

Freud's Obsessional Neurosis-Origin of Slavery, Status of Women and Technology: Indian and Greek Civilizations Revisited

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The theoretical paper has been developed around a hypothesis derived from the landmark essays of Sigmund Freud, namely; *Moses and Monotheism* and *Totem and Taboo*. Freud during his illustrious career as a psychologist and founder of the psychoanalytical technique paid detailed attention to neuroses. Amongst these, it was the obsessional neurosis which kept him absorbed throughout his life. Freud's contribution to the study of obsessional neurosis is immense. For him it is not only a disorder but the foundation of human civilization, culture, morality, law and religion. According to Freud art and philosophy bear striking resemblance to the symptoms of obsessional neurosis. This paper has tried to establish how the study of neurosis may help shed light on the origin of many human institutions, customs, ways of life, political systems and evolution of some disciplines such as Physics and Mathematics. The main theme of this research is to address how the concepts of slavery in Greece and untouchables in India (still invogue) display an underlying theme of the same neurosis. The advancement of both nations in the fields of mathematics and philosophy can be traced back to the existence of the rudimentary theme of neurosis. The replacement of the slave with the machine in the modern world also bears a strong relation to the theme of obsessional neurosis. Moreover, the low status ascribed to women in various societies can be explored in the light of such neurosis.

Keywords: obsessional neurosis, philosophy, mathematics, culture, civilization, religion, taboo, touching phobia, dirt, woman, physical labour, inferiority complex, slavery, technology, India, Greece.

The paper intends to explore an intrinsic relation between the obsessional neurosis and the evolution of slavery, technology and assignment of inferior status to women. The hypothesis is based on an assertion of Freud made in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), that obsessional neurosis (and different forms of other neuroses) are related to cultural institutions including art, religion and philosophy (Freud, 1985). Freud claims "...I should like to insist that its (obsessional neurosis) outcome shows that the beginning of religion, morals, society and art converge into the Oedipus complex. This is in complete agreement with the psychoanalytic finding that the same complex constitutes the nucleus of all neuroses, so far as our present knowledge goes" (Freud, 1913, p. 157)

Obsession is derived from Latin verb *Obsessionem*, which stands for siege, blockade and blocking-up; it moved to French in the first decade of 15th century and took the shape of obsession, a verb meaning, "to besiege". However, by the late 16th century it acquired its current meaning in English and other European languages as something that *engrosses the mind*. It was adopted in its strict psychological sense around 1900.

Freud, however, started using the phrase Obsessional Neurosis as early as in 1894 and quoted it for the first time in his article, "*Heredity and the Aetiology of Neurosis*" in which, he assembled some symptoms, collectively calling them obsessions and phobias.

He was the first one (Freud, 1896) to use the word "*zwangsnervose*" (neurosis of obsession) in German after two-years of brainstorming. He also tried *zwangsvorstellungen*, (obsessional representations), *zwangsaffecte* (obsessional affects) *zwangbeing* (compulsion of obsession) however, it was the *zwangsnervose*, which ultimately satisfied him, and the term appeared in the article (IV 6) *La Revue Neurologique* (1896). An obsession denotes an idea, word or words invading the patient's thoughts against his or her will. Such persistent ideas cause severe anxiety, depression and unbearable sense of guilt; like the persistent idea Oedipus Rex (Sophocles, 495-405 BC), experienced when he came to know that he had inadvertently married his mother, and had children from her. This is to be noted that the sexual attraction towards mother and the murderous desires for father constitute the content of Oedipus complex which is the hall-mark of Freud's System. Failure in the dissolution of this complex leads towards the obsessional neurosis. Freud has derived this idea from the great tragedy Oedipus Rex. Oedipus says when he comes to know about his misdeed:
*Don't tell me what I've done is not the best.
And from now on spare me your advice
If I could see, I don't know how my eyes
could look at my own father when I come
to Hades or at my wretched mother.
Against those two I have committed acts
so vile that even if I hanged myself
that would not be sufficient punishment.
Perhaps you think the sight of my own children
might give me joy? No! Look how they were born!
They could never bring delight to eyes of mine. [Lines 1615-1624;
Sophocles, 420 BC]*

