

**Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher*:
A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Mother-Daughter Dynamics**

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The paper examines Elfriede Jelinek's work *The Piano Teacher* published in 1983 in relation to psychoanalytic theories of mother-daughter dynamics. It focuses on how cultural figuring and societal structures are responsible for encouraging a relationship of domination and subjugation. Jelinek's world of obsession and dependency paves a way for perversion and sadomasochism. It further argues that the oppressive proximity of the maternal lays ground for repression of female sexuality. The paper, by taking a Lacanian reading, explores the development of the protagonist as a perverse sexual subject.

The Piano Teacher is a narrative by Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek that investigates the problematic relationship between the protagonist and her mother. It portrays Erika Kohut, a piano teacher at Vienna Conservatory, who is unmarried and shares two-bedroom apartment and same bed which is a kind of mini-necropolis with her widowed mother. The world of the two Kohut women is marked by deep ambivalence as it oscillates between extreme violence and obsessive attachment. This dysfunctional dyad leads to daughter's failure to attain subjectivity. Keeping up with the aforesaid, the study examines the psychodynamics of the daughter and how her denial to passivity leads to ultimate failure to attain stable feminine sexual identity.

Erika, in her mid-thirties, lives in a "pre-Oedipal" world of mother. Mother sees Erika as an object of her desire preventing Erika to attain individuation: "You must think I won't find out where you've been, Erika. A child should own up to her mother without being asked" (Jelinek, 1988, p. 03). The dialectic of control and power is evident between a mother and a daughter

where the mother is trying to become the centre of daughter's life. Jean Wyatt in "Jouissance and Desire in Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher*" asserts, "The unrelenting proximity of her mother blocks Erika's access to the symbolic order and thus to the ordinary escapes from maternal closeness described by psychoanalysis" (Wyatt, 2005). The Kohut mother overshadows her daughter and the mother's homemade structure of intimacy and security results in daughter's passivity.

The mother never releases Erika and tries to invade her physical as well as mental space: Time passes and we pass the time. They are enclosed together in a bell jar: Erika, her fine protective hulls, her mama . . . Erika is an insect encased in amber, timeless, ageless. She has no history, and she doesn't make a fuss. The insect has long since lost its ability to creep and crawl. Erika is baked inside the cake pan of eternity (Jelinek, 1983, p. 14).

The presence of pre-Oedipal mother in the life of the daughter is so hegemonizing that it resists Erika to come out of her mother's influence. The mother thinks that control is better than trust and Erika, to some extent, has also agreed to it. She punctually shows up to her mother at home. Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* says that "girls in relation to their mothers experience themselves as overly attached, unindividuated and without boundaries" (Chodorow, 1978). The mother influences the daughter in different ways throughout her life. But this attachment is distorting Erika's vision of self and her perception of the world and is preventing Erika to connect with other people emotionally. This social withdrawal has led to daughter's psychosis and regression.

Erika tries to ignore her mother wishes and yields to other influences, but it leads to moments of violence between Erika and her mother. The daughter yells at the superior authority "you bitch" (Jelinek, 1983) and pulls her mother hair vehemently but also regrets it and hopes that the mother will make up with her. "Erika's mother prefers inflicting injuries herself, then supervising the therapy" (Jelinek, 1983, p. 09). Arnold. M. Cooper states that such acts are the efforts by Erika that tries to protect herself against the vulnerability of loving, against the possibility of human unpredictability, and against the sense of powerlessness and passivity in comparison to others (Cooper, 2004). But the mother always wins in trapping the daughter in her pre-Oedipal universe and the daughter unknowingly crawls back to the space of maternal *jouissance* (Lacan, 1960). Though Erika feels protected and unaffected in that space, yet she is simultaneously losing her sense of self with the passage of time.

Barbara Kosta in her paper "Inscribing Erika: Mother-Daughter Bond/age" describes the mother-daughter bond, resulting from social conceptualization, as 'bond/age' (Kosta, 1994). The Kohut mother is nourishing and devouring at the same time. The daughter's psychic organization is molded to conform to the mother's and, as a result, the daughter is struggling to rid herself

from the internalized mother (Kosta, 1994). Erika knows “her mother’s embrace will completely devour and digest her, yet she is magically drawn to it” (Jelinek, 1983, p. 118). The Kohut daughter is caught between intense identification and quest for individual identity which, Carol J. Boyd asserts, is leading to the phases of conflict and dilemma over intra-dyadic separation and individuation (Boyd, 1989). Erika is continually oscillating between the semiotic and symbolic (Kristeva, 1969) and is unable to arrive at a fixed identity which is also leading to her psychic disintegration.

