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Freud's Dora: A Case of Hysteria and Repressed Political Consciousness

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Abstract:

Sigmund Freud's Fragment of An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria more popularly known as Dora is a classic case study of hysteria that not only intrigued the writer but also generations of psychoanalysts and scholars following its publication in 1905. The case study is universally acknowledged for its industrious way of attempting to treat its subject through the practice of psychoanalysis, a science which was still in its nascent state and also for the fact that Freud following this case could master some vital psychoanalytical techniques like 'transference' and 'counter transference'. But Fragment gained its principal notoriety, some decades after its publication, on the ground of its repressive treatment of the female subject. Freud was accused of being under the influence of phallogocentric ideas which attempted to classify and interpret the patient within the narrow bounds of a restricted and unvarying formula meant to fit within a certain theoretical framework (Psychoanalysis in this case).

Keywords: Hysteria, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysts, phallogocentric.

Sigmund Freud mentions in his case study of Dora, whose real name was Ida Bauer - an eighteen year old girl who first came to seek his help two years earlier on account of a chronic cough but then decided against therapy as her condition improved but she resurfaced two years later with her industrialist father Philip Bauer on account of her suicidal threats and deteriorating physical and mental health. The psychoanalyst was told by her father about the incident by the Lake in the Alps two years ago with a family friend Herr K who according to Ida had the audacity to proposition her. This incident was preceded by another incident some two years back when Ida was invited by Herr K to his place of business on the pretext of viewing a local church festival. However during the course of her visit he "suddenly clasped the girl to him and planted a kiss upon her lips..." This in turn resulted in producing "a violent feeling of disgust" in Ida and she "tore herself free from the man, and hurried past him...to the street door" (Freud 59). Though Ida didn't share the earlier incidence with her family, she managed to share the lake incident with her mother. But her father refused to believe her charges against Herr K. Moreover he refuted being part of any such scene and attributed the charge to Ida's fertile imagination nourished upon reading cheap erotic literature. Though despite her father's refusal to believe her narrative Ida continued to pester him to break ties with the Ks and after one such incident where she experienced a fit following her obstinate request, her father decided to seek

psychotherapeutic help from Freud who had earlier cured him of his venereal problem and subsequently the psychoanalyst was requested by him to "try and bring her to reason" (Freud 57).

Freud attempted the diagnosis of Ida's condition identifies her heredity as the primary root of hysteria. In the opening part of the *Fragment* he introduces Philip Bauer's sister "who was a little older than himself. She gave clear evidence of a severe form of psychoneurosis without any characteristically hysterical symptoms. After a life which had been weighed down by an unhappy marriage, she died of a marasmus which made rapid advances and the symptoms of which were, as a matter of fact never fully cleared up. An elder brother of the girl's father, whom I once happened to meet, was a hypochondriac bachelor." He further argues that "There could be no doubt, too, that it was from her father's family that she had derived not only her natural gifts and her intellectual precocity but also the predisposition to her illness"(Freud 49). While reflecting on Ida's mother, Freud comments that though he has never had the opportunity to be acquainted with her in person. Nevertheless from the account that he has had from Ida and her father had led him to imagine her "as an uncultivated woman and above all as a foolish one, who had concentrated all her interests upon domestic affairs, especially since her husband's illness and estrangement to which it led." (Freud 49) He considers her a victim of 'housewife's psychosis.'

Maria Ramas argues that the brief introduction of Bauer's family by Freud enables one to see that 'nervous illness was the special prerogative of the Bauer's women. Both Bauer's sister and his wife suffered extreme forms of mental afflictions, and his sister died of hers. This was not a state peculiar to this one family. Frau K, who plays so central role in this case, also had a history of neurosis and had lived many years as "an invalid", "obliged to spend months in sanatorium for nervous disorders because she had been unable to walk"' (Ramas 474-75). She further posits that nervous disorders such as hysteria were common to "women of bourgeoisie" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and America. Her argument being that neuropathologists and psychoanalysts such as Freud were operating within a patriarchal world with fixed gender roles and therefore it was imperative that the identity of female subjects such as Ida would be automatically associated with those gender constructs and therefore the attempted cure would instead of lifting repressions from the consciousness of the subject would inevitably and also unconsciously further push the female subjects towards another form of repression.

