such a feeling of power and control is fragile and leads to her love-hate relationship with Paul. It is evident that Paul exhibits psychological behaviour that conform to psychodynamics principles. Paul's tendency to write stories and poems when he is afraid or anxious is a good example of sublimation a process where one diverts his fears or anxiety to creative activities like writing. In addition, Paul's compliant behaviour towards Annie is a good example of an ego defense mechanism.

In terms of the psychodynamic approach, human behaviour is shaped by factors such as unconscious drives, repressed emotions and unaddressed conflicts. The abnormal and aggressive behaviour displayed by Annie Wilkes may be viewed as the outer expression of her psychological problems. In her case, the lack of proper emotional processing leads to a compulsive behavioural pattern aimed at establishing order amidst chaos. In this regard, the communication between Annie and Paul represents a position of confrontation between trauma and the unconscious mind. The interaction between the two characters is based on a sophisticated interplay of elements such as power, dependency and psychological imbalances. The enclosed environment makes their dynamic psychological relationship even more intense.

In his novel *Misery* Stephen King proves that only trauma can be damaging but also can become transformational and change someone's personal traits and behaviours. In fact, through the eyes of the psychologist it becomes clear that trauma can be the reason for people to develop compulsive and controlling behaviour as well as for them to show their resilience. Thus, the author presents psychology disturbance as both the cause of fear and the tool for survival making *Misery* a very important example of how a person can cope with trauma in a real-life setting. Paul Sheldon the main character proves that in cases of trauma a person can develop many useful skills such as being creative, rational and using strategic thinking. The combination of these two approaches Annie's pathology and Paul's resilience constitutes the basic idea of the novels psychology.

Trauma and the Fragmentation of Identity:

Trauma and Identity Fragmentation are important topics for investigation within psychology, especially with regards to how traumatic experiences alter the psyche of an individual. A trauma can be described as an event or a series of events that is more than what a person can handle thereby causing serious disturbances within the psychological makeup of the individual. These types of experiences are so disruptive that the normal functioning of the mind is affected by them the individual is unable to make sense out of their surroundings. It cannot be processed by the mind which means it continues to resurface through anxiety and intrusive thoughts.

Fragmentation of identity occurs as a natural result of the aforementioned disruption of the self. The reason for this is due to the fact that identity usually involves the combination of memory, emotions and experiences to create an integrated understanding of oneself. However, in trauma the self becomes disrupted in such a way as to create splits in the personality of the individual experiencing it. This can come through the form of conflicting notions about oneself emotional numbness towards oneself and feeling estranged from oneself. One might even perceive oneself as having split personalities with one being the old self before the traumatic experience and the other becoming the new post-traumatic self.

Trauma is one of the themes that run throughout the entire novel of *Misery* and have a significant impact on how both characters experience life and act towards each other. The traumatic experience experienced by Paul is an actual physical experience caused by the car accident he has suffered, which has put his life in jeopardy and made him rely solely on Annie for his life to be saved. The traumatic experience of being captured adds to Paul's experiences as he



gets repeatedly exposed to fear, pain and uncertainty. In fact, the man has never experienced such a feeling since he was always in charge of his writing and life.

As the captivity continues, Paul's sense of self begins to fracture. He becomes divided between the rational writer who attempts to think strategically and the terrified captive who is overwhelmed by pain and fear. These conflicting states do not merge into a unified identity but exist in tension, reflecting the psychological splitting caused by trauma. His mind shifts between detachment and emotional collapse, illustrating the breakdown of a stable and coherent self (King, 125).

The fragmentation of the identity of Paul in this case can be described as more than just an internal struggle or a psychological crisis. Instead, Paul uses such fragmentation as a mechanism for coping with his traumatic experiences. When overwhelmed, Paul tries to cope with the trauma through splitting off his experience and looking at his life situation objectively so that he is able to come up with plans and strategies. King describes Paul's internal dialogue as "He realized that in her madness, she had become his jailer and his savior" (King, 45).

