

## PSYCHOLOGICAL RESONANCES IN SARAH SCHULMAN'S NOVEL *AFTER DELORES*

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### **Abstract**

*This article unravels the psychological resonances that Sarah Schulman uses in her novel *After Delores*. As a writer and queer activist, Sarah Schulman is successful in exploring the psychological aspects of queer people who are sidelined by the heterosexual society. The central theme of the novel is the psychological effects that a lesbian goes through as her lover Delores leaves her. The rejection by family and society affects the psychological and social life of the rejected. Psychology is the scientific study of mind and behaviour, including feelings and thoughts. It encompasses the biological influences, social pressures, and environmental factors that influence how people think, act and feel. By analysing the words, deeds and expressions of the characters in Schulman's novel *After Delores*, one can study their minds and behaviours. A thorough analysis of the characters in the novel help one in unravelling the psychological aspects such as Seligman's theory of learned helplessness, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning, Robert Sternberg's triangular theory of love, kinesics, self-esteem and self-assertion, sublimation or displacement, repression and suppression, sadism, rejection, apathy, and unrealistic expectations. The exposition of psychological situation of the characters in Sarah Schulman's novel *After Delores* will help one to stand in their shoes, to understand the rejected people better and to approach them in an amicable way.*

**Keywords:** Psychology, Learned helplessness, Classical conditioning, Self-esteem, Apathy

### **Introduction**

The novel *After Delores* rose up at a time when lesbians were in an emotional anarchy. The emotional anarchy was caused by familial and societal rejection. This rejection made them to live in poverty, marginalisation, and a raw danger that comes into focus when all protections are withheld. This affected their psyche. Psychology being the study of psyche can extend its hand to alleviate their pain. This paper applies Seligman's theory of learned helplessness, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning, Robert Sternberg's triangular theory of love, kinesics, self-esteem and self-assertion, sublimation or displacement, repression and suppression, sadism, rejection, apathy, and unrealistic expectations to the characters in the novel *After Delores* to better understand their psyche. Looking at their lives through the lens of psychology would make one to understand them sympathetically and friendly.

The concept of learned helplessness is the foundation for numerous key principles in positive psychology. In the late 1960s, Psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman theorised the idea of learned helplessness. Seligman unexpectedly observed that dogs who had received inevitable electric shocks failed to take action in later situations, even when escape or avoidance was feasible, but dogs who had not received the unavoidable shocks took action instantly in subsequent scenarios. Human volunteers were used in the experiment employing loud noise instead of shocks, and the findings were identical. To explain the expectation that outcomes are uncontrolled, Seligman developed the theory learned helplessness. In psychology, learned helplessness refers to a mental state in which an organism forced to bear aversive stimuli, such as painful or unpleasant stimuli, becomes unable or unwilling to avoid subsequent encounters with those stimuli, even if they are "escapable", presumably because it has learned that it cannot control the situation. "We use the term "learned helplessness" to describe the interference with adaptive responding produced by inescapable shock and also as a shorthand to describe the process which we believe underlies the behaviour" (Seligman 408). The intuitive notion of helplessness entails the belief that nothing one does matters. In the novel *After Delores*, the character, Lila Futuransky, goes through this psychological trauma of learned helplessness. There is an incident narrated in the novel which exposes learned helplessness in the life of Lila. In a crowd of people, Delores demands her shirt from Lila Futuransky. "Give it to me now or I'm going to make a scene". What could I do? I looked down at my table at the Blue and the Gold and slowly undid all the buttons. I handed her the wilted green shirt and sat there in my bra"(98). The statement in the novel that "Some accept things as they are" also echoes learned

helplessness. A woman's learned helplessness of her confinement is clear in the following sentences "I am not a monster. I am just a woman in all her complexities. We must be able to accommodate a wide variety of simultaneous feelings within the confines of our feminine bodies"(70).

Ivan Pavlov was a Russian scientist whose work with dogs influenced how we think about learning. He developed the notion of classical conditioning. Placing a neutral stimulus in front of a naturally occurring response is known as classical conditioning. The neutral signal in Pavlov's classic dog experiment was the sound of a tone, and the naturally occurring reflex was salivation in response to food. The salivation response might be induced simply by connecting the neutral stimulus (music) with the unconditioned stimulus (meal). A conditioned response is a learned response or a response that is created where no response existed before. If one was bit by a passing dog once, the one will feel fear whenever the one sees dog. This fear you've started to experience is a conditioned response. A stimulus is a thing that arouses activity or energy in someone or something. Some of the words and deeds of Lila, the protagonist in *After Delores*, are related to classical conditioning. Lila hates Delores for leaving her. Priscilla's dealing with Lila becomes stimulus that enkindles the hatred in her. Lila saw Priscilla fighting with Ms. Leather. It acted as stimulus which aroused the feeling of hatred in Lila. "Before that night, I'd never considered fighting back"(12). Another stimulus was the gun that Priscilla left. Lila states that "having Priscilla's pistol in my pocket opened up a whole new world of possibilities"(21). As the dog salivates seeing the food which is a stimulus, seeing the gun which acts as a stimulus, the feeling of hatred towards Delores arouses in Lila. In short, she becomes classically conditioned with the use of gun as a stimulus.

