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**JACQUES LACAN'S NOTION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE REAL***Prof. Dr. Munthir M. Habib, Department of English, College of Arts, Zarqa University, Jordan***Abstract:**

*Psychoanalytical criticism has taken its birth in Sigmund Freud's writings. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is considered as a masterpiece in psychological criticism. According to him human mind can be understood with reference to his dreams or neurotic symptoms. He coined the term 'unconscious' to shed light on unfulfilled desires, memories, feelings and instinctual drives. However, Jacques Lacan improves the notion of Freud's unconscious. Lacan reworks and restudied Freud's 'unconscious' and relates it with the social order and language. As a result new criticism has taken birth with Lacan's arrival on literary horizon called as Psychoanalytical criticism. Lacan is less concerned with the relation between the ego and the desires and concentrates on the relation between the child and its objects. It is the mother who shapes child's personality during pre-Oedipal period. The child's attempt to separate from the identity given by mother and form its own identity in relation to external objects is at the centre of psychoanalytical criticism. It is language that gives identity to subject. Lacan shifts his attention to language and sees it and the unconscious as almost identical.*

*Though Psychoanalytical criticism is relatively new phenomenon, its seeds have been seen in the writings of Aristotle, critics and philosophers who attempted to discover the effect of texts on readers. Freud, Carl Jung, Adler and Jacques Lacan are considered as the pivotal figures in shaping and moulding the psychoanalytical criticism. Freud's notion of unconscious in understanding and interpreting a piece of literature opens up a new concern in literature known as psychology of literature. Unconscious forces are responsible for the human thought and action as represented in literature. The repressed thoughts, feelings, memories and urges are responsible for the strange behaviour of human being. Freud's notion of unconscious opens new horizon to study literature. Jacques Lacan improves upon Freud's concept of personality including unconscious and proposes his own theory of the Real and the unconscious. The linguistics and structuralism of Ferdinand Saussure have exercised influence on Lacan in conceiving his concept of unconscious. The present research paper attempts to study Lacan's theory of the 'unconscious' and the 'Real'.*

**Key Words:** *Unconscious, Real, psychoanalytical, Mirror stage, Symbolic order, imaginary.*

Jacques Lacan is well known for his theory of the Real, one among other three registers of the human experience: other two include the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Lacan has provided a strong theoretical basis for creative psychoanalytical practice through his reading of Freud and his works. The present research paper is a modest attempt to provide comprehensive reading of Lacan's work in order to construct his concept of the Real. The concept of the Real occupies central position in Lacan's criticism. Lacan's latter works give his notion of the Real than his early works of 1950s. M. de Kesel writes in this connection:

Of course, there is a difference between Lacan of the fifties, when it was all about the signifier, and the Lacan of the sixties and seventies where one sees a continually renewed emphasis on the Real (88).

Lacan's presentation of the real and the unconscious in his seminars and essays is difficult to understand due to obscure quasi-teasing style of presentation rather than plain. He used number of puns and images discriminately in his essays to make his point effective. Malcolm Bowie writes regarding difficulty in

understanding Lacan's psychoanalysis:

... his (Lacan's) aims in writing like this are clear: to allow the energies of the unconscious to become palpable in the wayward rhythm of his sentences to discourage the reader from building premature theoretical constructions upon the text and to compel him to collaborate fully in the inventive work of language (Bowie 1987 p. 105).

### **Methodology**

The close textual reading of Lacan's works is employed during the research. Since the main focus of article is to trace the concept of the real in Lacan's works, comparison with earlier psychologist has been avoided in the research. The present research paper aims to allow singular element of Lacan's theoretical practice to merge. The real is at the centre of Lacan's psychoanalysis. As a result, critical reading of Lacan's works helps us to understand his reconstruction of the 'Real' and the 'Unconscious'. Lacan's concept of the real and unconscious is distinguished from any other broader concept of reality. According to Lacan, 'reality' is generated and constructed using the registers of the imaginary and the symbolic.

