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The Victimised Victor: A Study of Parental Alienation in Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke*.

Abstract

Chuck Palahniuk, one of the renowned contemporary American novelists has attained much critical acclaim as a writer of fiction. The heterogeneity of themes that he deals with in his compositions makes him a vibrant and conspicuous explorer of diverse American literary themes including the theme of alienation. The novel *Choke* is a ground breaking novel portraying the struggle and conflict of an individual in essentially chaotic and deteriorating American society. *Choke* is fourth novel written by Chuck Palahniuk and it was published in 2001. *Choke* displays a psychologically unstable character who suffers from the disturbing results of a fatherless infancy and an altogether different and disturbed mother-son world. Thus this paper seeks to analyse the causes and consequences of parental alienation encoded in the text.

Keywords: Parental alienation, Basic anxiety, Basic hostility, Karen Horney.

Victor Mancini the main protagonist of the novel is a sex addict devoid of any parental love and affection who works in thematic Colonial Park. The plot reveals that he does not know his father much and his mother is not able to raise him like a normal child because of her unconventional and erratic personality. The mother-son worlds are altogether different and they live in two diverse secluded worlds. Victor's mother Ida holds eccentric views about hierarchy and codes of society. She constantly rebels against the governmental organizations, systematic and ordered structures and often ends up in the prison. Devoid of a mother, Victor spends his early years moving from one foster family to another. Ida frequently kidnaps him from his foster parents thus deterring victor's relationship with these foster parents. Moreover she herself could not pay attention to the needs of Victor as she often lands up in prison leaving behind agitated and confused Victor. He has to drop out of medical school in his second year to earn enough money to pay the bills of St. Anthony, where Ida is kept as a patient. He works as an Irish indentured servant in colonial Dunsboro, a re-enactment theme park set in eighteenth century. To earn money, he feigns as if he is choking in restaurants and waits for someone to save him from dying. Keeping detailed notes about the people who have saved him, he sends them postcards telling how he suffers from poverty. Victor's dysfunctional life is further challenged when Ida's supposed doctor, Paige Marshall, reads Ida's dairy. Paige claims that Victor can be the son of Jesus Christ as his mother is impregnated with the foreskin of Jesus in an experimental research. At first, Victor does not accept Paige's claim but in time he decides to serve for the welfare of humanity. After he kills his mother unintentionally by choking her with the chocolate pudding, it becomes evident that Paige is not a doctor but another patient of St. Anthony, and Victor is not Ida's son but she stole him from a baby stroller in Iowa.

The novel ends up with Victor realising that “it’s our job to invent something better” and not let the world decide how we should live (292). Palahniuk has very intelligently set the title of the book as *Choke* since the main protagonist not only literally chokes himself to earn both money and sympathy, but also chokes psychologically as he always craves for love and affection. Kavaddo writes choking “reveals the liminal state victor occupies in between the life and death (*Chuck* 138). So choking here implies first the state of utter discomfort and vexed life and secondly it is a defence mechanism to avert the gloomy sense of alienation by gaining affection, sympathy and friendly relations who actually care for him.

The phenomenon of parental alienation includes the programming of a child by one parent to vilify and stigmatize the other, targeted parent. This is done purposefully to undermine and interfere with the child’s natural relationship with that parent and is frequently an indication of a parent's powerlessness to isolate from the couple strife and concentrate on the necessities of the child. Consequently such denigration brings about the child’s emotional dismissal of the targeted parent and the departure of a proficient and loving parent from the child’s life. Psychiatrist Richard Gardner built up the idea of "parental alienation syndrome" 20 years back, characterizing it as:

...a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent. (5)

The children of estranged parents want to maintain a healthy and static relationship with both of their parents, and they want to be excluded from their parent’s conflict. But in some cases parents

in order to reinforce their parental character expect from their children to choose sides. In more outrageous circumstances, they encourage the child's dismissal of the other parent. In the most extraordinary cases, kids are controlled by one parent to loathe the other, regardless of youngster's intrinsic want to love and be adored by both the parents.

