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Where Angels Fear to Tread by E. M Forster in the Mirror of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

The novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* by E. M Forster narrates the tale of Philip Herriton, the conscientious son of Mrs Herriton who is trapped in the chronic clasp of his querulous mother, a matriarchal figure. Although the novel revolves around the rescue mission of the illegitimate baby begotten by Lilia, the deceased sister-in-law of Philip Herriton, the novel charts the journey of Philip's quest towards self-exploration. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the novel under the light of Lacanian Psychoanalysis demonstrating the progression of the male protagonist through the Lacanian model of the imaginary and symbolic order. The novel portrays Philip enmeshed in an elaborate tissue of interwoven, contradictory, mutually modifying perspectives. This paper demonstrates the initial inconsistencies and unstable progression of the male protagonist Philip, under the influence of the maternal in the imaginary stage. Jaques Lacan has argued that a subject can construct its identity only when it is able to serve its narcissistic first love for its mother. As the novel proceeds Philip is able to dissociate himself from the symbiotic relationship with his mother by conceding himself into the cultural realm of the Symbolic order. The paper also brings to our notice the conspicuous sibling rivalry between Mrs Herriton's children, Harriet and Philip, who compete for winning the allegiance of their mother.

Keywords: matriarchal figure, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, symbolic, imaginary, sibling rivalry, self-exploration.

Jaques Lacan has formulated a tripartite model of identity formation based on the premise that because the human neonate is born premature in terms of psychological functions by comparison with other animals, the infant is dependent on the world around it. For Lacan the humble mother-infant-father drama is the foundation of human ontology. Drawing on the Freudian conception of ego-formation in a human subject, the central pillar of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory states that the child just after being born thrives in the imaginary order, a primary state of narcissism under the influence of its mother. However, as the child enters the symbolic order and attains the prowess of linguistic overtures under the supervision of the father, it alienates itself from the mother and idolizes the father as the transcendent signifier. The novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* by E. M Forster, opens with the delusional relationship between Mrs Herriton and her children Philip and Harriet. The functional absence of the father in the lives of the Herritons has subverted the possibility of a triadic model of family (father-infant-mother), thus delimiting it to the dyadic model of relationship between the mother and her child. Lacanian Psychoanalytic criticism appears to be the most appropriate tool to examine the nature of the subjectivity of the primary characters of the novel under the influence of an omnipresent maternal vigilance.

A fractured personality is the dominant feature of the novel. According to the Lacanian notion of identity formation, an infant feels a tie of reciprocal contentment with its mother the very first object it interacts with, that renders every other phenomenon auxiliary and peripheral. In the imaginary order the child is unable to distinguish itself from its mother, having satiated all his desires from the plenitude she offers. But this blissful stage expires as soon as the child

assimilates itself with the law of the father. In the absence of the domineering voice of the father figure in the novel, and the subsequent inability of the primary characters to enter the symbolic stage of paternal order, a unique union develops between the mother and her children i.e., Mrs Herriton and her son Philip and her daughter Harriet, which makes them unimaginably dependent on her. Philip's unfaltering allegiance to his mother due to the disproportionate love between them is evident from the beginning of the novel. During Lilia's departure to Italy when she invited her brother in law, Philip, to accompany her, he replied plaintively, "I wish I were" (Forster 1). Philip's job at the Bar could easily afford him time and means to accompany Lilia and Miss Caroline Abbott to Italy, however he preferred to stay back because of his mother's disapproval of his continual visits to the continent. The narrator defines Philip's unquestioning complicity to his mother's disapprobation: "His family disliked his continual visits to the continent, and he himself often found pleasure in the idea that he was too busy to leave town" (Forster 1).

According to Lacan, there is an absolute feeling of possessiveness that exists between a mother for her child and of a child for its mother. For the child the mother is the ultimate epitome of perfection, it tries to amplify itself into the image of the mother, unable to distinguish itself from her. The child assumes its mother as one and the same identity and not the 'other,' while the mother cossets its offspring as an extension of her own self until it acquires a self-conscious attitude. The unbreakable tethered bond between Philip and his mother stands out exclusively analogous to what Lacan has established through his theory. This psychological possessiveness doesn't apparently endure any slightest separation from each-other. Moments after bidding farewell to Lilia at Charing Cross station, and engaging Harriet to look after Lilia's daughter, Irma, the mother-son duo found themselves at peace back at their home and "there was immediately confidence between them" (Forster 5). Critic Wimsott has contented that it is the mother's gaze that is constitutive of the child's ego formation, because

the mother's technique of holding, bathing, feeding and everything that she does for the baby sums up the child's first idea of the mother as a harmless amicable being. But this over-fascination with the image of the mother sometimes becomes an impingement for the child, as it can annihilate the child's agency and curb its empowerment. To Philip Mrs Herriton was the transcendent signifier, her ideals were infallible to him. When Mrs Herriton praised Philip for advising Lilia to go off on a holiday, to digress her from indulging into a scandalous affair with Mr Kingcroft an old acquaintance of her, Philip brimmed with unparalleled joy. Philip internalized his mother's ideals without an inkling of doubt.

