

Feminine Melancholia: Reconfiguring the Psychoanalytic Self in K.R. Meera's *Jezebel*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine how melancholia occurs in women, its effects on reconstructing the feminine self, and to analyze K.R. Meera's *Jezebel* through contemporary psychoanalytic and feminist criticism. Meera portrays female melancholia not only as an individual psychic wound but also as a critique of the patriarchal structures that lead to the pathologization of women's longing and their destructive impact on female subjectivity. Melancholia is presented as a paradoxical form of resistance, articulating the pain and grief through the confessional narrative, drawing on theories by Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan and feminist object-relations theory. It examines the protagonist's fragmented self, which becomes melancholic through internalizing loss, but is reconstituted through critical self-awareness and recognition of the self.

Keywords: Female melancholia, psychoanalytic self, self-recognition, feminist criticism

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many feminist scholars have argued that melancholic depression strikes women harder and more often appears like carrying an invisible weight in their hearts. Feminine melancholia describes a state where women feel a profound sense of loss, a broken identity, ongoing self-doubt, and unresolved grief. This feeling of melancholia occurs due to unfulfilled desires that arise from patriarchal limits, constant cultural scrutiny, or early losses of maternal figures. With the passage of time, this feeling is strengthened as women can't find the way to let it out or expressed freely. Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power* notes, "Melancholia results when loss cannot be publicly acknowledged or grieved" (132). As a result, women internalize this sense of loss so gravely that it creates a melancholic identity that undergoes cultural and moral scrutiny, leading to trauma, silence, and guilt among women.

K.R. Meera provides a thorough examination of female melancholia and the variations in the psychoanalytic self through her protagonist, Jezebel. Jezebel's life is characterized by failed

marriage, unsuccessful romantic encounters, inherent guilt and shame and erroneous identification of a stained and impure ‘self’ which causes deep psychological wounds that are caused by patriarchal society. The narrative provides both psychological depth and socio-cultural context. While recent research has focused on feminist and sociological approaches, little attention has been given to the novel’s relation to integrated psychoanalytic-feminist readings and feminine melancholia within Indian gender studies.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative textual analysis to explore how melancholia appears in *Jezebel*. Freud’s theory of melancholia helps to explain the unresolved and internalized loss faced by the protagonist. This theory is further supported by feminist thinkers Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, who provide an insight into how gender roles and social expectations shape women’s feelings, limit their desires, and silence their voices, adding more to female melancholia.

By combining psychoanalytic insights with feminist theories, this paper focuses on long-term grief, fractured identities, patriarchal systems, social hierarchies, and cultural oversight that contribute to the development of feminine melancholia. The framework also helps to analyse the introspection that women experience as they work to reclaim their agency and independence.

DISCUSSION

Melancholia and the Internalized Loss

The internalization of loss is a core aspect of the formation of melancholic identity. According to Freud, melancholia entails a deep internalization of loss, where it is the ego itself that becomes impoverished (243). In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud observes that “in melancholia the patient represents his ego to us as worthless” (246). This resonates with Jezebel who is dwelling between self-worth and self-doubt. Jezebel is an ambitious and opinionated woman trapped in the shackles of patriarchy. Being a doctor by profession, fully informed about the physical and emotional needs and desires of a person, Jezebel is forced to bury her desires which culminate in unwanted hate from within. As a result, she considered her recurring desires as ‘sinful’ and her body as ‘stained’ when confronted with the patriarchal structures. This is quite evident as Judith Butler in “Melancholy Gender- Refused Identification” says, “Melancholia is not merely about grieving a loss; it is about internalizing ungrieved losses that become constitutive of the subject’s sense of self” (Butler 7).