However, Paul gets into panic mode due to the pain he experiences, which reveals the unstable mental condition. This change in his psychological stance indicates the split personality as both his captive and writer selves exist in conflict. Writing is an integral element in this process of fragmentation. Paul is forced by Annie to bring back his fictional character Misery Chastain, who has to work creatively under compulsion. Although, at first glance it seems that once again control reigns supreme in practice it turns out that this process becomes the way how Paul can preserve and reconstruct himself. Through writing, he manages to establish contact with his self, thus ensuring some continuity in the face of chaos. At the same time, writing acts as a kind of psychological shelter, where Paul can find respite from the fear surrounding him. However, it is evident that trauma in the novel is not limited to only Paul's trauma but also involves the psychological state of Annie Wilkes. Even though there is no description about her history in the novel her actions clearly depict an unstable and fragmented psyche created by psychological disorders that she cannot overcome. It seems like Annie's identity is based on her position as a fan of Paul and anything that threatens her identity such as the death of her favorite character, triggers uncontrollable and violent responses from her.

The connection that Annie Wilkes shares with trauma is far more complicated and entrenched than that of Paul Sheldon. While it is not made explicit in the novel, it is evident from her actions that she was psychologically unstable and emotionally conflicted in the past. Her violent nature and emotional volatility reflect a lack of impulse control and demonstrate a broken personality. While Paul attempts to adjust himself to the traumatic experience, Annie is ensnared in her psychological turmoil and incapable of attaining any semblance of balance. This comparison underscores the different approaches people may adopt towards their psychological traumas. The confining nature of the narrative also highlights the connection between trauma and fragmented identities in this novel. The confinement serves as a closed mental world in which there is little contact with external reality and one's own personal experience rules. This confinement magnifies the impact of the trauma because it deprives the individual of social support and contacts with external reality, thus forcing them to depend only upon their inner world and experiences for strength.

Obsession as a Distorted Psychological Attachment:

Obsessive attachment as a pathological type of psychological attachment involves an excessive preoccupation with a person an object, or an idea that is not a natural expression of emotions and



becomes psychologically consuming for the individual. Whereas normal psychological attachment involves mutual respect, adaptability and understanding of personal boundaries, obsessive attachment involves rigidity, overreaction and irrational behaviour which is often detached from reality. Obsessive attachment is caused by an individual's extreme reliance on the object of attachment to satisfy psychological needs or restore equilibrium in their psyche and sense of self-identity. In this case, the object of attachment loses its autonomy and becomes a projection of the person's wishes, fears and fantasies.

Obsessive attachment often stems from some psychological problems in an individual including low self-esteem, trauma and emotional neglect. Thus, the attachment itself becomes twisted as the drive for control, validation and emotional regulation supersedes any real sense of attachment and emotional connection. The person suffering from an obsession typically experiences intrusive thoughts, exaggerated emotional responses and intolerance of separation, changes or rejection. In the event of any threats or disruptions to the object of the obsession, the person may become anxious, angry or aggressive illustrating the unstable character of such an attachment. Thus, in *Misery* the obsession of Annie Wilkes is a forceful and devastating phenomenon that motivates the plot and moves it forward. Annie's obsessive relationship with Paul Sheldon and his fictional creation Misery Chastain goes beyond admiration and appreciation as she displays a deep emotional commitment, unrealistic expectations and an irresistible urge to exercise control over the object of her obsession.

Annie's attachment to Paul and his fictional character goes far beyond admiration, developing into an intense and uncontrollable fixation. She refuses to accept the death of Misery Chastain and reacts with anger and emotional instability when her expectations are not met. Her sense of identity becomes tied to the continuation of the narrative, leading her to force Paul to rewrite the story according to her desires. This obsessive need to control both the author and his creation reflects a psychological condition in which the boundary between reality and fiction is completely dissolved (King, 72).

An obsessive relationship can be considered a type of distorted attachment, where a person tries to define them in terms of other people or objects outside themselves. From this perspective, Annie's attachment to the fictional world implies confusion between reality and imagination as Paul Sheldon ceases to be an independent personality for her and becomes her reflection, fulfilling only her wishes and expectations. The fact that Paul was asked to change the novel in order to bring Misery Chastain back from the dead shows how obsessed Annie really is. Her refusal to let the character die indicates her lack of ability to cope with losses and changes, which makes her psychological condition even more rigid. Psychological rigidity is one of the main aspects of any obsession because it prevents people from adapting and developing. Obsession in the novel is also associated with violence, since the character's unstable emotions provoke violent behaviour, which can lead to tragic consequences.

