
A Psychoanalytical Study of Somerset Maugham's *The Kite* from the perspective of Freud

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Abstract: William Somerset Maugham's short story *The Kite* is replete with the Freudian concept of psychoanalysis. The story deals with the Oedipus Complex (with the help of a number of other associated Freudian concepts), in which the child feels an extreme and unnatural attachment to the parent of his opposite sex. In this story, Herbert and his mother, Mrs. Sunbury, feel an unnatural affection towards each other.

From Herbert's early childhood, Mrs. Sunbury keeps control over her son. She flies a kite (the symbol of emotional attachment) with him. She is the jealous mother who is unwilling to share her son with a wife. Herbert's marriage with Betty Bevan separates him from his mother.

However, Herbert cannot be happy with his marriage. The kite-flying aggravates the situation. Actually, it is not merely a plaything. It symbolises his dependence on, as well as affection for, his mother, whom Betty dislikes for the same reason as that of Mrs. Sunbury. Herbert's marriage with Betty is only a temporary break in his cosy relationship with his mother, as he is fixed in the Oedipal stage. Betty's smashing the kite completely separates him from his wife, as it is a kind of matricide to him. However, Herbert's father is not involved in the mother-son relationship.

More often, the characters are caught in the conflict between the pleasure and reality principles, and in Herbert, it takes a more complicated form, as he is taken by death drives in the end. As even after marriage, Herbert's mind is still controlled by his subconscious desire and passion for his mother, the whole matter becomes problematic.

Keywords: Freudian, Oedipal stage, reality principle, death drives, subconscious.

Introduction: Like many of his short stories, William Somerset Maugham's *The Kite* deals with the intricate human psyche. The story is an excellent example of the Freudian Oedipus

Complex, which is a kind of manifestation of infantile sexuality in which the child feels an unnaturally and abnormally strong bonding with the parent of his opposite sex while keeping distance from others if he gets stuck in the Oedipal stage (the third stage of the five psychosexual stages). In this story, Herbert, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Sunbury, feels an unnatural affection for his mother and wants to be guided and controlled by her. Likewise, the mother is very fond of him. The notion of the Oedipus Complex comes from the Greek mythological story of King Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta and had children by her without knowing the true nature of both his acts. Freud, the Austrian doctor and psychoanalyst, once said – “His (Oedipus) destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so” (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* 280). Again, in the October 15, 1897 letter, he wrote revealing his own feeling and mental drive, “I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood...” (Freud to Fliess 272). In Maugham’s story *The Kite*, the excessive love and affection of Herbert for his mother and vice versa is manifest, but surprisingly enough, this hatred towards his father is absolutely absent. The reason behind this absence of hatred is due to the meek and submissive nature of Mr. Samuel Sunbury, Herbert’s father, who is totally in control of his wife, obeying her every advice, and who does not make a mess in their mother-son relationship.

Literature Review: *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud is a foundational work in the field of psychoanalysis. In this book, he suggests that dreams are the expressions of repressed thoughts and desires, including those related to the Oedipus Complex. In his “Chapter 5: The Material and Sources of Dreams” (specifically in “Section D: Typical Dreams”) of this book, he introduces and discusses the concept of the Oedipus Complex, which explains the child’s feelings and desires for his opposite-sex parent. He argues that this is a universal phenomenon that, to a large extent, shapes an individual’s personality and behaviour. Freud, in this book, also introduces the concepts of the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious.

Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* is a seminal work in which he introduces the concept of polymorphous perversity in association with infantile sexuality. His notion is that human sexuality is inherently perverse and that children are born with innate sexual instincts evolving through five psychosexual stages. The book discusses the concepts of the Oedipus Complex, repression, and sublimation to explore the intricate dynamics of human desire.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud speaks of a tripartite structure of the human psyche to reveal the complex relationships among the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. He divides the human psyche into three components, namely, the id, ego, and superego. The function of the id is based on instinctual drives and desires instant satisfaction, guided by the

pleasure principle. The ego is rational and adaptive, and mediates between the id and reality. The superego incorporates moral principles and influences the ego's decisions.

In his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud redefined his earlier notion of drive, which had primarily been associated with 'eros' and 'libido' under the influence of the pleasure principle. Challenging the traditional notions of human behaviour, he introduces the concept of the death drives and reveals a complex interplay between life and death instincts. Death drives refer to the tendency towards destruction and annihilation and often find their expressions in such behaviours as aggression or re-enacting traumatic experiences.