The principal objection that feminist critics have levelled against Freud's case history is his interpretation of the incident at Herr K's place of business where he attempts to force himself over the fourteen year old Ida Bauer and she reacts to his advances with a feeling of disgust and immediately flees from the site of his presence. This particular anecdote from Ida's past forces Freud to associate this repulsion towards an act of sexual seduction as a possible symptom of hysteria in the female subject. He suggests that "I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly

or exclusively disagreeable; and I should do so whether or not the person was capable of producing somatic symptoms” (Freud 59). This interpretation of Freud has been termed by Feminists such as Helene Cixous as an evidence of Freud’s phallocentrism. The primary objection that is raised against the nature of the deductive reasoning offered by him is that while making this particular analogy he inadvertently deprives the female subject of its agency and consequently attempts to fit the subject within a patriarchal heterosexual structure by force and this in turn is perceived in recent criticism as a deliberate act of violence perpetrated by the male psychoanalyst. Mairead Hanrahan suggests that Dora instead of being

A sexually obsessed girl out to thwart her avuncular doctor of the pleasure of solving her problem...comes across as a vulnerable young woman whose only avenue of help, Freud, is someone determined to see her, rather than the situation in which she finds herself as the problem, the abnormality: someone, moreover, who, far from being a neutral observer, is part of the system repressing her, not only in that his sympathies lie explicitly with the person, K, whom she considers responsible for her suffering , but in that, just as the others see her only as a means to their sexual gratification, Freud uses her as a means to his intellectual gratification. Like the other characters in Dora’s life, Freud is not interested in her version of events: he wants to impose his own. (Hanrahan 51)

According to Sarah French, Freud’s apparent failure to understand the situation of Dora arises primarily from the fact that he tries to analyse her condition by placing her within the Oedipal scenario. He substitutes Herr K as the father figure in the Dora’s universe and therefore contends that under normal conditions she should have felt sexually drawn towards him. And therefore her inability to do so is interpreted as “her failure to adopt the correct female role within the Oedipus complex” (French 250). Maria Ramas also builds her critique of Freud’s apparent failure to treat Ida Bauer on similar grounds. She highlights the disappointment that Ida has to experience with respect to her family members who not only refuse to accept her version of truth but also the conviction that her father has apparently decided to trade her off with Herr K in return of letting him pursue his illicit relationship with Frau K. As Freud writes that “when she was feeling embittered she used to be overcome by the idea that she has been handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relationship between her father and his wife; and her rage at her father’s making such a use of her was visible behind her affection for him” (Freud 66). Steven Marcus attempts to capture Dora’s disillusionment by suggesting that,

If we try to put ourselves in the place of this girl between her sixteenth and eighteenth years, we can at once recognise that her situation was a desperate one. The three adults to whom she was closest, whom she loved the most in the world, were apparently conspiring—separately, in tandem, or in concert—to deny her the reality of her experience. They were conspiring to deny Dora her reality and reality itself...the three adults were not betraying Dora’s love and trust alone, they were betraying the structure of the actual world. (Marcus 61)

As discussed above Sarah French attributes the failure of Freud to successfully treat Dora to the fact that he tries to analyse her condition by attempting to integrate her within the matrix of the Oedipal complex. She argues that Freud fails to take into account the figure of the pre-oedipal mother before jumping to his incorrect position. Maria Ramas, too, identifies this particular omission by him and she tries to address this problem by highlighting the loopholes in Freud's concept of Oedipal complex which she thinks that though successfully addresses the question of the male child's attraction towards its mother but in an attempt to construct a dichotomy his abject flawed attempt to link the girl child with the father figure on account of penis envy, fails to fulfill its desired purpose. She also highlights the fact that Freud does in fact realize the major loophole in his theory of Oedipus complex but this happens about a quarter of a century after he has written *Fragment*. She quotes Juliet Mitchell:

Until about this time in Freud's work, the Oedipus complex, the shibboleth on which psychoanalysis stood or fell, had also by and large been the main starting-point of actual analysis. Without detracting from the significance of the Oedipus complex, Freud now established the importance of a new realm-the preoedipal phase, in particular for girls. Hitherto he had assumed a symmetry in the Oedipal moment: boys loved their mothers and consequently wished to get rid of their unfair rivals in love, their fathers; girls desired their fathers, hence directed their jealousy against their mothers. But very early on Freud realized there was no parity here... (Mitchell 46)