Erika becomes unfathomable and starts puncturing the monotony of her life with her sadomasochistic perverse behaviour (Christian, 2009). The Kohut daughter’s repressed exterior is counter-balanced by her frequent visits to the porn shops. She gets voyeuristic pleasure by seeing other women’s naked bodies in front of her. “This woman wants to look at something that she could see far more cheaply in her mirror at home ... All Erika wants to do is watch ... The whole show is put up for her benefit ... good looks and good figure are the basic requirements” (Jelinek, 1983, pp. 51-52). She loves indulging in perverse pleasure. These acts boost her libido and provide her a space to connect with the symbolic. Her body refuses every limit and every border and enjoys these modes of corporeality which Kristeva calls ‘the improper/unclean’ (Kristeva, 1982).

This behaviour expresses the core need of separation from the mother. Erika's continued symbiosis with her mother and containment in a pre-oedipal situation projects itself as perversion climactically portrayed when she turns to her mother in their shared bed and overwhelms her with infantile, though explicitly sexual overtures of intimacy (Kosta, 1994). Throughout the novel, these symbiotic inclinations are visible:

She throws herself upon Mother, showering her with kisses . . . She keeps pressing her wet mouth into Mother’s face . . . the goal isn’t orgasm, but mother per se, the person known as Mother . . . Erika sucks and gnaws on this big body as if she wanted to crawl back in and hide inside it . . . Mother yells, “Stop!” in various keys. Mother resolutely orders her to halt! Erika’s kisses keep dashing over mother . . . Erika’s intention is cryptosexual ... Erika managed to see her mother’s sparse pubic hair . . . Erika cunningly uncovered her mother so she could see everything, simply everything . . . the daughter now hurls what she has seen into her mother’s face (Jelinek, 1983, pp. 232-236).

The absence of the father contributes in Erika’s dysfunctional development. The Kohut daughter wants to gain access into the mother's body as a male substitute, while it simultaneously serves as a drastic attempt at separation from the archaic mother through identification with the paternal realm that staves off further regression and psychosis (Christian, 2009). She tries to

force herself on her mother. It is evident from the above lines that her abnormal sexual behaviour aims to erase passivity. She thinks that identification with the father image and construction of the paternal order with the mother will deconstruct the toxicity of the intra-dyadic relationship.

Erika's unresolved conflicts, repressed wounds and guilty desires overwhelm her, and she becomes a sexual masochist. She starts finding pleasure in pain. Jessica Benjamin describes that woman's masochistic temperament is entrenched in the pre-Oedipal relationships, but its persistence can be discerned in the adult-life which is obvious in Erika's life too:

She waits and waits for the moment when she can cut herself unobserved . . . She is very skilled in the use of blades; after all, she has to shave her father, shave that soft paternal cheek under the completely empty paternal brow . . . Spreading her legs, she makes a cut, magnifying the aperture that is doorway into her body . . . Her hobby is cutting her own body . . . She always takes it (razor) everywhere . . . She presses the blade into the back of her hand several times . . . It doesn't hurt at all . . . It (blood) oozes, warm and silent and the sensation is not unpleasant (Jelinek,1983, pp. 86-88)

Erika is mystified by her genitals and she takes pleasure in cutting her skins and genitals. She herself sees her own genitals as a strange and enigmatic object. She sees her genitals as a doorway to her unexplored body. She finds an escape in these sexual perversions.

Erika perverse sexual desires also find their way out through Walter Klemmer, an eighteen-year old student, who is initially attracted towards the thirty-five-year old piano teacher. Walter represents everything that Erika is not. In other words, Klemmer is psychologically Erika's alter ego. Klemmer captivates Erika's attention but Erika, a confused being, feels fear, hatred and attraction for him simultaneously. Gilles Deleuze believes "the masochist derives his/her pleasure from the persistent suspension of gratification and the disavowal of sensuality – though this disavowal is not to be confused with complete negation of emotion" (Deleuze, 1991). Erika goes through the same as she oscillates between aggressive masculinity and regressive femininity and thus, has confined herself in masochistic bondage. And as a result, she doesn't know how to connect to Klemmer when he approaches her.

Erika has always witnessed a relationship based on domination and subjugation since her childhood. And she secretly wishes to build a bond with Klemmer based on the structure of control and obedience where Klemmer will dominate her. The only role that Erika sees open for herself as a woman, is that of submission. Erika sees "submission as the desire for independence and recognition and ultimately the desire for love" (Benjamin, 1988). In a scene, she gives a

letter to Klemmer in which she wishes for him to exert dominance over her sexually, the idea of which is formed on the basis of porn films she watches:

Her most haunting wish – the adored Herr Klemmer reads – is for you to punish me. She would like Klemmer as a punishment . . . Hogtie her, bind her up as thoroughly as he can – solidly, intensely, artfully, cruelly, tormentingly, cunningly . . . her letter says, I will writhe like a worm in your cruel bonds . . . you will keep me in all sorts of different positions, hitting or kicking me, even whipping me . . . obedience requires greater degrees of intensity (Jelinek, 1983, pp. 215-217).

