

The Process of Abjection in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*

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Abstract—The present study will try to point out the major character's struggles in Murdoch's *The Black Prince* in accepting and establishing their differences or escaping from them, fitting into the two conventional categories of male/female, thus being labeled as "normal" subjects. The notion of gender difference in the novel is to be examined based on Julia Kristeva's theories on "subjectivity", "melancholia", and the "abject".

KeyWords: *Abject, melancholia, subjectivity, self, other, Kristeva, Murdoch*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mansfield suggests that "this distinction between biological sex and cultural gender rejects theories—even feminist ones that fall back into biological difference between the male and female bodies as an explanation for the different behaviours of men and women" [1]. Thus, gender studies aims at working not only on the biological realms, but also on the cultural ideological factors that affect an individual in defining their identities. Throughout history, societies, or better to say systems have done their best in order to define male/female through their institutions, rules and boundaries in order to keep the individual's behavior in check. These institutions have varied from religious ones to scientific ones; both of which try to generalize by the help of unchanging essential rules and conventions.

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In the recent decades however, critics and cultural theorists tend to speak of "femininities and masculinities" [2] since instead of two distinct poles as female/male or feminine/masculine one could think of many possible

variations of each as if one is talking about a changing continuum when talking of one's gender. Moreover, many contemporary writers have attempted to show such varieties through their writings in that they tend to show the ordinary people's lives and identity formations once they are faced with the social conventions.

In many of her works, Iris Murdoch has tried to portray the characters' struggles in finding their true identities through defining their gender roles. These roles which are constantly defined by the ISAs tend to prescribe some characteristics for each sex, categorizing them as variations of normality as female or male, and consequently leaving out the ones who cannot be categorized in neither.

This study will try to point out the major character's struggles in Murdoch's *The Black Prince* in accepting and establishing their differences or escaping from them, fitting into the two conventional categories of male/female, thus being labeled as "normal". In pointing out these issues, the theories of Kristeva on subjectivity, melancholia, and the abject are to be applied on the notion of Gender difference.

II. THE ABJECT

McAfee defines the abject as when "the subject finds [something] both repellant and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained" [3]. So that the subject is both drawn to it and at the same time is scared of its very presence. Also as:

What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self. The abject is what does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject. [4]

Kristeva believes that the starting point of melancholia should be sought out in the relationship of the child with his mother, and she believes such a separation might cause melancholia in adulthood: "The "subject" discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body. It hates that body but only because it can't be free of it. That body, the body without border, the body out of which this abject subject came, is impossible". [3] So that in McAfee's words, "The first thing to be abjected is the mother's body...in order to become a subject, the child must renounce its identification with its mother; it must draw a line between itself and her. But it is so difficult to identify her borders". [3]

However, this is not a phase to pass, as McAfee notes, "It remains on the periphery of consciousness, a looming presence, as we've seen is the case with filth and death. So,

too, with the mother. In fact this fear of falling back into the mother's body, metaphorically at least, of losing one's own identity..." [3]. Thus, Bradley Pearson, the first person narrator of the novel, who is a writer himself, mainly abjects women and their bodies, behavior, and their very presence, and thinks of his mother as both a threat, shame, something unwanted, and at the same time a desired wanted object; for instance this is clear when he compares women to "ships". "Ships are compartmental and hollow, ships are like women. The Steel vibrated and sang, sang of the predatory women, Christian, Marigold, my mother: the destroyers" [4]. In another remark, he comments on this dual image of his mother and the other women in his life:

My mother was really important to me. I loved her, but always with a kind of anguish...I felt for my misguided mother pain and shame which did not diminish but qualified my love. I was mortally afraid of anyone seeing her as absurd or pathetic, a defeated snob. And later still, after her death, I transferred many of these feelings to Priscilla. [4]

This way, Bradley's inability to communicate is reinforced once he has to deal with women in his life. Kristeva believes that "This state is a constant companion of consciousness, a longing to fall back into the maternal chora as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity". [3]. So that Bradley constantly tries to assert his masculine subjectivity by abjecting any "non-masculine" thing. As Becker-Leckrone observes, "Pre-symbolic, abjection yet persists and returns in flashes, at places of strain or moments of crisis within the symbolic system. [5] This is quite clear once he starts to tell the readers about his ex-wife, and the way he thinks about "women" in general, a kind of dual feeling, love and hatred, as an abject:

I shall not attempt here to describe my marriage... (Christian) at first I saw her as a life-bringer. Then I saw her as a death bringer. Some women are like that. There is a sort of energy which seems to reveal the world: then one day you find you are being devoured...five years of marriage seemed to have convinced both of us of the utter impossibility of this state...there is nothing quite like the dead dull feel of a failed marriage. Nor is there anything like one's hatred for an ex-spouse. (How can such a person dare to be happy?) I cannot credit those who speak of friendship in such a context. [4]

The first instance where he shows similar attitudes towards women in the novel is when he is confronted with Arnold Baffin's wife, Rachel. Arnold calls him up at the beginning of the novel and asks him to go over to their house where Bradley finds out a fierce fight had been going on between the couple.

'Rachel, please control yourself. Drink some water.' The sound of that abandoned weeping was scarcely bearable, and something far too intense to be called embarrassment, yet of that quality, made me both reluctant and anxious to look at her. A woman's crying can sicken one with fright and guilt, and this was terrible crying. [4]

In these lines where Bradley is faced with the shocked hurt Rachel, who has locked herself in, in the aftermath of the fight with Arnold. It is apparent that Bradley is disgusted and made uncomfortable by the sight of Rachel's crying, since tears could be considered as an abject. In the process of

abjection especially when it comes to dealing with women could be explained in establishing his borderlines as an individual and as a male. These images act in a way as his "safeguards". [5] As Kristeva argues, "abjection draws the subject to the limits of its own defining boundaries" [5].

In another instance, Rachel accuses Bradley of such feeling, and tends to categorize him as a "male" who wants to distance himself from female in being "disgusted" by them. The fact that Rachel herself talks about the issue suggests her acceptance in this way:

All men despise women really. All women fear all men really. Men are physically stronger...of course they're bullies, they can end any argument. Ask any poor woman in the slums, she knows...and now you'll go downstairs and talk about me vilely to him. I know how men talk.'... I fill you with disgust. A broken whimpering middle-aged woman. [4]

He describes women as "broken whimpering middle-aged woman". Bradley assures the readers that what she believes is actually true, thus he proves the narrative to be true: "...I went down the stairs feeling very shaken and, yes, she had been right, disgusted-" [4]. Also, Rachel emphasizes this point later on, once Bradley has talked to Arnold about her:

-you talked to him about me.
-of course I did!
-They agreed that women were hell.
-Well, women *are* hell.
-is he unhappy?
-yes [4]

Later on, Bradley generalizes women in that at a certain age they tend to be "hysterical". By this label, he is trying to separate himself from the "female community" and the "hysterics". Put it another way, he is establishing himself as sane by rejecting any resemblance to the group:

At the age she's reached women always become a little bit odd. It passes I imagine. I suppose they sort of review their lives. There must be a sense of loss, a feeling of the final parting with youth. A tendency to be hysterical isn't too uncommon, I suppose. [4]

In addition, once he confronts his ex-wife Christian, whom he constantly avoids, he is filled with the same kind of disgust; however, he is simultaneously attracted to her, "A woman's face changes in tenderness. It may become scarcely recognizable. Christian en tendresse looked older, more animal-like and absurd, her features all squashed up and rubbery". [4] He tends to see her as having an animal-like quality that distinguishes her from "men", also from himself. He goes on to tell her once and for all, how he feels towards her: "... I know you're sort of scared. I just happen to detest you. You are the sort of insinuating power-mongering woman that I detest. I cannot forgive you and I do not want to see you". [4]

As Becker-Leckrone notes, "as abjection, this violence signals a dynamic that shapes the subject not just in the beginning, but always". [5] In another part, when Bradley meets with his sister, Priscilla in a severely depressed manner, reminded of Rachel's breakdown, he has the same reaction:

She was sobbing again, not touching her face, letting the tears flow down. She looked so pitiful and ugly...the scene in the dim light, reminded me of Rachel...I felt very shaken. I cannot stand unbridled displays of emotion and women's stupid tears...I felt fear and disgust at the idea of 'mental breakdown', the semi-deliberate refusal to go on organizing one's life which is regarded with such tolerance in these days.[4]

