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Love and the Sorrowing Discontent in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*

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Abstract:

The object of this paper is to trace the discursive aspects of melancholy and love that grows upon individuals, forever locked in sublimity. I have contextualised a psychoanalytical reading of the central character of Petra as the repository of isolation and discontent. The film goes on to prioritise the conflicting elements of violence and dependence to accentuate the necessity of the self in providing the fundamentals of identity and consciousness. My paper also intends to focus on Fassbinder's incorporation of certain cinematic techniques and the figurative devices of symbols to characterise this negotiation of melancholy with involvement and an ultimate disinterestedness that concretises the idea of sublimity in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972).

Keywords: melancholy; psychoanalytical; isolation; disinterestedness

Melancholy is the metonymy of the sorrowing sublime. The lugubrious constant of an amorous longing. One that never perceives the destined and never deems oneself to cross the emotive carapace. Yet the world turns an averted eye and the melancholic eventually sighs a dream of an un-lived life. The spaces of immobility and stillness, of memory and unborn years of an objectified real space where nothing alters, nothing remains intelligible, nothing grows and nothing turns to ennui. The singularity of yearning supersedes and retains the anatomy of contemplation and perceptions are conceived of conceits. Partial and incomplete, without compensation and the determination of ever attaining liberty to plunge into the realism of the ordinary. Petra von Kant is the embodiment of this sorrowful discontent. Her misery and the whole idea of longing for love transmute into the enveloped darkness that succumbs the entire scene at the end of the film. The blinding agony of Petra and the metaphor of the blackout and ultimately the wholesome loneliness that falls on her, sustains the idiom of the suffering and the discontent beyond the deconstructive denouement of the end. The distancing of the self into the ideal and the frigid loneliness that grasp the mind and the body of the individual is often an insidious inevitable.

The staircase with which the camera starts to capture the room, eventually assumes the entire film and it only changes its position to meet the needs of the characters and the temperament of each of the episode. A staircase is an intermediary space that separates and

connects to distinct location. Its insignificance become vital as the first three minutes of the film focuses completely on the staircase. Hence it can be suggested that the staircase projects something that is without any concrete sense of understanding. It embodies the sorrowing mindlessness of Petra, manifesting uncertainty, undecidedness, ambivalence and uncommittedness. Her initial appearance manifest an intrinsic and congenital sickness. The isolation and the agony is vivid and transparent. Her essential tender sensibility is unprotected and distinctly visible on the portals of her face. There is a strong sense of morbidity in her appearance and she seems diseased, peccant and unwholesome. This is soon followed by an unexpected overwhelming success in her professional sphere, where Kastadt, who has formerly refused to consign her three years ago, readily gives her the opportunity to design for their next consignment. But this paradox of professional success is immediately ruined by the arrival of Sidonie and most importantly, Karin.

Marlene's melancholy and suffering is again one those ambiguous portrayls of sorrow in the film. Her complete lack of language and the silenced tirade of emotional destitution is symbolic of the brutal loneliness that she has plunged into. The black robe, a raving symbol of mourning and of agony for the complete absence of love and compassion. Her silence can also be interpreted as an externalisation of Petra's own suffering and desolation. Probing beneath Petra's appearances, realities shift externally but the harrowing darkness of neurotic sensibility is where all the black feeble tortured emotions flow in and assume the colour of Marlene's robe. Throughout the film Petra alters her appearance – accentuates and reorders her face, changes her wig yet the putrid reality of her tortured self remains undeterred.

In *Fassbinder's Germany – History Identity Subject* (Amsterdam University Press, 1996), Thomas Elsaesser mentions about the structure of film that it is “divided into five acts set in the same room, against the backdrop of a painted mural after Poussain, the performances powerfully underline the emotional claustrophobia of the film, never letting the spectator forget the high artifice of the dramatic situation”. In the beginning she not only talks to Marlene very conveniently, without any conservation, she also dances with her. There is a sense of bliss, compassion, benevolence and empathy between the two. She finds it most comforting and soothing in her arms and probably this is quite early and the only time in the film when she is at peace before the turbulent emotions in retrospection or in person intercepts and destabilishes her, in her attempts to nurture relations with people, metaphorically outside her structured reality. There is a sense of monotony and a drowsy tranquility in her studio, that is repeatedly ruptured by the intrusion of the external world – whenever she comes in contact with people and situations external to her. What is further interesting is Marlene's relationship with her can also be seen as a masochistic bond where Marlene tries to protect Petra from the brutal realities and her own failures in doing so.

