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PSYCHOLOGICAL DELUSION AND LOSS OF THE HOLD OF REALITY IN ELIZABETH  
BOWEN'S STORY "THE DEMON LOVER"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of delusion found in Elizabeth Bowen's short story "The Demon Lover." Some critics read this story as a war time horror story but, a close examination reveals that it is much more than that. My argument in this article is that this story presents the psychological disorder mainly erotomanic delusion that Mrs. Drover, the protagonist, suffers from. The reason of this disorder discovered is the repressed bitter experiences of the past. The effect of this is that she is unable to differentiate between reality and illusion, between past and present. To support my claim, I have borrowed the insights of Sigmund Freud and erotomanic delusion as described in DSM IV, and have come to the conclusion that war does not only destroy the world of outer reality but also ruins the psychic world of those who have directly faced it.

Key words: Bowen, the unconscious, psychological disorder, erotomanic delusion, reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973), an Anglo-Irish novelist and short story writer, is a renowned name in the literary history of the twentieth century. Her works basically deal with general human problems, particularly the problems of upper middle class. Her craftsmanship in drawing the characters and weaving the plot, her minute observation of the situation and her microscopic descriptions draw the attention of the reader. Her stories collected in *The Demon Lover* published in 1945 were written in war time London between 1941 and 1944. Like many other stories, one of her powerful short stories "The Demon Lover" has drawn the attention of the readers basically to its thematic problem. The study of Chiho Nakgawa for example shows that Bowen's "The Demon Lover" and Shirley Jackson's story of the same name depict the psychological problem called paranoia seen in the female characters. In Edward Mitchell's words, most of Bowen's short stories are concerned with the presentation of an antithesis between external fact and internal reality. In the examination of Amano Natsumi hallucination is the central psychological problem in Bowen's stories. Another critic of Bowen Elke D'hoker has a different view to offer when he analyses Bowen's stories. His study presents the role of the images of house and home that celebrate the domestic in interwar Britain. Although there are many war references in the story, Douglas A. Hughes rejects it to be a war story but a psychic problem on the part of Mrs. Kathleen Drover, the protagonist of the story. Hughes also finds it to be the story of psychological disorder created by war experience.

Certainly there is something of paranoia, something of hallucination and something of war and horror. On the manifest level the story seems to be the story of the aftermath of war and of how common human being has to face the problem of dislocation. It also has some elements of horror and hallucination. On the other hand, Mrs. Drover seems to be a paranoid character. However, these observations are only parts of the problem. The major problem in the story is purely a psychological delusion which I attempt to explore in this article. Mrs. Drover is entangled with the images she sees but the problem lies in the chaotic world of her own unconscious. Actually this story is not the story of objective world but that of Mrs. Drover's mind. When I go deeper at the latent level, I find this story to be a projection of Mrs. Drover's suffering of erotomanic delusion, one of the delusion types categorized by DSM IV. Using the legendary theme of the return of the dead, Bowen in this story, has retold the story of legendary demon lover who returns from dead to reclaim his beloved. In this case the soldier fiancé has returned, at least in Mrs. Drover's mind, to claim his love. Since Mrs. Drover is perpetually threatened by the vision of the demon lover, she loses hold over reality and suffers from a personality disorder called erotomanic delusion. This can be evidently discovered by studying the differences between her behavior and her experiences repressed in her unconscious.

To analyse the story from this perspective, I have taken ideas of the concept of the unconscious as Sigmund Freud has developed it. To help understand the story properly, I have looked into *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV)* published by American Psychiatric Association. To go deeper into the meaning of delusion, the insights presented in "Understanding Delusion" by Kiran and Chaudhary have been considered. Moreover, I have cited other critics and the text to justify my claim. In the following section I have analyzed the text from the perspectives of unconscious and delusion, and presented the findings of the research in the concluding section.

