



THE TAX INSPECTOR: AN ENTRAPMENT OR AN ENDLESS MEMORIAL SEARCH FOR THE LOVED ONE

Shahram R. Sistani¹

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman, Iran

ABSTRACT

*This article attempts a psychoanalytic reading of *The Tax Inspector* (Carey, 1991). It studies specifically the mother-infant relationship and the emotions involved in this complex love-bond affinity as it is depicted in the life of one principal character. Using some of Freudian ideas about the castration complex, and the various ways in which psyche redirects and recreates concealed delusions and dreams, it will be discussed that *The Tax Inspector* reflects the role of the mother in the process of forming characters' personality. Introducing the mother, it also introduces two hitherto neglected aspects into the critical investigations of Carey's novel which are disintegration of the family and child sexual abuse. I believe that the recognition of these conflicts enable us to see the characters' troubled mind as the origin of these psychic battles. The psychological origins of negative feelings, rejection of personality that one sees in this novel have not yet been traced back far enough. Moreover, these psychic issues are often treated in relative isolation and not within a form that would reveal the possible connections among them. Anyway, the human psyche is fragile, and easily crumbles, and separation from the mother is unimaginably painful. So, it is important to understand this relationship, for he begins life within it, lives his life through it, and ends where he began. As such, the novel can be read as an endless memorial search for the loved one.*

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Keywords: The castration complex, The role of mother, Delusion, Infantile love, Infantile sorrow, Psychic battle, Concealed delusions.

Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the psychological emergence of negative feeling and rejection of personality in Peter Carey's novel.

1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Carey is the most distinguished and celebrated contemporary novelist of Australia. His novels have been studied from different viewpoints. They acquired lots of attention not only from critics' side but also from common reader as well. He blends realism with fantasy in his fictions. They depict a world saturated with bizarre nightmares. These nightmares are as Graham Huggan claims, "in part the products of the 'dream factories' of late capitalism" (Huggan, 1996). In his novels he is inclined to the depiction of the problems of transnational world. He is well-known in employing mechanisms of intertextuality. He is also obsessed with rewriting Australia's colonial heritage. As such Paul Kane avers, "In Carey's work the disjunctiveness of postmodernism coincides with his sense of the historical displacement of colonialism; the continuing influence of the past – the 'postcolonial condition' – is transformed into a vision of the future: Australia as the postmodern society. Thus, in Peter Carey's work the postmodern is the postcolonial, and 'Australian literature' comes to occupy a space of its own" (Kane, 1993).

In *The Tex Inspector* he scrutinizes the world of business. He comes close to the ideas of Marx and portrays the collapse of family ethics. In the novel, family abuse is paralleled with lack of social responsibility. It narrates generations of sexual abuse in Catchprice family. Regarding to the reason of attempting such a taboo subjects Carey remarks, "Every day it was hard to write. Without being too melodramatic, there were dark corridors one had to make oneself walk to the end of, even though it was repulsive or frightening. I asked myself everyday whether the book was worth writing" (Heyward, 1992). The novel challenges the fact of silence and any sensitivity towards discussion of family sexual abuse. At the same time it warns the people for degeneration of society in contemporary world. The family which is depicted in the novel is in fact a psychological prison and entrapment not only for the members but also for the others. As M.D. Fletcher claims, "Throughout Carey's fiction, both literal and figurative entrapment are invoked; and while naturally one must be careful not to see figurative entrapment everywhere, Carey is usually quite overt in that respect. His fictions abound with actual prisons and cages, which perhaps serve as metonym for Australian society" (Fletcher, 1997). But this is not the only interpretation. The image of entrapment and prison evoke psychological issues too. The relationship between characters discloses family dynamics and the way such dynamics influence formation of their psyches. The family and their firm are under the corrupt effect of social system and the novel depicts four days of auditing the firm by a government agency named Maria. The impacts of a decaying social system upon Benny a sixteen years boy is conveyed to the reader through these four days. The attention in this article will be paid to the wounded psyche of Benny throughout his transformation for the saving of family business. It illuminates his entrapment in a generation of abuse in the family.

2. FANTASY AND ENTRAPMENT

Carey's fictions are catalogues of often graphic infantile fantasies: fantasies of sex and violence, and the exhilaration of power. These fantasies are often reminders of the sense of defeat during childhood. There is a sense of deep frustration and dissatisfaction with these kinds of fantasies, apparent in many of Carey's fiction. In *The Tax Inspector* Benny Catchprice reads in a

glossy magazine about an instrument of sexual torture. He then proceeds to build one and try it out on an unsuspecting colleague thus,

When Benny had first looked at it, he had felt a numbness, a dizziness, like a new piece of music that he must somehow own or name. It was shiny and thrilling, as if something that had always been a part of him was now being revealed.

