

Exploration Of Perversity, Violence And Degradation In The Novel *The Piano Teacher*

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Abstract:

The present study deals with the exclusive novel of Elfriede Jelinek, an Austrian woman writer who delves the psychological derangements of human society through her characters as well as her own experiences revealed in the novel The Piano Teacher. She explores the character, a young woman Erika who is all along control by her mother, family and society. As a disturbed psyche she turns herself perverse, violence and self-degradation. This novel is a good example for those who under the rigid circumstance and extreme control would burst out of violence and degradation both inner and outer lives. The protagonist, who lives under her domineering mother, controls all her passions and desires which later turn herself as a rebel against her own mother and reflects the masochistic nature with her student. The novel reveals the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter; teacher and student. At the climax, the character loses her identity both as a teacher and daughter and bounded her with the social power structures under perverse emotions and self - degradation as much possible to satisfy her emotional and physical needs.

Key words: *Desires and passions of life- Psychological fundamentalism- Tyranny- Sado-masochism-Perversion- Violence- Self degradation.*

The most famous work from the provocative Austrian Nobel Laurette Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher* is the portrait of a young woman, Erika who binds between the repressive society and family under certain restrictions and control over to fulfill her desires.

The novel speaks about thirty years old Erika kohut, a piano teacher who teaches piano at the Vienna conservatory. Basically the English translation of the Piano Teacher is taken from the German language termed as piano player. This novel reflects the life of author, where she also studied piano at Vienna conservatory under some tough circumstances expressed over in this novel. The protagonist of this novel lives in an apartment with her domineering mother, who controls all over throughout herlife, even sharing same bed with her daughter. In the opening scene itself, the mother and daughter maintains stained

relationship. The character in this novel links chamber music with the perils of perfectionism, sexual masochism and sadism in her inner and outer life.

Eiikais strict and rigid with her students and herself. Her father had left shortly after her birth and happens to live with her old mother. Her mother has given her everything to develop her daughter's talent. But she has controlled her all along. Her mother says, "Erika has never had to do house work, because dustrags and cleanser ruin a pianist's hands" (5).

Erika's mother takes her from the Vienna Conservatory. On the way, she does not want her daughter to look upon the shops, shoes, books, hats, and jewelry. By coaxing her, she takes her through some other way. The mother keeps her daughter under her control throughout no matter wherever she goes.

She wants to take a walk with Erika....There are a lot of things to see in the shop windows- elegant shoes, pocket- books, hats, jewelry, but Erika should not see there under any circumstances. That is why mother came to pick her up. Mother takes Erika on a circuitous route, telling her it's because of the beautiful weather. The parks are blossoming, the roses and tulips are blooming and the flowers certainly don't buy their dresses. Mother talks to Erika about natural beauty, which doesn't require any artificial embellishment. Natural beauty is beautiful on its own, just like you, Erika. (30)

Erika loses her identity and is forced to become a parrot like conformist. Erika expresses her anger by dragging out mother's hair when she attempts to take a new dress that Erika has purchased for herself. The mother expects loyalty and discipline. She doesn't want to impose any modern adaptation on her daughter. Mother wants her daughter to be the great pianist. So she would not allow her daughter world's little pleasures. "She knows her best: she wants only the best for her child. She won't let her stay out in the street: After all, she shouldn't get involved in athletic competitions and neglect practicing" (25).

Erika's mother has little knowledge about music. But she boasts enthusiastically about music. She wants her daughter to become a popular figure. She forces her child to do what she desires. In return for her painstaking efforts she demands the life of Erika to herself.

Mother knows nothing about music, but she forces her child into its yoke. A fair if vindictive rivalry develops between mother and daughter, for the child soon realizes that she has outgrown her mother with regard to music. The daughter is the mother's idol, and mother demands only a tiny tribute: Erika's life. Mother wants to utilize the child's life herself. (26)

Her mother's suffocating control plays a major part in her life. Manju kapur in her *Difficult Daughters* portrays possessive mothers, "mothers want their daughters to be safe, we want them to take the right choice- right in the sense that they are socially acceptable" (qtd. in Mitra 75). The two women in Jelinek's novel abuse one another physically and verbally. Smothered by a mother who controls every aspect of her private life she resorts to what many would consider a perverse private life. Erika is unable to break the bonds that attach her to her mother. Indeed like a child who has never grown up, she wants to please her mother, but is driven to act out her own fantasies secretly. Her mother appears to be unaware of the deep seated repression that is consuming her daughter. She does not see her as an angry and hateful person, who lies to her and deceives her frequently. Erika's mother wishes the money to be spent towards a new, future apartment. Mother does not wear Erika's dress and Erika herself does not wear it, but merely strokes it admiring at night. Thus Erika remains the object of her mother's desire, unable to attain her worldly pleasures.

The Piano Teacher focuses on the life of a young musician and her struggle to become reconciled to the inexplicable pull of human relationships. In *Difficult Daughters* Manju kapur says:

Women at a relatively stage of life, laboring under the various compulsions, enjoy less social and psychological freedom than men and are forced to live their lives in the shadow, first of parental dominance, and then, of patriarchal oppression.

(qtd. in Mitra 73)

In quite a similar vein, Jelinek delves into the psyche of Erika, disturbed woman and explores the nature of the character's interactions and relations with her mother.

Erika expresses her bursted violence on the trains while travelling. She takes large instruments so that she hits people with that and calls it an accident or kicks or steps on the feet of other passengers. So that she watches them blaming someone else. She enjoys the sensational doings of others. So she frequently visits peep shows to watch it. Once she gets a chance of watching a couple having sex in a park. Being so affected and expressed her perverted feeling by urinating herself. The author recollects the childhood visit to Erika's life. In other occasion Erika's psyche is disturbed when her mother compels her to play piano in front of others especially in the presence of her young cousin. This activity turns her self-mutilated. Here the mother wants to expose her daughter's talents to the public. She expects praises from others.