### **Review of Literature:**

Critics and academicians have offered critical reading of Lacan and restored Lacan as an object of philosophical and theoretical study. J. Butler in his "Bodies that Matter on the Discursive Limits of Sex" has brought out Lacan's sexiest approach in his study of Freud and highlighted the persistence of phallus as a privileged signifier of identity. J. A. Miller has provided a formalistic reading of Lacan in his essay "Jacques Lacan" in *Psychoanalytical notebooks of the London Circle* 8, 2002. It is Miller who has pointed out Lacan's 'turn towards the real' in his seminar of the nineteen seventies. Alenka Jupancic has highlighted Lacan's ontological criticism that has some implications on the question of sexuality and gender in particular. Charles Shepherdson and Joan Copjec have seen Jacques Lacan as a thinker who offered resistance in dualities of nature and culture, the signifier and the body. In France, Guy le Gaufet has studied Lacan's mathematical formulation seriously and provided a virtuous reading of the concept of sexuation. Another critic, Lorenzo Chiesa wrote a book on Lacan - *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (2007) and pointed out how there has been a decisive break in Lacan's development of the 'Real'. Chiesa's book offers in detail the relation between different phases of Lacan's views on the signifier and the Real. According to him, Lacan's notion of the 'Real' is interlaced with language. In short, critics and scholars have studied Lacan and pointed out his notion of the Unconscious and the Real. However, the present paper is quite unique in its study of notion of 'Consciousness' and the 'Real' as revealed in Lacan's essays ranging from 1950s to 1970s.

### **The Unconscious and the Real:**

Jacques Lacan has developed his theory of structuralism based on Ferdinand De Saussure and linguistics Levi-Strauss. Like Derrida, Lacan has presented his thoughts in the form of paper in International Conference held at John Hopkins University in 1966. His book *Ecrits* (1966) is a large collection of his seminar talks, essays which were translated into English in 1977. In the seminar talk and essays, Lacan has proposed three orders of human mental disposition: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The present research paper traces the influence of Freud, Ferdinand De Saussure's structuralism and Levi-Strauss's linguistic criticism in forming Lacan's notion of personality and its relation to language.

Jacques Lacan has been influenced by the psychoanalysis of Freud and linguistic criticism of Saussure. Freud's notion of conscious has been the major concern of Lacan. At the same time Saussure's linguistic concept of speech and writing found its place in Lacan's notion of unconscious. Saussure has given importance to writing over speech. This prevalence of writing over speech makes Lacan to rethink and reconstruct the notion of Freud's conscious as composed of fragmented and irrelevant events and merely seat of the instincts. Lacan improves this notion and proposed his theory of unconscious. His essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Conscious" details his notion of conscious as complex process and

language is complex unit of conscious.

Jacques Lacan begins his essay with the definition of letter as “the material medium (support) that concrete discourse borrows from the language. Here letter means the complex structure of language and not the meaning associated with language. According to Lacan, language with its complex structure exists prior to speech. Lacan recollects Saussure's notion of signifier and signified. He gives more importance of “signifier over signified”, 'over' corresponding to the bar separating at two levels (Lacan, S 415). Lacan coins the term return to Freud that means a return and restudy Freud's emphasis on the narcissistic ego in contrast to contemporary practice of psychoanalysis based on the realist ego. Lacan has confronted the issue of two unresolved views of psychic entity: the realist ego and the narcissistic ego. The earlier works like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Ego and the Id* (1923), and *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938) give information about the realist view where Freud considers ego as in innate, mediating agency between the Id and reality. The working of Ego is here dominated by the principal of reality. Lacan reconsiders Freud's idea of ego as something influenced by the external social structures like the family and society. According to him, ego is not a reliable agency between the Id and reality. Such ego is doomed to failure because ego hides fragmented states of the body. Lacan offers his own notion of ego as formed in human subjects and attacks Ernst Kris, Erik Erikson and Heinz Hartmann for their practice of the ego psychology. His notion of unconscious is best explained in his paper on the 'The Mirror Stage' presented in 1936 to the 14<sup>th</sup> International Psychoanalytical Congress. The paper was later published under the title 'The Looking Glass-Phase' in 1937. The same essay was revised in later version entitled “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”.

According to Lacan, the central concern of Freud's psychology is the 'real' and the 'unconscious'. Lacan's essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as I Revealed” in psychoanalytical experience (Lacan, *Ecrits*, 75-82) delineates subtly Lacan's notion of the Real, the Mirror stage and the Imaginary. Lacan has given detailed information about the formation of ego which in turn defines the contours of the self and that which comes to threaten and appreciate it. This double turn of ego forms the basis of the Real. Lacan proposes three registers of human experience: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. All these three registers are interlinked and interconnected. Lacan's concept of the real is defined in relation to his concept of imaginary and symbolic. According to Lacan, the real is the “point at which words cease” (S2, 164). This definition reminds Kantian concept of 'noumena', especially associated with the outside of temporal and spatial called as in Lacan's words symbolic reality: “We arrived at a picture of the real as that which is - minus its representation, description, or interpretation” (E. Ragland, 188).

