

The Study of Desire: A Lacanian Perspective

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Abstract

Jacques Lacan made some important contributions in developing the meaning of the unconscious and in formulating the concept of desire under the light of structuralism. In analyzing the complexity of desire, Lacan refers to it as a state of loss. The object of this paper is to characterize certain features of Lacanian desire through its analysis. The most important feature of desire is that it is structural. Language alienates the subject as it never represents the subject's identity and causes a division inside the subject: a split between the conscious and the unconscious. This rupture transforms the original lack into desire, an absolute condition that can be neither formulated nor fulfilled. The other feature of desire is that it is distinct from need and demand. Furthermore desire is not sexual and is metonymic in its representation of want-to-be. As Lacan's analysis of desire is discussed in his different seminars, the object of this paper is first to study it in the context of contemporary literary theory and then characterize its main features. Finally I would argue that such a characterization of desire refutes the state of opposition that Plato's theory of desire formulates.

Key Words: desire, lack, metonymy, demand, need, subject, the other.

1. Introduction

One of the essential terms that assume a central position in contemporary literary theory is 'desire'. Post-Freudian theories characterize desire as the dialectic of loss. In the post-modern era, desire is the converging point of gender, self, sexuality and the other. Nevertheless, despite the introduction of discontinuity and heterogeneity in the configuration of subjectivity, we may recognize a

fundamental rupture (displacement), a form of renunciation in the nature of desire. The object of this paper is first to provide a brief account of the concept of desire in contemporary theory and then concentrating on Lacan's I would characterize its main features. As such, I would specifically refer to its structural features to reflect Lacan's significant contribution in the field.

2. Lacan in the context of contemporary literary theory

The word desire, though originating as a term in psychoanalysis, is now extended to other areas of study. The association of desire with ideas such as death, loss (lack) and identity, innovated by Lacanian psychoanalysis, have provided an extensive ground in other fields that relate desire to various issues: desire-language, desire-the unconscious, desire-gender, desire-semiotics, desire-the Other, desire-sexuality. In this regard, prominent figures such as Foucault, Kristeva, Irigaray, Girard, Barthes and classicists such as David Halperin have formulated their theories based on this relation. On the other hand, the analysis of desire in these fields has opened a particular perspective towards the 'history' of love or the space of *amour*. In this regard, we can refer to invaluable works such as Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, Kristeva's *Tales of Love*, Irigaray's *i love to you*, and Derrida's *The post card* as analytical discourses on love.

Michel Foucault studies desire more in a historical context of sexuality. On the genealogy of the desiring man, he moves from classical antiquity to Christianity, where he locates the modern obsession with desire. In his theory of sexuality, Foucault tries to determine the recognition of self as a subject of desire. In the formulation of Derrida, desire is deconstructed by the theory of *différance* that provides a new meaning for the notion of desire. In fact, desire is generated in the alternate space between presence and absence. In her speculations on Derrida, Catherine Belsey explains that *différance* gives rise to desire and at the same time prevents its fulfilment. According to Derrida, she maintains, *différance* makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. The paradoxical feature of *différance* makes the desire of presence possible. However, this means that desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. *Différance* produces what it forbids; makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible (Belsey, 1994:71).

In the area of feminism, the ideas of desire were linked to issues of sexual difference and gender in general. In any feminist formulation of desire, the dominant view is that the feminine is always excluded

from the modes of male eroticism. For Irigaray, contemporary theories of sexuality too often reproduce the Platonic model that omits any question of feminine sexual difference. She elaborates on this form of desire as the pursuit of masculine mastery through the spiritualization of the power of reproduction (Lentricchia, 1995:377). In the case of desire and gender, the dominant tendency is to draw a strict line between masculinity, rationality, active desire on the one hand, and femininity, matter, passive desire on the other.

One of the other challenging areas that investigate the idea of desire is in relation to language. Though influenced to a great extent by Lacanian theory of desire as a signifier, this field of analysis studies literary texts as they generate desire and the paradox of reading as an endless desire. If there is a crisis of representation, if desire is transparent, if the signified (writing) has lost its relation to 'the referent' and if the codes of signification are approximate, how can, then, desire make itself plain through a more direct linguistic representation? Thus, it seems that all these formulations of desire imply that desire can not be signified in any system of signs whether in language, gender or culture.