The Piano Teacher is a political novel too. It is critical of modern bourgeois life, which is mesmerized, disturbed and awed by Jelinek's abilities. Chamber music and sado-masochism represent the inner and outer lives of a tormented woman. Erika lives unhappily with her elderly mother who has given her everything to assure her daughter's success. In return of her life time of sacrifice the mother expects obedient and devotion.

The perverse and violent nature of the character develops gradually. The character Erika strongly develops a hateful relationship with her mother. She does not want to be like her mother. She wants to escape but she is powerless to understand how to do it. The novel *The Piano Teacher* depicts the women's subordination basically illuminating the relations of power, control and manipulation in class societies.

Erika is such a live wire, such a mercurial thing, why she may be running around at this very moment, up to no good. Yet every day, the daughter punctually shows up where she belongs: at home mother worries a lot, for the first thing a proprietor learns, and painfully at that is; Trust is fine, but control is better. (5)

Erika is unable to break the bonds that attach her to her mother. She wants to please her mother for all her needs. Erika has been under psychological control. Erika's sexual frustration takes the form of physical and psychological self-hate.

Erika has developed a connection between her mother and her, each like a brick in a mansion and made with her head and her heart. This kind of love-hate relationship between mother and daughter invariably emerges as a consequence of mother's efforts to introduce checks and restraints in the unbridled activities of the daughter. Erika has been deprived of everything a normal girl has while growing up. She has no clothing, no games, no friends and no loving family. She constantly has to suppress her feelings and sexual desires. When she enters into the sex shop amidst men enjoying their sexual desires, she controls her desires by only watching. Jelinek writes about Erika, "All Erika wants to do is watch...Erika feels solid wood in the place where the carpenter made a hole in any genuine female" (51). Erika has become just a compact tool in human fury.

Though Erika's desires haunt the feminist writers in this aspect, Jelinek offers a politically correct portrait with feminist ideals of some sentimental act of courage or independence. The suggestion is that, the female character can triumph any time. Jelinek has made Erika a human tool as well as nothing. She is both a victim of the phallic aggressive force and a female willingly to indulge in self-annihilation. Erika's desires can be described as androgynous. In this portrait of Erika, she does not feel like a nothing solely because of a consequential set of relationships. Though her mother's suffocating control plays a large part in her life, it is in keeping with Jelinek's psychological fundamentalism that Erika's desires are innately inside her and have assembled only to erupt later. Jelinek describes Erika as,

. . . hoping to get into her room without being seen. But her mother looms before her confronts her. She puts Erika against the wall, under interrogation-inquisitor and executioner in one, unanimously recognized as mother by the state and the family. (qtd. in Nobel prize speech delivered in 2004).

Moreover the novel focuses the musicality on their tradition. They use musicality to underscore the perversity of the main character, who participates in a musical tradition that gives training for women to play piano in order to attract their husbands. Erika's failure as a pianist is a sign of her perversion. Here the character both as pervert and artist attain pleasure. But when the artists reach pleasure as a noble feeling become desiring object. Whereas the pervert fails to achieve subjectivity and always remains bound to object status. The character

in this novel also remains bound in the hands of domineering mother and the society later due to her perverted emotions.

Walter Klemmer, an Engineering student is introduced in this novel. He is a handsome, self-absorbed man. He comes early to the class and watches Erika's musical performance. He eventually becomes Erika's student and develops a desire for his teacher. On the other side Erika thinks that falling in love is a complete escape from her mother and seems to rebel against her. She also seeks complete control over her student. She always tells Klemmer carefully what he must do to her, although she is a sexual masochist. Here too,, they feel the hard relationship as Klemmer finds himself more and more uncomfortable by the control and eventually he beats and rapes Erika in her own apartment, next to her mother's room.

Erika has a confused understanding of a relationship. She expects to hurt in one hand, and on the other hand she enjoys being hurt. And so this confusion of hers develops into a tragedy.

Throughout the first half of the novel Erika is successfully brow-beaten by her mother. Klemmer, her student has been falling in love or lust with Erika. It is believed that, some sort of affair may develop between the student and the teacher. The teacher's desires might well lead this student into murkier waters; nonetheless most readers will be rather startled as just how brutal Erika's dark, physical and sexual desires can lead her to and how confused, angry and revengeful Klemmer can be. Ultimately the mother loses her power and place. Erika carries on her deeds in darkness and Klemmer seems to go his own way, plunging back into the world of conquests among his batch mates.

Romance and sex have become obsessions with Erika. She is constantly warned about men by her mother. Her mother frequently insists her that, the men are not good. It is so elusive for Erika that she develops a perverse fascination with it. Sex is something she cannot do for the reasons others do it. It too becomes an aggressive release for her confused emotions. It also comes to be something she thinks she can control. Too much control and authority has caused irreparable damage to Erika. She has become a sado-masochist.

In this novel, Erika has been controlled in her entire life. She desires to exert a similar type of cruel control on others. The relationship with Klemmer takes the form of the degrading of her body and her impulses. She wants to be beaten, gagged and tied by him. And there is no doubt that the character is truly in love with music, the romantic art. At the end of this novel the character Erika and Klemmer reduced to the lowest common denominator as human beings. At first Erika successfully dominates her young student, but the tables are turned as she becomes dependent on him. Here, Jelinek depicts the tyranny over the master. Both teacher and student are playing zero sum game to lose their lives. The climax leaves Erika as a wounded and broken woman. Jelinek clearly depicts the character under the repressive society turns themselves towards perversity, violence and degradation in order to satisfy their earthly desires.

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