This figure of pre-Oedipal mother attains special significance when Freud tries to interpret Ida's adoration of the Sistine Madonna, the painting that drew her fascination at Dresden Art Gallery. In an attempt to interpret her fascination, he suggests that this possibly reflects her desire to attain motherhood. He reads this desire for maternity in close synchronization with her alleged repressed desire for Herr K. Ramas in a brilliant bit of analysis not only destroys this interpretation but also accuses Freud of representing a tunnel vision that keeps getting manifested in his never ending attempt to link Ida's repressed desire to her love for Herr K. On the contrary Ramas suggests that the figure of Sistine Madonna actually symbolises a pre-oedipal mother figure. Therefore her adoration for this painting signifies her hidden homosexual tendencies that sought fulfillment only by some sort of mythic union with the divine mother Mary Magdalen. The figure of Virgin Mary holding the baby Christ in her arms also represents Ida's subconscious desire to attain motherhood without being a part of the heterosexual union. This amounts to her unconscious attempt at denying her faith in the "primal scene", a concept developed by Freud that implies that sexuality development towards its designed role is greatly affected by an early childhood incident where the heterosexual intercourse of the parents accidentally gets revealed to the child. According to Freud, the child interprets this as some kind of violence that the father perpetrates against the mother. He calls this the primal scene and declares it as particularly of great relevance while treating neurotic patients. Ramas includes a discussion of Victorian pornographic literature to throw further light

on this concept. According to her pornography essentially makes use of this memory of the primal scene to stimulate sexual impulse in its readers. Majority of the pornographic literature makes use of the dominance-submission dichotomy that readily characterise heterosexual social relationships where the male is the aggressive partner and he derives his position of power from his phallus, therefore the phallus attains a position of celebration within such literature at the end of nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century literature. And most importantly it establishes its potency through acts of violence that also includes ability to provide sensual pleasure to the female subject. In this context Ida's identification with the figure of Madonna becomes all the more significant as it represents her disavowal of this heterosexual union and a regression to pre oedipal period of sexual identity. Her disenchantment with the male sexual organ is also based on her realization early in her life that her father indulged into illicit sexual relationships out of the marital wedlock that culminated into his getting infected with venereal diseases, that he unarguably passed on to her mother Kathe Bauer. Freud mentions in the *Fragment* that when Dora began to accuse her father for bringing bad health to her family by leading a loose life at the time there would be several days when she would identify with her mother "by means of slight symptoms and peculiarity of manners" (Freud). Ramas writes that "Ida remembered a visit she had made to Franzeens bad with her mother who was suffering from abdominal pains and from a discharge. Ida, no doubt correctly, blamed her father for passing on his venereal disease to her mother. One important meaning of Ida's own vaginal discharge, which she periodically fretted over, was identification with her mother" (Ramas 488). This particular episode of Dora's life gives an indication of the direction in which her sexual orientation ought to position itself. Her mother's obsession with keeping her house and furniture clean also reflects an anxiety of maintaining hygiene in order to avoid contamination. Dora, too, inherits this fear of contamination from her mother and therefore if one goes back to the an earlier scene in the life of Dora who feels disgusted when tried to be kissed and embraced by Herr K, it becomes a lot easy now to solve Freud's surprise to understand the displeasure that the event brought to Dora's consciousness. It seems to indicate that heterosexuality did not offer her the required platform to find fulfilment for her sexual desires; instead she seemed to associate it with a kind of contamination that has been inflicted upon the female world by the loose male members.