In the following scene Sidonie visits Petra and talks about the latter's failed marriage with Frank and engages in pitying her. Petra on the contrary, affirms that experiences monitor one's maturity and asserts that Sidonie's attitude in providing consolation and care is essentially

external. She points out Sidonie's dependence on gestures and words of her own and her conjectures to appropriate them and to implement the correct thought and expression to convey her concern for Petra. Sidonie occupies a secured position, without uncertainty and hence without that humanitarian element. She has a lot of adherence to the formal and exterior normalising emotions rather than providing an engagement with Petra or even trying to understand the significance of the situation and conveying her emotions with more intimacy. Hence she always engages in pity for Petra and as the latter points out pity and understanding are always incompatible to each other and pity can only come from the lack of understanding.

It can be suggested that Petra and Sidonie grows into aptronyms of emancipation and marginalisation respectively. For Sidonie it becomes shockingly inexplicable that it is Petra who demanded for a divorce from Frank. Petra justifies the situation that adultery on Frank's part could never had problematized the situation and confirms their absolute fidelity to each other. Sidonie, however, hints upon the devices of humility and tact with which women can manipulate their desires. Petra, on the other hand, rejects all such means as something grovelling and contemptuous as such behavior leads to the loss of freedom. Her diatribe against such petite compromises is well understood, the way she embraces her melancholic aloofness and disdain for patriarchy. There is a strong sense of certitude in the manner in which she states that the only reason for the disruption of their relationship was her professional success as a designer. Frank loved her to the extent of limiting her activities. He wanted to be the breadwinner of the family and offer a secured position to Petra. And though at first his paternalising and protective nature overwhelmed Petra soon she started realising his prejudice as something essentially vain and ridiculous, and decided to end her relationship with Frank. And though Frank subconsciously realised her withdrawal, he refused to come in terms with it. The rigidity of patriarchal pride to deprecate women beyond humanity is asserted in the animal imagery of a "bull mounting a cow". Petra mentions that when everything started failing, Frank tried to implicate control in a forced conjugal brutality.

The whole idea of their relationship and even Frank himself started getting repulsive and almost physically revolting for Petra. Her disruption of the heteronormative mannerisms and obligations become a humanist need for survival. She describes very elaborately the disparaging sensibility of ignominy that oppressed her. The revulsion took such an enormous form that every component of Frank's existence was an externalisation of Petra's repugnance. The insult and the violence that Frank unleashed upon her in their sexual intimacy were sensitive spots of despair that Petra loathed. While he thought that Petra's sorrow concerns her intent craving for love and concern from Frank, little did he perceive the humiliation of Petra. It is out of this disgrace that marks her disdain for Frank. She mentions that everything concerning Frank abhorred her – every movement from chewing his food to lighting a cigarette was essentially ridiculous and affected. The bleakness and the sordid circumstances that tortures Petra, inculcates in her a tremendous sense of dissociation. It concretizes her assertion that people are meant to need each other but they haven't learned to live together.

Petra turns the centripetal introspection to incorporate the specific reason that gathered together in a particular spot that is not only systematically impersonal but omniscient in reporting a loss. She affirms that though she believed in “the goodness of man”, it is the structure of marriage that brings out the worst in people. Though she feels that the shame of the event of separation itself was too frightening, she had to alter herself to survive the loss. Hence, she recounts that she and Frank were inseparable and indispensable, but there was a constant fear of their existence and it is through this uncertainty that people could possibly get to know each other. It can be mentioned that it is her melancholy that enables her to understand her emancipation and yet never fails to identify the general loss of humanity in the good opportunities that are lost for both of them. Hence, she mentions that her yearning is not for Frank but for the chances of a better life, that is ruined. This incorrigible prognosis of uncertainty, as she introspects, culminates to a suspension of affection and inculcates a falsifying egostic space that damages their possibilities of a better life. As she mentions that one is apprehensive of either being affectionate or being indifferent to the other. This illusive space burrows itself under the thick foliage of a sorrowing suspension of emotions. Isolation and indifference rushes in to assume the unheard oblivion and human beings are reduced to mere shadows of importance – “there are moments when you forget everything .. including the fact that you could resolve the difficulties, and find a common basis ...”

Julia Kristeva points out in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (Columbia University Press, 1992) that “Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing”. She goes on to mention that the depressed narcissist “has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable,” something that “no word could signify”. Karin intercepts the gloom of Petra’s mind and is almost a convincing symbol of pronouncing happiness and freedom from her misfortunes. Petra is immediately engaged upon to offer Karin her love and concern and the longing for compassion and kindness. Karin’s youthfulness and ignorance provides Petra, a possibility of redemption. The perfection of a space where she can commit herself and disperse all the allaying turbulence of the complex world. She also conceived Karin as the possibilities that were lost and the thoughts and dreams that constitute human minds and those that were thwarted in her relationship with Frank. She grants herself the voice of experience and that of protection with which she intended to embrace Karin. Hence trying to enable Karin to understand the importance of humility and modesty for a better life. Karin’s story of her own life further concretises Petra’s conviction and trust in her. The horror of being subjected to violence from her father has shattered the dreams of perfection for Karin. She witnessed poverty and brutality very early in life. Her father lost his job as a toolmaker and the bleakness of their impoverish condition drove him to kill his wife and then to hang himself. Petra felt a great affection for Karin and desired not only to work with Karin but also insisted that she should move in with her. These shot lapses of the human mind from isolation to illusion and to all those

resilient melancholia that shapes itself after abjection is far realistic and complete than possibilities of the plot to a happy denouement of events.