American psychologist Robert J. Sternberg proposed the triangular theory of love. This theory suggests that intimacy, passion and commitment are the three parts like the vertices of a triangle with which one can understand love.

The intimacy component refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships...The passion component refers to the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships...The decision/commitment component refers to the decision that one loves someone else, and the commitment to maintain that love. (Sternberg 119)

Non-love, liking, infatuation, empty, romantic, companionate, fatuous, and consummate are the eight types of love produced by varying combinations of these components. In general, the intimacy component might be viewed as largely deriving from emotional investment in relationship and stems from Intimacy; the passion component sprouts mostly from motivational involvement; Commitment to the relationship is part of the commitment component. Applying the triangular theory of love to the characters, Lila Futursky and Delores, in the novel *After Delores*, one can find that among the three components of love, they had intimacy and passion but they lacked decision/commitment component. Lila and Delores had intimacy in their relationship. "In the old days, I would come home from restaurant and Delores would be there. Hi baby I missed you so much she would say" (18). This conversation proclaims that their relationship had closeness, connectedness, and bondedness and thereby, there was intimacy in the relationship. They had the aspect of passion in love. "When we made love, we had to be quiet because we were scared of getting caught" (148). Being lesbians they had romance, physical attraction and sexual consummation. It means that their love had the second component of love called passion. Lila and Delores missed the decision/commitment aspect of love. It means that they did not have the commitment to maintain love. "The problems started when she talked about "forever". My idea was that we stay together for as long as it worked...Sunshine said "forever", so she wasn't interested in me anymore" (94-95).

Kinesics is the study of bodily movements and gestures. "Body language is just a down-to-earth way of referring to kinesics- the study of bodily movements which accompany speech" (Foerster 440). Some of the gestures are clear to us. One nods one's head to say yes, moves the hands to say hello and moves the head to both sides to say no. "We communicate with words but not with words alone. The following formula depicts the proportion between our words and the other parts of our communication: 7 percent words only 38 percent tone and inflection 55 percent facial expression, body position, and gestures (body language)" (Mehrabian 183). Kinesics is inevitable in human lives. "There is no question that body language is real, that it works, and that it is essential to persuasion" (Stefano 31). We are exchanging our ideas using our body. "We are communicating by body language" (Lewis 245). One cannot speak every language but everyone can speak through body language. A perfect example of communication through kinesics can be spot out in the novel *After Delores*. Lila asks Punkette "how did you know it was okay to come out to me so quickly. Easy. Charlotte taught me the trick. She says that if you're talking to a woman and she looks you in the eye and really sees you and listens to what you say, then you know she's a gay. It works every time" (27).

Self-esteem is an important concept in psychology. According to the dictionary definition, "To esteem a thing is to prize it, to set a high mental valuation upon it; when applied to persons, esteem carries also the warmer interest of approval, cordiality, and affection" (Williams 309). Self-esteem has a significant role in personality development. "In common parlance, then, self-esteem is the extent to which one prizes, values, approves, or likes oneself" (Blascovich and Tomaka 15). In psychology, the term self-esteem is used to describe

a person's overall subjective sense of personal worth or value. In other words, self-esteem may be defined as how much you appreciate and like yourself regardless of the circumstances. Self-Esteem refers to one's attitudes about oneself. It is the evaluation we make of ourselves. It can be positive and negative. People with high self-esteem perceive themselves as good, competent, worthy etc., while those with a low self-esteem see themselves, incompetent, etc. The character Priscilla in the novel *After Delores* is a person with high self-esteem. She perceives herself as good and worthy. Lila Futuransky says that "Pris didn't give a shit about what anyone thought of her"(12). Priscilla herself says that "I never let a man touch on me and plenty have tried. I take myself very seriously"(14). Lila admires Priscilla for her self-esteem and self-assertion. "I had to admire her because she had the courage to live out her fantasy...so she didn't let other people's opinions stand in the way of her pleasure"(44).