Philip's love for his mother knew no bounds, that in order to seek the undivided attention of his mother he often side-lined his sibling Harriet. The cataclysmic impact of Philip's love for his mother leads to a bitter animosity with Harriet. It has been recorded that sibling rivalry is a pertinent issue that espouses for gaining parental affection and attention, a part of the wider Oedipal drama. According to Leventhal and Schachar's theory of Cain complex and deidentification, siblings amplify differences with each other and minimize similarities. In the biblical book of Genesis, Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain had killed Abel out of envy, when God favoured Abel's offering to the Lord and discarded his. Cain was thereafter condemned to a life of wandering. Employing the biblical metaphor of Cain and Abel as a foundation, Alfred Alder has suggested that it is the consequent fear of losing the love of the parents that induces feelings of unsettled rivalry between the siblings who try to strive for significance within the family. Philip's estrangement towards his sister Harriet often erupted into an irreconcilable hostility that "Mrs Herriton had to intervene" (Forster 9). Sibling jealousy elicited in Philip is probably due to the fear of a triadic intrusion into the dyadic relationship between him and his mother, resulting in his behavioral dysregulation. "Oh, Harriet is a bad lot," remarked Philip disconcertingly after a heated argument with Harriet, that

had espoused when Harriet proclaimed that English churches were better than the churches in Italy (Forster 9).

Carl Jung had proposed the term ‘devouring mother’ to personify the mother – woman who are afraid of solitude, and hence critical and manipulative, one who smothers her children with excessive love, stifling their growth. These women unlike the oversimplified ‘natural mothers’ don’t shower ‘unconditional love’ to their children, rather her passionate love proves to be antagonistic to her children’s well-being. Mrs Herriton befits the role of a devouring mother archetype because, she is an anguished woman bereft of a husband, and who has already lost her eldest child Charlie. Mrs Herriton was bludgeoned with a ‘narcissistic injury’ after suffering from a series of irrevocable losses in her life. In his case study of the ‘Wolf-Man’, Sigmund Freud conceptualized the term ‘narcissistic injury’ to address the loss of love and failure that entails behind the permanent injury to self-assurance in the form of a narcissistic sear, which contributes to a sense of inferiority. The lacuna created by the emotional emptiness of Mrs Herriton deprived of a husband and her eldest son, goaded her to preserve her only surviving children Philip and Harriet, as a reparative measure. Mrs Herriton conscientiously dealt with each of her surviving children separately wary of their notorious rivalry. When Philip condescendingly remarked on Harriet calling her a ‘bad lot’, Mrs Herriton scoffed it off with jocularity by simply asking him not to be naughty. Again, when Harriet complained to her mother about Philip’s uncouth patronizing attitude, Mrs Herriton placated her by advising, “Let Philip say what he likes, and he will let us do what we like” (Forster 10). Through her consolidated assertion of being neutral to her children, she assures them of her unbending loyalty towards them, thus winning the allegiance of both her children.

It is important to note that, Mrs Herriton’s unswerving attention towards Philip is precisely more in comparison to her love for Harriet, because she couldn’t afford to impinge her ‘ego’ already pierced by the spurious marriage between Charlie her eldest son and Lilia Theobald,

the woman she utterly detested. Mrs Herriton's loss of her eldest son first to a flagrantly impertinent daughter-in-law and then to death, served as a devastating blow to her pride and by extension to her ego. She secretively held herself accountable for the loss of Charlie and therefore she decided to crystallize a claustrophobic relationship with her only surviving son Philip, to evade any chances of losing him. Mrs Herriton's constraining influence resonates throughout the novel. Mrs Herriton deftly swerves the topic of Italy when she sensed Philip's over indulgent admiration of the place. Envisioning a budding essence of whimsical romance within Philip whenever he talked about Italy which she found vulgar and irresistibly noxious, she "adroitly changed the subject before Philip got excited" (Forster 6). Alice Miller through her essay 'Depression and Grandiosity as Related forms of Narcissistic Disturbances' focuses on the case of mothers who try to satisfy their selfish needs through their child. A mother loves her child as her self-object, as an extension of her own-self and he is needed to develop something that the mother needs, which certainly is fulfilling and appeasing to the mother, but nevertheless may prevent the child from being himself. As soon as Mrs Herriton was bombarded with the news of Lilia's engagement to an Italian man, she derisively employed Philip to go and contravene the engagement: "If Lilia marries him (Italian man), she insults the memory of Charles, she insults Irma, she insults me. Therefore I forbid her" (Forster 14). Philip wasn't even allowed a moment of rest after he returned from his work and decreed by his mother to "start in half an hour for Monteriano" (Forster 14). Despite of being in a 'painful position' Philip acquiesced to her decision unquestioningly in a low voice, "I will do all I can" (Forster 14). Philip couldn't bear to see his mother in a distraught state, therefore like a prodigal son he reluctantly departed for Italy internalizing his mother's conviction.