Jezebel’s suffering is also internalized though it is never fully acknowledged or socially admitted. There is a continuous clash between ego and superego and consequently, guilt and anxiety occur which is quite evident in Jezebel’s case. It echoes in Sigmund Freud’s reflection of the superego as a “cruel and punishing force” (34). As a result, melancholia overtakes the self and the self becomes the ‘melancholic self’. Moreover, Jezebel’s marriage to Jerome was a nightmare. Her mother forced her to marry Jerome George Marakkaran, who was a doctor. Despite her

grandmother and brother's disapproval, she got married to Jerome on her mother's insistence. She consoled herself and accepted Jerome as her man but soon on her nuptial night, all her dreams were shattered and turned into nightmares. She couldn't believe he was the man of her dreams who crushed her soul under his feet. He made fun of her name and her identity too by taunting her continuously, which hurt her soul even more as described, "But your name...I like that one! Do you know what the name Jezebel means? Whore! Whore! Whore! He laughed, panting. Do your name justice, Edam, do it justice! Let me see how smart you are! You whore! Whore! Whore!" (26). After the catastrophic collapse of her marriage, she began questioning her self-worth and morality under social structures. Even her marriage clearly indicates the manipulation and cruelty that she faced yet she considers herself responsible. She turns the blame inward and wonders if she had been a good wife. In the Indian context, the moral codes regulate female autonomy; in that case, this internalization of loss becomes more potent. Jezebel not only loses her autonomy and legitimacy but also moral recognition, incorporating guilt and shame so her shame becomes a valid reason through which her melancholia stabilizes.

Fragmented Structure as Melancholic Temporality

Trauma is an experience of emotional distress that is faced by almost everyone. It involves dealing with inner fears in relation to outside forces that occur when exposed to certain situations. Olivia Guy-Evans explained that this recurrence of trauma is known as 'repetition compulsion' where a person keeps re-enacting a traumatic event or its circumstances. This behavior seems aimed at mastering, healing, or understanding the event, even though it can be harmful (Guy-Evans). K.R. Meera relocates this recurrence of trauma by using several narrative techniques like fragmented structure, non-linear timeline, constant flashbacks and monologues. Cathy Caruth also notes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event; it is the event that is not fully known and returns in repetitive, intrusive forms" (4). This is what is known as belatedness which is displayed by the protagonist repeatedly.

The novel follows a disjointed structure which shows the inner turmoil and psychological condition of Jezebel. It reflects the return of painful experiences that lead to unresolved trauma and this complexity of emotions and the ongoing turmoil exaggerate melancholia. K.R. Meera demonstrates this reenactment of trauma by creating a courtroom drama, deepening the wounds of Jezebel and amplifying her melancholia. As she stood in the family court, pelted with the blame of having paid a contract killer to kill her husband, Jezebel had this revelation: "To endure extreme torture, imagine yourself as Christ on the cross" (3). As the lawyer proceeds with more questions, Jezebel is forced to relive her past again. It leads to the cyclic recurrence of loss that Jezebel internalized and the self becomes melancholic.

Moreover, the novel's narrative explores generational trauma by illustrating how moral obligations, gendered suffering, and emotional baggage are passed down through generations. As Sara Ahmed discusses in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "Emotions are not individual feelings

but relational forces that stick to bodies through social narratives” (201). In Jezebel, the female characters inherit fear, which is not personal but a socially transmitted emotion that leads to a melancholic sense of self. Jezebel’s mother-in-law, Lilly George Marakkaran, exemplifies patriarchal trauma. Her marriage to George Jerome Marakkaran was forced after her first relationship ended. The boy used her, engaged her as his fiancé, then rejected her, saying, “If you were a good woman, you wouldn’t have shared a bed with me before marriage...I don’t need a woman who spreads her legs the moment a man touches her” (Meera 88). Pregnant with John, she was married to George Jerome Marakkaran for a hefty dowry: “He oppressed her, crushed her underfoot. Lilly tried to love him and endured his slights” (89). This demonstrates how patriarchal trauma is not solely personal but also passes through generations, further resulting in a genealogical female melancholia.

