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**Lacanian Praxis of “Unconscious”, “Lack” and “Desire”: Reading Ashvin
Desai’s *A Tale of Two Truths***

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Abstract :

Literary theory negotiated (and then altered) the literary semantics good deal with its overbearing intellectual discourse in the enlightenment informed contemporary academia. The curious saga of literary inquiry has come a long way from simpleton traits of Liberal humanism which shirked from the explanation of the totalizing realities and the ‘grand narratives’. The contemporary literary theory, as a resolute adversary to make the unheard thin phenomena more vocal and explanatory, is hence bent upon taking a rational dip into the subterranean networks of words and sieve meanings and contribute towards the newer productions and, consequently, codifications repotentiating the literature with political energies drying up in the complacent lap of liberal humanism. The attention here shall be conferred upon the psychoanalytic criticism and its posthumanistic progression ushered in Jacques Lacan, one of the premier iconoclasts of the twentieth century whose deconstructive version of the Freudian unconscious suffused the literary

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theorizations with new psychological cryptology freeing the literary and the psychosocial from the restricted and corroded mythologies of the Freudian school. The chosen literary work here is Ashvin Desai’s A Tale of Two Truths, the fable whose psycho-historical constitution renders it a convenient Lacanian reading in terms of metaphorical and metonymic representationality.

KEYWORDS: *Lacanian, metaphor, metonymy, fable, meta-narrative, unconscious.*

Psychoanalytical criticism has long stood as a consequential approach of literary criticism in the linguistic paradigm. It draws heavily upon the findings and pronouncements of cult psychologist Sigmund Freud whose clinical skills of curing the psychological problems with his unique and ground-breaking methods of “free-association” and “dream-interpretation” created a wave of psychology as an important stream of intellectual sphere of influence. The psychoanalytic critics employ these archetypes of psychoanalysis and critique a literary work. These critics propose that literary texts could express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author and a literary work is a demonstration of the author’s own neuroses. The critical paradigm of psychoanalysis seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilts, ambivalences, and so forth within what may well be a disunified literary work. The author’s own childhood traumas, family life, sexual conflicts, fixations, and such will be traceable within the behavior of the characters in the literary work. But psychological material will be expressed indirectly, disguised, or encoded (as in dreams) through principles such as “symbolism” (the repressed object represented in disguise), “condensation” (several thoughts or persons represented in a single image), and “displacement” (anxiety located onto another image by means of association). Such a pioneering analysis of human mind was supposed to find favor with the critical confabs around the globe and it surely did. But with the passage of time Freudian analysis about vague dreams and visions started appearing fuzzy and new critics and intellectuals started knocking with their tweaks and turns in the theory. Jacques Lacan is foremost among them with his startling insights bordering on the already iconoclastic deconstruction philosophy of another French thinker Jacques Derrida.

According to Lacan, there is a perceivable divide between conscious side, the accessible psyche and an unconscious side, a series of drives and forces which remain inaccessible. The cost of human “knowledge” is that these drives must remain unknown. What is most basic to each human entity is what is most alien. We are what we are on the basis of something that we experience to be missing from us – our understanding of the other – that is the other side of the split out of which our unconscious must emerge. Because we experience this ‘something missing’ as a lack we desire to close it, to fill it in, to replace it with something. Lacan calls this lack ‘desire’. Desire is what we cannot satisfy even when our demands are met. All our needs are at once converted into desires that cannot be satisfactorily fulfilled. This is why sexuality cannot be considered as the result of a need (Delhoyde, web). The unconscious manifests itself by the way it insists on filling the “gap” that has been left by the very thing the subject feels is lacking in him or her, that is the unconscious! (the unconscious attempts to fill in the gap caused by the unconscious) Whereas Freud adopted only the empirical, humanist tradition believing in the stable self’s ability to access the “truth”, Lacan belongs to the post-structuralism institution. Accordingly, he believed that the knowledge is constructed by way of linguistic and ideological structures that organize not only our conscious but also our unconscious lives. Consequently, Lacan situates a more proper linguistic model for understanding the human subject’s entrance into the social order. Unlike Freud, (though he thrived on his fodder) he pays close attention to the text rather than the psyche of the author as the motivator owing to his belief in the orderly patterning of the unconscious and its complexity as the structure of a language. The present paper attempts to implement the Lacanian insights on a literary work which is a revival of the ancient genre of fables which has been a potent medium of furthering moral education to children since times immemorial on plane level and also has been employed by many writers to satirically portray the ills and malice of the human world. It is metaphoric and allegoric in texture and has been dexterously employed by the accomplished writers like George Orwell in the recent times. The Lacanian insights shall be tried to fathom in the language of the text itself since it is the textual character which Lacan tries to scrutinize and hints at its analogy to the unconscious of the human brain.

