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The Emotional Odyssey of the Repressed Self in Penny Busetto's *The Story of Anna P as Told by Herself*

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Abstract:

The memories of childhood sexual abuse get repressed for many years inside the corner of the mind and may lead to emotional stagnation. Psychoanalysis considers the existence of repression as a basis on which the development of neurotic disorder happens. Repressed memories can lead to a high level of amnesia, due to the anxiety which is buried deep inside. Penny Busetto's novel *The Story of Anna P as Told by Herself* tries to explore the inner consciousness of Anna P and complex external actions connected with her inner thoughts. It is a psychological novel which tries to explain the human psyche and explains the motivation behind the human behaviours which is affected by sexual trauma. Busetto's novel can be explicated by using the technique of psychoanalysis to explore the repressed memories and Anna P's sexual trauma.

Keywords: Memory, Repression, Anxiety, Trauma.

The search for a new identity is an important issue in South African Literature. Contemporary South African writers deal with identity crisis and the process of complex identity formation as one of their main thematic concerns. Apart from the major themes of racism and colonialism, the awareness of their self has led these writers to focus on the various dimension of human existence. The shift in the cultural sensibilities has led them to place more emphasis on the interior characterization. They try to expose the motives of the inner consciousness and the inner self which manifests itself through external action. Penny Busetto is a South African writer whose debut novel *The Story of Anna P, as Told by Herself* has won the European Union Literary Award. Busetto was born in Durban, South Africa and she moved to Italy where she studied and worked and later she returned to South Africa and has settled in Cape Town.

Busetto's *The Story of Anna P, as Told by Herself* is partly a biographical novel which reflects the past, present and future of the protagonist, Anna P who comes from South Africa but has vague memories of the place or people from where she comes. The character Anna P might be an inspiration for the author by Anna O, which is a pseudonym of a patient Bertha Pappenheim, diagnosed with hysteria and treated for disturbance of vision, hearing and speech, as well as hallucination and loss of consciousness. Infact, when the treatment was going on for Anna O there was no progress but became worse like the character Anna P of the novel. But, later Anna P recovers over time and leads a productive life. In an interview

with Tarah Childes, Busetto admits the similarity between Anna O and Anna P. She says, "Anna P, like Anna O, does not talk, yet the doctors think they can explain her. There is a problem of agency here" (n.pag)

Busetto's *The Story of Anna P, as Told by Herself* tries to explore the inner consciousness of Anna P and complex external actions connected with her inner thoughts. It is a psychological novel which tries to explain the human psyche and explains the motivation behind the human behaviours which is affected by sexual trauma. "The Book of Memory" in *The Story of Anna P, as Told Herself* explicates the psychological and psychotherapeutic theories associated with psychoanalysis for the mental cure of the person affected. Psychoanalysis acts as a therapy probing into the connection between the conscious and the unconscious state of the mind. Sigmund Freud, a neurologists tried to find a successful treatment for patients with neurotic symptom and he formulated his own theory of psychological .

Freud first used the term psychoanalysis in 1896. The basic principles of psychoanalysis states that a person's development is determined by forgotten events in early childhood rather than by inherited traits alone. Moreover, according to this theory human attitude, mannerism, experience and thoughts are largely influenced by irrational drives that are rooted in the unconscious. Further, it asserts that the conflicts between the conscious and the unconscious or with repressed material can materialize in the form of mental or emotional disturbance like, neurosis, neurotic traits, anxiety and depression. It also contends that liberating the elements of the unconscious is achieved through bringing this material into the conscious mind. Thus, Busetto's novel can be explicated by using the technique of psychoanalysis to explore the unconscious trauma and the repressed memories that is the root cause of all the problems of Anna P.

Repression is one of the most haunting concepts in psychology. It is one of the key factor around which the structure of psychoanalysis exists. Psychoanalysis considers the existence of repression as a basis on which the development of neurotic disorder happens. Repression is also the level of forgetfulness. It is completely unconscious; which begins with a person's deliberate effort to put something painful inside the mind and not to think about them. Repressed memories can vary from a temporary abolition of uncomfortable thoughts to a high level of amnesia, due to the anxiety which is buried deep inside. The memories of childhood sexual abuse are repeatedly repressed for many years inside the corner of mind and may lead to the adult emotional stagnation.