Before proceeding further, we should have a brief look at the idea of Taboo as described by Freud. Taboos are the earliest forms of

obsessions and still bear the closest relation with them. Freud (1912) elaborated that *taboo* was a Polynesian word difficult to translate because of its obscure conceptual connotation. The meaning of the word diverges in the two contrary directions; on the one hand, it is considered 'sacred', 'consecrated', and on the other 'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden' and 'unclean'. The modern use labels it as sense of unapproachable expressed in prohibitions and restrictions distinct from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not based on any divine ordinance, but may be imposed by the patients on themselves on their own account. Taboos differ from moral prohibitions as they fall into no system that declares abstinences essential or gives reasons for their necessity. Freud (1985), adds that since taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin they are unintelligible to us, but to those who are dominated by them obey them as religious duties.

The first taboo, an obsessional neurotic enforces on himself is avoiding touching objects and that is why Freud (1912) called obsessional neurosis a touching phobia or *delire de toucher*. The prohibition does not apply to immediate physical contact but has an extent as wide as the metaphorical use of the phrase 'to come into contact with'. Anything that directs the patient's thought to the forbidden object, anything that brings him into intellectual contact with it, is just as much prohibited as direct physical contact. The central theme of this paper thus revolves around the concept of *avoiding touch*, disliking things that are filthy, contaminated and infected. This also gives rise to the abhorrence for the work with hands, derogatorily termed as menial labour. People who do not wish to touch dirty things must have other people and/or instruments to perform these dirty tasks. Women involved in household chores and raising kids perform menial tasks, thus can be deemed as belonging to a low stature when compared to men. To extend our line of thinking, this obsessional neurosis produced slavery in the past and technology in the present times. And if technology is driven by it, then all that casts technology like mathematics and natural sciences, can also be embedded within the offshoots of such neurosis.

To elucidate these assumptions, we shall survey two great civilizations of India and Greece.

Indian Civilization

India represents a systematic and strict tradition of institutionalizing and stratifying a caste system to build its socio-economic and political life. Because of a strong caste system which has its root embedded within the traditional Hindu practices and preaching, the concept of untouchables still exists in India. Despite all constitutional guarantees against it, the caste system is still followed by a large number of people in the country. Fair-skinned invading Indo-European nomads, Aryans, instituted the caste system in India. Through their philosophy of racism we can see traces of the themes of obsessional neurosis.

India is an old civilization (2000 CE) predominantly composed of dark-skinned Dravidians in the southern peninsula. About the middle of the second millennium BC, Aryans came through the passes of the Hindu Kush Mountains (Northwest) and conquered and remade India (Majumdar, Raychaudhuri & Dutta, 1960). These Indo-Aryans were to make up the majority of high-class Hindus, who, in time, became the prominent group in India (Reyna, 1971).

The Aryans developed the first-ever recorded philosophical treaties in the world known as *Vedas* (*Rg Ved*, *Yaju Ved*, *Sama Ved*

and *Atharva Ved*) and mentioned the origin of castes in society in *Rg Veda*:

*When they divided Purusha (man)
How many portions did they make?
What did they call his mouth? What his
arms? And what his thighs and feet?
The Brahmana was his mouth,
His arms the ruling men, Katriya
His thighs were the Vaisyas,
And from his feet came the Sudra.*

These four castes of the Indian society are designed to represent the complete image of the creative Cosmic Being; a spiritually ideal society in which everyone is dedicated to a duty in accordance with the Vedic virtue. When the Lord Krishna says to Arjuna:

*Your own duty done imperfectly
Is better than another man's duty done well.
It is better to die in one's own duty;
Another man's duty is perilous.*
(*The Bhagavad-Gita*, 3:35)