The novel under scrutiny is Ashvin Desai’s *A Tale of Two Truths* whereby Desai has tried to make a telling commentary upon the existing faltering meta-narrative of religiosity through a

Lacanian Praxis of “Unconscious”, “Lack” and “Desire”: Reading Ashvin

Desai’s *A Tale of Two Truths*

fable in the postmodernistic tradition. As commonly known a fable is a succinct fictional story, in prose or verse, that features animals, mythical creatures, plants, inanimate objects or forces of nature which are anthropomorphized (given human qualities such as verbal communication), and that illustrates or leads to an interpretation of a moral lesson (a “moral”), which may at the end be added explicitly in a pithy maxim. It extends back to before Aesop’s Fables in 6th century BC Greece and the collections of linked fables from India, the Jataka Tales and Panchatantra, which employ anthropomorphized animals to illustrate principles of life. Many of the stereotypes that are recognized today, such as the wily fox and the proud lion, can be found in these collections. In the present paper, it is the donkey which has been traditionally symbol of a dunce is the cynosure and through the shifting frames of his mind that writer Aswin Desai has weaved his tropes to forward a grim reality. The fable was, in the ancient times, created to teach wisdom through fictions that are meant to be taken as fictions, contrasting them favorably with the poets’ stories of the gods that are sometimes taken literally. Aesop, “by announcing a story which everyone knows not to be true, told the truth by the very fact that he did not claim to be relating real events” (Mason and McCarthy 270)

The story of the novel is set in the small town of Karwi hinging around the wretched life of the character of a donkey named *gadha* by the writer and further *Dhobi ka Gadha* or DkG. He works like a machine for his master, the dhobi, day and night but is treated with utter disgust and derision. He doesn’t know much about the world other than his master’s home and the *ghaat* or the river bank where the clothes are washed and in which he oscillates to and fro. At best he fancies Pyari, the she donkey in the neighborhood whom he loves. He is suddenly shaken from his smugness by the proddings of Toti, the Buddhist parrot from Sarnath, and in her wake Langu, the Hindu monkey from Varanasi, armed with the tenets of their religions. Both have one agenda: to convert the donkey. While one promises Nirvana, the other assures Moksha, things which DkG doesn’t receive with enthusiasm and contemplates with skepticism. He is utterly puzzled as to what was being done to him:

While Toti and Langu were hatching their plots to capture DkG, the donkey himself, quite unaware of what was afoot, was getting increasingly befuddled on

how to attain, now what became a priority, a karmic leapfrogging to become a Dhobi. The problem was that there were two sets of opposite instructions to gain this objective. While Toti was taking him away from desire Langu was fast pulling him towards it. Then there was problem of God. As DkG's brain worked digitally his thinking only dealt with one and zero; either clear acceptance or total rejection, nothing in-between. Now God was a baffling exception. He was both zero and one, depending on the nature of events that took place. He wanted to believe in God when good things happened, and just the opposite when things were not going right. Both alternatives were therefore sometimes true and sometimes not. This dialectical entanglement left him so jammed that no progress was possible. (Desai 101)

But the concealed and ultimate desire of climbing and leapfrogging the karmic ladder to achieve equanimity with human beings especially his master dhobi makes him enter the whirlpool which invites his collapse. While trying to unravel the mystery of things and dispelling the darkness of things around, DkG dies while intercepting the path of an elephant. Thus, the novel ends while lampooning the religious bigotry in the country which breeds hatred and communal frenzy in the country. The heated exchanges between the parrot and the monkey to establish their ritualistic superiority fomented by the clerics of both the sects and throwing themselves in the trivial matters is thought provoking and critical. But the chief attraction of the novel is the fablistic text which camouflages the Lacanian unconscious framework and uncovering which is the aim of the paper.