It was a woman being fucked up the arse. She had short, blonde hair. She had a thin waist and a plump arse that was as smooth and round as something in a dream ...

The woman was held at the shoulders and arms. She was held at the top of the calves and the ankles. The base was made of moulded fiberglass. It was more or less in the shape of a shallow 'n', not a hard thing to make, really easy. You could do it in your back yard, your cellar. The end result was that her arse stuck up in the air and she could not move, she could not fucking *move*. (Carey, 1991)

Fantasy has not only a close affinity to the unconscious part of human psyche but also originated in the unconscious. Huggan (1996), concerning Carey's use of fantasy, claims, "For Carey, fantasy functions as a barometer of impermanence, of fluctuations in both the individual psyche and society. Fantasy is an ideal vehicle for the exploration of the unconscious, and for an analysis of the ways in which unconscious drives affect human behaviour. Carey's fiction might appear preoccupied with the psychology of *deviance*".

The other significant instance of Carey's fantasy is actually Benny's bunker; it is a recognizable psychic space. It corresponds to those hidden recesses where we hoard our dirty thoughts and guilty secrets. His fiction entices or induces us into these forbidden territories. Benny's bunker reminds one of a mother's womb and the feelings a child has towards it. Benny's life shows that it is the mother who is felt to be lost. An interpretation of his early psychic life reveals where some of his deepest and most persistent fantasies come from. I do believe that his anxieties and aggressions are all adult manifestations, reenactments of a troubled infant-mother bond. Certainly, his desire to live in a terrible place like that bunker expresses a desire to merge with the mother. The novel gives a detailed account of three generations of incest in the Catchprice family. He can be considered as the ultimate victim of the Catchprice family. Benny has been sexually abused by his father. Mort connives with his mother in this act. Benny's mother Sophie deserts him at his early age. She actually tries to save Benny but shoots him instead of Mort. His uncle Jack, after knowing what happened to Benny, deserts the family as well, Benny's relation with his brother is also not normal.

Benny loses his job in spare parts although he works efficiently. Frieda hires a new worker as a salesman even though Benny has been trying to set himself up for this position. Despite being trapped in these brutally punitive circumstances, he makes several efforts to escape from his victim role. But the significant point is that he never abandons his cellar. Anthony J. Hassall believes the cellar is, "The other visual expression of his self-loathing, with its claustrophobic suggestions of hell, entombment, the unconscious, and the dark desires of incest. The cellar is an appallingly vivid image of the abuse he has suffered and of his junk status in the family" (Hassall, 1994). But, I see a basic human need behind his strange behavior – to love and be loved which we all share. For

Benny however this need turns into a persecuting fear of destroying the loved one, which we all experience during infancy.

3. ADULTHOOD AS FEARFUL AS CHILDHOOD

An important contribution of psychoanalysis to the reading of Carey's novels is its emphasis on love. This characteristic suggests that our emotional make-up and our relations to ourselves and others are shaped by this early love bond between the infant and the mother. This relation is often dominated by feelings of maternal loss and by an anxiety that originates in such traumatic feelings. Freudian psychoanalysis assumes that human psychic life begins with the infant's relation to its mother, and, although this is an exceptionally complex relationship, it is shaped by one persistent need on the part of the infant: the need to be loved by the mother. At this early stage, love provides the vital emotional nourishment that the infant needs to survive and grow. To receive the mother's love, for the infant, means to be alive. But at the same time, the infantile ego also fears that its loved mother will disappear. Thus, from the beginning, the ego is faced with a difficult problem: its ultimate aim is to have a good mother and to establish a good and enduring relation with her, while all the time threatened by the mother's disappearance. As we shall see, the situation is made worse by the fact that the infant often fears that its libido is the cause of the disappearance of its loved mother.

