Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the Film “Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara” : a Peep into the Self

Meetu Khosla,
Psychology Department, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi,
4 Patel Marg, Maurice Nagar, Delhi.
E-mail: meetukhoslaphd@gmail.com

Abstract
This article tries to explain the notion of self from a psychoanalytic interpretation of Hindi film Zindagi na milegi dobara. The film portrays a series of events and the underlying emotions which help to peep into the unconscious realms of the self. As the film story unfolds, its text plays with the emotional world of the spectator. An attempt is made to carefully analyze the text and the depiction of relationships within the psychoanalytic theory. The diverse emotional scenes presented in the film have been approached through the psychoanalytical lens to highlight the developmental traumas, desires, conflicts, fears, and the emergence of the self.

Key Words: Psychoanalysis, emotions, catharsis, desires, self

Emotional films have a great impact upon our mind. The spectator viewing a film often gets involved in the content to such an extent that it influences their psychological and physiological arousal (Khosla 2005). Films enforce an active participation on the part of the viewer where in the viewer tends to identify his or her hidden desires and drives by associating with the characters depicted in the film. Films depict fiction or a representation of our dream in a socially justified manner. Hence the viewer often tends to relive his repressed desires, fears, memories and fantasies by associating with the events depicted therein (living out their desires vicariously via the characters; identification). Films provide a more socially acceptable forum to experience our innermost desires and face our fears.

Over the recent years there has been an increased emphasis on extending the application of psychoanalytic theory from real life to reel life settings. Though Freud (1910) cautioned against the loose interpretation of psychoanalytic theory and technique, he emphasized about the analyst’s interpretation of psychoanalytic ideas, and on self-discovery by the client without the analyst’s imposition. Tummala-Narra (2013) suggests that broader interpretations of psychoanalytic principles may still be experienced as precarious, especially in the way the psychoanalytic ideas have been applied to understand the diversity within clinical and nonclinical contexts. Psychoanalysis continues to face challenges to its scientific legitimacy, despite evidence for the effectiveness of psychoanalytic psychotherapy (Shedler, 2010). This article intends to explore the potential application of psychoanalytic theory and principles in understanding the functioning of the human being within the Indian socio-cultural context. Various psychoanalytic concepts will be addressed by interpreting the sequence of events portrayed in the film “Zindagi Na Milagi Dobara (ZNMD)” more inclusively. The global appeal of psychoanalysis will gradually unfold as we move towards a more complete understanding of the individual within an Indian socio-cultural context from a psychoanalytic perspective. Psychoanalysis has the potential to provide depth and meaning to various aspects of diversity. Psychoanalytic literature has increasingly recognized the need to attend to social context in the therapeutic dyad. Hence insights from psychoanalysis will help to understand the process of the development of the self in purview of one’s environment with the help of characters from the film. Specifics of experiences with diversity (culture, social class etc.) tend to shape the psyche (Smith, 2006). It is important to recognize the specifics in order to analyse what is manifest or infer what is unconscious.
The film involves a story of three friends Kabir, Imraan and Arjun who go on a road trip and indulge in various adventurous tasks in an effort to find themselves. The following sections will analyse how each character experiences himself, his feelings, and how their compelling conflicts influence their psyche.

Representation of the Unconscious

Films often deal with fantasies, hence they could be considered analogous to dreams and qualify as manifestations of the unconscious. Beneath our conscious and daily social interaction there exists a dynamic, active realm of forces of desire that is inaccessible to our rational selves. This unconscious is active in our dreams, slips of tongue, and forms of artistic activity. The character of “Imraan” was about a person who was very simple, jovial and very fond of writing something mysteriously. There was a part of his thoughts which was only open to him. The road trip was indeed a search for his identity, his biological father. His poems revolved around life and conflicts about parent-child relationships.

Poetry was perhaps a way for him to seek and enjoy activities that helped him to symbolically relive his own painful emotional experiences (separation from his biological father in childhood) and hence achieve relief or resolution. Poetry was a way of reawakening feelings of loss in his life and reliving unfinished personal experiences. The hydraulic model of emotions and venting theory (Scheff, 2001) suggests that emotional distress, if not expressed, gets stored and can create pressure in the system, therefore 'venting' emotions should decrease tension and consequentially the negative psychological experience and symptoms. Hence the greater the expression of negative emotions, the greater the relief should be. He argued that emotion is not a cultural phenomenon, rather it is a natural body reaction and a way of dealing with hurtful experiences. However, suppressing emotions has important negative impact on the individual. Once he came to know about his biological father, his mother tried to brush it off rather than dealing with his intense emotional reactions as surprise, anger and resentment being disowned by his own father. Hence as a part of the socialization process, children are often taught, very often with punishment, how to control emotional reactions and suppress the instinctual need for discharge.