In the context of this novel these targeted parents are foster parents with whom Victor Mancini has developed an innate desire to connect emotionally. He wants a strong and static relationship with these foster parents. But his mother does not want him to have an emotional bonding with these foster parents. She constantly brainwashes him in order to develop a sense of hatred towards this targeted parent. Moreover she frequently kidnaps Victor from the care of these parents and does not even care for his feelings and thoughts. In other words, she forces Victor to grow up in extreme harsh and uncaring conditions and he is debilitated both physically as well as emotionally. This debilitation is one of the major reason for his alienation and that he is not able to love or connect emotionally to anyone in later part of his life as he always runs away from the ones who actually love and care for him. There is a passage in the text that demonstrates this brainwashing of victor to denigrate the parental identity of the foster mother in whose care victor was supposed to live:

“You already have me,” the Mommy said. “So what do you call this foster one?”

Mrs. Jenkins.

“And do you like her?” the Mommy said, and turned to look at him for the first time.

And the little boy pretended to make up his mind and said, “No?”

“Do you love her?”

“No.”

“Do you hate her?”

And this spineless little worm said, “Yes?”

And the Mommy said, “You got that right.” She leaned down to look him in the eyes and said, “How much do you hate Mrs. Jenkins?”

And the little cooz said, “Lots and lots?”

“And lots and lots and lots,” the Mommy said. She put her hand for him to take and said, “We have to be fast. We have a train to catch” (66).

It is noteworthy here that the questions Victor’s mother Ida asked are framed in order to extract a response that aimed at fuelling hatred against the targeted parent. Furthermore Victor just pretends to make up his mind but he knows he has to answer what his mother wants to listen. He is not able to express his true feelings under the influence of his mother’s over possessive stance and this attitude remains with him throughout his life as we see later that he is not able to express his true feelings for Dr. Paige. This hatred towards the foster parents has been nurtured and nourished by Victor’s mother Ida, “And pulling him through the doors, she said, ‘And just in case the police or anybody asks you later on, I’m going to tell you all the dirty, filthy things this so-called foster mother did to you every time she could get you alone’” (66). This discussion above is in consonance with what Amy Baker states in her book *Surviving Parental Alienation: A Journey of Hope and Healing* where she maintains that:

Parental alienation involves a set of strategies, including bad-mouthing the other parent, limiting contact with that parent, erasing the other parent from the life and mind of the child (forbidding discussion and pictures of the other parent), forcing the child to reject the other parent, creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous, forcing the child to choose between the parents by means of threats of withdrawal of affection, and belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent” (qtd. in “Psychology Today”).

When Victor grows to be a man he is not happy with his life and the reason is that he cannot forget the past. He cannot forget the way his mother treated him when he was a child. Victor has developed what can be termed as schizoid behaviour as a consequence of his unfulfilled familial relationships. His childhood has remarkable similarities with that of the narrator of *Fight Club* in that both were raised by single mothers devoid of fatherly love. While the relationship between the narrator and his mother is not quite clear in *Fight Club*, in *Choke* Victor has an everlasting impact of his mother’s personality on him. Ida does not fit into the framework of stereotypical mother endowed with care and affection for her children and thus making Victor devoid of the maternal compassion and care.

This lack of care and affection in a person’s childhood and consequences thereof are deeply analysed by eminent social psychologist Karen Horney. Horney in her analysis of the roles that early childhood play in defining the overall personality of an individual asserts that culture, especially early childhood experiences, play a leading role in shaping human personality, either neurotic or healthy. She states difficult childhood is primarily responsible for neurotic needs. She maintains that these neurotic needs develop in relation to a pathological need to be loved by others. These neurotic needs emerge as a mean to gain affection and approval. These needs become

