



Oldboy: Analyzing the reflection of Greek tragedy in modern era through psychoanalytic theories

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Abstract

Oldboy reflects the ideas and thoughts of early Greek tragedy King Oedipus but with more depth and scientific as well as logical explanations. Analyzing the inner and outer conflicts between the characters of King Oedipus and Oldboy through Psychoanalytic Theories has been the main motive of the study. Together with the support of previous authentic books, articles, film reviews and self-interpretations, the essence of hidden demand inside human mind has been revealed.

Keywords: revenge, Oedipus complex, Lacan's mirror stage.

Introduction

It is desire for which human being wants to live, even someone dying wants more and maybe this is how the concepts of heaven and hell has been created but it is impossible to fulfill someone's desires because it never ends. Everyone has their own needs and desires, some they understand some they do not, some they keep inside, some they express. Though for a longtime sexual attraction towards someone related by bloods or family was and still it is a taboo there have been many literary works in western countries such as King Oedipus by Sophocles, Hamlet by Shakespeare, Sons and Lovers by D.H. Lawrence etc. related to it. Sigmund Freud being influenced by play King Oedipus and mostly Hamlet along with his research cases and later French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan shaped the theories of Psychoanalysis. However, there were a little amount of literary work which emphasized on theories of psychoanalysis in east because of more social restrictions and barriers. Oldboy a South Korean neo-noir action thriller and the second film of Vengeance Trilogy by Park Chan-Wook is perhaps the most renowned eastern tragedy that reflects Oedipus Complex of Freud and The Mirror Stage of Lacan. Oldboy with a multi narrative voice tells us the story of Oh Dae-Su, his daughter Mi-do and how a mistake of his past related to Lee Woo-jin and his sister Soo-ah ruins his life. It is often called a story of vengeance, modern time tragedy of King Oedipus but more than that it shows the sufferings of an individual person from his/her the inner and outer conflicts. Besides it's more complicated as different stories are told at a time and at the very end all the incidents get connected where it creates an ambiguity about the real protagonist of the film. Scenes like walking inside the memory tunnel, hypnotism, hallucination, wide and close up shots with long duration take within extreme red, green and violate colored lighting subtly tells a story of blindness of love when it is pure as the characters falls in love with his/her family members, consciously or unconsciously and the consequences of it. Chan-wook here takes a different voice about love as he relates sexual desire as a part of love and human existence like any other animal which can be created inside anyone for anyone but due to social and religious restrictions they

do not expresses the truth inside them though at a stage of life circumstances defines us who we really are. It was a brave attempt that through the character Jin, the director shows even someone can love his mother or sister knowingly and despite everything they will always love each other. According to the Abrahamic religion all these ideas and theories exists from the dawn of human being in earth as the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve were married though now it is seen as a taboo. However, Freud's and Lacan's theory have been an influence for Oldboy and throughout the whole paper I will analyze the film with psychoanalytic theories. Firstly, I will discuss about the film's connection to the Oedipal myth and its punishment with reference to Freud's Oedipus complex and Electra Complex. Secondly, how the film is connected to Lacan's "Mirror Stage."

2. Materials and Methods

For this research, my primary source was the film Oldboy (2003) itself. Apart from this film, I have looked into well renowned journals and mostly film reviews, blog posts etc. that I have found in internet and gathered information to complete this paper which makes it a qualitative research. Moreover, since I came up with the topic first and later searched for data in support of the claim it is also an inductive research. Besides, because of the shortage of proper research about psychoanalysis in internet I will add my own thought, interpretation to analyze the film and also connect it to the previous literary works.

3. Discussion

3.1 Movie Review

According to The Guardian, "Oldboy has touches of Kafka, and echoes of British paranoia thrillers like The Ipcress File and The Prisoner." Sequart Organization stated that, "Oldboy's violence, it's at least as complex. And as beautiful." Letterboxd mentioned that, "Oldboy is a disturbing, unsettling & violent thriller from South Korea that will traumatize most of its viewers with its harrowing & sickening depiction of revenge.....A haunting masterpiece." Hee-seung Irene Lee in his article, "My name is Oh

Dae-su': a mirrored image of Oedipus in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*" stated that, "the film seems to closely examine how the ontology of human subject as a civilized being necessitates and perpetuates the inhibition of incest on the dimension of the unconscious and its automatism."