According to Freud, "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (147). Repression is the process of suppressing a thought or desire which is so shocking to an individual and the individual's mind takes hold of its memory and relegates it to some inaccessible corner of the unconscious mind and there it is dormant for years and isolates itself from the rest as a psychological defence mechanism. This Psychological and defence affects the memories of the past and prevents from understanding the individuals own self and consumes their energy which leads to the emotional numbness.

It is either by choice or by the action of another individual that people suffering from such personal chaos prefer living a hidden life from mainstream of society. In Busetto's novel *The Story of Anna P as Told by Herself*, the protagonist Anna P has the problem of repression. The heaviness of unsaid information loads inside her and makes her imbalance. Her originality is compressed and her natural cheerful expression is suppressed. The sexual oppression that she faces in her early age is repressed deep inside her and this becomes the main focus of the novel. The sexual trauma in the protagonist life is the result of her repressed memories of her childhood days as well as her teenage days. Though Anna P does not fully realise what happens in her life, her struggle to introspect to identify herself is pathetic.

When the novel begins Anna P is in her forties, in an island working in a local school as a temporary English teacher, until the Ministry of Rome appoints someone. She has been living there for twenty years uncertainly, not knowing when the real teacher may replace her. Anna P has the habit of painting her self-portrait during leisure hours. Those portraits are a sort of relief from her inner turbulences of mind. A sense of anxiety and fear always troubles her and the pain of loneliness burdens her greatly. To overcome this she approaches a woman Sabrina and offers her money to spend a night with her. It is not about sex but to avoid her pain of loneliness. Anna P's life in the island seems quite normal, but when she is in Rome everything is out of the control of her mind.

Anna P's only solace is the emotional bond that she develops with a shy boy Ugo. It gives her a feeling of survival which she has not felt before. Though Anna P's inner consciousness warns her to distance herself from Ugo, she is exhilarated in his presence. He usually waits for her after school but she passes through ignoring him because she is agitated not knowing how to place him in her life. But Ugo contemplates Anna P as a mother whose concern he craves for. Only later, she experiences the feeling of love and hope in the company of Ugo other than that she feels emptiness. Anna P ponders "days of anxiety, of fear, yet how can I tell you the stirrings of joy and life in me. All my instinct tell me I should not let him come back again, yet I know I will not be able to turn him away if he returns" (62).

The secretary of the school Signor Cappi hands a letter to Anna P stating that it is from the police headquarter of Rome to inform her that she needs to come to the police headquarter to meet Inspector Lupo along with all her documents. She wonders what the inspector wants from her; Anna P's heart beats fast, so she tries to put away the letter from her mind. In her coat pocket she gets a receipt from Pensione Arcadia in Rome. It is made out of her name but it is strange that she has no memory of being there. Anna P goes to police head quarter to meet inspector Lupo on the way she sees Pensione Arcadia, she knows that she has been there before but it's just a feeling rather than a memory to locate. She thinks "I know I have been here before, but it's a feeling on my skin like a ripple of recognition rather than a memory that I can locate. I try to push against the resistances of my mind a little, try to force the images to come. But it's like having a word on the tip of your tongue. I will have to wait for it to come of its own accord" (14).

Inspector Lupo in their first meet confiscated Anna P's passport and enquires about her long stay in Italy. In their later meet he shows her a photograph and in it she sees a street with a car, a mustard colour cinquecento parked in front of the building Pensione Arcadia and he enquires about her stay in board Arcadia on second of the November, for her name is in the register. She replies that perhaps she might be there but she does not remember anything. But a sense of panic rises inside her. Lupo informs that the hotel manager died on the day of her stay. They suspect that it was not an accident. She has no memory of Arcadia. Anna P's mind is in a restless mood. She takes a train journey to reach the little church of Saint Felicita. Inside the church she feels that the church is dark and empty.