Her letter shows her yearning for submission in a sexual relationship where she can feel how powerless she is. She tells him that the urge to be beaten has been in her for years and she wants him to take part in her masochistic fantasies. The Kohut daughter deliberately belittles herself. Erika gives Klemmer the idea that he has all the power and Erika is powerless in this relationship. But the truth is Erika is the woman with all the power as she dictates and negotiates the sexual scenario. Erika has never had much control in her life as she has been physically limited by her mother, but she is taking agency for herself in relationship with Klemmer (Hayes, 2013).

Erika’s need for intense control and not getting it from her mother turns her toward Klemmer and she sees Klemmer as an idealized figure for submission. The three sexual encounters of Erika with Klemmer show the painful yearnings of a masochist (Powell & Bethman, 2008). Erika remains passive but she commands. Klemmer feels disgusted over masochist’s madness and retaliates. He feels degraded on the role reversal of gendered power relations. He goes to Erika’s place and rapes her and kicks her and abuses her but in frustration. Erika feels violated and returns to her mother. Mother, the witness of abuse, is dumbfounded and feels “If anyone is going to slap Erika, it will be mother . . . mother indignantly points out that he is damaging someone else’s property, namely hers” (Jelinek, 1983, p. 264).

Adrienne Rich, an American feminist, talks extensively about motherhood and opines, “One thing that most belongs to women is motherhood. But it is also least our own because it has been manipulated by ideology and power” (Rich, 1976). Society has placed the irrational demand on the image of mother that she bestows perfect constant love. This underwriting of motherhood by patriarchy which contains self-denial and sacrifice makes it an institution, but it fails to recognize the pain and suffering of this experience. This institutionalized sacrifice hinders the possibilities of growth for women (Badinter, 1980). But Elfriede Jelinek, in her work *The Piano Teacher*, unveils devotion and self-sacrifice as a strategy of autocratic operation seized with mother’s interests. The Kohut mother sees ‘piano’ as a medium for attaining

bourgeois ideal and consequently makes her daughter learn piano. She is well aware of the fact that Erika is the only channel for capital in the house so she tries her best to keep her daughter away from bad influences: “She wants to prevent Erika from being thoroughly reshaped by man” (Jelinek, 1983, p. 13). In Viennese culture, piano-playing symbolizes superiority and is the best way of attracting a suitor for a woman, but the mother tries her best to keep her daughter from obtaining sexual attractiveness.

It becomes more evident in the novel with the arrival of Walter Klemmer and the mother feels intimidated: “the twosomeness at home, which no one else can share, appears threatened” (Jelinek, 1983, p. 74). The Kohut mother begins to fear that she may lose authority over her daughter. When Klemmer tries to come in between the dyad and wants to take Erika out of that bond/age, the mother feels threatened and fears that the daughter will come out of that semiotic chora (Kristeva, 1980). The Kohut daughter is dominated by a chaotic mix of perception, feelings and needs. The mother has played the decisive part in the daughter’s life. She has brilliantly invested in daughter’s life so that the daughter’s feel indebted her entire life (Kosta, 1994). She knows that this self-sacrificial bond will emotionally harness the child. As a result, Erika has felt a prey to this complex emotional, physical and bond. She unconsciously tries to deny her own sexuality because it represents separation from her mother. She is only a body that is mentally and emotionally frozen: “Such are the thoughts of Erika, a loner. Nocturnal, slugs, shapeless, spineless, mindless” (Jelinek, 1983, p. 91). She has become a prisoner to her own body. Erika’s mother has made her daughter immovable in every way possible so that the daughter won’t run away.

Society tends to instruct women from the very beginning about mother’s unconditional love and idealized the image of mother. It has also taught women to love their children to the point of self-annihilation. But the Kohut mother uses this image for her benefit and gains power, purpose and control through her daughter. The daughter has provided the mother with a heightened sense of self that the mother never wants to get shattered. Even though the Kohut mother cares for her daughter, it can’t be denied that she has entombed her daughter in a world of repressed emotions. Jelinek gives us the insights of this mysterious world where the mother-daughter tie is contradictory; sometimes tender and sometimes violent but a tie that unites mother and daughter.

In this paper by describing how a mother can obviate daughter’s sense of self, I have proposed that this failure in the process of attaining identity leads to daughter’s dilemma and further to female perversion. The daughter denied of all control in the maternal bond begins to look for control through other relationships. It also depicts that society has constructed an image of mother which ceases mother’s womanhood. The study is the critique of this inbuilt dynamics

of power and powerlessness in every relationship. This mother-daughter dyad is a witness of cultural figuring and aims to expose it.

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