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Negotiating Desire: A Lacanian Reading of Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deploys Lacan's theory of desire in reading Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*. Jacques Lacan, in his vested interest in human psychology, developed deep psychological insights influential not just in understanding the components of human psychology but in critical engagement with literature. One of the highpoints of Lacan's postulations is his theory of desire. In the theory, he projects the knowledge of *Ate* with which he seeks to explain the desires and psychological drives of the human mind which often leads to a tragedy. Lacan, in the theory, argues that it is not harmatia that is usually the source of the tragic end of a hero but the *Ate*– the desire, a zone of second death closely linked to Freud's Thanatos with which he seeks to give several of Freud's concepts– a Lacanian conclusion. Deploying this theorization of the desire–*Ate,* the study demonstrates how the tragic atmosphere in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*, experiential in the actions of some of the characters in the novel, is piloted not merely by their tragic flaws but by a psychological yearning for tranquility that is found in death– an affirmation of *Ate* central in Lacan's theorization. The paper concludes that the awareness of *Ate* provides a gateway to understanding human desires and motivations and in controlling and engaging them.

Keywords: *Ate, desire, second death, Thanatos, psychology, unconscious, hamartia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalysis is a branch of study that is interested in the study of the human mind and how the activities of the mind both in the conscious and the sub conscious functions in the buildup of a healthy personality. It is a method of explaining and treating mental and emotional problems by having the patient talk about dreams, feelings, memories etc. it is also a method of analyzing psychic phenomena and treating emotional disorders that involves treatment sessions during which the patient is encouraged to talk freely about personal experiences and especially about early childhood and dreams. Courtney Ackerman quoting McLeod avers that psychoanalysis is a type of therapy that aims to release pent-up or repressed emotions and memories in or to lead the client to catharsis, or healing (McLeod, 2014). In other words, the goal of psychoanalysis is to bring what exists at the unconscious or subconscious level up to consciousness. This goal is accomplished through talking to another person about the big questions in life, the things that matter, and diving into the complexities that lie beneath the simple-seeming surface. There are proponents of this important theory and the foremost and leading names among them are: Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic theories and principles, Carl Jung and his mythological criticism, Northrop Frye and his mythological criticism and Jacques Lacan and his psychoanalytic theories and most importantly, his projections of Freud's Principles.

Susan Van Zyl in her essay, "Psychoanalysis and Literature: An Introduction" makes a very interesting remark on the symbiotic relationship between literature and psychoanalysis which enjoy decades of fraternization enjoyed in literary scholarship. She avers thus:

The history of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis is as long as that of psychoanalysis itself and probably longer than that of literary theory, at least in its present form. Freud himself devoted some of his most interesting work of literature and post-Freudian psychoanalysis is central to the European intellectual tradition which continues to provide literary theory with some of its most important material and concepts (1).

Psychoanalysis has become an interesting theory in the study and analyses of a work of art. Even though Sigmund Freud and the proponents of other psychoanalytic theories were interested in psychology and in providing answers and solutions to psychological ailments and dispositions of their patients, nevertheless, the theory have become one of the popular critical approaches to literature and had also influenced some popular literary works in various genres. As Courtney Ackerman views it:

Due to psychoanalysis's tenure as an influential theory and form of therapy, it's had a sizable presence in art, literature, and films. Psychoanalysis has also left its mark on literature, both by inspiring works of fiction that incorporate aspects of psychoanalysis and/or psychoanalytic theory and by serving as the basis for psychoanalytic literary criticism, in which literature is critiqued through the lens of psychoanalytic theory (8).

This kind of criticism approaches the analysis of literary works form the workings and psychological dispositions of the human minds. The critic using this theory based its attack on the psychological issues in the characters of in a work of art, sometimes even the writer. The critic is interested in the psychological drives of a character; what motivates a character and what makes a character to act in certain ways he/she does. In the opinions of Ann Dobie:

Human beings are fascinating creatures. Readers can be said to take a psychological approach when they try to understand them. The questions readers ask about characters are the same ones we might ask about a friend or family member. "Why would he want to do something dumb like that?" one might say. Another might shake her head and comment, "I knew that wasn't going to work. I don't see why she had to try it". People never seem to run out of speculations about others' motives, relationships, and conversations or, for that matter, their own. They also speculate about dreams, puzzling as to their source.... (53)

Psychoanalytic theory has been criticized and faulted in the sense that it lacks aesthetics; nevertheless, it has provided the basis for the formulation of other theories and could function perfectly when juxtaposed with other known theories of criticism. This theory has influenced many writers at the wake of the 20th century and continues to dictate the tone of many literary works since inception. A good example is D.H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* among many literary works that could be examined from the point of view of psychoanalysis. *Sons and Lovers* is one of the modernist novels of the 20th century which was written in the Sigmund Freud's theory of the psychoanalysis of the human mind, was making waves in Europe and beyond. The novel, S*ons and Lovers* is reputed as D.H. Lawrence's autobiographical novel, a novel where he recreated his childhood days, fantasies, longings and passions which did not only affect his psyche and attitude but propelled his literary work.