Scheff (2001) stated that most people accumulate massive amounts of repressed emotion, bodily tension which is always present but usually not recognized. These suppressed emotions interfere with thought and perception processes as well as with a person's ability to respond to others and to cooperate, and with the ability to tolerate strong emotions in others. This could perhaps explain why Imraan was not truly apologetic towards Arjun for cheating on him and was willingly accepting Arjun’s brunt with a smile. Venting negative emotions by itself without a cognitive change is not enough to produce a positive outcome in psychotherapy (Bohart, 1980; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). This explains why even after Imraan apologizing to Arjun, he was not forgiven as Arjun felt it was merely an emotional reaction and not brought about by a cognitive change. Later however, when Imraan feels the pain and anguish being deserted and unwanted by his father, he felt cheated and this probably led him to empathize with Arjun’s pain. Hence the apology that followed after this experience was indeed accepted by Arjun.

Catharsis

Kabir was engaged to a girl and was not ready for marriage. His mind was full of confusion and conflict. His repressed negative emotions were expressed in the school time prank he played on people, by screaming and scaring them. Hence his re-enacting the pranks from his college days probably brought the unconscious conflicts into consciousness and eventually experience catharsis, and thus achieves relief and positive change. Probably Imraan experienced catharsis as he wrote about his conflicts related to his identity, birth and father in a more socially acceptable way. He was also
using a defence mechanism of sublimation by expressing his thoughts and worries in a more socially acceptable way.

Catharsis emphasises upon the emotional aspect (strong emotional expression and processing) and the cognitive aspect (insight, new realization, and the unconscious becoming consciousness) and as a result - positive change. Hence probably when Imraan interacted with his father he vented his true emotions by crying and then finally realizing that he was indeed simply following a stranger and not his father. A realization which awakens his understanding about his step father who brought him up with all love and affection. Also it helped him understand why his mother was protecting him all though, because she knew that he would not be able to bear his biological father’s bitter/rude indifference towards him. Breuer and Freud described catharsis as an involuntary, instinctive body process, for example crying (Breuer & Freud, 1974). Schultz and Schultz (2004) followed the psychodynamic tradition and defined catharsis as "the process of reducing or eliminating a complex by recalling it to conscious awareness and allowing it to be expressed". Scheff (2001) emphasized upon the emotional-somatic discharge and cognitive awareness (distancing), when the person experiencing catharsis is maintaining the 'observer' role rather than the participant. This gives him a sense of control and full alertness in his immediate environment. Hence catharsis is essentially a release from some burden (either physical or mental) and furthers healing through its cleansing effect.

Aristotle used the concept of catharsis in both the medical and psychological sense (Aristotle, 2001). Experiencing catharsis has moral and ethical implications. It helps to moderate passions and strong emotions, therefore restoring the balance in one's heart. Pleasure of sharing and reliving catharsis provides relief from disturbances such as pity and fear.

Free Association

Freud’s development of free association as a therapeutic technique was gradual, occurring primarily from 1892 to 1895 (Jones, 1961). Free association became the fundamental technical rule of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1913/1958). The utility of this procedure was based on the principle of psychic determinism that posits that thoughts that arise in the mind are constrained by earlier associative links. The “so-called ‘free’ association would prove, in fact, to be unfree, since . . . the ideas that emerged would be seen to be determined by unconscious material” (Freud, 1924/1961, p. 166). Thus, even a seemingly illogical succession of ideas would reveal links between associations, which led to the underlying cause of the patient’s problems.

Sometimes we repress our various desires, fears, memories, and fantasies in order to function well. Hence beneath our conscious, daily social interaction there exists a dynamic, active realm of forces of desire that is inaccessible to our rational selves. In the film when the three friends play a game of free association, it eventually reveals each ones internal unresolved conflicts, repressed impulses, motives, wishes and attitudes. Hence free association technique helps to bring out the repressed unconscious material into our consciousness and functions as a talking cure. The film uses the talking cure technique very efficiently. This power of this technique is evident when Kabir asks Arjun to play a game and say whatever came to mind in response to the cue words that he would be giving. Kabir instigates Arjun to use words to verbalize that which was preconscious and the same technique each friend uses on one another to understand what was bothering their mind. Though Arjun and Imraan responded well but Kabir resisted, showing the use of defense mechanisms of resistance to protect his hurt ego.