Philip lived a quotidian life under the supervision of his mother. The narrator describes Philip's life as a teenager, who had been keenly conscious of his defects yet was unable to give a shape and significance to his identity. Philip often sighed after examining his features in a

looking glass “I shall never carve a place for myself in the world” (Forster 51). On reaching Monteriano Philip was in no mood for hospitality, he was anxious to ask Lilia to reconsider her decision regarding her engagement with an Italian resident she met on her journey. The systematic oppression of his mother had made him oblivious to the architectonics of life, he was so convulsed with the desire to execute the task given by his mother that on arriving in Monteriano he furnished Lilia with explanation of undertaking the arduous journey: “I have come all the way on business” (Forster 54). David Winnicott has described his concept of ‘primary maternal preoccupation’ in which the state of maternal hypersensitivity leads to smother the infant with so much love, that it fails to establish connection with the exterior world and is always hounded by the fear of the vagaries of separation. Philip’s thoughts were enveloped with the desire to appease his mother’s self-esteem, combined with the fear that if he failed he would lose his mother’s love .Before striking the deal with Lilia and her new fiancé, he had been thinking for “three days,” “what he should say” inventing a “dozen of imaginary conversations in all of which his logic and eloquence procured him certain victory” (Forster 17). Philip stooped to the nadir of snobbery to break the engagement between Lilia and Italian man Gino, that he considered offering Gino a hefty sum of thousand lire to step off the alliance. The narrator subtly defines Sawston as the inception of Philip’s thoughts. The reference to Sawston i.e., the place of Philip’s birth can be perceived as a metonymic reference to the womb of his mother, therefore suggestive of the fact that the roots of Philip’s ideologies was inextricably associated with his mother.

The prospect of the ‘reigning influence of the maternal figure’ can be traced back to the life of the author, who himself was brought up in an atmosphere inordinately dominated by women. After losing his father, E. M Forster lived with his mother till the age of thirty. Forster’s deep attachment with his mother is evident from his letter to Malcolm Darling informing him about his decision to visit India and the terrible misery it would cause to his mother, “I know

she will mind me going, even if she urges it, and that she will be lonely without me." Again in a letter to J. R Ackerely he announced his close proximity to his mother, who for him was the unending source of love, "although my mother has been intermittently tiresome for the last thirty years, cramped and warped my genius, hindered my career, blocked and buggered up my house, and boycotted my beloved, I have to admit that she has provided a rich subsoil where I have been able to rest and grow" (Forster 137-142).

According to Lacan, the symbolic father is not necessarily the same as the biological father, but rather any agency that separates the child from its mother and introduces a 'desire' of freedom in it. In the novel, Philip is posited vis-à-vis the symbolic order not through his interaction with the figure of a human father but the spatio-temporal setting of Italy. According to the Lacanian terminology, the entry of the subject into the symbolic realm acquaints it with the merits of language i.e., expression, freedom and sense of identity. From Lacan's point of view as stated in his magnum opus *Ecrits* a subject's entry into the Symbolic introduces him to a 'lack' and 'gap' that deprives him of the plenitude it witnessed in the dyadic relationship with its mother. However, the symbolic stage registers a desire within the subject to assume the mantle of his own life and encourages it to look beyond the horizon of the maternal. It was at the age of twenty-two when Philip first came to Italy for a short visit with some of his cousins and returned with the "air of a prophet" who would "either remodel Sawston or reject it" (Forster 51). Philip's entry into the cultural dominance of Italy a surrogate father, helped him constitute a subjectivity and favored him with the process of self-approbation, championing the availability of new possibilities but it had initiated an ideological rift between him and his mother. On his return from Italy, he "had shocked half a dozen people, squabbled with his sister, and bickered with his mother" (Forster 52). Nevertheless, on returning to the promised land of dyadic unity his fleet-footed obsession with his self-centeredness evaporated and he "resumed his placid life" (Forster 52). The resumption of the dyadic relationship albeit brought

disillusionment and dubiousness to Philip, it was a victory for Mrs Herriton who found it "convenient to have her family united" (Forster 52).