Jacques Lacan insists on difference between his conception of reality and that of the Real. According to him, imaginary and symbolic elements construct the reality whereas the Real is out of reach of the ambit of human perception and experiences. Lacan does not situate the Real outside the Imaginary and the Symbolic axis, rather it is something that intervenes and interferes at the border. This description of the Real is best illustrated in Lacan's lecture entitled “the Symbolic, the Imagery and the Real” later published as an essay in 1953. In this essay, Lacan has associated and linked the registers of human experience with the psychoanalytical clinic. During his discussion on Freud's 'pleasure principle' in relation to neurosis, Lacan sees the reflection of the imaginary and the symbolic in a neurotic subject's illusions or hallucinated reality. He distinguishes this reality with subject's “satisfactions whose objects are in the Real, plain and simple” (Scott Saviano, 3). The need of the human being is satisfied through biological act. This is called as the Real. Lacan links the Real to biological impulse or instinct. This biological instinct is always mediated by the Symbolic though separable from mediated instances of symbolic desire. Thus, the relation between the Real and the Symbolic is ambiguous and complex one. This kind of the Real departs from its prior, purely biological meaning. Thus, the Real for Lacan is not just a biological act but an expression of analysis central to the analytical process: “There is, in analysis, an entire

part of the Real of the subject that precisely does escape us" (Ibid. 2). Lacan sees the Real as central in his vision of analysis. However, this vision of analysis reveals the obscure and opaque limits of analysis. The multiple definitions of the Real are seen in Lacan's notion of the Real. The relation of the subject to the real is at the centre of Lacan's discussion of psychoanalysis as a practice of knowledge.

Lacan's theory of unconscious and language is the major concern of his paper entitled "The Agency/Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious since Freud" (1957). Lacan urges to rethink the notion that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts" (*The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud*, 190). According to Lacan, language should not be confused with the "various psychical and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject- because language its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain in his mental development makes his entry into it" (Ibid. 190). He connects unconscious with the language and writes that beyond the speech "what the Psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language" (Ibid. 190). The subject appears to be the slave of language and the unconscious cannot survive without the language. It is language that distinguishes human sciences from the natural sciences. Lacan alters Saussure's theory of signifier and signified and maintains that signifier does not have the capacity to convey meaning. It is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable" (Ibid. 194). The signified slides from the signifier; no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification. Language cannot cover the whole field of the signified. The signifier suggests only an illusion of the signified. If the signifier yields meaning, it is in relation to the object and not thing. As a result the relation between the signifier and signified is not one of parallelism. Lacan gives an example of two identical doors of toilets in train. "Ladies" and "Gentlemen" were inscribed over these two doors. Though the function of these two doors are the same, the signifier "ladies" does not merely point to a signified that somehow is already there, outside of it; here "signifier enters the signified, namely, in a form which, not being immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality" (Ibid. 192). Each signified is the same country traversed from different points of view; the different point of view creates a difference in the signified. Meaning is seen at the particular point of time and place. None of the elements in itself consists of meaning. Meaning is always postponed, paused, stands upon another element. Meaning is not stable. Lacan calls this chain of signifiers as "rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings" (Ibid. 193).

Lacan proceeds to elaborate his notion of the Real in his lecture at 14th International psychoanalytical Congress at Marianbad held in 1936. He gives account of the 'Mirror Stage' as one of the most important stage in the development of child. A Lacan view on 'mirror stage' is the most influential contribution to psychoanalysis since Freud. Lacan has offered details of child psychoanalysis and ego formation and consolidation in this essay. Henry Wallon's (a French psychologist) experiments inspire Lacan to form his theory of the ego formation. The various stages in the development of child is the basis of Wallon's experiments. Lacan identifies three stages in the development of child: Pre-Oedipal stage, the Symbolic stage and the Real. The child of 1 - 6 months old identifies itself with the mother. The child is unable to distinguish itself from its mother and other objects in the world. This stage is called as the Imaginary or pre-Oedipal stage where the child cannot recognize any line between itself and the rest of the world. The child does not know itself as a complete and coherent entity or self. This stage is "one of unity (between the child and its surroundings), as well as of immediate possession (of the mother and objects), a condition of reassuring plenitude, a world consisting wholly of images (hence the "imaginary") that is not fragmented or mediated by differences, by categories, in a word, by language and sign" (Ibid. 91). Lacan writes about the first stage in child's development:

The body here appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically



represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions that visionary Hieronymus Bosch fixed for all time in paintings (Lacan 2006, 78).