Ramas contends that Ida perhaps subconsciously understood the sexual dynamics in a largely heterosexual world very early in her life. And this in turn withered away her hopes of leading a liberated existence. As Freud informs in the beginning of the *Fragment* that Dora seemed to represent a young girl of good looks and sharp intelligence. It is also revealed in the case history that initially Dora possessed a sharp mind in terms of her academic performance but with the onset of the hysterical fits as early as at the age of eight, she started lagging behind her brother Otto Bauer. This in turn demonstrates the fact that she wasn't able to adjust with her designated sexual or gendered identity in the world and therefore the repression of her pre oedipal desires necessarily resulted in the emergence of her hysterical condition. Ramas, therefore, claims that Freud's primary mistake lies in his inability to notice the homoerotic

relationship that Ida shared with Frau K. Ida's second dream in which she gets a letter from her mother informing her about the death of her father, can be in turn read as a repressed desire of her consciousness. She possibly detested the two male figures in her life—her father and Herr K. who inevitably structured an unfathomable distance between her and Frau K. Also her lonely wandering in an unknown town reflects her association with the young suitor who sent her a picture of the new town where he has been posted. This indicates her desire to take his gendered position. And finally her encounter with a forest while looking for the station in her dream perhaps reflects her encounter with the female sexual organ.

While talking about *Fragment in The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous and Clement claim to have read it as fiction. In order to establish Dora or Ida both as a victim as well as transgressive character who embodies a revolutionary consciousness that holds the potential to subvert the patriarchal social structure, Cixous wrote a play called *Portrait of Dora* where she employs several distinct dramatic devices such as projection of Dora's memories on screen while the action continues on stage, as well as attempted to use silence as a performative tool to convey the trauma which the protagonist has been subjected to. Her resilience towards the all incorporating narrative of the patriarchy personified by the Austrian psychoanalyst is symbolized both through her silence as well as her ambiguous responses. By endowing Dora with a dream like caricature where her responses do not fit in the linear narrative or the fixed meaning that Freud labours to obtain during the course of the verbal exchange and also by constructing the play in a form where the narrative or the scenes have no formal distinction, in fact one scene dissolves into another giving the play a dream like form. Also the part that deals with the interpretation of the two dreams in Freud's *Fragment* finds an omission in Cixous's *Portrait of Dora*. Instead as Mairead Hanrahan argues that "all the poetic passages that punctuate the play either recount a dream or are dreamlike in form" (Hanrahan 56). Therefore it can be argued that by breaking free from the hierarchy of plot and subplot and by injecting a fluid form to the dramatic narrative, Cixous tries to liberate the theatre from the traditions which are inevitably a part of the patriarchal social structure and consequently attempts to develop a new kind of theatre that may cater to hitherto unnarrated tales of subversive women characters like Dora.

Sarah French comments on Cixous's attempted redresses of the case of Dora by suggesting that

As in Kristeva's theory, the pre-Oedipal mother also plays a central role in Cixous' theorization of the hysterical female subject. For Cixous, the hysteric is a privileged figure because she cannot be assimilated into the symbolic discourse. Her 'failure' to complete the transition into the symbolic order via the Oedipal complex means that she remains within the pre-Oedipal and pre-symbolic phase of psychic development. Cixous views the pre-Oedipal phase as a repressed yet vital stage in which feminine language and desires are given free reign. In the case of the hysteric, Cixous suggests, the lost female language and feminine jouissance of the pre-oedipal phase are reignited. (French 255)

It can therefore be noticed in Cixous's critique of Freudian concepts - a departure from the centrality of the father figure as manifested in the Oedipal complex and an imaginary movement towards the significance of the pre-Oedipal mother figure and therefore it signifies an attempt to retrieve the agency that women have been hitherto deprived of in a patriarchal society. French, however, refuses to believe in the legitimacy of perceiving a hysteric as a revolutionary figure. She argues that hysteria is characterized by an absence of subject formation and also the existence of amnesia and aphonia deprives the hysteric from the voice as well as the agency to protest against the injustices that have been inflicted upon her. Therefore, according to her the choice of a hysteric as a viable model for contemporary feminism is inherently flawed. Though she acknowledges Dora's contribution in terms of rejecting the authority of the male psychoanalyst's interpretation of her conscious and unconscious self but she nevertheless rejects her celebration as a subversive character. Ramas, on the contrary recognises Dora's contribution in terms of an unconscious refusal of the normative gendered roles which the society attempted to impose upon her, on account of having identified the oppression and servitude that women had to undergo in her world. Her realisation and therefore her unconscious association with the servant woman who was allegedly exploited by Herr K, reveals the tragic situation of women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and perhaps the extent to which this subordinate position of women in society had been internalized in the social psyche and particularly the male psyche finds an ironic expression in Freud naming Ida in his case study after a nurse maid of his sister.

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