In his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud discusses the concept of sublimation, which is the process of redirecting one's otherwise unacceptable thoughts and impulses into socially acceptable forms. He says that it is an important factor in the development of civilization, as it allows an individual to satisfy his/her instinctual needs in a socially acceptable manner.

Research Gap: So far, various Freudian interpretations have been made to analyse Maugham's short story *The Kite*. The things that are specific about this paper are to interpret the text minutely as well as delve deep into the minds of the characters by exploring the intricate and complex interplay amongst the id, ego, and superego, and also between the pleasure and reality principle. Besides, the Freudian death drive is also applied here to make an analysis of Herbert's mind.

Research Objectives: This paper aims at analysing the text of *The Kite* by Maugham from various Freudian concepts of psychoanalysis. By delving deep into the text, it tries to make a deep probe into the minds of the characters as well as their complex and intricate relationships with each other. Apart from the quotes of Freud and others, this paper uses textual quotations to support the thesis.

Discussion: The central theme of the story *The Kite* concerns family matters and problems. Herbert is brought up in quite a different way than any other average child. From his early childhood, Mrs. Sunbury keeps control over her son. In bringing him up, she is motivated by a kind of super-ego. She creates a lot of absurd rules of etiquette to exercise extraordinary control over her son's manner, behaviour, and attitude. In doing so, she does not allow him to express his mind or motives of his own accord. She teaches him to take his food in an authentic manner. A snobbish woman, Mrs. Sunbury does not allow him to mix "with a lot of riff-raff" (Maugham, *The Kite* 221). But she herself mixes with the common while flying a kite with her son, though retaining a dignified manner and attitude while coming into contact with them. Here she is guided by the reality principle (ego).

The theme of the Oedipus Complex comes to the surface in the context of Herbert's twenty-first birthday. Mrs. Sunbury speaks highly of his good health. But when Herbert's father makes a reference to his (Herbert's) marriage, she becomes extremely rough in temper

and harshly tells him not to put such “silly ideas into his head” (Maugham, *The Kite* 222). “I don’t hold with a man marrying till he knows his own mind” (Maugham, *The Kite* 222), says she, and no one, according to her, becomes mature or knows “his own mind till he’s thirty or thirty-five” (Maugham, *The Kite* 222). She typifies, obviously, the jealous mother who tries her utmost to hold on to her son while keeping him away from any other woman in the world. Her inherent jealousy of another woman as a sexual partner of her son comes to the surface.

Then comes the girl in the life of Herbert. His mother feels extremely jealous when she hears from him that he has asked a young lady called Betty Bevan to come to tea in his house. For Mrs. Sunbury, it is a bolt from the blue. Her immediate response is “You done what?” (Maugham, *The Kite* 225), forgetting her grammar. Describing the situation under which they come to know each other, in answer to the question put by Mrs. Sunbury of how they became acquainted, Herbert makes a reference to Betty’s bag falling down and his help in picking it up and her giving him thanks. Mrs. Sunbury defiantly tells him that dropping the bag is an old trick used by Miss Bevan, thus making it clear to Herbert that it was only a pretence by the girl in order to be friendly with him. However, here she is guided by the reality principle (ego) and tries to put aside her jealousy and keeps it hidden in the preconscious mind. Thus, Mrs. Sunbury agrees to Betty’s visit to her house. When the girl comes, she (Mrs. Sunbury) is guided not only by her ego but also by a kind of super-ego. So, she ushers her into their sitting room (instead of the dining room), which they do not usually use for eating purposes. Of course, her jealousy of and hatred for the girl is evident here, as her real motive is not to welcome her guest cordially, but to show that they are socially superior to Betty. Thus, though Mrs. Sunbury tries to suppress her jealousy, she cannot hide her conscious self. Her real self comes out when she tries her utmost to insult Betty in an indirect manner and to make her feel uneasy in every possible way. Mrs. Sunbury even decides not to help her in finding a way to leave the house in order to make her feel more and more uneasy in her clutch. Herbert goes a little way with Betty on her return home. On returning, Herbert rebukes his mother for behaving towards the girl in such an adverse manner and for insulting that “poor” (Maugham, *The Kite* 229) girl, and his mother firmly and curtly tells him that she has behaved towards the girl in such a rough and harsh manner so that “she’s never coming here again...” (Maugham, *The Kite* 229). But, as an adult, he wants to break away from the cosy mother-son relationship and enjoy his adult life fully. It is also important to note that Betty strangely resembles Herbert’s mother in her youth with “the same sharp features and the same rather small beady eyes...” (Maugham, *The Kite* 227), though she adds to her natural beauty by artificial help, which Mrs. Sunbury intensely abhors. All these facts are replete with Freudian thought on the Oedipus Complex, according to which a person’s mother fixation may result in choosing a sexual partner who resembles his mother. So, Herbert searches for a mother figure, and in Betty, he finds it. It may also be read in terms of the Freudian notion of sublimation [one of the six defence mechanisms which the ego makes use of to make a compromise in a conflict between the id (guided by the pleasure principle) and the super-ego (very strict regarding morality and conscience)], which is the satisfying of an impulse with a substitute object that is socially the most acceptable. He feels tormented by the internal conflict between the id and the super-