Outside the church she enters a shop and buys a knife. The shop keeper wraps it with wedding wrap and with white and silver colour bells. She keeps it inside her bag. But few weeks later she opens her bag there she sees wrapped knife but she wonders where it comes from. "I open my handbag and catch sight of a small parcel wrapped in white- and- silver paper. For some reason the sight of it bothers me. Without removing it from my bag I unwrap it. Inside it is a knife....I wonder where it comes from" (56). Also there is a ferry ticket in waste basket, but she does not remember that she travelled in ferry day before. A sense of panic rises in her. She feels like everything inside her and everything she knows about herself is unreal. She examines her self-portraits and has no memory of how she painted them. "How is that possible? If I didn't, then who did? (88). This incident reveals that she is losing her memory. She continuously feels exhausted and has disturbing dreams.

In her next visit to police head quarter inspector Lupo shows another folder to her it is from South African authorities on everything they know about her along with her medical records. Anna is a bit apprehensive and several questions arise in her "But I don't know what information he got from the South African authorities. What records do the doctors, the police, store from those times of which I have no memory? What would they know of my inner world?"(77).

Inspector Lupo's queries trouble her deeply so she compels herself to recollect the memory of Pensione Arcadia. In the mind she gets the faint image of a man. She tries to capture it but it is gone. So she visits Arcadia to conform whether the faint image is there, but she does not find that man. Anna P is restless, her thoughts flow like a river and prevents her from sleeping, which makes her weak both mentally and physically. She starts to realise that she has the problem of forgetfulness. "No I'm not sick. I think I'm losing my memory. My mind. There are things in my mind that I can't explain and things I can't remember that I am sure I must have done" (86).

When Anna P is informed that the real teacher has been appointed by the Ministry of Rome to replace her, she starts to worry how she is going to survive. While pondering she remember a man in a mustard colour cinquecento who offers her a lift and besides her a man seems lying and blood seeping from his body, and she pushes him off from her. She brushes the leaves from her cloth and looks around and finds a mustered colour cinquecento, again her memory is gone. She wonders that something has happened but she does not know what it is, but she can feel that something is troubling her inner consciousness.

She realises that there is no continuity in her life even her thoughts are fragmented. She wishes to go away along with Ugo, far away and both could be happy by themselves.

I remember faces and sounds from long ago as if they were with me here now. I see my dog, Manfred, dead years back, come bounding down the path out of the mist, warm brown eyes full of love for me, and I am about to bend and embrace him but he slides away past me and is gone. And I see my mother, firm and young and pretty, laughing at a joke, and then she sweeps past me too and dissolves into nothing. (89)

In the next enquiry Lupo pulls out her files and shows mustard colour cinquecento. In order to try to resolve everything, she replies that a man with this mustard colour cinquecento has given her lift on 20th November. Lupo tells that the man's body is found in the wood at Ostia. She firmly denies that she does not know anything about his death. But inside her a sense of panic arises and makes her uncomfortable. Lupo informs her to wait for him but she grasp her folder and race out from the head quarter. She examines the folder and there she finds her medical record "Valkenberg Mental Hospital printed in black across the top. Below, my name and my file number 56789. Below that again the date of admission and discharge. Then the words *Improved* and *Unimproved*. The second has been ticked" (93).

Anna P reflects "what I have dreaded all these years has come to pass" (73). From this one can understand that Anna P is a patient, who suffers from some sort of mental illness and she is aware of her critical situation. In order to divert herself she rents a room in Pensione to spend the night, but Lupo finds out her and tries to abuse her but in her rage she murders him also and retrieves her identity card from the concierge's desk then rushes straight to the school and decides to journey to another land which could offer her peace and she takes Ugo along with her.

The sexual trauma that Anna P faces in her childhood becomes the repressed memories and this becomes the cause of her grievances and forgetfulness. This trauma leads her to revenge those abusers. In this regard it is apt to cite Daniel Schacter who in his book *Searching for Memory*, writes "Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's classic studies of hysteria describes patients who could not explicitly remember childhood sexual abuse, but experienced disabling fear, nagging anxieties, intrusive thoughts, or disturbing images that reflected implicit memory for the trauma"(274).