The second stage in the development of child consists of the "Mirror Stage" into (6 to 18 months old) where the child can see and recognize itself in the mirror. This stage marks the point where the imaginary stage in child development breaks down and pushes child to the symbolic order, a world of predefined social roles and gender differences. It is also a world of subjects and objects, the world of language. For Lacan the child substitutes mother and the rest of the world with the language. This presence and absence of mother in the life of child also seen in the comment made by Grosz:

Lacan interprets this as the child's attempt to control the mother's presence and absence through language, substituting a linguistic relation, which it may control, for the mother's presences and absences which it does not control (p. 60).

Thus, Freud's notion of unconscious as the repressed desire of the child is improved and opened a new dimension of consciousness by Lacan. Conscious is not a place but a relation to the social world of law and morality and religion and conscience. The child passes through the Imaginary order to the Symbolic order and longs for wholeness and distinguishes itself from the mother and the entities of the world. Lacan explains further that child's desires and longings pass in an unceasing movement along an infinite chain of signifiers, in search of meaning in an ever elusive signified. The child's longing for the signification of world through various signifiers makes Lacan post-modern psychoanalytic critic. The child lives in a world of alienation, his actions are highly mediated and controlled by social rules and structures and language is only medium of social structures. The child attempts to make sound to understand how itself is different from the rest of the world. Here, the child uses sound to differentiate itself. The child's creation of sound is symbolic of use of language and enters in the third phase called the 'Real'. Lacan speaks of the Real but not given clear definition of the 'Real'. According to Lacan what lies beyond the world of signification is called the Real. For him, the real is impossible, it occurs beyond the entire framework of signification. The Real is the absence of its own image, it points to itself as mere signifier. For him, the unconscious is structured like a language. The real and the Unconscious defer their meaning. There is no subject in unconscious, no axis, no centre and this unconscious is always created in child's encounter with the other. The three stages in child's development are interconnected and interrelated to each other. Lacan vacillates between the imaginary and the symbolic aspects suggestive of constituted object of the unconscious. Lacan also vacillates between the aspects of the Real that suggest at the perpetual reconstitution of the unconscious. Lacan writes: "My position in the imaginary [...] is only considerable insofar as one finds a guide beyond the imaginary, on the level of symbolic plane" (S1 p. 141). This symbol plane is represented in the Mirror Stage as developed by Lacan which diverts and curves the 'real reflection' for the gazes of the subject.

Lacan proceeds to relate to unconscious to the structure of language. Drawing upon Saussure and Levi-Strauss, Lacan sees language as a multidimensional. Like language, Unconscious has dynamic structure. However, structuralists' emphasis on complex totalities is not found in Lacan's philosophy of language. Lacan emphasizes limitless semiotic freeplay of language as seen in poststructuralist. At the same time, Lacan manages partially to avoid theorizing language as an internal complex. According to him, signifier can be understood as something beyond any signifiatory function. The signifier is not confined to any meaning or signified. The meaning is, though, covered and hides behind signifier, it always slips and moves away when attempt is made to find. Lacan uses two terms in order to explain his theory of language - signifier-in-relation and the signifier-in-isolation:

Now the structure of the signifier is, as is commonly said of language, that it is articulated. This means that its units - no matter where one begins in tracing out their reciprocal encroachment and expanding inclusions - are subject to the twofold condition of being

reduced to ultimate differential elements and of combining the latter according to the laws of a closed order" (Lacan *Ecrits*, 418).

Thus, here signifier-in-isolation refers to the ultimate differential elements whereas signifier-in-relation refers to other signifiers that make meaning possible. Signifier-in-isolation refers to signifier as the Real, isolated in its material element away from the network of relation that makes it to yield meaning. To Lacan "signifier represents the subject for another signifier" (S11 207). Signifier, for Lacan is the stubborn avatar of the Real disrupts meaning even as it is its very condition. Thus, Lacan rejects structuralist notion of the language in favour of Post-structuralist and proposed his own theory of language and unconscious. The signifier yielding meaning is not a symptom of the metaphysics of presence, but a symptom of absence of the possibility of such a presence; it is only, finally, by risking itself on the back of the signifier's materiality, its Real existence, that a transitory and temporal structure of meaning may arise.

The materiality of the signifier, nonetheless, threatens and ultimately dethrones any putative transcendental of the signifying function, considered apart from what Lacan calls here the Imaginary and temporary consolidation of meaning (Tom Eyers 74).

To conclude, Jacques Lacan through his various lectures in various seminars that later published in book form laid ground for the analysis based on three orders in human development. His notion of the Real with the resulting subordination of the Imaginary and the Symbolic plays a significant role in understanding post-modern psychoanalytical theory.

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