ego. If he is motivated by the pleasure principle, he is to take his mother as his object of sexual desire, but he knows that this is not possible, i.e. socially not acceptable. So, he chooses Betty, who becomes an alternative to his mother-love. Thus, Herbert's sexual desire for his mother (which he holds in his subconscious mind) becomes modified and is elevated into his choice of being married to Betty, as this is socially acceptable. However, hearing Herbert's information that he is engaged to her, Mrs. Sunbury gasps and calls him "fool" (Maugham, *The Kite* 229). But here she shows her prudence and, guided by the reality principle (ego), she tries to repress her feelings for the next few days. Then, once guided by the super-ego and also by her jealousy towards Betty, she says to her son, "I dare say we shall be able to do without you" (Maugham, *The Kite* 230), and she does not visit Herbert and her daughter-in-law.

As time passes, their romantic feelings subside. Betty calls kite-flying a child's play or hobby. "You know what women are," Betty said: "Be your age" (Maugham, *The Kite* 232) – says Herbert to his father when he asks Herbert why he has not bought a kite. Actually, the kite is not merely a plaything. To Betty, it acquires a symbolic suggestion. In her subconscious mind, she holds the notion that the kite is a representation and continuation of Herbert's extreme affection for and attachment to, as well as his dependence on, his mother, whom she dislikes for the same reason as Mrs. Sunbury. She feels that it is this kite or kite-flying which keeps him away from her and keeps him from giving his whole attention to her and diverts his mind to "that old beach" (Maugham, *The Kite* 235). His mother is nearest to Herbert. In fact, Herbert cannot keep himself away from his mother, and this acquaintance and marriage is only a temporary break in that mother-son relationship, as he is stuck in the phallic or Oedipal stage. For this reason, even when he is separated from his mother after his marriage with Betty, mentally he is still dependent on her. So, in spite of Betty's disapproval, he goes to the common (park) every Saturday to fly a kite with his mother. Mrs. Sunbury also becomes very impatient, as is evident from her words to Mr. Sunbury – "I knew from the beginning he wouldn't be able to keep away from it" (Maugham, *The Kite* 232–233) ["it" refers to the kite, which is the symbol of emotional attachment between Mrs. Sunbury and Herbert]. She is very anxious to be nearest to him who is now separated for the time being. So, they begin to fly a kite. It may be said, in a sense, that Herbert has not got his umbilical cord cut. In order to fly a kite, one is required to have contact with it all the time by means of a string or cord. So, Herbert Sunbury and his mother are continually in contact with each other by the string of the kite. His mother tugs on the kite string to maintain control over her son. It is also evident that as he gets older, she purchases larger and more costly kites for him. The reason is to make him close to her and also to be close to him. However, Herbert's kite-flying with his mother arouses Betty's sexual jealousy, and it becomes unbearable to her. As H. Jackson Brown quotes, "Love is when the other person's happiness is more important than our own." However, Betty is more concerned with her own happiness than Herbert's. She feels distressed watching Herbert fly kites with his mother, as it symbolizes—both for her and for Herbert—his emotional closeness to his mother. This is why she finds it difficult to forgive him.