According to this the duties prescribed to the *Brahmana* (philosopher, priest), insist that they be pure, pious, and pursuer of knowledge. The virtue of a *Katriya* (warrior, ruler) lies in courage, chivalry, self-restraint and the nobility of character. That of *Viasya* (tradesman, economist) is maintained by honesty in his dealings. However, the virtue of a *Sudra* (untouchable, slave) is to give service to all the three mentioned above. This idea of a spiritualized typical society arose from the hypothesis that each man has a typical nature (*svadharma*), which reflects the elements of the divine nature. Everyone is born to his own place in the divine display of the creative power, that is, the world, and it is the first and foremost duty of a man to live up to his Divine role (Reyna, 1971). This, nonetheless, is a doctrine supported by all mainstream religions, even those without clear-cut caste system. The expression obsessive also depicted the picture of a philosopher, scholar or pedant; it is used excessively for the meticulous, perfectionist, absorbed, or otherwise fixated individual (Barrios, 1985).

Bhagvad Gita says:
*Out of many thousands among men,
One may endeavour for perfection,
And of those who have achieved perfection,
Hardly one knows Me in truth.*
(*The Bhagavad-Gita*, 7:3)

Modern literature suggests that the characteristics associated with perfectionism have a strong relation with the underlying themes of obsessional neurosis. The patients who score high on tests designed to measure perfectionism and its two predicted dimensions (concern over mistakes and doubts about actions) are more obsessive when compared to the control community group (Frost & Steketee, 1996). The instinct of mastery lies at the core of obsessional neurosis and transforms and exhibits itself in the form of instinct for knowledge.

Studying the themes of obsessional neurosis in the light of the philosophical treaties that form the basis of the caste system in India, we can see that seeking perfectionism, doubting one's own actions and avoiding everyday menial tasks can be observed readily in the Brahmins. The Brahmins were ranked at the top of the caste system and were forever concerned with brining about perfectionism in all their acts, consequently delegating menial and unworthy tasks to the Sudra (the untouchables). Due to the strict institution of the inter-marriage and the rigid caste-system, the

enhanced drive for perfectionism could not prevail to the other sections of the society confining these obsessional characteristics to the educated and the wealthy.

Greek Civilization

India and Greece are ancient hometowns of Philosophy. Just as the caste system prevailed in India, slavery flourished in Greece without any moral restraint or remorse and great philosophers like Plato and Aristotle justified it. These upholders of democracy never considered slavery condemnable rather they remained busy making philosophy, music, literature, mathematics and astronomy. Slaves on the other hand performed dirty tasks on their behalf. Women were equally a deprived class without any political and civic rights. Russell (1945) adds, "Whatever may be thought of a social system which tolerates slavery, it is to the gentlemen in the above sense that we owe mathematics, was the source of a useful activity; this increased its prestige, and gave it a success in theology, in ethics, in philosophy, which it might not otherwise have enjoyed." (Russell, 1945, p. 34)

Ancient Greek philosophers had a different idea of *justice*, to them justice was not equality, rather right proportion; this right proportion is somewhat an equivalent of equality. The justice of a master or a father is different thing from that of a citizen, for a son or slave is property, and there can be no injustice to one's own property. The next question is whether one may enjoy friendship with a slave? Aristotle answers categorically: "there is nothing in common between the two parties; the slave is a living tool...*Qua* slave, then, one cannot be friends with him. But *qua* man one can...therefore, there can also be friends with him in so far as he is a man" (Aristotle in McCarthy, 1992, p. 168). Aristotle even touches the limits of racism in the justification of slavery, as for him slavery is expedient and right but the slave is naturally inferior to the master. From birth some are marked out for subjugation and some for rule. However, the slaves should not be Greeks, but of an inferior race of less spirit. He further shows his abhorrence and loathing for the menial labour and dismisses the chances of citizenship for people working for their livelihood in these words, "Citizen should not lead the life of mechanics and or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble and inimical to virtue...Nor should they be husbandmen...the citizens should own the property, but husbandmen should be slaves of a different race" (Russell 1945, p. 162).