3. Lacan's concept of desire

By introducing the principles of Saussurian linguistics into psychoanalysis, Lacan opens up a new vantage point from which to consider human nature, i.e. the formation of the subject through language. His profound and subtle analysis of the concept of desire concentrates on desire as lack, and elaborates the formation of the subject and the relation between desire and love. Moreover, the significance of Lacan's formulation of desire lies in his complex analysis of the object of desire in the notion of the 'Other', highlights of which are very responsive to any study on the discourse of love. Lacan's analysis of the idea of sublimation and the role of reproduction in the chain of signification are no less radiant. Lacan assimilated the structure of the unconscious with the structure of language. Such a revolutionary formulation of the unconscious led to the idea of language as the privileged part of the Symbolic order and therefore a different view of the subject, desire and sexual difference.

Lacanian psychoanalysis traces the source of lack to biological and social conditions where the process of the formation of a primordial lack is analyzed. He describes desire in terms of lack and his most famous axiom 'desire is lack' appears quite often in his works: "Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being

properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists. This lack is beyond anything which can represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil" (Lacan, 1988:223). It is only in its lack that the subject comes to being: "being arises as presence from a background of absence" (Lacan 1988:224). Desire-as-lack, indeed, forms the framework of Lacan's psychology as it uncovers the formation of the subject. Very close to the notion of Plato's Eros, desire is the want of something it does not have. Lacan's theory of desire, however, moves further than that; it is lack in the organization of the unconscious:

Desire in Lacan is more fundamentally something lacking: the unconscious, which is itself built up around loss. Desire is also a principle of structuration in the genesis of the subject. It points to that void or real in human existence around which interpretation in the registers of the imaginary and/or symbolic grows up. (Sullivan, 1991:40)

Lack explains man's genesis. Life or, more precisely, birth is a separation in itself. It is separation since by entering the world, man has to succumb to a system he does not belong to; he has to translate himself. Lacan explains the cause of lack by referring to the absence of a physical unity before birth, something that reminds us of Aristophanes' myth of completeness. For Lacan, lack is the void or the gap that precedes the instinct and also the desire expressed in a signifier. Therefore, in Lacan's interpretation of desire, the notion of lack is coincident with the formation of the subject. Being incomplete, the subject has to maintain its existence through the system of language that Lacan calls the system of signification. The signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier. This means that there is no subject without signification: "[T]his signifier will therefore be the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject: that is to say, in the absence of this signifier, all the other signifiers represent nothing, since nothing is represented only *for* something else" (Lacan, 1977:316). Coming out of its shell, the subject faces the outside on which he is totally dependent. It has to communicate itself to satisfy its basic needs. The role of the signifier is to represent the subject to another subject who is also a signifier. The signifier derives from the realm of an order named the Symbolic in Lacanian terminology. This realm is the realm of signs, symbols

and representations. The Symbolic order is the institution of language, discourse, and consciousness; it “mediates” (Lacan, 1977:67) the subject as it is a medium for representation. In other words, language serves as a mediator between the subject and the truth of the unconscious. The Symbolic order performs the way a symbol does. It can not define the nature of the real for us neither can it be related to it; it merely stands for the real and represents it.

The insertion of the subject within the system of signification and the alienation resulting from it inscribes a sense of loss in the unconscious that causes a desire in return. The moment loss is constituted in the subject desire is born. Thus, Lacan’s famous formula: desire is lack. Such an observation makes it clear why Lacan assimilates the transition from lack to desire to the subject’s exposure to language: “Desire always becomes manifest at the joint of speech, where it makes its appearance, its sudden emergence, its surge forward. Desire emerges just as it becomes embodied in speech; it emerges with symbolism” (Lacan, 1988:234). Only it is in the process of alienation of the subject that desire is formed. The splitted/alienated subject desires the (primordial) object that is lost forever. In translating his need, the child alienates it in the signifier and thereby betrays its real meaning.

The other feature of desire is that Lacan distinguishes it from need, demand. Such a differentiation clarifies what Lacan means by signification of desire and clears away the overlapping margins. Once again, we return to man’s genesis. In his earliest relation to others, the child is unable to make a connection for the satisfaction of its basic needs. In other words, to survive, s/he has to communicate. Though it is totally dependent on others, it is not equipped with the tools of the system of signifiers to convey her/his needs: the language lies in the realm of the other. As Brenkman explains, in response to its specific need, the child’s demand is interpreted as a general appeal by the signifier and this transmutes needs into a proof for love. The child not only is cared for his needs but receives love as well. Such a gesture transmutes the response into a proof of love, silences him and so deprives him of establishing a simple signifying relation and produces a desire that exceeds simple biological need (Brenkman, 1977:416-17).