3.2 Oldboy and Freudian Psychoanalysis

The story begins with a bizarre scene at the edge of a roof where someone is holding another person's tie and saying, "I said, I want to tell you my story" (*Oldboy*, 0:56). Then with a flashback it goes several years back and the story of Oh Dae-su starts in a police station as he has been arrested for being drunk and rough behavior. From the very beginning of the film his instability and urge for revenge is shown in a funny way as he wants to piss in the police station, he tries to fight with them again and again for wasting his time because it was his daughter's birthday and he bought a gift for her. The gift for his daughter was two wings like fairy which is the most important symbol and foreshadows its relation with the incidents of future Oh Dae-su is taken within five minutes of the cinema and the gift is left behind in the lonely street. It symbolizes that his daughter has a connection to his disappearance and the gift might be vital point to solve the mystery and I will also repeat about this gift in my discussion later. However, he finds himself locked up in a room, tries to get out but finds no way and stays fifteen years in that room. After he is set free his crucial past becomes clearer to him day by day as he seeks revenge and finds out about his existence on earth as a human through a journey of violence, revenge and unusual love. Freud's interpretation about the erotic physical attraction of a child toward his/her opposite sex parent known as Oedipus Complex or Electra Complex shown in *Oldboy* cinema is more like King Oedipus. As we can see Oedipus and Mi-do of *Oldboy* cinema both were taken away from their parents at a very young age and grew up without knowing them and here the glimpse of true identity of human beings comes out in front of us. Like any other animal we feel attracted to opposite sex, our Id influences us but when it is someone from our own family our super ego rejects it according to our moral principle. What if the relation is unknown to us? This question leads us to the life of Oedipus or Oh Dae-su as they both falls under same condition, one as son and another one as father. Oedipus married his mother Jocasta without knowing their relation similar to Oh Dae-su and Mi-do which represents Freud's interpretations about the unconscious part of human mind. According to Freud, "The ego ideal is therefore the heir of the Oedipus complex, and thus it is also the expression of the most powerful impulses and most important libidinal vicissitudes of the id" ^[1]. To Freud ego shows the true nature of human and when the id becomes aware of the desires of ego, it seeks help from superego. However, both Oedipus and Oh Dae-su were the victim of faith but of course their silly mistake or ignorance lead them to this downfall. Aristotle mentioned in his book *Poetics* that, "in the Oedipus, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect" ^[2]. The weakness, ignorance or mistake which is the reason of the protagonist downfall is known as *peripeteia* and like the "Chaos Theory" where a silly mistake can lead someone to a disastrous end. Oedipus' pride was his sin for which he did not notice his mistakes and Oh Dae-su's envy was his *peripeteia*. Being a prince, Oedipus was always arrogant and he killed his own father