It gives us the notion that the earliest philosophers felt a definite dislike for physical labour that is, working with the hands. This was actually their aversion and repugnance for touching the things. Their same detestation led them towards approval of slavery on one hand and to the development of simple machines on the other hand. Their extraordinary interest in mathematics and physics was the outcome of the same obsession against the touching things and doing chores with hands. These were the Greeks who invented and introduced the lever for the world. Lever is a simple machine that makes the work easier. A lever is a rod or a board or a bar that rests on a fulcrum and moves load. The closer the load is to the fulcrum, the easier it is to move it. Archimedes declared that he could move the entire earth with its help "Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world" *"ΕΛΕΓΕ ΔΕ ΚΑΙ ΑΡΧΙΜΗΔΗΣ ΤΗ ΦΩΝΗ ΣΥΡΑΚΟΥΣΙΑ, ΠΑ ΒΩ ΚΑΙ ΧΑΡΙΣΤΙΩΝΙ ΤΑΝ ΓΑΝ ΚΙΝΗΣΩ ΠΑΣΑΝ"*.

As per the hypothesis of the present paper, the very first person who used a lever did not know that it would improve the speed and efficiency of the work performed manifold. He simply used it to avoid direct contact with the thing and touching with the rod. That he realized later that this rod might have been a great facilitator in the work which led to further scientific research and subsequent breakthroughs in technology.

Modern Western Civilization

In the West, on the other hands, the development of capitalism gradually led towards the growth of the democratic institutions and civil liberties. The slave labour was converted into industrial labour gradually. In the 18th century, Industrial Revolution and development of machines changed the entire scene of the modern world, and finally by the middle of 19th century the institution of slavery was fully abolished but it could not be denied that the slaves fulfilled the hard and dirty tasks of the "cultured" and the "civilized" for centuries rather millennia. Those who used slaves so ruthlessly can be seen as people who suffered from a form of obsessional neurosis and disliked manual labour, physical tasks and touching things. A similar comparison can be drawn with the development of machines, these are simply robots that can work for such people so that they may avoid the touch. Technology proved itself beneficial for human health and well-being, since the things untouched by human hands are cleaner and more hygienic. Now in food and drug industry, every task is performed by the sterilized machines and nothing is touched by the human hands till the last procedure. Physicians and surgeons wear gloves while touching the patients. The height of sophistication is that we made tools for eating as well and we prefer not to touch the food we eat, with hands. The invention of utensils like spoons, knives and forks can be seen as the outcome of the similar theme of neurosis. In big shops of the edibles, the salesmen do not touch the food-items without gloves. The deep-rooted obsession behind all this can be seen as a reflection of the primary belief of the obsessional neurosis that to touch the things is a stigma, and those who touch the things or perform tasks by hands are inferior people.

The worse and insignificant grade consigned to women in society since the beginning of human civilization has its roots in the tenets of the obsessional neurosis. Women have always been considered morally and intellectually lower and inferior to men. We may ask ourselves why this is so. Keeping in view the linkage we have established between obsessional neurosis and the drive to achieve perfectionism, delaminating oneself from all things that represent the unworthy we can easily answer this question.

Sigmund Freud, declared intellect and morality as sole property of men. He believed that men alone have a drive towards achieving excellence and attaining perfectionism in their being, hence making them the sole sufferers of symptoms similar to those found in obsessional neurosis. Due to the higher moral and intellectual level of men, strive for excellence is a purely masculine trait; transferred to women through inheritance from fathers.