2. THEORIZING THE TRAGEDY OF DESIRE: A FLASH POINT OF LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Jacques Lacan is one of the prominent names in the field of psychology. In the mid to late 1900s, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called for a return to Freud's work, but with a renewed focus on the unconscious and greater attention paid to language. Lacan draws heavily from his knowledge of linguistics and believed that language was a much more important piece of the developmental puzzle than Freud assumed. There are three key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis that set it apart from Freud's original talk therapy as detailed by Courtney Ackerman: The Real, Symbolic Order, Mirror Stage. Ackerman agrees that while Freud sees the symbolic as being indicative of a person's unconscious mind, particularly in dreams, Lacan theorizes that "the real" is actually the most foundational level of the human mind. According to Lacan, we exist in "the real" and experience anxiety because we cannot control it. Unlike the symbolic, which Freud proposed could be accessed through psychoanalysis, the real cannot be accessed. Once we learn and understand language, we are severed completely from the real. He describes it as the state of nature, in which there exists nothing but a need for food, sex, safety, etc. On the symbolic order, Ackerman posits that Lacan's symbolic order is one of three orders that concepts, ideas, thoughts, and feelings can be placed into. Our desires and emotions live in the symbolic order, and this is where they are interpreted, if possible. Concepts like death and absence may be integrated into the symbolic order because we have at least some sense of understanding of them, but they may not be interpreted fully. Once we learn a language, we move from the real to the symbolic order and are unable to move back to the real. The real and the symbolic are two of the three orders that live in tension with one another, the third being the imaginary order. Lacan further proposes that there is an important stage of development not covered by Freud called the "mirror stage." This aptly named stage is initiated when infants look into a mirror at their own image. Most infants become fascinated with the image they see in the mirror, and may even try to interact with it. But eventually, they realize that the image they are seeing is of themselves. Once they realize this key fact, they

incorporate what they see into their sense of "I," or sense of self. At this young stage, the image they see may not correspond to their inner understanding of their physical self, in which case the image becomes an ideal that they strive for as they develop.

One of the highpoints of Lacan contributions is his advancement of the theory of desire. In the view of Lacan, as Ruth Parkin-Gounelas captures, 'if language, as we have seen, is constitutive of reality and meaning, it is desire which is its permanent condition. Desire emerges, as Lacan says, at the moment of its incarnation into speech. And yet its fate is never to be incarnate in speech; it always passes beyond. 'Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing namable. 'flowing through the signifying chain, it flows beneath it as well, in the unconscious, and always either exceeds or falls short of its linguistic mark. It is as Lacan's most famous definition puts it, 'a relation of being to lack, the fundamental condition of human existence (82).

Lacan's psychology has also proven apt in the study of *Hamlet* and its Oedipal Textuality. Desire as arbitrary and undirected as it may seem is core to the Oedipus complex, it is in the view of Lacan, the desire of the Other.' It was agreed that in the tragedy of desire, Lacan was simply taking Freud theory of the Oedipal to its logical (Lacanian) conclusion. Oedipus complex has been fingered by Freud to be very pivotal in the study and understanding of William Shakespeare's Hamlet. The inability of Hamlet to kill the uncle and revenge the death of his father was believed to be as a result of the Oedipus complex. Freud believes that everybody was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes As Freud puts it:

The idea has passed through my head that the same thing may lie at the root of Hamlet…How better to explain Hamlet's hesitation to avenge his father's murder than he himself had meditated the same deed against his father because of the passion for his mother…? (223).

Lacan calls desire neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (287) in *Antigone*, Lacan posits that the tragedy is not from Harmatia but caused by *Ate* and this is what gives her situation its distinctive interest as well as its seminal position in the Lacanian definition of desire. *Ate* can be defined as perdition or devastation, a zone of the second death, that which is between life and death, a life lived in relation to death later described in terms of Freudian's death drive. It was opined that Antigone is from start associated with death, emphasizing her own commitment to the place where both her parents and her two brothers dwell. From her point of view, Lacan writes, 'life can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side. (280) however, it is only at the moment when she enters physically into what will be her tomb that her association with *Ate* was concentrated. Neither civic or divine law holds power over Antigone, driven as she is by her commitment to the other 'order' of *Ate*. In death, only in death, therefore can the tragic hero find a satisfying resolution. This is also the case with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Othello* and several other works that made interesting psychoanalytic study.