The first out-of-box element which meets the thinking eye in the novel is the fable element where animals are the chief characters acting out like human beings. The Toti or the parrot preaching Buddhism, Langu or the monkey preaching Hinduism and DkG, the donkey as their recipient are general aberrations which don't qualify for the literary legitimacy in a genre like novel and the text of the novel thus metamorphosed into something which could be read like the unconscious whose lack is perceivable and is desired to be uncovered. Also, a fable relies upon the linguistic means like metonymy (where one thing represents other by means of part standing for the whole) and metaphor (where one things stands for the other) which Lacan corresponds and maps to the Freudian psychological tenets of condensation and displacement in

Lacanian Praxis of “Unconscious”, “Lack” and “Desire”: Reading Ashvin

Desai’s *A Tale of Two Truths*

free association technique. The thrust of Lacan here is to establish the structuring of text like language since dreams condensed and displaced could be expressed in language in the form of metonymy and metaphor. Fable is replete with situations and actions of the characters with metonymic and metaphoric resonances as is the case with *A Tale of Two Truths*.

In the present novel, each and every character of the novel be it human or animal, like Toti, Langu, DkG, Dhobi, Ramdulari, Goswami etc. tries to situate his supremacy over the grand-narrative of religion. Since meta-narratives are not usually told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture, every character in the novel tries to impose his or her narrative of discursive justification. For example Toti, the Buddhist parrot instills the premises of its religion in the desolate mind of DkG, the donkey:

This Karma thing confused me for a long time. See, it works like this. The way out of your misery is to overcome your limitation and think better than a donkey in this life. Then in your next life you will be born higher than a donkey with less misery. You can, maybe, become a horse and if you do better than a horse then in the next to next life you can rise higher...and so on. In this way, through the law of Karma you can even become a dhobi, but that will take plenty of favorable rebirths. (Desai 9)

The self-proclaimed religious superiority and the religion meta-narrative thus seem to affect the actions of all the characters though none is wisely rapt in its discursive practice and embodiment as is clear in their rash actions symptomatic of violence and feuds. Also, the author himself has not given any approximate signification to it nor tries to clear the smoke around it. Yet it is the reality which governs all the motifs and actions of the characters listed above. Similarly, the content of the unconscious is, as per Lacan indecipherable and enigmatic but everything we do bears its colors and “we can guess at the nature of this content by observing its effect.” (Barry 117) In the novel too, we can also make out the force the religion is considering its communal angle which is so much conspicuous in Indian milieu but we cannot decode the encrypted sentiments enshrined in the textual reference of it. All the textual references are, then, mere

signifiers which have sliding signifieds without any stable reference point. The psychoanalytic mode of action is implemented by Lacan in one of his interpretations of Edgar Allen Poe's trademark detective story "The Purloined Letter" in his book *The Purloined Poe* whereby an investigator unravels the mystery of a stolen letter by stealing it from the thief replacing it with a fake one creating anxiety for the culprit and consequently exposing him. The letter generates such a buzz around bringing about a shake-up in the lives of all the major characters in the story but Poe doesn't give a recourse to the contents of the letter, again a Lacanian interpretation where contents of the unconscious are not known but are just felt and speculated. "Likewise, all words are purloined letters: we can never open them and view their content unambiguously" (Lacan 178). All we have the signifiers which are the verbal envelopes and cannot be unsealed thereby letting the signified hidden. The analogy between the contents of the letters and the misleading utterances of the parrot and the monkey in the novel is vivid.

The anthropomorphization of the animals is the hallmark of fable narrative which includes abstract characters build around animals. Such an ancient and anthropologically revised mode of conveyance of the universal truths and meta-narratives requires a majestic style reflective of grandeur and sublimity. Meta-narrative being "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephens and McCallum 34) requires a commensurate treatment of sumptuousness and dignity which, in the novel under scrutiny, is deconstructed employing trivial actions and situations. Hence, no importance whatsoever has been attached to characters in the novel which have been relegated to insignificance by Lacan too. Lacan's viewpoint is that 'unconscious is the kernel of our being' followed by unconscious is linguistic and language is a system already complete before we enter into it. It, hence, deconstructs the notion of a unique and separate self which literarily is the notion of 'character' in a literary work. Characterization is, consequently, rejected and the characters in the novel are not people but are groupings of signifiers huddling around a proper name. All the characters mentioned above of *A Tale of Two Truths* are also mere signifiers without stable referents or signifieds giving any legitimacy to the novel characters. The parrot, the monkey, the elephant, the donkey, etc. all are thus assemblages of signifiers clustering around proper names like Toti, Langu, DkG, etc. This belief in the theories of signifiers and the shifting signifieds makes us, like Lacan, reject literary realism embarking upon the journey of

Lacanian Praxis of “Unconscious”, “Lack” and “Desire”: Reading Ashvin

Desai’s *A Tale of Two Truths*

postmodernistic experimentation, allusive and disjointed text whereby “a novel plays with the devices of other novels and so on, just as, for Saussure, the signifiers which make up a language refer to one another, and interact with one another, but do not figure forth a world” (Barry 113). The use of fable or the animals to set forth the meta-narratives of *Moksha* and *Nirvana* in Desai’s novel is a mean to achieve the same end. A clear case of contradictory undercurrents lying like subconscious beneath the “conscious” of the text is apparent here.