The agony that Anna P faces in her childhood is too difficult to express in words. When her father abuses her physically, she wants to stop him, but she never gains the confidence to disclose it even to her mother, though she always holds her mother's hand and wanders around her. Everyone calls her "Mummy's Little Shadow" (105). Anna as a child could only imagine running away to a safe distance from her father and also desires of her father's death as well as her own death. Her inner desire manifests in the form of action. She makes use of her father's drunken state and pushes down her father swaying at the top of the stair. She did not feel the prick of consciousness but goes to sleep peacefully.

In the morning when Anna P gets the news from the mother that her father is injured due to an accident, she thinks "It's actually quite difficult to kill someone, she realises: the body puts up a huge fight for survival" (112). But few days later her father dies and Anna P is in agony and fear haunts her inner peace for she expects that the police may arrest her at anytime and wishes to go far away were no one finds her. Her thoughts inside the unconscious mind trouble her a lot, so she starts to control her memories of her father. Still she cannot tackle the truth that she is the murderer, so she set off herself aloof from everyone, the only thing now she interested is food. When she engages herself in other activities to bury the truth inside her, those thought are repressed in her mind. Repression is the refusal to recognize an internal reality or source of anxiety.

Anna P suffers due to amnesia in her adulthood and it can also be seen as the consequences of her childhood abuse. The repression and amnesia from which Anna P suffers can be explicated through Fryed's essay on Trauma. Jennifer J. Fryed says, "Betrayal trauma theory suggests that psychogenic amnesia is an adaptive response to childhood abuse. When a parent or other powerful figure violates a fundamental ethic of human relationships, victims may need to remain unaware of the trauma not to reduce suffering but rather to promote survival..." and further he proceeds that "the degree to which the most fundamental human ethics are violated can influence the nature, form and processes of trauma and responses to trauma" (307).

The second incident that gives internal shock for Anna P at the age of twelve is her first crush Luke who is ten years elder to her. As they become closer they have sexual relationship too and when all of a sudden he comes to her home with his wife she feels ashamed and unsafe. So from that day onwards she stops talking and becomes mute. For a long time nobody notices, until after sometime everyone starts to realise that she has become mute. This can be explained in psychological terms quoting S.K. Mangal who in his book *Advanced Educational Psychology* states: "When one is under the influence of emotions like fear, anger, or love, one may forget all one has experienced, learned or believed earlier. When one is in the grip of these emotions one becomes so self-conscious and that thinking becomes paralysed" (275).

Anna P's muteness compels her mother to consult a doctor. The doctor tries to communicate with her but she remains silent there, even though she hears what he is speaking. So he gives up eventually. She contemplates thus: "...if someone were to threaten her life, or if the building were to catch fire, some part of her would be able to react, would cry out, would run. She knows it is not a physical barrier. Somewhere, some part of her knows she could choose to be different, to break the silence and paralysis. Expect she chooses not to" (120). They apply an electrode to her temples and to her chest and the shock is applied to her body. The treatment is repeated and as there is no improvement she ends up finally in the psychiatric hospital. But three months later she is discharged with a medical record stating her condition as Unimproved. This is the record that the South African authority's sends to Inspector Lupu while he is enquiring into the case of Anna P.

After being discharged she prepares for the school leaving exams and Luke arrives unannounced and abuses her physically and leaves. His attitude is something violent, and though he knows very well of Anna P's condition he makes use of it and harasses her violently like pleasure seeking animal. At the age of seventeen she becomes completely mute. As soon as the exams are done, Anna P's mother sends her to Italy to study Italian from the university for foreigners in Siena. Along with that she arranged for Anna P to spend a week in Rome, so she booked a room in Pensione Arcadia. A man, who gives AnnaP a lift in his mustard colour cinquecento, abuses her physically and drops her in Arcadia. In the Pensione Arcadia the manger abuses her.

For a week all these men uses Anna P's muteness as an advantage and sexually harass her continuously along with their friends. At the end of the week she understands that she is bleeding and when she comes back to consciousness, Anna P realizes that she is weak and has not eaten anything for a week because she feels guilty and panic-stricken to go into a shop to order food. Anna P's continual abuse registers in her unconscious mind and when she starts to repress those incidents it fades from her consciousness. But unconsciously, she starts to revenge the people those who have sexually assaulted her, with the help of the vague repressed memories. The major reason for repressing those thoughts by Anna P is due to her new life that emerges after she joins in the University of Art School and begins to talk Italian. But she does not remember how she finds her way there.

