RESEARCH ARTICLE

Parasitism as Sadism: Analysis of Symbiotic Relationship in Paulo Coelho’s The Witch of Portobello

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ABSTRACT

Relationship in general is an undefined phenomena which acts as an ‘only connect’ between two or more living species physically and psychologically creating a mutual bond in them. When human beings relationship is viewed on the basis of the relationship of several other living species in an ecosystem their behavioral characteristics can be compared with human beings relationship with one another. Symbiotic relationship helps in studying the intimation or the relation between two different biological species. In Paulo Coelho’s, “The Witch of Portobello” the protagonist Athena shares a symbiotic relationship with other people utilizing them for her own sake and leaving them in distress. Finally she got herself utilized by some dominant supernatural power and was brutally murdered at last. This paper attempts to trace the relationship of the protagonist with other people by analyzing the eco-critical perspective in the psychological relationship.

Keywords: Ecosystem, Symbiotic relationship, Psychological relationship, Mutual relationship, Species.

“The world was not made for any one species” -Daniel Quinn.

All living species in an ecosystem are inter-connected with each other. Ecological relationship is the study of relationship between several organisms in an ecosystem. Symbiotic relationship is something which can be considered as a special interaction between different species. ‘Symbiosis’ is a Latin word with a Greek origin which means ‘living together’. Heinrich Anton de Bary, a Professor of Botany at Strasbourg, Germany, used this term to describe the relationship between two unlike organisms the fungi and the algae, and studied the formation of lichens as a result of their association. But later the term was invested in various fields of biology with varied significations. In literature, the term was first used by cultural anthropologists to understand the process of “complete interdependence between two social groups or two different caste in primitive societies” (RanaNayar 146).

Erich Fromm, a famous Neo-Freudian used the term ‘Symbiosis’ in analyzing the ‘mother-child’ relationship and thus the term took a new dimension in Psycho-analysis. According to him, “In psychic symbiotic union, the two bodies [mother and child] are independent, but the same kind of attachment exists psychologically” (20). In Paulo Coelho’s, “The Witch of Portobello” the protagonist Athena leads a symbiotic living with her family, as well as with other people she meets. The whole novel centers on Athena’s symbiotic relationship with several people, which shows a ‘Symbiotic Union’ of dependency. Erich From in his book “Escape from Freedom” clearly stated that “Symbiosis, in a psychological sense, means the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its
own self and to make them completely dependent on each other.” (158)

Athena’s biological mother was a gipsy. Her father was a foreigner who abandoned her mother and left her with child. As a result soon after the child’s birth her mother left her child in a nursing home as she was not accepted in her gipsy society. Mr. & Mrs. Khalil a wealthy Lebanese couple had no children for many years and adopted Athena and treated her as their own child. This form of symbiotic relationship where both parties are benefited with each other is called as ‘Mutualism’. The relationship in this case of a child who was abandoned by her birth mother and was adopted by another parent can be purely considered as a mutualistic relationship as both of them were benefited directly or indirectly in one sense. Michael W. Eysenck writes:

Mutualism is like reciprocity in that it involves two animals behaving in altruistic or cooperative ways to each other. The difference is that both animals obtain benefits at the same time with mutualism, but the benefits for one of the animal are delayed in the case of reciprocity. (221)

Athena’s relationship with her adopted parents was also fragile and failure one. Even though they treated her as their own child it did not last long. Once a relative of Khalil seeing the pleasures Athena enjoys from her parents and the rights she takes from them told her that she was an adopted daughter and was not born to them. That created a huge impact in the small girl’s psyche even leading to her isolation from her parents. When her parents took her to consult a psychiatrist, he advised them to reveal the truth behind her birth. But soon after knowing the truth she felt even more dejected and decides at last to lead a life on her own waiting to claim independency from them. Instead of knowing the truth that she would leave them one day they nurtured and protected her till she became a matured adult. This kind of symbiotic relationship she had led with her parents till seeking a complete independency form them can be compared with ‘Phoresy’ in ‘Commensalism’ in which one is benefited and other is neither harmed nor benefited. Luis A Marrero writes:

Commensalism happens when one person benefits and the other is unaffected. This can be observed when a person allows to be, to grow, and to succeed on his or her own terms…. Similar to commensalism in some ways is one added by logoteleology: transcendentalism, or the practice of altruism. Here one person is serving other without expecting anything him return. (19)

Finally at the age of nineteen Athena entered one of the Universities in London to finish her higher studies and slowly distanced herself from her adopted parents. At the college she met Luka’s Jessen Petersen and developed a kind of love affair with him. Fr. Giancarlo Fountana was one of the true friends in Athena’s circle. Every morning after the mass, Athena used to play the guitar and sing her own songs to Virgin Mary. Once Fr. Giancarlo felt a “sense of paradise” (WP 39) in her song, and that spiritual intimacy had developed a fruitful friendship between them. One day soon after the mass Athena informed him that the spiritual energy in her asked her to have a child and further she shared her desire to get married to her college mate Luka’s Jessen Petersen. Jessen’s parents who were against their marriage created a great fuss in the church on the day of their marriage but Jessen stood firm on the side of Athena readily sacrificing his relationship with his parents for the sake of his love for her.