The idea of a mental breakdown is something that he tries to abject for his fear of having one, so that he tries to categorize women as "hysterics" and the ones who might have a breakdown whereas he as a man can stay away from such threats. Furthermore, he sees her as "savage" and "nonhuman" while she is experiencing a breakdown. Even the disordered hair color of her hair disgusts him and makes him utterly sick since as a human being like her, he unconsciously knows that he could be in her place:

She jumped up, savagely pulled the blankets back, then crashed on the bed. She pulled the clothes violently over her, hiding her head...only a little of her hair was visible, with a dirty line of grey at the roots of the gold. Her hair was dry and brittle, more like some synthetic fibre than like human hair. I felt disgust and helpless pity and a prowling desire to vomit. I sat for a time patting her with the awkward ineffectual gesture of a small child trying to pat an animal. [4]

In another part of the novel, he notices her "unwashed" face, and is frightened by, "Two hard deep lines ran down on either side of her blubbing mouth. Beyond the runnels of the tears the dry yellow make-up revealed the enlarged pores of her skin. She had not washed since her arrival" [4].

Furthermore, Bradley who tries to mark his masculinity denies any homosexual desires, and by rejecting Marlowe, the homosexual in the novel, reinforces his threatened identity. For instance, when he is faced with Marlowe's suggestion that he might be unconsciously in love with Arnold he strongly rejects the idea:

'You mean I'm in love with [Arnold Baffin]? What perfectly obscene nonsense!

'And he's in love with you. Why has he taken up with Christian, why have you taken up with Rachel?'

'I haven't-'

'Just to make the other one jealous. You're both unconsciously trying to bring about a new phase in your relationship... [4].

As an alternative voice throughout the novel, Marlow advises him into accepting who he is and what he desires instead of denying them in order to establish his identity as a "normal" man who is supposed to be heterosexual based on the hegemony and "non-neurotic", "sane" one. As McAfee explains, "The melancholic needs to do in order to triumph over his sadness". [4] He needs to complete his separation from the enigmatic Thing and begin to identify with the image of the logic of identification, the imaginary father.

'One must accept one's body, one must learn to relax. Your thing about smells is a guilt complex because of your repressed tendencies, you won't accept your body, it's a well-known neurosis-

'I am not a neurotic!' [4]

In regarding women, their love, bodies, and his relationship with them as abject, in order to marking his masculine subjectivity, he is quite unconsciously affirming his desire for men instead. As Mansfield notes, "as Kristeva says, no absolute distinction between subject and object results. The subject is merely the hypothetical inside of an imagined container whose walls are permeable. The subject tries to stabilize itself as the inside, yet supposedly unconscious materials are forever pressing in on it". [1] What confirms the validity of this claim is that the only time he experiences true love is when he falls for Julian, the young daughter of Arnold. The point is that he has practically raised this girl from her infancy, and his love for her has been always a fatherly love, and the moment he experiences the true ecstasy is when he happens to see Julian in the street, not recognizing her, and thinking it is a young boy:

He was standing upon the kerb and strewing flowers upon the roadway, as if casting them into a river...I now saw that what he was strewing was not so much flowers as white petals...I had paused and had been watching him for some moments and was about to set off again when...I realized that the light had deceived me and that this was in fact no young man but a girl...it was Julian Baffin. [4]

This echoes the point about abjection that expresses a drive to separate me from a not me which the "I" cannot bear to assimilate, and yet from which it cannot cleanly part. [5]

On the other hand, Bradley's sister, Priscilla, can be said to be suffering from a kind of melancholia which is different from that of her brother's, Bradley's. She is suffering from the type which "Is a mourning for something lost...the subject feels both love and hate toward this object, love because he cannot do without it and hate because he has been undermined by its loss" [3]. Her first and major loss was when she and her brother did not receive the motherly affection in their childhood as Bradley remembers her constant fight and disapproval of his father. Right now, Priscilla's loss is that of her husband's love. As discovered by Bradley's visits to their house, Priscilla's husband, Roger has been with a much younger woman, Marigold, for a long time, engaged and expecting a baby, something that Priscilla has not been able to offer to him.