for silly reason and married his mother but all this could be avoided if he would have been more concerned about his weaknesses and the truth. Oedipus like any other Greek tragedy had an influence of gods curse. On the other hand, Oh Dae-su as a modern hero and normal human, had the same kind of downfall though it was not for a prophecy, his envious mentality and own gossip about Lee Woo-jin and his sister's physical relationship victimized him and Lee Woo-jin trapped him by keeping in a room for 15 years, tricked him to have sexual relationship with his daughter Mi-do and showed Oh Dae-su that they both are same, beasts with developed brain. The slightest different was revealed at the very end and after 15 years when Oh Dae-su began to realize the wildness and darkness inside him he said to a man who was trying to commit suicide that, "Even if I am no better than a beast, don't I have the right to live" (*Oldboy*, 19:50). Furthermore, to live once more he made vengeance his path but the truth that was buried inside him made his life more miserable. It was Oedipus' eyes which did see the truth and at the end he punished himself by stabbing his eyes with golden pin and Oh Dae-su's tongue was the reason for his downfall so he also cut his tongue to punish himself punishment caused them more problems but it was not the solution. Moreover, if we look at *Oldboy*, it has more deeper meanings than Oedipus and which are different in a subtle way. King Oedipus is only a story of Oedipus's bravery, good governance, pride, his mistakes (marrying his mother and killing his father) and downfall but *Oldboy* helps us to understand human natures which are more related to Freud's discussion about id, ego and superego in his book, 'The Ego and the Id' and also his interpretations about human desires. Oh Dae-su had a thirst for vengeance because he was deprived from his need for a long time and after he was released from the room all he wanted was to fulfill them. When he first went to Mi-do's house and Mi-do went to the washroom his Id influenced him to have intercourse with her even if he had to force. Later, he suddenly grabbed her and began to force but when she hit him in his head though he was not hurt that much he again ran away from there with shame. The id inside him influenced him to bring out the beast but again with the superego he controlled himself. Mi-do and Oh Dae-su found similarities among themselves physically and mentally which motivated them to fall in love with each other. In his book, 'The Interpretations of Dreams' Freud stated that "It may be that we were all destined to direct our first sexual impulses toward our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence toward our fathers;" ^[3]. To discuss about the opposite cases like Mi-do where she feels attraction to his father unknowingly, Freud developed the underlying ideas of the Electra complex, although he did not term it as such (Carl Jung coined the term in 1913). Freud rejected the term and described it as an attempt to emphasize the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes. Freud referred to a daughter's tendency to compete with her mother for possession of her father as the feminine Oedipus attitude or the negative Oedipus complex. Freud mentioned the same thing, "King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and wedded his mother Jocasta, is nothing more or less than a wish-fulfillment - the fulfillment of the wish of our childhood" ^[3] which also represents Mi-do as her wish comes true but though in a different way. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Douglas Brick in their article, 'The Oedipus Problem in Freud and Lacan' mentioned that, "In fact, one need only read the great texts of the twenties to note that Freud has tremendous difficulty maintaining

his "official" version of the Oedipus complex" ^[4] and this has been proved by the modern scientists that the theories of Freud do not represent the whole human race but still there are lots of people having "Oedipus Complex" or "Electra Complex" which is not a sin nor a problem but it is more scientific and natural phenomenon. More than vengeance or Freud's interpretation about the problem, Park Chan-wook focused on love as a solution to remove this taboo. By showing the relationship of Woo-jin and Soo-ah which was not about just fulfilling physical desires more of a mental attraction among brother and sister, Chan-wook tried to change our view on love as we also think more about society and other people than ourselves like Oh Dae-su. This is what is represented when Woo-jin says, "My sister and I loved each other despite everything. Can you two do the same?" (Oldboy, 1:55:02). The difference between typical Freudian ideas and Chan-wook's thoughts are, along with physical needs he also focused on our mental needs and through Mi-do's support showed how Oh Dae-su finds himself.

There is also a possibility that before Oh Dae-su came to know about Mi-do's identity he found a reflection of him and his wife in Mi-do which probably has motivated him to fall in love with Mi-do. Furthermore, at the end after the climax there is another twist that begins when Oh Dae-su who was filled with hatred and vengeance suddenly changes his thoughts and began to pray for mercy to Woo-jin. Julian Darius in his article, 'Revenge, Hypnotism, and Oedipus in Oldboy' stated that, "Oh Dae-su's desperate attempts to find something — anything — that will keep Lee Woo-jin from revealing the truth to Mido culminate in Oh Dae-su spontaneously cutting out his own tongue" ^[5]. Even to convince Woo-jin, he sings the song about the school named "OLdboy" where he and Woo-jin studied. He called Mi-do not to open the gift box because it was the wings Oh Dae-su bought for her 15 years ago and if she opens it and the person who took it tells the truth everything Oh Dae-su now possesses will be lost. Though Mi-do opened it but she was not told about the identity of Oh Dae-su. After creating the famous fighting long take of Oldboy, continuous close up shot of Oh Dae-su's cruel face seeking vengeance and lots of his sacrifices, love changed him within few days and which burst out at the end. Hee-seung Irene Lee in his article, 'My name is Oh Dae-su': a mirrored image of Oedipus in Park Chan-wook's Oldboy' mentioned that, the film's implantation of incest at the heart of its revenge plot seems to shed a different light on the immediate and almost instinctual connection between incestuous wish and the fundamental condemnation of it by creating a gap between the two" ^[6]. Rather than having revenge he wanted to save Mi-do and have a better life with her because after the harsh 15 years of imprisonment he found someone whom he can love and rely on.