And that is how need is transformed into demand. What the subject receives is not the same as what he requested. In the process of transforming needs to a demand, signification causes a kind of ‘deviation’. Thus subjected to the signifier, the child’s needs return to

the subject 'alienated', something other than what they were. In return for his request, he receives satisfaction of his needs together with love. Thus, needs are transmuted into a demand for love. However, the object of love is the Other who as the subject of lack can not give love: "That which is thus given to the Other to fill, and which is strictly that which it does not have, since it, too, lacks being, is what is called love" (Lacan, 1977:263). This is how Lacan distinguishes need from demand by differentiating their object. "Since demand is articulated and addressed to another in a situation where the other has nothing to give, it is distinguished from need (for an object will satisfy a need) by the fact that the object involved is nonessential; thus any demand is essentially a demand for love" (Wilden, 1968:189).

What was called alienated need changes into a demand for love which is also abandoned and unsatisfied. Therefore, being repressed and transformed, it seeks for the primordial satisfaction. Lacan calls this search for replacing the loss (lack) to satisfy the subject 'desire'. In other words, desire appears as the effect of the lost needs; therefore, it can be seen as the efforts of the subject to reconstruct the lost object. However, this reconstruction is everlasting, but not in the sense that Plato describes it. Plato's desire is an eternal state of 'possession', while Lacan's desire is eternal because it can not be satisfied: "To say that desire is beyond demand means that it transcends it, that it is eternal because it is impossible to satisfy it. By articulating desire with its own conditions as a linguistic form, demand necessarily betrays its true import" (Lemaire, 1977:163-4). Any articulation of desire limits its reference to a basic loss and that is the nature of language or any linguistic structure. All the objects that can potentially satisfy desire are in fact mere substitutes offered by the Symbolic. Such a structure guarantees the inevitable absence of wholeness sealed by desire (Shullenberger, 1978:34). The Symbolic system led to the formation of desire because the subject did not have the access to the unconscious on the level of the Real order. As such, it can only offer substitutes to the subject's desire rather than the real lost object of desire. In the course of his argument on the subversion of the subject, Lacan elaborates on the graph of desire which formulates all the developments of the subject in the unconscious. There, he explains very systematically the distinction between need, demand and desire: "desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)" (Lacan, 1977:287). Need is situated at the level of instincts that can be

satisfied with an object outside the subject. Demand, on the other hand, is not a request for an object but for love and can only articulate itself through language. Finally, desire is the deduction of need from demand; it does not yield itself to any object as it is absolute and can not be signified. With reference to Laplanche, Wilden summarizes Lacan's distinction of desire from need and demand:

Desire is born from the split between need and demand. It is irreducible to need, because it is not in principle a relation to a real object which is independent of the subject, but a relation to phantasy. It is irreducible to demand, insofar as it seeks to impose itself without taking language or the unconscious of the other into account, and requires to be recognized absolutely by him. (Wilden, 1968:189)

Desire not only is beyond demand as its object is absolute and independent of the subject but also it is a striving for the unnamable: "Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation" (Lacan, 1988:223). The course of development of the internal energy of the subject from need to desire demonstrates a form of elevation as if desire is the sublimated form of need. That is, the inarticulate lack eventually restores itself in the nonrepresentational characteristic of desire. This brings us to another feature of desire as metonymy. Metonymy is the representation of something through an association. This means that as there is no object that can signify desire, each signifier as the object of desire stands as a metonymy for it. Everything is merely an attribute to the desire-as-lack since nothing can represent it completely. "Desire seeks continually to replace that which was suffered in the original displacement; but each substitute object, each 'signifier' available from the symbol-system, reconfirms its difference from what was lost, and so sustains desire in its metonymic inertia" (Shullenberger, 1978:35). In Lacan the chain of signifiers is endless and this constitutes desire as the metonymy of the want-to-be. Moreover, not only does desire represent lack through association, but the state of ego is also metonymic for desire. Therefore, desire is a structure of repression when Lacan distinguishes it as metonymy rather than metaphor: "metaphor superimposes two terms without the repression of either, whereas metonymy displaces the energy or interest bound to an original term upon a term or idea associated with it, thus effacing

the original term by the process of association” (Shullenberger, 1978:39).