The trajectory of mourning and despair, gathering momentum in silences of dialogues and promises of spoken and gestured words, reaches its death and there is a confirmation of a recognizable emotion in this episode. The semblance of love and sincerity is no more disguised by the reputation of these words. It is dictated by an unsparing brutality that obliterates the beauty of human conceptions. The utter sense of inaction in Karin and her obstinacy shows her to be nothing but indifferent, brutal and shrewd. The promises of care and concern and the testifying sentiment of learning together is completely ravaged and nothing remains in their relationship. Their exchanges of love is as stiff and unfeeling as almost a transparent sheath of protection, where brutality and cruelty can be the only devastating emotions. Karin is non emotive and amply withdrawn and Petra's disintegration has already started filling its score in her. She finds her love and fondness for Karin unrequited and brutally rejected. Petra moved out from her state of loneliness to enter into a state of perfection with Karin and the paradox consumes her when Karin starts playing on such ideas of personal freedom and liberty. The ideas of compersion on which Petra initially positioned herself, soon turns out to be fatal for her.

It can be mentioned that Petra's yearning for the sublime is the romantic quest of the unattained and the unobtained. She is eternally locked and consumed in this yearning for the distant dream of sublimity. Obtaining it would be unreal. Her sublime is located in the bitterness of her experiences and the slight effort to alleviate this suffering would be unreliable and uncertain. Hence when Karin refuses to be tender with her, Petra feels castigated and diminished and feels that "everything aches in love for you", yet it is the contempt of neglect and indifference that confuses her. Her *sehnsucht* is in the enormous pain that darkens her consciousness, convincing her that the singular object of desire is in locating the intensity of love, manifested here in Karin. The brutality of this yearning is so fierce that it recedes back several times in an unknown destiny of hatred and rejection, for something she longs for and is unable to acquire it.

Karin's sexual involvement with a man the previous night and her sudden desperation to get away with her husband Freddy can be seen as the last two physical misfortunes that falls on Petra. The last section is a testament of the excruciating pain that overcomes her as an essential continuation of these two incidents. There is no confirmed and constructed consciousness to pattern her behavior and her understanding of the people and their beliefs and their relationships with her. Her agony of isolation and the need to feel that pain reaches such an acute pinnacle of desire that she can no more protect and secure the interiorised suffering from people around her. She positions herself in her catastrophe and her melancholy wounds her in a complete sense of indifference and unfeeling. There is a sordid interplay of repulsion and enticement for Karin that consumes Petra. It can be mentioned that here Karin is the embodiment of longing for Petra, where Karin the individual does not to exist.

In this last episode she rejects all of them who were closely related to her. Her daughter's fondness and need of her mother's concern and her unhappiness over her newly found love in an acquaintance are all presented in a sharp contrast to Petra's love for Karin. It is almost depicted in a comic light in which Petra snubs her daughter's foolishness. Essentially it can be seen as Fassbinder's ingenious technique to show the daunting cruelty of Petra and how her problematic situation makes her unaffected and distant from understanding her daughter. He turns against Sidonie, exposing her intention to draw ridicule from Petra's condition and even condescends her mother for being selfish and opportunistic. It is in her madness that Petra can talk very lucidly about the oblique superficiality and pretension of others. It is here that she becomes quite symbolic of a Lear-like figure of suffering and it is through this suffering that she comes in terms with the truth of her loneliness. It is this melancholic state of unconcern and separation that enables her to deliver and release her torment, giving away to her undisturbed tranquility at the end. Christian Braad Thomsen in *Fassbinder – The Life and Work of a Provocative Genius* (translated by Martin Chalmers, 2004) mentions that "... Petra puts on the record 'The Great Pretender' by the Platters, just as Marlene is leaving. This song, of all songs, is a rather obvious characterisation of Petra – and also an inappropriately emphatic negation of the possibility that she is at all capable of changing herself. With the revolver and the song, Fassbinder is close to betraying his principal character and reducing his 'double' image of human beings to an automatic gesture." He goes on to mention that "when Marlene gets a chance to lead an equal life, in which she is no longer Petra's slave but not her partner, she leaves. She could not come to terms with such a life."

Hence suffering and emotional devastation on one hand recreate realities and it is the love for such possibilities to survive that constitute the authenticity of an identity. The film can be seen as a discourse on the verity of melancholy in the context of lived experiences. Petra's mother, for instance, faintly understands this idea as she asserts "where there's turmoil, human beings are so feeble". It is the continuing vulnerability of the human heart that legitimises the conception of life and living.

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