3. LACANIAN READING OF CHRIS ABANI'S *BECOMING ABIGAIL*

Chris Abani's novel, *Becoming Abigail*, is a heart-touching story of a young girl, Abigail, forced to assume the personality of her late mother as opposed to her true desires. The young girl, trapped and helpless– is caught up in the duality of personality that ends up consuming her. Her dead mother, Abigail, dies giving birth to her leaving the baby, Abigail under the care of a love-sick and broken father. The writer intimates about the shared bond between Abigail's father and his wife [Abigail's mother], which her death rather than extinguish, strengthens the bond with desires that become neurotic and depressing. The father loves the wife dearly that when she died giving birth to her only daughter, he is forced to name the surviving girl Abigail, as a reminder of the woman he loves so profusely. Accepting the loss of a wife he could not replace, Abigail's father determines to find her replacement in her surviving daughter and apart from naming the baby Abigail, after her, he raises her up to be everything like his dead mother. This desires sets the tone that drives the tragic tone of the novel. Abigail grows up with desires to be herself– a free-spirited and care-free lad with little or no care only to find her desires conflicting with her father's set standards. She is condemned to bury her true nature and in its place, picks up the tall identity of her mother. The conflict develops at very age in her life as she begins to attempt weird things in her search to understand and give meaning to her true existence. Her plight compounds after she finds out the true person of her mother– a lawyer, an educated and refined personality that conflicts with whom Abigail desires to be. Taunted by a super-ego driven father, the young girl immerses herself in the conflict of clashing personality that ends up not only destroying her but tragically affecting the people around her. Abani, in the novel, creates many characters motivated by various psychological drives. Abigail's father is trapped in the cocoons of uncontrollable super ego, typical of Eugene Achike in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* that makes his tragic end seemingly predictable. Abigail, on the other hand, is driven by her id instincts– the desires to be free, to roam wild and be whatever that pleasures her heart against societal and paternal dictates. As early as Abigail could remember in her childhood, she is surrounded by high expectations be like her dead mother. The death of her mother reduced her father to a near psychopathic love-sick patient. He soon loses desires for life and engages in reckless living with little care for his daughter expect in raising a dead wife out of a daughter. He becomes alcoholic to a height that he begins to favour a solitary and isolated life with jazz, music and liquor away from his daughter and her longing for fatherly love and

guidance. Abigail describes him in one of his usual broken moods, clutching the photograph of his dead wife, drinking and wasting away under the swaying influence of a song:

Her father was in the middle of the room swaying along to "The Girl from Panama", clutching the photograph of Abigail to his chest. She walked in and took the photograph from his hands. "Abigail", he said over and over. "It's all right, Dad, it's just the beer." "I'm not drunk" "Then it's the jazz. You know it's not good for you. But she knew this thing wasn't the jazz, at least not the way he had told her about it on other countless drunken nights… This thing with her father was something else Abigail suspected, something dead and rotting. "Shhh, go to bed, Dad", she said. He turned and looked at her and she saw it and recognized what it was. She looked so much like her mother that when he saw her suddenly, she knew he wanted her to be Abigail. (14)

Abigail's father's grief degenerates to a depressive ailment and reduces him to a vegetable. He sees not a daughter in his child but a reflection of a woman he lost– a woman he has to find again through his daughter. This attitude which carried on for months translated into years and Abigail's father did nothing to cure his grief and accept the reality of his loss. He spends the entire years of Abigail's growing up blaming her for the death of his wife since she died giving birth to her. It is therefore, no surprise that he would have preferred the baby to die and his wife to have survived. Perceiving her as the bad omen, the very source of his pain, the relationship between Abigail and her father is rather regimented and punctuated with scorn. The writer confirms that "it remained unspoken between her [Abigail] and her father, but as with all silences … Yes, this thing was like that. The shadows under the smiling eyes that said over and over you killed her. You. Why her? I loved her. (37)

Julia Kristeva makes an insightful revelation into the character of a depressed person, which comes handy in our understanding of Abigail's father's mental state. According to her: "The depressed person is full of hatred or wounded for the mourned 'object' and 'mourned 'thing' (11). Building on the classical psychoanalytic theory of Abraham, Freud and Melaine Klein, she contends that:

Depression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning. "I love that object," is what that person seems to say about the lost object, "but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself" (11).