It has been recorded that in the dyadic relationship between the mother and her child, the child receives a sense of completeness because of the fecundity she confers on him by taking care of all his needs, however, there is an anxiety that develops within him, which Freud viewed as the morbid anxiety of being separated, a fear instilled within the child when it cannot find the mother near him, and he assumes that he has either eaten her up or destroyed her. Melanie Klein has named this anxiety as "depressive anxiety." When Mrs Herriton implored Philip and Harriet to conceal the news of Lilia's death due to childbirth from her own daughter Irma, under the ostensible reason that it could collude the mind of the little girl on knowing about her mother's ignominious marriage with an Italian. Philip although was dissatisfied with his mother's illogical reasoning, decided not to oppose her. "All his life he had been her puppet. She had let him worship Italy, and reform Sawston – just as she had let Harriet be low church. She had let him talk as much as he liked. But when she wanted a thing she always got it" (Forster 64). Because opposing his mother could probably offend her and turn their relationship acerbic, which he couldn't afford to bear, Philip complied to his mother's poignant request, and ecstatically responded, "Here beginneth the New Life, then" (Forster 54).

'Narcissistic injury' is a phrase coined by Freud, according to whom narcissistic injury occurs when one's true self has been revealed, making the subject experience a fall from grace. Mrs Herriton experienced narcissistic injury when Carolina Abbott, the close friend of Lilia and the only witness before whom Lilia exchanged vows of marriage with her Italian lover Gino, questioned her about her responsibility towards the baby begotten by Lilia. In his explanation of the concept of Narcissistic injury Heinz Kohut stated that one's narcissistic rage made them prone to oversensitivity and instigated them with the need to take total control of their environment, for righting a wrong or for undoing a hurt. Caroline's impulsive inquiry to

Mrs Herriton about the child pierced her ego and she instinctively wanted to alleviate her suffering by sending Philip and Harriet to fetch the child from the vicious influence of its Italian father Gino, not out of the sense of responsibility but in order to satiate her impinged ego. "You must go to Monteriano," Mrs Herriton pleaded to Philip, "Harriet shall go too," and before Philip could discern his judgement, Mrs Herriton planned the whole thing and was looking out for trains (Forster 68).

On Philip's second visit to Italy the metaphorical realm of symbolic under the pretext of fulfilling the desire of his mother to fetch Lilia's child, his mind was initially preoccupied with the task consigned to him. Like a prodigal son Philip constantly reminded his sister of his mother's plans: "did mother explain it all to you?" (Forster 69) According to the Lacanian deliberation on the process of subjectivity construction, when a subject enters into the cultural realm of the Symbolic it engenders a sense of self, through the acquisition of language and culture, and the unconscious mind of the subject separates itself from the ambivalent childhood world of objects and its mother's care. However, the entry into the symbolic realm provokes a loss, the loss of the mother's infinitude, which deludes oneself to search for the lost completion. Thereafter the individual is constantly driven by a desire to find substitute for the lost object. A sense of alienation develops in Philip once again the very evening he reaches Italy. Fascinated by the charms of the new world away from the surveillance of his mother, he assumes himself as a coherent and self-governing unit. "What did the baby matter when the world was suddenly right way up?" Philip smiled admiring the beauty of the place (Forster 82). But the admirable change in Philip transpired a traumatic essence of loss, engendering a desire within him. Desire Lacan affirms is an unconscious wish, the desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the product of difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second. Philip's unadulterated relationship with his mother abruptly severed in his self-translation made him search for a replacement. Motivated by the

fundamental crisis of the object of desire and the recurrent required feeling of completion he shifts his attention to Caroline Abbott, the only woman other than his sister who accompanied him to Italy. The narrator notes, “he (Philip) watched her in silence, and was more attracted to her than he had ever been before. She really was the strangest mixture” (Forster 82). In search of the pre-symbolic harmony that existed between Philip and his mother, he supplanted his pathetic aversion towards Caroline with an extraordinary likeness towards her: “Philip found a certain grace and lightness in his companion which he had never noticed in England” (Forster 83).