3.3 Lacan's Mirror Stage, a way of discovering one's true Identity

After Oh Dae-su found the truth he had two options, suicide or live with Mi-do by keeping the relationship and it was impossible but here comes the part of hypnotism, mirror stage of Lacan and discovering one's new self but Chan-wook differently showed it differently. Among the three orders of human existence The Imaginary (Mirror Stage) part of Lacan, was an influence for the film. Mirror Stage is a symbolic word Lacan used but it does not mean someone can find himself by looking at a mirror. In the cinema, after Woo-jin had his revenge and Oh Dae-su found if he

wants to live, he needs to forget the past and find out a new Oh Dae-su, he searched for the hypnotist who hypnotized him when he was imprisoned. She was convinced by Oh Dae-su's thirst for living and hypnotized him. The ideas of Mirror Stage have an effect on the last few minutes of hypnotism and during hypnotism, Oh Dae-su inside his memory finds himself in front of a mirror and slowly he split into two different men. With the deep violent colored environment in these scenes Chan-wook emphasizes on Oh Dae-su's unlimited desires. Jane Gallop in his article, 'Lacan's "Mirror Stage": Where to Begin' writes that, "Lacan's notion of the formation of the ego in mirror stage is the, 'self itself' is an idealized form abstracted from the real" ^[7]. This is what was reflected in Oldboy, as Chan-wook shows the monster inside Oh Dae-su who knows his secrets dies after moving 70 steps forward and another one who does not know anything about his past comes back to the real world as a new Oh Dae-su. Lacan mentioned about the mirror stage that it "will be the root stock of secondary identification" ^[8]. Here, the fragmented and devastated Oh Dae-su identifies himself but not through his mother or father only and only by himself. As a moral and perfect man for Mi-do he comes back who can keep her happy not as a father as a husband. Here Chan-wook showed that self is an illusion and a product of the unconsciousness as the previous self of Oh Dae-su vanishes and his new version comes to Mi-do to fulfill the gaps of his life. The problem occurs when at the very end Mi-do says him, "I love you, Oh Dae-su" (Oldboy, 1:57:18) Oh Dae-su hugs her and laughs but suddenly the laugh turns into a painful frown.

4. Conclusion

This ending reminds us about the beginning of Oh Dae-su's story, when he was taken to the room, lived a lonely life, he tried to find about the people who could have done it, he started to train him to fight and as we can see like a camera through the room like Woo-jin, we see the deepest desires and thoughts inside him. He masturbated, tried to commit suicide, talked with himself and the most interesting and important part was his thoughts about life while he kept standing in front of James Ensor's "Man of Sorrows." He understood a deep meaning about human existence and said to himself that, "Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone" (Oldboy, 7:35). This is what comes back again though he had Mi-do but he was all alone. The days he passed in the room is impossible to forget as he discovered the devil inside him there. This room represents another secret message about our religious view on creation and creator. Both this world and the room is nothing more than a prison and maybe someone is observing and experimenting on us in his/her laboratory like Woo-jin did to Oh Dae-su. With the help of opposite colored lighting such as green dim lighting during the last fight and Oh Dae-su wearing red shirt symbolizes how his fate and nature is against him. Throughout the whole film by narrating two stories together and solving it through Oh Dae-su's walking inside his memory and also at the end photographs of his daughter solves a mystery but solving puzzle was not the intention of Chan-wook. Every frame of the film, every shot, lighting and contrasting dresses or make up helps us to know about ourselves and questions us if we ever fall in love with someone with whom the society prohibits us to have relationship, what will we choose, love or society? Chan-wook's answer was toward love and hope because only love can help us during our

hardship and it is hope that keeps us alive. Human are no better than beasts, he/she feels the urge to fulfill his/her desires whether it is physical or mental and which is normal and with our superego we control ourselves. Maybe this is what makes us different from other animals. We have created right and wrong, we have created punishment and reward for our wrong doings and right doings for this life and afterlife, we have people in society who will never look if we die but we bury our desires which are not harmful to others, which are authentic and which are normal but as someone before us has decided what should be done and what not, we all live a fake life. We laugh at each other; we lie for the whole life and at the end we regret that we had everything in life but not happiness. Oldboy, with the help of romance, vengeance and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories tells us the journey to find ourselves, it does not mean that everyone has a forbidden desire. It emphasizes on how we should find happiness even if goes against everything.

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