Thus, in the case of Benny, all his aspirations concerning the mother vanished. He not only does not receive the mother's love but is also shot by her. He as an infant also experiences the disappearance of his mother. The infant-mother relationship is a complex encounter in which two psyches touch each other. But for Benny this complex encounter is one-sided. It is an emotional encounter in which each shows the other the whole gamut of emotions from love, desire, lust and creativity to hate and destruction. In the adult encounter, this happens too; we show one another raw emotions as well as hardened ones, and we try to accept these from each other as wonders of our psychic being. In adult encounters we try to be in contact with ourselves as well as with one another, and we try to learn to be something to and for one another. Freudian psychoanalysis argues that our adult world has its roots in infancy, that our adult behavior and relations bear the mark of our infantile relations with the world around us especially mother, our infantile needs and our infantile fears. It shows us that we are never completely free of such fears and needs, that we all experience them and suffer anxiety as we pass through the stages of childhood. Some of these infantile experiences are retained within and we gradually become more capable of coping with them. But for some of us, adulthood is as fearful as childhood and adult relations replicate the anxieties of infantile relations. Freud's study questions what it means to be an 'adult' and live in an adult world, while at the same time enduring over and over again our infantile needs and anxieties.

But regarding Benny Catchprice, he has been punished by a fear of abandonment and maternal deprivation. In his case the ego is like a saddened and homesick wanderer. The presence of the mother's love is life-affirming; it is the foremost source of love, of one's sense of being, of one's sense of self-identity. The absence of the mother's love leads to a great struggle on the part of the child to have a meaningful life in a meaningful world.

This is actually a normal stage of early infancy; however, if the mother later fails to convince the child that she really loves him as a person, then it becomes enormously difficult for the child to maintain an emotional relationship with her on a personal basis. Consequently, he tends regressively to restore the relationship to its earlier and simpler form and revive his relationship to his mother. The significant point here is that the separation of the mother is a tragic attempt on the part of the child to sustain a relationship with the mother. This relation is dominated by ‘taking’ rather than ‘giving’, since the infant is totally dependent on its mother to receive love and nourishment. The infant’s anxiety thus originates in maternal absence and it is compounded by his fear that he has emptied out his libidinal object, that he has destroyed the source of gratification. As a result, the child comes to feel that its libido is destructive, dangerous, and bad, that it should be kept under strict control and that it should not be let out and expressed. In an attempt to save its loved mother, the child inhibits its libido and transfers its external relations to his inner world.

In the case of Benny Catchprice, he feels that the reason for his mother’s apparent lack of love towards him is that he has destroyed her affection and made it disappear. At the same time, he feels the mother is bad because she rejects his love. Bruce Woodcock, concerning the characterization of Benny remarks, “Benny is the main outcome of this poisoned environment. When, naked and hairless, he asks his father ‘who was it made me like this?’ (154), he poses a question of responsibility which takes in the family and society. The characterization of Benny is a disturbing portrayal of a psychopathic mental state” (Woodcock, 1996). The bizarre and disturbing things, he says and does bring to light his mental and his psychological state. When he examines the details of the image depicted in the magazine, it is the beginning of a series of disturbing statements indicative of a deranged schizoid person. When he sees Maria Takis leaving he says to himself “she’s mine. He meant it too. He committed himself to it as he said it” (Carey, 1991). The way he takes Sarkis and then Maria into the cellar obviously shows that his anxieties stem from his childhood experiences. When he takes Sarkis into the cellar and straps him down, he says, ““This is a serious business you have got yourself involved with”” (Carey, 1991). Significantly, when Vish tries to stop Benny, he leaves Vish in no doubt that part of the motivation behind his actions is avenging for his own past. Benny’s juxtaposing with Maria Takis is another evidence to prove that his aggressions are results of childhood experiences. His treatment of Maria is fundamental in relation to the plot and thematic development. As such Woodcock believes, “At one level, it is the confrontation between two world-views, two alien cultures – progressive social change and rapacious social exploitation” (Woodcock, 1996). Benny’s cellar is only a small sign of the anxieties hidden in the heart of each psyche. Carey’s depiction of Maria’s entering the cellar is important here to quote:

As Maria Takis entered the cellar, Benny Catchprice remained behind her with his shot gun pushing into the base of her spine. He had already cut her cheek with it, and it did not even occur to her to plead with him.

It was like a subway tunnel in here. She could smell her death in the sink of the water. Even while she had fought to stop his grandmother being committed, all this-the innards of Catchprice Motors – had been here, underneath her feet. She did not see her name written on the wall, but in any case she did not understand

the parts or what they did-the snakes in bottles, the cords tied with plastic, the writing on the wall, the ugly white fiberglass board with its straps and buckles. How could you ever understand it? It was like some creature run over on the road. The rough-sawn barrel grabbed and tore at her dress. (Carey, 1991)

Benny is an ominous symbol of retribution. When he shoots Vish and Maria, it echoes his own shooting by his mother Sophie. His appropriation of Maria's baby, whom he names little Benny, demonstrates his inner anxieties.