Control and the Dynamics of Power:

Control and dynamics of power involve the processes through which the exercise of authority and influence and the dynamics of dominance can be exerted. Control can be defined as the capacity of an individual or a group to guide or regulate the behaviour or actions of another individual or group. This is achieved through a range of methods such as physical coercion, psychological manipulation, social status or mental superiority. Power, therefore, represents the actual capacity or power that enables an individual to exert control. Dynamics of power involves the relationship



that is formed when two individuals or groups enter into a process of power negotiation. From a psychological point of view, control is associated with the desire for stability, security and preservation. Controlling someone else is one possible manifestation of anxiety and fear in oneself. This applies especially to situations when a person dominates another and the relationship becomes imbalanced. Power relations between people may be imbalanced and one-sided since one person has more influence than the other who is intimidated by fear, duty and inability to act.

The theme of control is another major topic that comes out strongly in *Misery*, especially with regards to the relationship that exists between Paul Sheldon and Annie Wilkes. The control aspect of their relationship can be seen right from the outset in the form of the level of control Annie exercises over Paul both physically and psychologically. In typical King fashion he expresses this relationship when he states: “Misery’s return was her salvation, and Paul Sheldon was the key” (King, 96). For example, Annie controls Paul’s ability to take his medication confines him to his room and even directs his movements, thus putting Paul under complete control. Besides being physically controlling of Paul, Annie is also psychologically abusive. In an attempt to control herself, Annie controls Paul. However, there is some balance in the relationship in terms of power dynamics.

I’m your number-one fan.” She said it as if it explained everything, and perhaps to her it did. The words were spoken with a kind of dreadful pride, a statement of ownership rather than admiration. In that moment, Paul understood that whatever power he thought he had—as the creator, as the writer was gone. Here, in this room, Annie Wilkes was the one who decided what was true, what was allowed, and what would happen next. His world had narrowed to the boundaries she set, and every breath he took was subject to her will (King, 7).

As the novel unfolds, Paul starts to gain back control by applying certain strategies. His submission to Annie is sometimes well-planned and serves as a tool he uses to manipulate and ultimately escape from her grasp. This aspect of the novel demonstrates how power is a rather flexible concept and can be negotiated and renegotiated throughout a situation. From the psychological point of view control is always intertwined with trauma and obsession. In the case of Annie control is a response to her own vulnerabilities and insecurities. Paul struggles for control as a way to survive and protect himself.

Conclusion:

Misery is a captivating novel that shows the depth of psychological conflict. Using the interplay between the characters of Paul Sheldon and Annie Wilkes, the author provides a fascinating representation of the human psyche in times of crisis and trauma. Thus, this work proves that the scariest and most dangerous things in life come from the depths of one’s own mind rather than from outside factors. This paper proves that one of the key themes discussed in the novel is the issue of trauma as the main character experiences it during his stay with Annie Wilkes. Trauma causes disruption of continuity and fragmentation of personality. Paul’s kidnapping shows how one’s sense of identity is distorted in the case of being trapped and constantly threatened by someone.

The process of adapting and relying on one’s creativity demonstrates the capacity of the human psyche to survive and rebuild oneself even through traumatic situations. Finally, the character of Annie Wilkes shows that failure to overcome trauma results in mental disintegration. Obsession as portrayed in the novel can be defined as a form of obsession that negates the presence of barriers between the self and the other. In the case of Annie’s fascination for Paul and



his fiction her obsession can be viewed as a form of rejection for separation and the notion of change and self-rule. Obsessiveness from this perspective can be seen as intimately related to the theme of power and control. It can be argued that control is an essential element of the novel not just because it acts as a physical restraint but more importantly a psychological one in terms of domination and resistance.

In addition, the novel also explores the connection between the psychological distress brought about by isolation. The isolation through the closed-space confinement of the character magnifies the themes of trauma, obsession and control, hence creating confusion between what is real and what is perceived in terms of the psychological state of the characters. Through the closed confinement the characters become more aware of their internal struggles and fears, hence leading to the destruction of identity. Nevertheless, there is room for reconstruction of the characters identities through such acts of reclaiming power and sense of identity as shown by the character Paul. In conclusion, from the discussions above this paper has clearly discuss that *Misery* is one of the important novels contributing to the study of psychological literature. The novel highlights the vulnerability of the human mind and its capability of being transformed due to certain extreme situations.

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