This explanation anatomizes Abigail's father and his desires. He is depressed, triggered by his aggression towards his lost object (his lost wife). In mourning the object he lost and loved, he begins to hate himself for losing it and the hate drives his to a desire to kill himself, a romance wih the Ate–the desire which Lacan concedes drives tragedy and catalyzes suicide. The intriguing thing in Abani's fictional narrative is the transfer of existential angst from a father to a daughter as clearly seen in the novel. It did not take time before Abigail's father infects her with his depressive mood and his constant blame on the poor helpless girl triggers a series of psychological breakdown that traumatizes Abigail and positions her for inescapable psychological breakdown. First, Abigail seeks to assuage her father by desiring to assume the role he desires for her– the stature of his dead wife. She begins this quest by undertaking to do chores and menial jobs for their neigbours in the hope that she would please them and in their good mood, they would supply insightful information about the true personality of her dead mother she wishes to be like as part of her efforts to help her father. Unfortunately, the information destroys her sanity following her discovery of the tall and towering personality of her mother, a personality that conflicts with her lifetime desires. Abigail desires to be different and unique in her own way, to pursue her desired career, against her mother's and aspire to her own loftier heights not her mother's. She finds herself in a crossroad of desires– pleasing herself and her psychopathic father. At an early age, she breaks down and begins to do weird things in her search for balance exorcism. Once she takes a catapult and stones collected from her mother's grave and shoots six birds from the sky. The stones collected from no other spot appear symbolic and her intentions to bury the six birds appears more like an exorcist ritual: she dresses the six birds in a lace cloth torn from her mother's wedding dress. She places the lace-wrapped birds on funeral pyres and holds burning candle over each of them like a sentinel until they fill everywhere with the scent of roasted meat. She burns the birds and the lace and roasts them with the candle. Then she takes seven photographs of her mother from the family album, tears the faces out and turns them upside down with seven candles on them while she mutters an incantation over the torn faces. All the while she is doing all these; her father stands watching through the window but makes no attempt to restrain her. She then takes the candles off the photo fragments, picks up the fragments, and holds the severed photos of her mother's face up to the light before cramming them into her mouth. (30). It is at the very peak of this ritual-like practice that her father suspects the entire show that was no longer like an ordinary childish play to kill time and comes to her rescue, perhaps interrupting her ritual cycle. Suspecting a mental case, her father takes her to a psychiatrist who only prescribed some sweet-tasting children's aspirin and sends them home. Not satisfied by the doctor's act, Abigail's father takes her to a local witch believing her crisis to be emanating from a troubling spirit. The witch ends up exploiting the family and all she could recommend is a heavy silver bracelet and earrings to match which the old woman puts on Abigail. Yet, Abigail's problem is far from abating. The father is blinded to see that the turmoil in the child grows from a desire to please him and be like her dead mother which conflicts profusely with her true desires. Gradually, this conflict escalates and affects her sexual life. At the age of ten, her fifteen-year-old cousin, Edwin steals her virginity and warns her to not tell anyone or he would kill her. Unknown to Edward, Abigail fights a deeper mental conflict to bother about telling anyone about their sexual

escapades. Her sexual trauma compounds when all the men she sleeps with are always in a hurry to leave her after their love making and she makes no effort to stop them. She lives a life of giving and not longing to receiving like she received nothing from her father but blames and scorns. Her unrepressed desires of becoming Abigail alter everything for her. An incident worthy of note is the day she writes on her body with flat noodles burned into her skin by cashew sap with needle and cigarette tips. The fire never burnt her nor the cashew sap or the needle. If it did, Abigail did not feel any physical hurt as she writes on her body these emotion-laden words:

Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody. She starred at them. This burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permance even. (26)

All Abigail's fantasies and dreams are crushed by the constant pressure on her to abandon her true self and become her mother, Abigail. Her repressed and unfulfilled desires to be herself relapses her to a depressed state, just like her father too. Abigail's father, unable to carry on with his loss relapses into Thanatos, the death drive in the id which drives Lacan's *Ate.* Abigail's father, like Sophocles' Antigone, begins to operate under the guiding light of *Ate*, the death desire and it culminates to the fateful day he takes a rope and commits suicide. The novelist reports thus:

This was how she found her father. Hanging. The week she was to leave with Peter. Hanging from the hook where the ceiling fan had been. And now a cruel breeze blew in and he swayed in the raveling and unraveling of the hemp rope. Round. And round. Like a lazy Christian ornament. And down one life and pooling on the floor, his reluctance. Yellow. And in the heat, putrid, rank with him. His life, His loss and she didn't cry. Didn't seem shocked. She always knew. It was more a matter of when. And how. (77)

Abigail's father's tragedy is not mainly from a tragic flaw (though his inability to get over his grief appears a flaw), it finds explanation in Lacan's theorization of desire, the *Ate* that drives tragic ends. Lacan calls desire neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (287). Just like in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the tragedy of Abigail's father as Lacan contends, is not necessarily from hamartia but caused by *Ate* defined as perdition or devastation, a zone of the second death, that which is between life and death, a life lived in relation to death which equates to Freudian's death drive.