'Oh Christ,' he said.

He took off his cotton shirt. He threw his bloodied suit jacket on the floor and wrapped up the frightened baby in the shirt.

'Give him to me,' Maria said. 'Give me my baby'.

'Little. Benny,' he whispered to it.

'Give me my baby'.

She was shouting now, but there had been so much shouting in his life. He know how not to hear her. Tears were streaming down Benny's face. He did not know where they were coming from. 'He's mine', he said.

He closed his heart against the noise. He hunched down over the baby.

'Don't worry', he said. 'Nothing's going to hurt you'. (Carey, 1991)

This image is an echo as of his own experiences. This notion that a child is born in that cellar reminds Benny of his own birth in Catchprice province. The condition of the cellar is a reminder of his mother's act of abandoning her own son in that terrible atmosphere. Such a fundamental understanding of selfhood helps each personality in the process of making of the self. As Anthony Elliott avers,

Implicit in this is the belief that there is something stable and durable about the self. I believe myself to be the same 'self' as I was yesterday; and, for purposeful social life to be possible at all, I must also believe that others have a fairly coherent sense of their own identity. Such presumptions about ourselves and others, unless a person is ill or disturbed, are at the root of our cultural life. (Elliott, 2002)

A point to note regard to the Benny and also his uncle Jack is that they believe and expect people to understand and sympathize with them. As Woodcock remarks:

In the interview with Robert Dessaix for ABC radio in 1991, Carey said that his notion of the characters in the book was 'as plants in poor soil, or even poisoned soil ... struggling in some way towards where they can see some light ... struggling to reinvent themselves ... the problem with the characters is the nature of the soil ... a repressive, abusive environment ... without, I don't know if you can say "spiritual food"'. For Carey, the horrific scenarios dealing with Benny in his cellar, an emblem of the inferno that the family 'business' has become (163, 234), are counterpoised by the moment of Benny rising up from hell towards the light, transformed into a hairless angel. (Woodcock, 1996)

So, Benny's problem is about love. When he appropriates Maria's baby and christens him little Benny, he actually does not want to hurt the baby. "Don't worry," he said. "Nothing's going to hurt you" (p. 276). This shows that for him, love does not move outwards; it is locked within himself. He likes to reestablish his own relation with his mother. In Freudian terms all his attempts in this regard are Oedipal longing. His aggressive behaviors can be considered as an act of repression and displacement. According to Freud, a child stores many painful memories of repressed sexual desires, anger, rage and guilt in his or her unconscious. Because the conscious and the unconscious are part of the same psyche, the unconscious, with its hidden desires and repressed wishes, continues to affect the conscious in the form of inferiority feelings, guilt, irrational thoughts and feelings, and dreams and nightmares.

Hence, these acts of repression or displacement are instrumental in desires breaking with the past. But the past returns to harass those who believe they have abandoned it. It is vital, however, to pursue these emotions, such as Benny's and other people as well. Without understanding the source and nature of these feelings, one will fail to grasp the crucial aspect of the psychic suffering revealed in Carey's fiction. It is important, too, that we be patient enough not to consider hatred and impersonality at face value. We must stay alert to the various forms that a wounded psyche can take to hide itself. Hate and solitude, as critics like Christopher Lasch and Erich Fromm have shown, are among the important features of a person's relation to the outside world. But love is there too and critics have not sufficiently focused on that yet. As it is indicated in these lines from Fromm, "Not that people think love is not important. They are starved for it; they watch endless numbers of films about happy and unhappy love stories, they listen to hundreds of trashy songs about love-yet hardly anyone thinks that there is anything that needs to be learned about love." (Fromm, 1957)

Carey's fiction can be explained as a struggle between mind and body. It is a struggle between objective truth and subjective experience. I should mention here that impulses in themselves do not have moral or amoral values but they gain their meaning through the ego's relation to the mother. It means that the vital question for the ego is not the gratification or repression of guilty impulses but having a good relationship with the mother. The infant's relation to its mother is the first and the most crucial relation, in which it is totally dependent upon its mother. The mother's response to this dependency has a vital effect on the infant's emotional development and for the future of its relations.