Freud (1912) addresses human functioning as comprising the presence and absence of meaning. That one may be aware and therefore consciously experiencing, or one may be unaware and unconscious. Something once in awareness may recede, become absent, but remain latent in perception. For instance when Imraan pauses at the cue “father”, it reveals an experience that he was probably trying to understand, as to how his life had suddenly become meaningless and confused in
lieu of the biological father whom he came to know about after so many years. His response revealed the struggle that he was having internally, and how he was searching for a way to develop and strengthen his authorship over this experience. The emphasis of the game was to understand how the experience could be translated into words so that the friends would help out one another deal with their problems. The words given as cue were merely given to guide the pattern and content being experienced. It involved reflection and talking about painful experience in order to understand the root cause of the problem without any socio-cultural barriers or expectations. Hence each friend was encouraging the other to speak about their struggles and understand the meaning of their lives. This not only facilitated emotional growth, but also enhanced their capacity to find a solution for their problems by being aware of the perceived experience and improving their ego-functioning. Kabir was caught in a moral anxiety where he was in a dilemma to marry or not being forced into matrimony by unforeseen circumstances.

The role of Desires

Desires guide human behavior. Sometimes the id wants immediate gratification and without worrying for the adverse consequences, we indulge into most irrational acts, for instance when the three friends make fun of people, showing age inappropriate behavior or when Imraan throws Arjun’s phone out of the window. These were id impulsive behaviors. Sometimes our desires may also be unconscious and drive us to think and behave in different ways. Perhaps the ring that Kabir got for his mother on her birthday could also be a sign of emotional attachment to the mother or oedipal complex. Maybe he was still not prepared to let go one developmental stage into the other more mature one.

Psychoanalysis placed increased emphasis on the importance of desires in the life of the individual. The road trip planned by the friends was perhaps a way to fulfill their desires and also an opportunity to challenge their friends. This was also an escape from the reality because by indulging in childhood desires and sports they were working on the pleasure principle. They were avoiding their inner pain indulging in sports that were dangerous for their wellbeing. But probably they felt more powerful and resilient by participating and succeeding in their sports. This was also an opportunity for the friends to bond together despite their differences and strengthen their childhood feelings of attachment and affection.

Phobia

Freud believed that the thing feared served as a symbol for some other fear, usually one that stemmed from an event that had occurred in early childhood but had been repressed into the unconscious. It may be something that happened in real life, or it may have been on TV or in a movie. The older fear would produce feelings of anxiety that the person would attribute to the thing that was now causing fear.

Imrans’ fear of height (acrophobia) is revealed when he is scared to jump for paragliding. His fear of height was probably symbolic of his fear of facing his biological father. Developmental studies suggest that fear of height may be the unborn foetus’s response to stance, conflict between the pregnant woman and the man. The arguments could have been causing trauma to the baby in the womb. So these negative feelings could have caused an impact on the unconscious mind then since these feelings were never discussed these feelings got repressed, and then were transferred into feelings of anxiety and acrophobia.

Vertigo (giddiness on heights) that Imran experienced could be perceived as one of the manifestations of anxiety that he was feeling before meeting his father for the first time (Freud). Based on Freud’s theory then it can be inferred that the unused drive energy (libido) was transformed into anxiety. The phobic anxiety associates itself with particular situations and this was very apparent in the
fear of falling demonstrated by Imraan. The giddiness that he was expressing was a form of anxiety hysteria. In anxiety hysteria, the libido is liberated from pathological material by repression, and is set free in the shape of anxiety (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). The danger of physical helplessness is like ego’s stage of early immaturity (danger of loss, of object, of love) fills in the lack of self-sufficiency during the early periods of childhood (the fear of loneliness that manifests in the form of anxiety). Freud suggested that vertigo is an attempt to protect, to avoid the sudden eruption of the state of anxiety, hence to protect himself from any place that may lead to vertigo. So probably this was symbolic of Imran’s attempts to protect him against the anxiety that he was experiencing in anticipation of the meeting with his father. This is also seen when Imran asks his friends to take a detour to meet the artist and then changes his mind. Probably his ego was sensing the anxiety as a signal, giving a warning against the dangers (how his father would react to his presence, would he accept him etc.,) that threatened his integrity. Vertigo may be a longing for lost unity. This was very apparent in Imran’s case because despite his mother dissuading him from meeting his father, he made this trip keeping him in mind, with a hope of uniting with his long lost father whom his mother never disclosed.