#### **OVERCHARGED UNCONSCIOUS AND EROTOMANIC DELUSION**

"The Demon Lover" produces a puzzling effect on the reader if one tries to analyze it with conventional insights. There is only one character Mrs. Kathleen Drover who returns to her "shut-up house to look for several things she wanted to take away" (The Demon Lover 242). In the hall she finds a letter sent by a K. and addressed to her reminding of her an appointment with a soldier fiancé who has been "reported missing, presumed killed" (243) in the World War I. She is frightened by the message and the surveillance over each of her activities. While collecting the things she is haunted by the memory of her fiancé with whom she promised to marry. She gathers her goods, leaves the house, walks quickly to the cab rank, enters the taxi, which without her direction "faced the main road" (247). The jolt makes her lean forward and she happens to look at the driver's eyes and she starts screaming and beating her "gloved hands on the glass all round at the taxi" which makes off "with her into the hinterland of the deserted street"(247).

This brief summary of the plot gives us clues to understand the basic problem in this story. Some of the basic questions like 'Has the long-lost lover returned back?' 'Who is the letter writer K.?' 'Who puts the letter on the table of a locked house?' 'What is the arranged hour?' 'And the taxi driver?' can puzzle the common readers. Every puzzling event that we observe in the story takes place in the inner world of her psyche. So without probing deeper in her psychical world no one can find the answers of such questions. Mrs. Drover's psychic projection is intermingled with external facts. Her delusional experience is the result of antithesis between two realities: internal reality and external facts. Edward Mitchell in his article "Themes in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Stories" states, "One situation to which Elizabeth Bowen consistently devotes her attention is the antithesis between external fact and internal reality, between the objective condition and the projection of internal world where feeling only reigns" (41). 'The feeling that reigns' is nothing other than the content of Mrs. Drover's unconscious mind. As Otto F. Kernbeg and Eve Caligor state that "psychoanalytic research allows us to observe the relationships ... between surface behavior and underlying psychological structures" (114), it is by probing deeper into the underlying psychological structures, we can understand Mrs. Drover's behaviours. Underlying psychological structures are nothing other than content of the unconscious level of mind.

Sigmund Freud is the first psychologist and psychiatrist who studies the mechanism of human mind in a systematic way, though his Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan later reject some of his claims and modify others. Freud presents his theory of the human mind and topographical point of view of the unconscious in "The Unconscious" which helps us to understand the mechanism of the unconscious:

The unconscious comprises, on the one hand, acts which are merely latent, temporarily unconscious, but which differ in no other respect from conscious ones and, on the other hand, processes such as repressed ones, which if they were to become conscious would be bound to stand out in the crudest contrast to the rest of the conscious processes. (577)

This statement clarifies that the content of the unconscious are the repressed acts, desires, wishes, shocks, unresolved conflicts and so on. Freud further analyses unconscious mechanism:

We may say that in general a psychical act goes through two phases as regards its state, between which is interposed a kind of testing (censorship). In the first phase the psychical act is unconscious and belongs to the system *Ucs.*; if, on testing, it is rejected by the censorship, it is not allowed to pass into the second phase; it is then said to be 'repressed' and must remain unconscious. (578)

As stated earlier, to understand this story, we must understand Mrs. Drover's unconscious mind and her present behaviour. What does her unconscious contain? Her unconscious is full of 'repressed' acts, ungratified wishes and different bitter experiences. Using a flash back technique Bowen takes us to the past of Mrs. Drover's life where we can notice indications of what went on in her mind. When she was 15, she had an experience of "intense moment" of meeting her fiancé without completely seeing his face (244). Bowen creates the future prospect of horror in the first meeting between them as Mrs. Drover "imagined spectral glitters in the place of his eyes"(244) and she caught a breath for the moment when she could go running back into the safe arms of her mother and sister and cry "'what shall I do, what shall I do? He has gone" (244). The separation has been a fearful experience that makes her feel "so apart, lost and foresworn" (245).

During this 'intense moment' Mrs. Drover had to make a promise to wait but when her fiancé was "reported missing, presumed killed" (245) she suffers loneliness for 15 years before she gets married to William Drover in whose arms she feels safe "and she dismissed any idea that they were still watched" (245). Then the war comes as yet another shock in her life. They live in London "till they were driven out by the bombs of the next year..." (245). The war gives her another jolt from which she hardly recovers. All her bitter experiences slowly go deeper into the unconscious.