The love life of Jessen and Athena was also a failure which ended with Athena’s adamant wish for a baby. Their love life was shattered soon after the baby’s birth. Even during her pregnancy, she danced and played guitar to calm the baby, to make it feel loved but failed to show any kind of love towards Jessen and kept distancing from him. Athena, who had never experienced the love from her birth mother, showered all her repressed love on her child. She named her child Viorel and was much attached to him rather with her husband Jessen. Jessen was forced into a situation to take care of his family and his job as a trainee with a firm of architects, while Athena was worried only about her child’s growth and never maintained a harmony in her relationship with her husband. Also Athena
often quarreled with him that the child needs a father as Jessen who left the home early morning and comes home only late at night from the job. This misunderstanding all the more creates trouble in their family life. At last it made Jessen conclude, “…if she’d simply wanted a child, she could have done that on her own, without causing me all these problems” (WP 45).

Jessen being a responsible family man tried all extreme possibilities to adapt to the situation of the family but was miserably failed. Athena often accused him and showed dominancy in her behavior towards him. Jessen sadly noted, “…I felt I was losing Athena because of the child. Our arguments became more frequent, and she threatened to leave because she feared that Viorel was picking up the ‘negative energy’ from our quarrels” (WP 46). Biologists call this kind of relationship as Parasitism in Symbiotic Relationship. Parasitism is the relationship between two living things where one is benefited from the other and the later is harmed. G. W. Esch, J.C. Fernandez writes:

The classical definition of parasitism holds that it is an intimate relationship between two organisms in which one lives on, off, at the expense of the other. The clearest implication of this type of lifestyle resides in the last part of the definition because it implies harm to the one of the partner and benefit to the other. (3)

Similarly, in Psychology, Erich Fromm calls this active form of domination as Sadism. According to Roy F. Baumeister “Sadism can be used to describe getting enjoyment or pleasure from hurting others, as well as the desire for that pleasure” (285).

Though Athena does not seem to be completely a Sadist personality, her indifference and cruelty in hurting other’s feelings shows some Sadistic characteristics in her. When Jessen suggests a divorce, she never wanted to ask the reason or she never tried to solve the problem but simply decides on her own and willingly accepted it without showing any signs of true feelings about the separation. This further created a huge trauma in Jessen making him feel guilty on Athena. He thought at last that she married him not because of love for him but only for want of a baby.

My heart was bleeding because I was hoping that she’d ask me, please, to stay. But she seemed calm and resigned, concerned only that the baby might hear our conversation. It was then that I felt sure she had never loved me, and that I had merely been the instrument for the realization of her mad dream to have a baby at nineteen (WP 48).

After her divorce from her husband she joined a bank to earn for her living. She was humiliated there by her manager and was also forbidden to attend the church communion service even Fr. Giancarlo told her strictly that divorced people were forbidden from receiving the sacrament. Mr. & Mrs. Khalil who came to know about Athena’s situation were ready to accept her and undertake her child. But she stood firm on her claim and never wanted to be united with them. She even told them her desire to visit her birth mother. Athena knows very well that her words would hurt her parents but the problem is she can’t resist herself (WP 147). She herself accepts that, “My Parents have always done everything they could for me, and I do nothing, but disappoint them” (WP 147).

Heron Ryan, a journalist helped Athena in finding her birth mother’s place. In spite of having a relationship with Andrea Mc Cain, a famous drama actress Heron loved Athena. But she never encouraged him and always kept him in a distance and hurting him most times. Heron’s love for Athena was more concerned with her baby as he says “…I was always there when she needed me; I was trying to build some kind of relationship with her son, in the belief that he would one day call me ‘Dad’”(WP 306). Andrea was very kind to Viorel and does not show any kind of jealousy over Athena even after knowing Ryan’s love towards her. She too felt after repeated conversation with Athena that Athena plays with “…other people’s feelings in a quite terrifying way” (WP 10). “…she made all those who loved her suffer. Including me” (WP 12).

Athena received spiritual powers of prophesying from St. Sarah, the goddess of
Gypsies. Her popularity among people gained her a title as ‘The Witch of Portobello’. The title is very significant as it lay as one of the valid point in proving Athena’s parasitic relationship. A witch is supposedly a woman enhancing evil magical powers. The evil spirit or the supernatural thing which lives in them can be considered as another living species in a biological sense and as multiple personality in a psychological sense. Similarly the relationship Athena shares with the supernatural thing is a parasitic relationship. But at last she ended her life in death. It is important to analyze the case of Athena to further study the symbiotic relationship she had had with the supernatural power. In a biological sense it is called as ‘necrotrophs’ or ‘Parasitoids’ which is an uncommon parasitic relationship where one dies at last.

Thus the relationship which Athena shared with others was arbitrarily a parasitic relationship that sucks the host and leaves them at a disadvantage. In her case like a parasite she established her dominance over others but at last was been trapped. Though she pretends to be independent, she was always dependent like a parasite, longing for others support and at the end harming them in many ways and similarly got harmed. Therefore, Athena’s ‘Symbiotic life’ clearly shows signs of Sadism in the Psychological sense and signs of Parasitism in the eco-critical perspective.
References