Philip’s awareness of his steady journey towards his subjectivity coerced him to explore the cultural realm more and more. Philip marveled at his own dynamic transition in the symbolic order. Philip’s sojourn to the Opera at Monteriano on the very strenuous day of arriving in Italy along with Caroline and Harriet sums up his over-enthusiasm in mingling with the new realm. Philip was so blinded in his enterprise for an alternative existence away from his imposed identity validated by his mother, that he didn’t realize that he was converting the rescue mission of Lilia’s child to an “amusement on the very first day of its mission” (Forster 86). Having submitted himself to the power and privileges that the symbolic realm of Italy procured for him, Philip deliberately forgave Gino for treating him insolently during their first meeting. “I’ve forgiven him. Oh, but he has a sense of humor!” justified Philip to Caroline Abbott (Forster 91). Even when Caroline Abbott had gone to fetch the baby alone from the pervasive influence of Gino, without the knowledge of Philip, he didn’t reveal any signs of aggression. Rather he demurely confided in Caroline that he believed the she couldn’t harbour any innocuous intentions regarding the rescue of Lilia’s child. Philip agreeably began to dismiss his initial qualms associated with Miss Abbott: “he was content to observe her beauty and to profit by the tenderness and wisdom that dwelt within her” (Forster 108).

The abnormal craving to possess Miss Caroline in the land of romance that Italy conferred on Philip, was brought to halt when Harriet suddenly went missing from the hotel that they had rented at Monteriano. On realizing that Harriet had furtively connived to steal the baby from Gino's house, yielding herself to the grotesque temptation of winning the favour of her mother, Philip was dragged back to his senses: "he was frightened at the episode; the whole of life had become unreal" (Forster 115). Alder Alfred from his own early experiences argued that a child's place in the family (birth order) was a key determinant in the formation of his personality. According to him a child's psychic development and potential could be veritably determined by understanding the family constellation. He stated that girls were more likely than boys to feel inferior as they were considered to be less valuable since antiquity. Harriet's zealous attempt to kidnap Lilia's baby to fulfill the wish of her mother, when she sensed the relative slackness of her brother in the rescue expedition, sums up her wish to attain a superior position against her brother Philip, who she believed was more close to her mother.

The apocalyptic death of Lilia's baby under the indiscreet supervision of Harriet, shuddered Philip and made him realize that he was momentarily deflected from the actual mission spearheaded by his mother. Stung by his conscience for neglecting his mother and utterly vexed at his own selfish desire to supplant his mother's love with the want of a female partner, he decided that, "he, and no one else, must take the news of it (baby's death) to Gino" (Forster 122). Philip acknowledged the crude weakness of his character and confronted Gino as a gesture of penitence for his infidelity towards his mother.

Lacan in his conceptual framework about the formation of ego returns to Freud's definition of the ego as a site of narcissistic self-idealization. Once the subject enters the Symbolic stage and becomes exposed to binary oppositions it is unable to go back to the imaginary order of plenitude and blissfulness. The 'desire' initiated in the symbolic realm in absence of the mother, is never fully satisfied and only transcends to another desire. Philip who

becomes the socially constructed subject in the new atmosphere of Italy away from the subversive potential of his mother, is unable to detach himself from his new identity and his newly acquired self-competence. Philip's consolidated assertion to leave Sawston the place of his birth for London sums up his desire to be independent. His resolute reply to Caroline on being asked about his future plans, bears testimony of his new subjectivity: "so that is my plan – London and work." Envisioning alternative spaces for himself , Philip obdurately writes to his mother from Monteriano, "trying to explain things," despite being aware that Mrs Herriton would never approve of his freedom (Forster 130). Moreover, on learning about Miss Caroline's infatuation for Gino, which she had carefully concealed until their final departure from Italy, Philip shifts his 'desire' from her to the immense array of possibilities of freedom and happiness away from the sequestered banality of existence under the influence of his mother.

The novel ends with the brief description of Philip's eyes fixated on the Campanile of Airole, but "he saw instead the fair myth of Endymion" (Forster 135). The subtle reference to Endymion in the departing scene can be interestingly interpreted as a metonymy to Philip's condition. Perhaps Philip envisioned himself as Endymion the fair Aeolian shepherd in mythology, who had spent much of his life in perpetual sleep. Philip too had been living a closeted existence within the domestic core of his mother's household before entering into the symbolic realm of culture and conventions. Philip's idealization of Endymion at the time of his departure literalizes his resignation from immobility. The novel thus portrays the journey of Philip from a confined state under the excessive love of the maternal to a liberated one fostered by the realm of the symbolic order. Despite of being bludgeoned with a series of contradictions and discontinuities Philip is able to transcend his static codified entity under the template of his mother through the transformative power of the symbolic realm of Italy and able to foreground an entity of his own.

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