AnnaP registers for a long distance degree in Anthropology and Psychology and she also chooses to study Philosophy at the University of Bologna. There she meets a boy Ahmed from Libya and lives with him happily for three years transforming herself into a new identity as Sameera. When Anna P comes to Milano from Bologna to write an exam, she meets a man, and becomes closer to him. Though, Ahmed begs her not to leave, she decides to live with the other man who is not aware of her past life. Anna P senses that she is leading a special life with him and thinks she would die without him. The years in South Africa, the hospitals, the muteness feel like something from another life. She has undergone a great mental turmoil to defend her past so she pushes those memory into the deep corner of her mind, she does not want those haunting memories. She tries her level best to bury those past memories deep inside her. These type of repressing certain memories is explained by S.K. Mangal in his book *Advanced Educational Psychology* :

According to Freud's psychoanalytical school of psychology, repression is a mental function which cushions the mind against the impact of painful experiences. As a result of this function, we actually push the unpleasant and painful experiences into the unconscious and so try to avoid, at least consciously, the conflict that bother us. This kind of forgetfulness is motivated and intentional ... Thus, as a result of repression, we forget the things we do not want to remember... in this kind of forgetting however, some serious mental cases may also be encounter. (275)

Anna P's repressed memories reduce her peace of mind and leave her conscience restless. She becomes abnormal due to her disturbing memories. So one day she musters

courage to talk to him about her past. She feels, "If she has a past, she exists. She isn't just an extension of his imagination" (136). Anna P shares only a glimpse of her past experiences, about her father and psychiatric ward and does not talk about Luke or men in Rome. She trusts that her act of confiding might increase their closeness. But, he feels cheated and retorts that he would not have fallen into relationship if he had known her past before. His reply gives her a mental shock and affects her deeply. Anna P could have tolerated anything else but his action of indicating her as mad affects her deeply. For Anna P, disappointment, betrayals, rejection everything seems unbearable and out of frustration she leaves him, wanders for a while and then comes to the island and this kind of anxiety is expressed by Gerald Davison as "It is the subjectively unpleasant feelings of dread over anticipated events, such as the feeling of imminent death" (154).

These repressed past story follows her till she is in her forties, for she cannot separate her present from the past for she is in a state of amnesia. . Psychiatrist Bessel A. van der Kolk and Rita Fisler explores the effects of traumas on memory functions thus: "Traumatic amnesias are age- and dose-related: the younger the age at the time of the trauma, and the more prolonged the traumatic event, the greater the likelihood of significant amnesia" and they further state that the "Amnesia for these traumatic events may last for hours, weeks, or years. Generally, recall is triggered by exposure to sensory or affective stimuli that match sensory or affective elements associated with the trauma." Moreover they are also of the opinion that the "The combination of lack of autobiographical memory, continued dissociation and of meaning schemes that include victimization, helplessness and betrayal, is likely to make these individuals vulnerable to suggestion and to the construction of explanations for their trauma-related affects that may bear little relationship to the actual realities of their lives" (505-25).

Anna P thus experiences all these fragmentary nature of traumatic memories and finally, after her dreadful experience of revenge, murder and the burning of her past records seized from the inspector, Anna P takes a journey along with Ugo to the outskirts of the city. She and the boy wander through the deserted village and flew from field to field for food. After a few days both become very lean but never get exhausted and feel sadness. While wondering she notices their photos on the newspaper. They do not know where they are going, but they know that they have to move forward unconcerned about the future. There is a small square in the middle of the hamlet with a little church at the end; they decide to take refuge there because it seems like there is no other village nearby. Antonio and his sister Elisabetta, living in the village greet them warmly. They lead a life away from the city life surrounded by nature which is pure and its beauty never faded due to the less interference of human being.

Anna P is able to overcome the angst of repressed memories in her unconscious, by establishing a new identity and by experiencing freedom and solace in the lap of Mother Nature. She also decides to restore her painting in the little chapel at the far end of the piazza. Her agonized soul finds gratification through painting and the comfort offered in the fortified village. Nature helps her to overcome her mental agony and it acts as a healer of her repressed memories.

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