powerful because they are the child's only means of gaining feelings of safety. Freud can be credited as the first to make the proposition that our actions are largely influenced by the mental process of the mind. But whereas in Freudian psychoanalysis emphasis is particularly laid on the infantile sexuality and the basic instincts, Karen Horney believes that psychoanalysis should move beyond instinct theory and include the importance of cultural and social influence in determining personality. "Man is ruled not by the pleasure principle alone but by two guiding principles: safety and satisfaction" (*New ways* 73). She proposed that no single event of childhood is responsible for personality development but "the sum total of childhood experiences brings about a certain character structure, or rather, starts its development" (*New Ways* 152). Thus she concludes that "Later attitudes to others, then, are not repetitions of infantile ones but emanate from the character structure, the basis of which is laid in childhood" (*New Ways* 87). Horney believed that people need favourable conditions for their overall development. The conditions include a loving ambience, attention, care and recognition. When such conditions are met they feel safe and satisfied and this helps in realisation of their real self. But under unfavourable circumstances psychological needs are frustrated and people develop strategies of defence both within their own self and in their relationships with others. One of the ways in which these conditions are not met is the parent's inability to love their child. These parental behaviours include obvious preference for a sibling, unfair punishment, erratic behaviour, promises not kept, ridicule, humiliation, and isolation of the child from peers. If parents do not satisfy the child's needs for safety and satisfaction, the child develops feelings of "basic hostility" toward the parents and when these basic psychological needs like safety, warmth, support and esteem from parents or for that matter anyone from which child seeks affection are not met in infancy, alienation from the self takes place as defence against "basic anxiety," which Horney defined as an "insidiously increasing, all-

pervading feeling of being lonely and helpless in a hostile world” (*Neurotic* 89). To keep this anxiety down, the person devises defence strategies, which are ways to cope with people and to manipulate them with minimum damage to himself, and “constitute our effort to fulfil our now insatiable needs for safety, love and belonging, and esteem” (*Imagined* 18-19). Horney suggested that people encounter basic anxiety by embracing one of three cardinal interpersonal attitudes or “neurotic trends”: moving toward, against or away from people. Among neurotics one of three trends emerges as more dominant. The other attitudes will still be operative but will be dormant. Most normal people take any of these the neurotics are adamant to rely on only one.

Whereas normal people are mostly or completely conscious of their strategies toward other people, neurotics are unaware of their basic attitude; although normals are free to choose their actions, neurotics are forced to act; whereas normals experience mild conflict, neurotics experience severe and insoluble conflict; and whereas normals can choose from a variety of strategies, neurotics are limited to a single trend. (*Theories* 171)

Moving towards people or the compliant personality displays attitudes and behaviours that reflect a desire to move toward other people: an intense and continuous need for affection and approval, an urge to be loved, wanted, and protected. They often behave in ways others find attractive or endearing.

Assaulted by social dogmas, by his own traumatic experience, and by his permanent need to satisfy his addictions, Victor Mancini, the narrator and protagonist of *Choke*, is exposed to the addictive sins of the world, recognizes the Oedipal devil in himself, and fights an inauthentic combat against the evils of the flesh. A victim of Alzheimer’s disease, Victor’s mother is a patient

in the St. Anthony's Care Center, costing the eternally broke Victor over \$3000.00 a month. When not working or conducting liaisons with nymphomaniacs he encounters at twelve-step meetings for the sexually addicted, Victor earns extra cash by forcing himself to choke on food in crowded restaurants. Inevitably, someone saves him, so that later Victor can strike up a greeting card relationship to subtly beg for money from people who think they've become responsible for Victor's life. Flashbacks are interspersed throughout the narrative that relay with unflinching and brutal honesty Victor's childhood with his mother. Their history together is a litany of "rescues" from foster care; each new experience shared by the two brings a new lesson in paranoia and delusion. As an adult, Victor is as dedicated to emotional distance as he is to physical contact. The effect his mother has had on his consciousness is made even more apparent by Victor's grudging investigation of his mother's delusional belief that he is the son of Christ. Victor also demonstrates the oedipal tendencies in him when he states "The truth is, every son raised by a single mom is pretty much born married. I don't know, but until your mom dies it seems like all the other women in your life can never be more than just your mistress" (15). This complex can be seen as a result of Victor's manipulated behavior by his mother where she has produced in him a sense of jealousy and hatred towards the foster parents. This runs parallel to Horney conception of Oedipal complex where she desexualized Freud's Oedipal complex, claiming that the clinging to one parent and jealousy of the other was simply the result of anxiety caused by a disturbance in the parent-child relationship. Although Victor does not have much interaction with his mother during his childhood days but even her momentary presence was enough to have a deep rooted effect on Victor's conscious. He feels that his mother is the one due to whom he does not have any fatherly love and it reflects in his conversation with Nico when he admits, "in the modern Oedipal story, it's the mother who kills the father and then takes the son" (16). Due to the narcissistic nature of Ida she

emotionally abuses Victor and thus Victor develops a very low self-esteem. A sad consequence of being enmeshed with a narcissistic parent is that the child enters adulthood without having a strong sense of self. Victor feels the same sense of self when he admits, “hell, I don’t even pretend to know myself very well (21).