The Performance of the Abject and False Self

Julia Kristeva defines the abject as something, neither subject nor object, which disturbs identity and order, provoking both disgust and fascination. Jezebel’s troubles are revealed through the body, sexuality, and the maternal, all of which are associated with the abject. Jezebel’s body is regarded as abject because it is continuously targeted, rejected, controlled, and expelled by the patriarchal structures. The emotional trauma and suffering of Jezebel can be explored through object relations theory. Nancy Chodorow claims in *The Reproduction of Mothering* that women often find who they are through the connections they make with others, and this is a part of what makes them (169). For Jezebel, her marriage was a letdown because her husband did not respect her. From the beginning, he treated her like an object; he never really loved or tried to understand her since he was gay. He married Jezebel for the sake of society and for his father’s happiness. Her traumatic marriage creates an emotional void that cannot be fulfilled. She felt like she was losing herself and started hating her body since all her dreams were shattered. The continuous rejection by her husband made her feel sinful and stained. As Jerome puts it, “I am a man. You are not good enough for me. I would rather be with someone else because just looking at your body makes me sick” (Meera 6).

Jezebel felt like she was being crucified, like Jesus and that she had to put up with anything that came her way. She started to turn her anger inward due to shame as she thought of her body as dirty and impure. Whenever she tried to love someone, she felt guilty and ashamed, leading her to suppress her feelings. Whether it was her childhood friend Sebin, her coworker Sandeep Mohan or her psychiatrist Kabir, she would get attracted to them at first and then she felt disgusted with herself. Every time she got close to someone, she felt to lose something. She could not accept what society expected of her which made her stuck between the person society wanted her to be and being true to herself. Donald Winnicott in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* said that sometimes people create a persona to hide their real feelings (145). Jezebel tried to be a wife in public, but it increased her anger inside and deepened her sadness.

Melancholia as Critical Consciousness

In the story, Jezebel's sadness gradually turns into a kind of awareness as she begins to question the norms. She reflects on her marriage, the rules, and what it means to be respected. She looks back on her life choices and the guilt that society placed on her. This change echoes what modern feminist affect theory suggests: negative feelings can lead to awareness and resistance. Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, points out that feelings like shame and anger can actually help us think critically (200). Jezebel's pain isn't something that only hurts her; it is what keeps her going. When she talks about her pain, it is like she's expressing her desires. Jezebel finds herself by discussing her pain and what she lacks. According to Lacan, our wounds are what generate desire, and without desire, we don't know who we are. Jezebel's love isn't about her sadness; it's about her taking control of who she is. Although it's never fully achieved and can cause pain at times, it also makes her human, reclaiming her agency. In the second half of the novel, her melancholia appears not only as a symbol of psychological suffering but also as a way to re-examine her fragmented identity. The process of transforming melancholia alleviates her pain and allows her to reclaim her agency. Thus, melancholia reshapes the self toward self-awareness and intellectual resistance.

CONCLUSION

Jezebel's melancholia arises when she dwells between silence and articulation. Her confession provides her with a voice to resist these patriarchal structures. She realizes her melancholia is not a personal one, but it is a universal struggle against patriarchy. She understands and accepts her desires and body. Freud and Lacan's theories help explain why Jezebel is stuck in her own despair and she can't move on. She finally understood that her longing is tied to a deeper extent that no lover or relationship can ever resolve. Kristeva's theory examined how Jezebel had a generational trauma. She realized that her desires and needs are not impure; it's the symbolic order and conditioning that lead her to hate her own body. Ultimately, Jezebel gives her a voice that not only exposes her wounds but also purifies her soul. She realized her desire can never be fully satisfied though it is the inherent lack and she needs to live with it. She asserts her body and self, condemning the patriarchal structures and culture that once condemned her. Her wounds are not just the scars of her suffering but also the reminder of her strength and resilience. Thus, Jezebel reclaimed her own self and identity through her melancholia.

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