He uses his favourite Oedipus complex to justify his claim. A lengthy paragraph from one of his famous essays, "*Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes*" is worth quoting here. "In boys the complex is not only repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration. Its libidinal cathexes are abandoned, desexualized and in part sublimated; its objects are incorporated into the ego, where they

make the nucleus of the super-ego and give that new structure its characteristic qualities, in normal, or, it is better to say, in ideal cases, the Oedipus complex exists no longer, even in the unconscious, the super-ego has become its heir.....In girls the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex is lacking. Castration has already had its effects, which was to force the child into the Oedipus complex. Thus the Oedipus complex escapes the fate which it meets with in boys: it may be slowly abandoned or dealt with by repression, or its effects may persist far into women's mental life. I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to express it) that for women the level which is ethically normal is different from what is in men. The super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought against women- that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgment by feelings of affection or hostility---all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego which we have inferred above" (Freud 1991).

In another essay included in *On Sexuality*, under the title of "*Dissolution of the Oedipus complex*", he repeats the same thesis in the following words, "The fear of castration being thus excluded in the little girl, a powerful motive also drops out for the setting-up of a super-ego and for the breaking-off of the infantile genital organization. In her, far more than in a boy, these changes seem to be the results of upbringing and of intimidation from outside which threatens her with a loss of love. The girl's Oedipus complex is much simpler than that of the small bearer of the penis" (Freud 1991).

For Freud, the abandonment of the Oedipus complex in boys/men led towards the formation of the super-ego and the institutions of conscience and morality. So according to him conscience and morality are masculine traits, transferred to women only as hereditary traits. Otherwise they have no role of their own in the growth of these virtues.

In "*Female Sexuality*" Freud further affirms the same, "We have already learned too, that there is yet another difference between the sexes, which relates to the Oedipus complex. We have an impression here that what we have said about the Oedipus complex applies with complete strictness to male child only and that we are right in rejecting the term 'Electra Complex' which seeks to emphasize analogy between the attitude of two sexes. It is only in the male child that we find the fateful combination of love for the one parent and simultaneous hatred for the other as rival. In his case it is the discovery of the possibility of a castration, as proved by the sign of the female genitals, which forces on him the transformation of his Oedipus complex, and which leads him to the creation of his super-ego and thus initiates all the processes that are designed to make the individual find a place in the cultural community" (Freud 1991).

Freud goes on to state "on the other hand the same complex produces far less cultural, moral and intellectual transformation in women since they acknowledge the fact of their castration, and with it, too, the superiority of male and their own inferiority. In women Oedipus complex is not destroyed but is created as an influence of castration. For this reason the cultural consequences of its break-up are smaller and of less importance in them. We should probably not be wrong in saying that it is this difference in the reciprocal relation between the Oedipus and the castration complex which gives its

special stamp to the character of females as social beings" (Freud 1991).

Freud is convinced of the "lesser character of women" due to the efficacy of the Oedipus complex. It is interesting to note that women remained a mystery and object of his study throughout his life. "*Femininity*" is one of his landmark essays on the topic wherein he has repeated the same idea again with renewed vigour. He asserts that we are struck by a difference between the two sexes, which is probably momentous, in regard to the relation of the Oedipus complex to the castration complex. In the boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed fully and swiftly because of the threat of the castration and a very strict super-ego replaces it. "What happens with a girl" he writes, "is almost the opposite. The castration complex prepares for the Oedipus complex instead of destroying it; the girl is driven out of her attachment to her mother through the influence of her envy for the penis and she enters the Oedipus situation as though into a heaven of refuge. In the absence of fear of castration the chief motive is lacking which leads boys to surmount the Oedipus complex. Girls remain in it for an indeterminate length of time; they demolish it late and, even so, incompletely. In these circumstances the formation of super-ego must suffer; it cannot attain the strength and independence which give it its cultural significance, and feminists are not pleased when we point out to them the effects of this factor upon the average feminine character (Freud 1991).

When the little girl discovers her own deficiency, from seeing a male genital, it is only with hesitation and reluctance that she accepts the unwelcome knowledge. As we have seen, she clings obstinately to the expectation of one day having a genital of the same kind too, and her wish for it survives long after her hope has expired. The child invariably regards castration in the first instance as a misfortune peculiar to herself; only later does she realize that it extends to certain other children and lastly to certain grown-ups. When she comes to understand the general nature of this characteristic, it follows that femaleness---and with it, of course, her mother---suffers a great depreciation in her eyes (Freud 1991).