Broadly speaking, for Freud the Oedipus complex refers to the desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex and a resulting sense of rivalry with the parent of the same sex. "What prevents the male child from continuing to have incestuous desires for his mother is fear of castration by his father. The child therefore represses his sexual desires, identifies with his father, and hopes someday to possess a woman as his father now possesses his mother. Unconsciously, the boy has now successfully made the transition to manhood" (Bressler, 1999). Classically this situation resolves as the child learns to identify with the parent of the same sex and represses its antisocial sexual instincts. According to Freud, the super ego the moral factor that dominates conscious has its origin in the process of overcoming the Oedipus situation. Freud holds that the Oedipus complex is the nucleus of all human relationships, and he argues that overcoming the

guilty sexual impulses through repression and sublimation is an important social achievement. This emphasizes two things: first, it assumes that the child has unappeasable, sexual instincts about which it feels guilt; and second, because of these amoral instincts, it expects castration – that is, punishment. Thus, these phenomena have essentially moral implications. Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety tells a moral story which is, in Harry Guntrip's words, "the traditional theory of bad impulses rooted in the flesh and calling for drastic control" (Guntrip, 1969). He believes, Freud adopts the conventional ideas of Plato and St. Paul as his starting point thus, "Plato's charioteer of reason and St. Paul's law of the mind' became the controlling ego with its scientific reason. Just as Plato's 'reason' made an ally of the lion (aggression), turning it against the beast (instincts) to enforce control, so Freud envisaged the ego working with the sadistic super ego to turn aggression inwards against the id, and showed how pathological guilt produced depression" (Guntrip, 1969). In other words, for Freud and his predecessors, the problem was, essentially, an unending war between flesh and mind, a separation between body and mind or soul. The fundamental question remained a moral one. Guntrip suggests that this kind of interpretation of the human psychic structure in part explains the interest in depression, since depressive diagnosis is associated with feelings, aggression and reparation. The Freudian emphasis on depression, Guntrip believes, originates from the fact that, "The diagnosis of 'antisocial instincts' has always been man's most convincing rationalization of his plight, a subtle reference against the alarming truth that the real trouble is fear, flight from life at deep mental levels, and the failure of basic strong ego-formation, resulting in consequent inadequacy, both felt and factual, in coping with life." (Guntrip, 1969)

As I see it, Carey's fiction is enactments of such an endless memorial search for the lost loved mother. For the reason that inside the mother's body is the maternal heaven. This is where there are no divisions between the mother and the infant. In this imagined experience between mother and infant human emotions grows emotions from rage to envy, from envy to gratitude, and from gratitude to love.

When we look at stories of the life of people like Benny, at their most basic level, there is a longing to go back to this imagined harbor. But the story gets blurred as the person grows older and gets more confused. Something happened, he believes, that he did not wish for, something untimely. Something changed, he feels, when he was not prepared. The stillness has broken, the peace has gone, and his world is populated by others that scare him. The intuition that something has happened and the mother has changed forever sinks in the infantile ego. In a way, then, at an early stage of life, he starts looking for a way back. Later, as the mother becomes ambiguous, we become frustrated and anxious. As our frustration grows we grow restless, and the world and its inhabitants become less and less satisfying and more and more hostile. Gradually the external world becomes an empty lot without the loved mother a desert giving rise to maternal mirages.

4. CONCLUSION

The psychic pattern depicted in *The Tax Inspector* suggests that the life of characters such as Benny is entrapped in an endless search for the mother. This search is stored in his memory. His personality is truly a portrait of a troubled person. The deprivation of a loved mother leads to a

great struggle in him in the process of forming a meaningful self as well as of living in a meaningful world. Benny internalizes his mother and builds a world of his own. This is a significant discovery because it enables us to see the psychic reality of the child as a domain that he withdraws into and lives within. The flight into this world is conditioned by the infant's fear-ridden retreat from an external reality that is too overwhelming to cope with during early life. However, the infant faces a difficult situation since a complete withdrawal from the external world eventually means the total loss of its mother-relation and any sense of external reality. The ego is, then, pulled apart by two opposing needs: on the one hand, the child wants to withdraw from a painful external reality to an inner world, and on the other, it needs to stay in touch with external reality.

As an adult he experiences a particular feeling. This sensation is too elusive for him to express. The point is that Carey's novel works in a similar way; it is strangely familiar but it is not easy to tell what exactly it is about or where the familiarity comes from. Yet it is a masterpiece. The power of his novel derives from his skill in verbalizing these pre-verbal experiences and memories so vividly.

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