She decides to break off her relationship with Herbert, and he comes back to his mother's house, that cosy and soothing place. After a few days, Betty becomes conscious of the reality of her situation and is guided by the reality principle (ego) and puts aside her super-ego. She wants to live with him in spite of his kite-flying. But Herbert is stubborn in his decision as he becomes fixated in the Oedipal stage permanently. So, he does not agree with her. In her fit of violent rage, she smashes Herbert's kite, which is the cause of her separation from him. Herbert cannot endure this, as he thinks that it is an attempt to break off their cosy mother-son relationship. Now he is guided by his super-ego. "Well, she never gets another penny out of me..." (Maugham, *The Kite* 242) – says he in his violent rage. At last, the case goes to court. The magistrate orders him to pay Betty a weekly allowance of twenty-five shillings. But Herbert cannot see the reality and rather accepts the jail term than pay the alimony, as he tells the magistrate, "I said I wouldn't pay her and I won't, not after she smashed my kite. And if you send me to prison I'll go to prison" (Maugham, *The Kite* 243). He is unable to forgive Betty because, to him, destroying the kite feels like an act of symbolic matricide. And here he is overwhelmed by the complex interplay between Freudian life and death instincts, or perhaps it is his pleasure to be aggressive towards Betty, who was, according to him, the reason for the separation between himself and his mother. His death drives (which is a later Freudian concept that tends to make an individual behave in a destructive or risky way) can be seen in his treatment of Betty in such an aggressive manner and in refusing to pay the alimony, even if it may result in his own destruction. His death drive can also be seen in the renewal of his intimate bond with his mother, whose over-dominating nature seemed too suffocating to him earlier. As he is taken by death drives, he wants to re-enact his traumatic experiences with his mother, who once created a mess in his relationship with Betty. It can be that Herbert wants again to be in control of his mother to neutralize his otherwise traumatic experiences with her. The kite, for Herbert, has long been the symbol of independence, hope, pride, and accomplishments. It has been a means of escape from the monotony of life. But as he refuses to pay the alimony and goes to prison, it reverses its role by assuming its negative meaning, as now he is out of control of his own life and is controlled by his wife, thus being at the mercy of his surroundings. However, it can also be that Herbert goes to jail to re-establish control of his own life. Again, it is also possible that in his suffering Herbert finds, to quote Winston Churchill, "the means of inspiration and survival." He chooses suffering rather than paying the alimony to Betty, who has been a thorn in this intimate mother-son relationship. Or it may also mean that he makes atonement for his act of disobeying his mother (by going away from her) by torturing himself and by refusing to pay Betty so that she may suffer more acutely than himself and also more than his mother.

Conclusion: The theme of *The Kite* is rooted in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In this story, however, a different type of manifestation of the Oedipus Complex is found, as the father does not become a hindrance or obstacle in the mother-son relationship. He always keeps his temper and is guided (or too much dominated) by his wife and obeys her each and every order. He becomes a silent and helpless observer of the quarrel between Herbert and his mother. Mrs. Beatrice Sunbury is controlled, neat, and ordered in her attire and appearance;

but underneath this neatness, there lurks the viciousness of her character. Betty is a fashionable girl. She wants to win Herbert's heart by her sexual charm. But her sexual charm is defeated by the assurance of succour and comfort given to him by his mother in their house. Both Mrs. Sunbury and Herbert's wife are wrong in their over-possessive attitude towards Herbert. Had they recognized the fact that, like each individual, Herbert has his own personal identity which can attain its accomplishment in its own way, they would not have been over-possessive in such a manner. Herbert, though aged, is totally dependent on his mother. He cannot endure the confusion and tumult inevitable in married life. Instead, he prefers the relief and order in his mother's house. As Sigmund Freud says in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, "Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility." So, Herbert avoids responsibility and freedom and wants to live under his mother's control and guidance. He fears facing real life. As Maria Montessori says, "The greatest gifts we can give our children are the roots of responsibility and the wings of independence." But Mrs. Sunbury does not agree to give even the necessary freedom and responsibility suited to Herbert's age. On the other hand, Herbert's Oedipus Complex has stunted his normal mental growth. His mind is controlled by his subconscious desire and passion for his mother (almost a mother-lover), which he cannot get rid of. A single statement of his reveals the Oedipal nature of his relationship with his mother – "I never made a bigger mistake in my life than when I left home, Mum" (Maugham, *The Kite* 238). His unnatural bonding with and attachment to his mother—that is, his mother-fixation—proves fatal.

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