The unconscious must get expressed in one way or the other but in disguised manner, through the process of 'displacement' and 'condensation' or the person becomes neurotic patient. Mrs. Drover is one of those neurotic Londoners who live in mental crisis. When she enters her "shut-up house to look for several things she wanted to take away" (242) what does she bring in her mind? She brings a whole reservoir of all the repressed emotions like all past wishes, desires, pleasure seeking impulses and unresolved love affairs. Her unconscious mind is actually overcharged with bitter experiences and as a result she has undergone delusional disorder. Her unconscious actually gets expressed in the form of erotomanic delusion when she sees the letter on the dusty table. She is claustrophobic and because of this she starts hallucinating the things. Hallucination occurs as part of delusional disorder. "Bowen's hallucinations can be unconscious dream, fantasy, illusion and visible or invisible ghosts" (Amano 134). They are of course fantasies and illusions. She deceives herself by creating illusory ideas and objects, and fears the uncanny situation. Uncanny experience is also related to the unconscious. Sigmund Freud in his essay "The Uncanny" makes the connection clear when he explains that one of the reasons of the uncanny is visible "when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression" (950). The delusion that Mrs. Drover undergoes has direct bearing upon the impression that has when she enters her house. I will return back to this point a little later.

"The essential feature of Delusional Disorder" states American Psychiatric Association "is the presence of one or more none bizarre Delusions (296). The Association has categorized delusional disorder into seven types: erotomanic, grandiose, jealous, persecutory, somatic mixed and unspecified (297-98). Mrs. Drover's case, as I have claimed, is of erotomanic type. The Association states the meaning and the features of this type as:

This subtype applies when the central theme of the delusion is that another person is in love with the individual. The delusion often concerns idealized romantic love and spiritual union rather than sexual attraction. The person about whom this conviction is held is usually of higher status (e.g., a famous person or a superior at work), but can be a complete stranger.

Efforts to contact the object of the delusion (through telephone calls, letters, gifts, visits, and even surveillance and stalking) are common, although occasionally the person keeps the delusion secret. Most individuals with this subtype in clinical samples are female. (297)

Although Chiho Nakagawa finds female paranoia, a psychological disorder characterized by delusions of persecution that “ manifests its symptoms when the alternative interpretations of their lover’s behaviours emerge, forcing the female characters to question heterosexual romance scenario (55), the features of erotomanic disorder resemble Mrs. Drover’s behaviours. She, as a female, feels that her long lost fiancé, a reputed soldier at that time, still loves her and she is always being watched. In her teenage she had a romantic love affair with him and wanted a permanent union. She had a fear of losing him but he had reminded her of their ultimate union- “I shall be with you... sooner or later” (244). Just after she sees the letter, the narration very clearly states this delusional crisis: “The desuetude of her former bedroom, her married London home’s whole air of being a cracked cup from which memory, with its reassuring power, had either evaporated or leaked away, made a crisis- and at just this crisis the letter writer had, knowledgeably, struck”(245).

The whole house has become a ‘cracked cup’, an object of delusion, from which her sense of differentiating fact and delusion has evaporated and she creates illusory objects and ideas. Bowen’s use of the house as a trope, a metaphor, results in a strong bond between the house and the character. Bowen often develops her characters drawing upon the house as a symbol or metaphor and, therefore, her “houses become her stories’ controlling poetic image” (qtd in D’hoke 268). Like many other fictional works, “The Demon Lover” opens with the strange atmosphere around and in the house. “Queerness” (242) in the once familiar street and “dead air” (242) that meets her when she opens the door are clear indications that she is going to face trouble in the house as an emblems of the past. Like Mrs. Drover herself in the past, the house is deserted because of war. She returns to this house alone and observes the “cracks in the structure left by the last bombing” (243). The ‘crack’ in the house, “the cut of the button on the palm of her hand” (244) and the whole house as a ‘cracked cup’ in one way or the other help producing delusional crack in her mind. Mrs. Drover has metaphoric relationship to the house. Actually a house is a place of comfort and peace but in this case, it is “haunted or hollow, lonely or oppressive” (D’hoke 277). She is severed from comfort and warmth of her house, as she was from her fiancé, and it has turned to be the object of horror and delusion for her. The cracked cup resembles the symbolic ‘weal’ the cut of the button made by the breast button of the soldier. This cut in her hand is what she has been carrying permanently with her as a memory of her lover. She tries to come to her senses of the reality but the crisis is so powerful that she refuses all other possibilities along with “supernatural side of the letter’s entrance” (245) and comes to the conclusion that “It was possible that she was not alone. She might be being waited for, downstairs” (246). Her conclusion is based on her vision of the letter. Once a person is the victim of delusional disorder, it is difficult to differentiate between illusion and reality. “For two or three seconds shutting her eyes, told herself that she had imagined the letter. But she opened them – there it lay on the bed” (245). Mrs. Drover’s terror increases and remains persistent when she reads the letter:

Mrs. Drover looked for the date; it was today’s. She dropped the letter on to the bed-spring, then picked it up to see the writing again-her lips beneath the remains of lipstick, beginning to go white. She felt so much change in her face that she went to the mirror, polished a clear patch in it and looked at once urgently and stealthily in. She was confronted a woman of forty four. (243)

The letter haunts her continuously. When she deludes that her soldier lover has returned she is horrified: “the hour arranged...my God... What hour? How should I...? After twenty five years...?” (244). The whole delusional events are the result of the feigned letter.

Analyzing the reasons of delusion, Kiran and Chaudhary in their research article “Understanding Delusion” state that “Delusions are a symptom of either a medical, neurological, or mental disorder” (3). They locate delusions in the mental disorder like psychotic, bipolar, depressive delirium and dementia (3). Mrs. Drover is of psychotic type because in this type “the affected person has a diminished or distorted sense of reality and cannot distinguish the real from the unreal (3). As “a person with delusion is absolutely convinced that the delusion is real” (Kiran and Chaudhary 3) Mr. Drover thinks that the letter is real; that her lover is alive ; that he has returned back and that he wants to meet her. She is so mentally disturbed by the vision of

the person whose face “under no condition could she remember” (246) that she loses her sense of reality. She envisions nothing other than the face of her soldier lover and becomes unaware of the facts around her.

Douglas A. Hughes’ study of Bowen’s “The Demon Lover” from the point of view of psychological disorder in his article “Cracks in the Psyche: Elizabeth Bowen’s ‘The Demon Lover’” rejects the possibility of being it a supernatural story but “a masterful dramatization of acute psychological delusion” (411). Bowen herself accepts that the stories collected in *The Demon Lovers* can have “important psychological facts” and “These stories” as she states “are between-time stories ...they show a leveled down time, when a bomb on your house was as inexpedient but not more abnormal than a cold in your head” (Prints on the Landscape 125). As Bowen’s stories actually “do not contain more ‘straight’ pictures of the wartime scene” (Prints 124). “The Demon Lover” is, therefore, a story of a ‘cold’ in Mrs. Drover’s head, her psychological disorder, because “Psychical processes in the unconscious are not in every respect identical with those with which our conscious mind is familiar” (Freud *Totem* 82). Mrs. Drover’s delusional behaviours and her fantasizing the letter are unfamiliar to her conscious mind. The abnormality in Mrs. Drover’s thought and vision is, therefore, the expression of the content of her unconscious mind.

## **FINDINGS**

The delusional disorder is an expression of psychological disorder, when the contents of the unconscious try to get ventilated. The erotomanic delusion occurs when the person feels that somebody is in love with him/her. Mrs. Drover’s unconscious also gets expressed in the form of erotomanic delusion. Actually everything happens in her mind, not in the outer world of reality. She fantasizes the letter which symbolizes the displacement of her adolescent love object, her lover’s arrival in the arranged hour and even the taxi driver taking her away without being asked. She is actually haunted by her past, and her abandoned ‘cracked’ house, which had been a locus of comfort, stimulates her delusion no sooner she enters it. Her conscious and unconscious then appear in flashes and the past and present and illusion and reality blur. Bowen actually presents a character in war time situation. She makes a connection between world War First and the Second through Mrs. Drover and portrays how powerful psychological pressure people have to undergo in the time of war. She also depicts how destructive battle in the outer world projects itself in human psyche and ruins the inner world.

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