The word "sublimation" has an interesting background. The basic meaning of the word is to change form. Sublimation is a type of defence mechanism in which unacceptable urges are transformed into more productive and acceptable behaviours. In the novel *After Delores*, Lila Futuransky was angry with Delores as she left her and joined with Sunshine. She loved Delores and therefore, she could not hurt her. So, she displaced her anger on Delore's lover Sunshine and hit her badly. "I saw Sunshine. I hit her so hard, my hand broke. I could feel it go ... I kicked her one more time, really hard, and then I left fine. I was so happy. I was free. I was the freest bird" (160). "Oh shit. I can't smash Delores. I love her"(161). Another incident of sublimation in the novel is when Lila Futuransky kills the murderer of Punkatte. Actually, Lila wanted to kill Delores but she sublimated it to the murderer of Punkatte.

Repression is another term in psychology which is often used interchangeably with the term suppression. Repression involves unconsciously blocking unwanted thoughts or impulses whereas suppression is entirely voluntary. Suppression is deliberately trying to forget or not think about painful or unwanted thoughts. In Freudian understanding, repression is the most important defence mechanism. In this, frightened memories and impulses are excluded from conscious awareness. In the novel *After Delores*, there are examples of repression and suppression. "Delores continued to ignore the state of emotional life" (100). Another sentence by Lila shows the suppression aspect in her life. "I hate you Delores. I walk down the street dreaming of smashing your face with a hammer, but when your face right in front of me, I had no hammer. What have you done that someone who once loved and cared for you could be made to feel this way"(100).

The psychological term sadism refers to the derivation of pleasure through cruelty and inflicting pain, humiliation, and other forms of suffering on individuals. A person who is sadist seeks pleasure by inflicting pain and humiliation on the other. It is considered as a psychological disorder. Usually, the term sadism refers to sexual sadism. Sexual sadism is infliction of physical or psychological suffering such as humiliation and terror on another person to stimulate sexual excitement and orgasm. But sadism refers not only to sexual sadism but also to all acts through which one derives pleasure by hurting or inflicting pain on another. Sadism as an act of inflicting pain on another is seen in the novel *After Delores*. An apt example for it is the following sentence "I would make Delores suffer. It was the only way that I could be happy" (143). Delores, Lila's ex-lover, derives pleasure by publically humiliating Lila by making her sit in bra in public. Lila derives pleasure by hitting and inflicting pain on Sunshine, Delore's new lover.

In the field of mental health care, rejection most probably refers to the feelings of shame, sadness, or grief people feel when they are not accepted by others. "Rejection at any age can be devastating" (Ahmed 245). A person might feel rejected after a significant other ends a relationship. "Rejection might often contribute to pre-existing conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression or lead to their development" (Ahmed 246). There are instances in the novel where the characters feel rejected. One is rejected as she is a lesbian. "I think you're a lesbian. You'd better not come round here anymore" (48). At another case, a homosexual is rejected. "I don't like homosexuals he said" (62). Delores rejects Lila and embraces Sunshine. "I was the person Delores cared about the most. Now I'm the one she most wants to break"(96). The sad thing about the sadists is that they would be our closest ones. "There was so much more pain than I had ever imagined and I didn't have to look for it. Those closest to me would bring it with them" (116).

The psychological term apathy is characterized by feelings of indifference and lack of emotion. The term is often used to describe a lack of caring or concern. People are not interested in anything. Whatever happens they just carry on their life without paying any attention to it. This kind of indifference is depicted in the novel *After Delores*. When the murder news of Punkette appeared, people were indifferent. Lila comments that "No one was going to take the time to find out what really happened. People watch real life the way they watch TV, sitting in an armchair drinking a beer and talking during the commercials"(41).

Unrealistic expectations also bring psychological stress on people. Expectations are personal beliefs about occurrences that may take place in the future. Expectations serve a basic function to prepare humans for action. The choices humans make are based on the expectations they hold for how their decisions will affect themselves and the world around them at some future time. Lila had unrealistic expectations from Delores. "I really thought Delores was my friend. I thought she'd love me even when she got mad. That's what hurts the most, being violated when you trust someone. Everything gets poisoned"(35).

“Loneliness may be described as an unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, or feeling that one is alone. It is essentially undesirable and it may have implications for the health of the person experiencing it” (Forbes 352). Loneliness can be external and internal. “Those people with larger social networks, more social support and high-quality relationships tend to have better health and wellbeing” (Smith 38). Lila, the protagonist, is the person who feels loneliness the most. “I was so lonely at that moment; I have never been so lonely”(186). The loneliness was caused by Delores who left her.

### Conclusion

The voyage through the psychology of the characters in Sarah Schulman’s novel *After Delores* opens the eyes of the people to look at the sidelined lives of lesbians with better understanding. The rejection by the dear and near ones and society causes psychological trauma in their lives. Knowing their psychology, one can approach them with a positive outlook which will have a positive effect in their lives. Studying the minds of the marginalised will equip one to draw them to the centre and accept them as they are.

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