Freud is never tired of elaborating this issue, at another place he has written, "The psychological consequences of envy for the penis, in so far as it does not become absorbed in the reaction-formation of the masculinity complex, are various and far-reaching. After a woman has become aware of the wound to her narcissism, she develops like a scar, a sense of inferiority. When she has passed beyond her first attempt at explaining her lack of penis as a punishment to herself and has realized that that sexual character is a universal one, she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect, and, at least in holding that opinion, insists on being like a man" (Freud 1991).

In a lengthy footnote in the same article, "*Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes*", Freud asserts, "In my first critical account of the '*History of the Psychoanalytical Movement*' (1914d), I recognized that this fact represents the core of truth contained in Adler's theory. The theory has no hesitation in explaining the whole world by this single point ('organ-inferiority', the 'masculine protest', 'breaking away from the feminine line') and prides itself upon having in this way robbed sexuality of its importance and put the desire for power in its place! Thus the only organ which could claim to be called 'inferior' without any ambiguity would be the clitoris (Freud 1991).

In another similar footnote, just see what he has to say, "It is to be anticipated that men analysts with feminist views, as well as our

women analysts, will disagree with what I have said here. They will hardly fail to object that such notions spring from 'masculinity complex' of the male and are designed to justify on theoretical grounds his innate inclination to disparage and suppress women. But this sort of psychoanalytic argument reminds us here, as it so often does, of Dostoevsky's famous knife that cuts both ways. The opponents of those who argue in this way will on their side think it quite natural that the female sex should refuse to accept a view, which appears to contradict their eagerly coveted equality with men. The use of analysis as a weapon of controversy can clearly lead to no decision" (Freud 1991).

In the "*Rise of Greek Civilization*", Bertrand Russell has written that the social system was very different in different parts of Greece. In Sparta a small aristocracy subsisted on the labour of oppressed serfs of a different race. In the poorer agricultural regions, the population consisted mainly of farmers cultivating their own lands with the help of families. But where commerce and industry flourished, the free citizens grew rich by the employment of slaves—male in the mines, female in the textile industry. These slaves were, in Ionia, of the surrounding barbarian population, and, were, as a rule, first acquired in war. *With increasing wealth went increasing isolation of first respectable women, who in later times had little part in the civilized aspects of the Greek life except in Sparta and Lesbos.....'Democracy meant government of all citizens, in whom slaves and women were not included.* (Russell 1985).

Russell has further added that we know more or less what an educated Greek learnt from his father but we know very little of what, in his earliest years, he learnt from his mother, who was, to a great extent, shut out from the civilization in which the men took delight. Athenian democracy also excluded slaves and women. In his Utopia, Plato passes onto a curious argument about the drama. The good man, he says, ought to be unwilling to imitate a bad man; now most plays contain villains; therefore the dramatist, and the actor, who plays the villain's part, have to imitate people guilty of various crimes. *Not only criminals, but women, slaves, and, inferiors generally, ought not to be imitated by superior men.* Plays, therefore, if permissible at all, must contain no characters except faultless male heroes of good birth. The impossibility of this is so evident that Plato decides to banish all dramatists from his city (Russell 1985). [Italics added].

In the nutshell we may see that Freud, and Greek Philosophy are in consonance regarding the lower status of women and their roots may easily be explored, somehow or the other, in the symptoms of obsessional neurosis. The above discussion, nonetheless, is definitely not sufficient to "prove" the ultimate connection among neurosis, slavery, technology and subjugation of women but it does indicate some sort of link in all these factors.

As stated earlier the aim of the paper was to establish a possible linkage between these ideas. It is a purely hypothetical effort to establish a relation, association and causal alliance. Further research may clarify the issue.

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