In Kristeva's words, "With the process of abjection—primary love is lost before it can be expelled-- the child can never properly make the break between subject and object". [3] Priscilla's subjectivity as a childless woman is defined by the love and presence of her husband. So that after partly recovering from her breakdown, she starts to miss him, and feels sorry for abandoning him, blaming herself as an inadequate wife:

'It's no good. I should never have left him. It isn't fair to him. And I think away from him I'm literally going mad. All chances of happiness are gone from me. Just being with myself is hell all the time anyway...even hating Roger was something, it meant something, being made unhappy by him did, after all he belongs to me. And I was used to things there, there was something to do, shopping and cooking and cleaning the house, even though he didn't come home for his supper...still it was part of something...I'm connected with

him forever, it's for better and worse, but any time is something when one's drifting away to hell. [4]

This way, by mentioning the dull house chores that not long ago made her unhappy, and hurt, and the way Roger used to treat her, she is looking for her blurred subjectivity since she has left him. To be "part of something", and "being made unhappy" are things she is seeking back in order to feel like a "female" subject.

She is not able to feel whole this way, since her subjectivity is threatened by the absence of her husband, and his love for her, so that her mere existence has lost its meaning:

I'm awful, awful, I can't think how anyone can bear to look at me...I hate Roger and the last year or two I've been afraid of him. But if I don't go back to him I'll just dissolve, all my inwards will come pouring out, like people who are just going to be hanged.. [4]

This way Roger is an abject to her, by whose love and fear, she would be able to affirm her subjectivity as a woman; the one thing that she constantly needs to push away and at the same time needs having it in order to feel whole. Throughout the course of the story, she attempts suicide twice, and she succeeds the second time. As Kristeva explains, "suicide is not a disguised act of war but a merging with sadness and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never reached, always elsewhere, such as the promises of nothingness, of death" [3].

Moreover, Bradley is the one to reassure her of losing what it takes to have her being, her subjectivity:

You're in a thoroughly nervous silly state. Women of your age often are. You're simply not rational, Priscilla. I daresay Roger has been tiresome, he's a very selfish man, but you'll just have to forgive him. Women just have to put up with selfish men, it's their lot. You can't leave him, there isn't anywhere else for you to go. [4]

By suggesting her return to Roger, and accepting her insignificant role in his life, Bradley tries to persuade her that it is only through these actions that she could be able to feel like a "woman of [her] age", so that the possibility of leaving her husband is denied since there is nowhere else for a woman like her to go; having no other cards to play, she would not feel her wholeness as a female subject.

III. CONCLUSION

Kristeva notes that "if abjection is a signified, then its signifier is literature". So that literature at the same time could act as an abject for the subject. In this novel, the two characters, Bradley and Priscilla obviously suffer from forms of melancholia as defined by Kristeva. However, they tend to deal with their melancholic moods, their gender issues, and their individual mindsets as subjects differently.

Bradley Pearson, being an artist, is a "creative melancholic", in Kristeva's words, that is by the help of literature, and through writing, he tends to overcome his issues. At the end of the novel, the readers learn that throughout his narration, he has been in prison with the charge of murder. However, it is through his love for Julian and his art that he can resolve his issues even when he is

wrongly accused of murder of his close friend, Arnold Baffin, and end up in peace.

Priscilla, on the other hand, chooses suicide in order to put an end to her miseries. By committing suicide, not only she leaves the issues unresolved as a female subject, but also she silences the subject's voice, that of the female. Roger, who can be at times taken as her abject, confirms this claim since without him, she, as an individual subject cannot go on living. This also has an alternative effect which is caused by the text itself. The female subject that was presented as an abject throughout the story, in particular by Bradley, cannot rise above it.

Despite the characters' struggles, and the polyphonic nature of the narrative, the text as a whole denies the females characters their sense of wholeness as a subject, both in their views of themselves, and those of the male characters'. For instance whereas Bradley is able to assert himself as an individual subject by abjection of women and the "feminine" qualities, Priscilla cannot do the same since as a female subject, her subjectivity needs to be defined, and validated by the presence of a male subject in a male-centered society. In not being able to do that, she chooses death over life in order to stop her never ending struggle to assert her subjectivity as a "female".

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