Considering Karen Horney’s definition of neurosis as “a disturbance in one’s relation to self and to others” (*Struggle* 368), the term neurotic is applicable to the fictional character of Victor Mancini insofar as his behaviour in the narrative can be shown to be disturbed, both within himself and in relationship with other fictional characters as Horney explains that “neuroses are essentially the result of conflicts” (*New Ways* 24). Victor Mancini is not sure of his abilities. He is not in genuine relationships with the women, but for him these women are only means of his sexual gratification. His hollow relationship with these women becomes evident when he admits, “It’s not that I don’t love these women. I love them just as much as you’d love a magazine centerfold, a fuck video, an adult website, and for sure, for a sexaholic that can be buckets of love. And it’s not that Nico loves me much, either” (17). This is the problem of his life. He’s not able to receive the love which he craves for. His childhood memories have an adverse effect on him. Lack of a father figure and his troubled relationship with his mother, produced in Victor what Karen Horney terms as “basic hostility” that ultimately leads to “basic anxiety” as a result of his inability to express his dissatisfaction over Ida’s behaviour (*Neurosis* 366). To cope up with this basic anxiety Victor develops the strategies of extreme indulgence in sexual behaviour and choking. These strategies, as already mentioned in above discussion can become indispensable needs and can result in neurotic behaviour this is what happened in Victor Mancini’s case. In Victor’s case there is a neurotic need for affection that has been denied to him by his parents and his companions. In

choking himself, he finds that kind of affection which he is seeking. Describing that ecstatic moment that he felt the first time in his life when he choked he says:

At that moment, it seemed the whole world cared what happened to him. All those people were hugging him and petting his hair. Everybody asked if he was okay. It seemed that moment would last forever. That you had to risk your life to get love. You had to get right to the edge of death to ever be saved. (3)

This kind of behaviour has been described by Horney as “moving towards others”. In this kind of neurotic personality an individual develops a compliant personality. Victor as an individual has devised submissiveness as a protective device to fulfil his need of affection. “It’s all so easy it’s not about looking good, at least not on the surface-but you still win. Just let yourself be broken and humiliated. Just your whole life, keep telling people, *I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry*” (93). At one stage of the novel Victor get to know that he is biological son of Jesus Christ. He readily accepts this when it is revealed to him by Paige Marshall. This can be viewed as intrapsychic defence wherein Victor creates an idealised self image. As mentioned earlier the idealized self-image is an attempt to solve conflicts by painting a god-like picture of oneself. Choking is obviously very painful and unpleasant but Victor believes that pain is a price he has to pay for love and the pain is worth it:

Somebody saves your life, and they'll love you forever. It's that old Chinese custom where if somebody saves your life, they're responsible for you forever. It's as if now you're their child. For the rest of their lives, these people will write me. Send me cards on the anniversary. Birthday cards. It's depressing how many people get this

same idea. They call you on the phone. To find out if you're feeling okay. To see if you maybe need cheering up. Or cash. (49)

Yet the choking is about more than Victor's unconscious quest for the symbolic surrogate parents-being somebody's "child" and receiving "birthday cards"-or even more than the crude scam for money. By choking Victor continues, "you become a legend about themselves that these people [who save him] will repeat until they die" (50). Also pain is a challenge for him; when he has his bowels blocked by anal beads, he refuses to see a doctor although he is in a great pain. In this moment of the novel Victor believes he is a son of Jesus and when Jesus withstood suffering, he can as well. The same as Jesus he wants to feel the pain to redeem his sins. But this sense of identity becomes unstable when finally it is revealed that Victor is actually a stolen baby and identity of his parents is unknown. Moreover Victor is unaware of such incidents of neurotic behaviour. Horney in her book *Our Inner Conflicts* maintains that these conflicts can only be resolved by working at the neurotic trends involved, and by so changing one's relations with others and with himself that he can dispense with the trends altogether. His redemption lies in the people he keeps at arm's length; through the development of his bond with his similarly afflicted friend Denny and the mysterious Dr. Paige Marshall, Victor comes to understand that only the human warmth of lasting relationships will provide him the peace he seeks.

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