Lacan’s consistent readings of unconscious and the language makes him enter into further the realm of physical consciousness. He expounds it by relating to the growth of a child’s consciousness: first it is the imaginary stage when there is no distinction between self and the other with an idealized identification with the mother. In the next stage i.e. the mirror stage, Lacan proposes that human infants pass through a stage in which an external image of the body (reflected in a mirror, or represented to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver) produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an “I”. Here the child enters into the language system concerned with lack and separation which are important terms in Lacan poetics since language names which is not present and substitutes it. It is also referred to as Symbolic stage by Lacan whereby now the infant encounters the socialization and its restraints and forbiddings generally associated with patriarchy. In literary analogy, Symbolic realm is seen in the realist text or literature authorized by patriarchy and logic. On the contrary imaginary realm is approximated to ant-realist text devoid of logic and grammar like the language of poetry. So the disparity between the two can be read as the one between prose and poetry. Lacanian understanding would propel us to search for a text where there is the intermingling and intertextuality of the Imaginary and the Symbolic as is the case with the meta-fiction which could be defined as fictional writing that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Imaginary and the Symbolic in the present case), usually using irony and self-reflection. Here the novel itself challenges its own realism. The present novel also becomes a manifestation of the meta-fiction with its irruptions of the realism (commentary upon the communal status quo of the country) and anti-realism (fable elements bordering on magical realism). The arguments of

the parrot and the monkey abet the communal flare-up suggesting the misinterpretation of the religion and its clerics and followers which is, so to speak, the realist dimension of the novel while the words of wisdom and scriptural dialectics uttered from the mouths of the humble animals is the anti-realist sphere which cross-questions the author and resists the motive of the characters. The notion of subjects has stable amalgam of consciousness in the novel thus, get deconstructed.

To conclude, the novel *A Tale of Truth* as a fable has a texture which is the exemplar of a meta-fiction owing to its mixing of the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic orders and touches upon the postmodern theorization of the meta-narratives, the overreaching totalizing explanation of things, which, here is religion. The anthropomorphized characterization in the novel render forth Lacanian concepts of constructedness and instability of the subject (self) or the subject as a linguistic concern and language as a self-contained universe of discourse. In the paper, the psychological connotations of the characters are not probed since it would be a Freudian exercise of getting at the unconscious rather those of the text itself are excavated to underline the contradictory undercurrents of meanings lying like ‘subconscious’ beneath the ‘conscious’ of the text. The employment of a fable the meta-fiction to contest the meta-narrative of religious superstructures satisfactorily establishes the Lacanian notions of textual unconscious.

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Lacanian Praxis of “Unconscious”, “Lack” and “Desire”: Reading Ashvin
Desai’s *A Tale of Two Truths*

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Dr. Rohit Phutela is an avid scholar of English Literature with a voracious penchant for research. He has to his credit around four dozen research papers in various famed national and international journals like *Poetcrit*, *Dialogue*, *In-between*, *Re-markings*, *Creative Writing and Criticism*, *Atlantic Literary Review*, *Atlantic Critical Review*, *International Journal of Multicultural Literature*, *Writers Editors Critics*, *Hyphen*, *Journal of Literature, Culture & Media Studies*, *Reflections*, *JELL*, *Pragati's English Journal*, etc. To boot, he has presented over 17 research papers in various National and International Conferences with Chaired Session. He is also empanelled in the editorial board of various journals viz. *Literary Icon*, *Aesthetica*, *Conifers Call: Shimla Journal of Poetry and Criticism*, *Critical Space*, *Literary Exegesis* etc. coupled with being the editor of reputed journal *The Literati*. He also has, in his scholastic repertoire, four books viz. *Communication Skills-II*, *Indian Contours*, *Postcolonial Deliberations* and *Indian Diaspora* which were received with verve by the targeted reading sections. He obtained his PhD on Diasporic Literature with Cinema and Film Studies as its significant breadth. He is working as an Assistant Professor of English at DAVIET, Jalandhar (Punjab).