From the above account, we now understand that desire only partially represents the want-to-be and in this way effaces any access to lack. Catherine Belsey explains the metonymic feature of desire in terms of a split both in the subject between the Real and the Symbolic and in desire itself:

Desire is a metonym (a displaced version) of the want-to-be that necessarily characterises a human life divided between the unmasterable symbolic and the unreachable, inextricable real. And desire itself is split between the quest for satisfaction in the real, “refusal of the signifier” on the one hand, and the desire of (for) the Other, the origin of meaning, which entails “a lack of being”. This must be so because if the subject longs to find the real again, it also yearns to find the self which is perpetually created and destroyed by the signifier. (Belsey, 1994:60)

In other words, desire yearns for something that is denied. And this conveys exactly the opposite nature of *eros* where *eros* desires to have something that it does not have though accessible. The role of language in Lacan is, therefore, paradoxical. On the one hand, it forms the subject by generating its individuality and relates it to the Other and on the other hand, it binds the subject to the system of signification and limits him in its relation to the realm of fantasy. In this context, desire is the movement of displacement in contrast to the substitutive movement of love.

The other feature of Lacanian desire that should be stressed here is that desire is asexual. Although the commonplace understanding of desire is sexual instinct or a kind of yearning for instinctual satisfaction, desire in Lacan has nothing to do with instinct. Desire, as explained before, is an expression of loss. Furthermore, desire is the linguistic institutionalization of loss since desire itself is structured through a state of alienation that it always struggles to overcome. Accordingly, although the cause of desire at the stage of its articulation as need and later as demand is reduced to satisfaction of an instinct, it is not sexual. The object of sex is definite and conditional (for satisfaction), while desire is absolute: “Sex addresses itself, rather to the Other whose object each subject is, albeit unawares aiming not at reproduction, but at being in the circuit of the drives” (Ragland-Sullivan, 1989:738).

4. Lacan and Plato

Having explained the nature of desire, we can strongly suggest how Lacan deconstructs *Eros*. The binary state of opposition governs every dimension of Plato's philosophy. Continuing the tradition of Greek philosophy (pre-Socratic), Plato's philosophic system is structured on the principles of opposition and change that form our existence. The tension between matter and spirit serves as a microcosm of a macrocosm that presupposes the constant struggle between diverse elements in the universe. Plato's *eros* is by nature dualistic. *Eros* is conceived from *Poros* and *Penia*: two opposed elements. Illustrating the definition of *Eros*, *Poros* (Plenty) represents desire while *Penia* is the symbol of lack. Diotima describes the dual nature of *Eros* in terms of time when she says that *Eros* is flourishing in one moment and dead at another moment (*Symposium* 203e). The other feature of *eros* that stresses its dualistic nature is that it is a daemon. Diotima describes *eros* as a mediator (*Symposium* 202e) that binds the mortal with the divine. The demonic feature of *eros* paves the way for the subsequent oppositions between the human and divine love in general and mortal/immortal, matter/spirit, lover/beloved, male/female in particular. The state of opposition not only justifies but guarantees the logocentric feature of *eros* in the Platonic ladder. On one side of the ladder, there is the man who lacks wisdom and merely propagates itself in matter. At the other extreme side stands the philosopher who searching for the Absolute beauty propagates his soul.

Contrary to Plato's *eros*, the nature of desire in Lacan can not be explained in terms of binarism. Loss in Lacan might be interpreted as the cause of desire but that is merely in the linearity of cause and effect. This position does not define the nature of desire. Desire and lack are co-existent. Such representation of desire as lack seems to eliminate dualism in the nature or mechanism of desire; it undoes the linear understanding of desire fixed in the fluctuation of time. The presence of desire does not indicate the absence of lack or loss; desire does not start where lack stops. In other words, desire is not the development of lack nor lack is the continuation of desire. Desire constituted in the subject does not substitute lack since it continuously represents loss or lack in our being. As a result, nothing (no signifier) may satisfy desire since its object is lost in its primordial state. In conclusion one can say that Lacan's innovative study of desire opens up a new approach to the notion of subjectivity in contemporary literary theory. Desire in Lacan is absolute; it cannot be signified.

Furthermore, the nature of desire is distinct from both need and demand. Desire is not need since it cannot be satisfied by an object outside the subject. It is different from demand as it is not a request for love and can not articulate itself through language. Desire is beyond demand. It strives for the unnamable. This nonrepresentational feature of desire explains the cause of it and shows that lack is not signifiable. Therefore, desire is metonymic. This means that no object can signify it; everything is only an association to its object that is lost. Desire is not sexual and is metonymic in its representation of want-to-be. Such a characterization of desire refutes the state of opposition that Plato's theory of desire formulates.

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