Abagail's father, at the climaxing point of his depression is already tilting to the side of the 'other,' the liminal zone of *Ate.* And for Lacan, only in death can the tragic hero find the measure of peace he seeks. It is interesting to note that Abigail did not express shock, neither did she cry at the discovery of her father's dead body dangling in the living room. She knows it was only a matter of time– the desires and hunger to die was evident while he lived. On another level of argument, Abigail too, just like her father already operates on the same liminal zone with her father. She is where he was– that liminal zone where life has lost its taste and death holds the beauty of all that mortality and eternity promise. She is beginning to find admiration and satisfaction in death, like her father. It was this death drive that is pivotal and helps her endure all she passed through in London in the hands of her cousin Peter. The character of Peter is a twist in the entire narrative. Peter is driven by Eros, a sexual perversion that makes him sleep with Abigail that was supposed to be his cousin in the most absurd manner. Apart from keeping her to provide sexual pleasure, Peter turns her into a prostitute. He sleeps with her at will and when he was not in the mood, he invites other men to feast on the poor Abigail. One night, unable to control Peter's abuses and molestations, screaming loudly, she invoking the spirit of Abigail (perhaps her Abigail and her mother's), and in that frenzy, she tears off Peter's penis. He leaves him in pain and runs into the street with the penis in her hand and blood all over her. The police finds her but she refuses to assist their investigation and all effort to trace the owner of the penis, even Abigail's identity were in vain since Peter brought her into the country with fake identity. The name Abigail Tansi does not exist anywhere in the immigration list confirming that she is metaphorically dead– and is existing just as a ghost, the ghost of the two Abigails– her mother and herself.

Abigail is recommended to a psychiatric hospital for the second time in her life. There, Derek, one of the social workers takes interest in her and his sexual desires for Abigail lures him to her. Derek throws caution to the wind and begins to bring Abigail to his matrimonial home for sexual pleasure. Abigail, now healing in the psychiatrist home, becomes a journey to recovery and reclaiming herself. Encouraged by the affection she enjoys from Derek, she begins to loosen her grip from the entrapment of *Ate* and nurses desires to leave again and perhaps be herself this time against any desires to be her mother. The writer describes Abigail's sexual entanglement with Abigail as not just making love but a psychological way of reclaiming back her true self which she lost as a child. There are nights she did many weird things in Derek's kitchen like using his wife's needle and holding it over the naked flame of the gas, she burns the needle to steaming hotness. With the hot needle, she burns two points onto her breasts, one on each. The marking is extended to her stomach, and on each thigh. She does the same on her knees and ankles and finally her buttocks. The hotness of the needle does not hurt her like it never did to her while she was still a child. While she performs the act, she cries at the same time and licks her tears:

"This one" she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then other." This one is you, this, me… Here and she was down on her stomach, "is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's and here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don't you see?... "This is my mother", she was saying "This is my mother. Words. And words. And words. But me? These dots. Me, Abigail. (48)

These are ritual-like sequences to break free from her entanglement with her mother and pursue her dreams. Her actions are consequences or her childhood repressed feelings–that desire to be her real self, overshadowed by imposed desires of that of her mother's. Derek's love affair with her is later exposed after his wife discovers them making love in their living room. Abigail stabs her in the struggle that ensued which leads to Derek's wife's death and his imprisonment afterwards. Towards the end of the novel, Abigail sees darkness and follows it, perhaps to no way, just escaping the realities of her destiny as Abigail but we know where darkness usually leads, where the Thanatos usually drives, when *Ate* seduces the depressed soul-Death.

4. CONCLUSION

Freud and Lacan are two important psychologists whose theories are of utmost important to literary criticism and the quest to understand human lives better since literature is all about life. This study deploys Lacan's theory of desire in reading Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail.* From the actions of the characters created in Abani's *Becoming Abigail,* our minds are enlarged to fully appreciate the Lacan's views on desires. The tragedy of the tragic hero is not always from hamartia but have some psychological connections rooted in the desires, the zone of the second death. *Ate*– the perdition or devastation, a zone of the second death, that which is between life and death– a life lived in relation to death is a conscious part of human psychology. An awareness of this leads to general understanding of individual motivations and longings and ignites conversations on these psychological realities and how best to checkmate and mitigate its reoccurring existence.

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