Arjun’s fear of deep sea diving (hydrophobia) became apparent when the friends planned to plunge into this sport. This could be because Arjun probably lived his life in a box. His father died early leaving him to bear the burden of his father’s debt. So he became scared to face reality. His workaholism was an attempt to suppress his fears of losing anything any more. As he was overcoming his poverty and the fear of insecurity by overworking which was misunderstood by his wife who deserted him, like his father who deserted him and his mother.

He blamed himself for his miserable life, felt suffocated and created a rather secure self in his boundaries. Diving made him plunge into a world that was insecure, where he had to learn to overcome his fears of water for survival. Water perhaps reminded him of his childhood insecurities and poverty that was overwhelming for him. So to come out of his cocoon needed courage and once he did it, he could not believe that he had the ability to float once again, he kind of regained confidence in himself. Also he felt that he was alone in this big bad world and he had to thrive but when the teacher insisted on teaching him how to dive and feel the new environment and overcome his fears, he realized that goodness still prevailed and that there were forces that wanted him to thrive. It seems that perhaps Imraan could have regressed to a stage in childhood, the early years to be more precise, when the infant indulges in threatening activities to test his environment. This is evident from the way he chose his sport, which could have killed him, almost like the infant puts his/her hand in electric sockets, testing the environment. His search for the was a search for his biological father was perhaps a search for the caregiver who was to protect him from such threatening situations, for him to develop with a sense of security in the environment.

Defense mechanisms

Defense mechanisms may be used by the ego to protect itself from the threatening or harmful situations, but sparingly. Arjun was using defense mechanism of sublimation in which he used his workaholism to hide his anxieties, insecurities by showing his obsession for work. His workaholism had made him forget about his id, and his ego played a dominant role in his life. Laila brings in a fresh air and makes him search for himself, something he had forgotten in quest of materialism. He was working to protect himself of any impending danger (of being poor) and trying to be cautious and thoughtful in his approach to life, with no place for emotions. This was also reinforced by his failed relationship with his wife, or perhaps he felt that everything was related to money, even feelings.

Kabir was an emotional person who valued friendship more than anything. He was gentle and funny but a balanced person and would not share his inner most feelings even with his closest friends. The bull running incident were symbolic of him facing his fears. Bull was perceived as the fire and the anger of getting married when he was not ready. It was a depiction of being trapped by
circumstances. Bulls represented a challenge that he had to face (to get married and he was not ready for it) but he was trying to rebel in his thoughts only.

Projection is a common defense mechanism which humans defend themselves against their own unpleasant impulses by denying their existence while attributing them to others. For example, a person who is rude may constantly accuse other people of being rude. This was apparent when Arjun is rude to his friend Imran perceiving Imran to be insensitive and arrogant.

Hence this article explored how psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the importance of desires in the life of the individual, has influenced the cinema. Psychoanalysis helped to explain a series of diverse concepts presented in the film with the intention of involving the viewer into the content most willingly, building upon the film- and its viewers’ relationship. The free association technique not only helped to get an insight into the emotional and unconscious mind of the characters with whom the viewers may tend to identify, but also helped to delve deeper into the contemporary perspectives on human functioning within the Indian cultural context. The film presents a beautiful transition between dreams and reality and the emergence of a mature self. It demonstrates the love for self in terms of liberation from the major causes of anxieties and fears. Freud emphasised upon thanatos, the death instinct, which is beautifully depicted where the characters indulge in life threatening sports, to emerge as resourceful and resilient to face the bitter realities of life. The film tends to explore the unconscious thoughts in a beautiful way, where in the characters gradually delve into the content of their troubling ideas. Also how they make an effort to make them conscious because repression of undesirable thoughts cause neurotic or moral anxiety depending upon the precursor of conflict is ego or morality. The formation of subjectivity is very complex and has a profound influence on the development of self and sense of identity.

References


Tummala-Narra, P. (2013). Psychoanalytic applications for a diverse