

SUBLIMATION – A STUDY OF DEFENSE MECHANISM THROUGH AMULYA MALLADI’S SERVING CRAZY WITH CURRY

Author: S. Ramalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.

Research Scholar (Part Time), Department of English,
Kalaingar Karunanidhi Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous),
Pudukkottai – 622 001
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University) &
Assistant Professor of English, Cauvery College for Women (Autonomous), Trichy –18.
abiramahasini@gmail.com

&

Co-Author: Dr. M. Sagaya Sophia, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Research Guide
Assistant Professor of English, PG & Research Department of English,
Kalaingar Karunanidhi Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous),
Pudukkottai - 622 001
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)
msagayasophia@gmail.com

Abstract:

Amulya Malladi is one of the most popular prolific writers of Indian Diaspora. In her third novel *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), she discusses the psyche of Devi, the protagonist who is inflicted with the obsessive thought of suicidal. She is maladjusted due to the unreasonable hatred for her mother and the influence of the American culture where she is living at present. She has lost the control of her life and becomes a failure as a percussion of her waywardly life in the USA. She is haunted by the thoughts of suicidal and commits suicide. But her mother rescues her in the last minute. This article discusses how Devi recuperates from her harmful feelings applying the defense mechanism *Sublimation* unconsciously and becomes an expert cook.

Key Words: Sublimation, defense mechanism, suicidal, culinary art, psyche, recuperation, cuisine.

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According to the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, the personality of a human being is distinguished into three components such as the id, the ego and the super ego. ‘Id’ is primitive and it wants to gratify its impulses immediately regardless of the circumstances. ‘Ego’ compromises the controversies between the id and restrictions of the world. It delays the id’s desire in order to fulfil the demands of the society. In his *The Ego and the Id* Freud pronounces, “... in each

individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his *ego*. It is to this ego that consciousness is attached; the ego controls the approaches to motility... it is the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes....” (17) ‘Super ego’ is the moral component resolves to follow the moral ways of the society whatever the difficulties it may confront. It enables the ego to adhere to the demands of the society in all the times. All these components are always in constant conflicts as the ego’s inability to balance between the demands of the id and the superego, as the id wants to satisfy its desire but the ego does not allow it to do for the various situational demands. In his *An Outline*

of *Psycho-Analysis* Freud observes, “Just as the id is directed exclusively to obtaining pleasure, so the ego is governed by considerations of safety. The ego has set itself the task of self-preservation, which the id appears to neglect.” (199)

This internal conflict creates certain anxiety in the minds of the people. Freud, in his *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis* discusses that the ego “is able only to modify the pleasure principle but not to nullify it.” (198) That is why; the ego develops a character which is otherwise called as ‘Defense Mechanism’ to overwhelm this displeasing situation. Further, Freud points out in his book *The Ego and the Ids*, “For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common senses, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions.” (25) Thus, people adopt certain behaviour unconsciously in order to come out of their anxiety.

Freud has pronounced various defense mechanisms such as *Repression, Reaction Formation, Projection, Rationalization, Displacement, Denial, Regression, and Sublimation* and these defense mechanisms have been redefined and further added with other defense mechanisms by the forthcoming psychoanalysts. *Sublimation* is one of the defense mechanisms projected by a person who wants to convert his socially unacceptable thoughts or feelings evoked by id such as sexual aggression, guilt, or suicidal into the socially accepted activity such as music, art or sports. The person diverts his strong harmful emotions into a socially accepted form using the defense mechanism *Sublimation*. *Sublimation* is an unconscious positive strategy used to separate people from their embarrassing events. In this article, the defense mechanism *Sublimation* is explored through the act of Devi Veturi, the protagonist of Amulya Malladi’s novel *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004).

In Malladi’s psychological novel *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Malladi tries to explore the psyche of the suicidal through the character Devi Veturi. Devi wants to be successful in her career like her sister, her father and her grandmother. Devi feels inferior

while comparing herself with her family members’ positions. However she strives hard in all directions to make her prominent. But, unfortunately all her efforts come to a futile end which creates a complex in her mind. As her mother is supporting her sister Shobha, she hates her mother and her sister. As per the culture of the USA, she dates with many men but has no intimate relationship to share her inner feelings. She confronts only failures in her career life and her intimate relationship also is at stake though she lives independently on her own terms in an apartment. Due to so many factors such as sibling rivalry, cultural influence and lack of parental attention, she feels ignored and without her consciousness, she starts longing for love. And so she tends to behave aggressively. Her loneliness and depression takes her to its extremity which is her suicidal attempt. Sometimes, she analyses the reason for her survival and finally comes with a reason for suicide also. Before her suicide she writes in a paper the causes to live and causes to die like this:

REASONS TO DIE

1. Have disappointed the father and grandmother who love me
2. Laid off again
3. Completely in debt
4. Can’t pay rent
5. Have had only failed relationships
6. Slept with a married man
7. Had a relationship with a married man
8. Fell in love with a married man
9. Lost a baby

REASONS NOT TO DIE

1. Have a loving family (sort of, if mother and sister are not included)
2. Have my health
3. Hmm.... (SCC10)

Thus, she delays her suicidal thought re-analysing the goodness she has faced in her life. She is hesitant, depressed and scared to think about her mountainous problems. Thus, her ego tries to delay the id’s desire of committing suicide. Her prolonged depression starts eating up her energy. Finally, she swings

fully into the act of committing suicide. She slits her wrist and swoons in her bath tub. She is rescued by her mother who comes to her apartment accidentally and she is hospitalised. When she comes to her consciousness, she keeps muted for all the enquiries of the psychiatrist Dr. Berkley. The psychiatrist enquires Saroj whether Devi was speechless like this any time before. Saroj recollects an incident when Devi was at her ten years and says, “She stole a girl’s money and broke that girl’s nose. Instead of saying sorry and telling us why she did it, she stopped talking for a week. She is just spoiled and that is our fault, but *nothing* bad happened to her. I didn’t drop her on her head as a baby or anything.” (SCC 35)

As per the psychiatrist’s advice she moves to her mother’s house reluctantly. Her mother arranges the shelves of Devi’s old room with literary books except the one where she keeps her recipe notebooks assuming Devi’s engagement with reading. Devi is impressed by the recipe journals written by her mother, Saroj. Devi gets inspired after reading the recipe journals. Devi is aware of the entire change of her present situation that she is surrounded by her family members all the time. Devi is delightful in drawing the attention of her family members towards her.

Devi decides, “If she couldn’t use her tongue for talking, she felt she had to use it for something else and her taste buds, since the “incident,” had come alive. Food, which had been merely meals before, objects of sustenance, had become objects of art.” (Malladi 58) She starts pondering innovatively as “Her mother usually makes only mint chutney and Indian recipe. Devi never cooked. It wasn’t that she was a terrible cook.” (Malladi 48) She resumes her cooking by blending the Western and Indian cuisine together. She writes the responses of the inmates about her dish in the form of a journal as suggested by her Psychiatrist. She feels awe when she receives positive comments from her family members. Thus, everyone of her family starts relishing her innovative style of cooking. Malladi wonderfully portrays Devi’s change of mind thus, “Her chutney was a success. Pride swelled inside her and for the first time in a very long time she felt a small measure of

confidence... She couldn’t just make chutney every day and get a sense of accomplishment.” (Malladi 49)

In Devi’s diversion by the regular activity of cooking, sometimes her suicidal thought come into surface thus, “A whole week passed and the “incident” seemed unreal now, even though in the back of her mind there was a constant struggle. One Devi wanted to stay home and enjoy cooking and not talking, while the other Devi wanted action, wanted to get into that bathtub again and end it once more.” (Malladi 57) When she goes for counselling under the Psychiatrist, the Psychiatrist admires on seeing her mental improvement. When she comes to know from Devi’s parents that Devi cooks in a delicious manner, she confirms that the person who is suicidal cannot think innovatively like this. The Psychiatrist exclaims, “You know, those who think about death, don’t cook,” ... “Inside you there’s something that wants to live and taste and explore.” (Malladi 57) Devi deliberately focuses on cooking in order to ignore her interior as it carries many wounds of past. Thus, Devi’s id wants Devi to commit suicide which is unacceptable impulse to anyone. Her ego tries to postpone the desire of the id. Now and then her id appears to fulfil its desire. Thus her ego is anxious unable to stop the desire of her id. Her ego tries to divert her by creating interest in her for cooking. Thus, Devi gets diverted and separated from her anxious thoughts for a certain moment.

Devi’s interest in cooking enhances and she feels encouraged. Devi feels happy that her mother cannot scold her hereafter as she is a suicidal. Thus, her unwanted harmful emotion of suicidal gradually gets diverted and transformed into the sublimed act of cooking. Her curiosity to cook makes her divert from her suicidal thought. Usually, her mother Saroj makes biriyani during some special occasions such as wedding anniversaries or birthday celebrations. Devi feels elated when her father handover her driving licence as it reveals his confidence on her. This new freedom makes her happy and so she makes prawn biriyani to celebrate that moment. Her father Avi’s comments are pleasant to her ears thus, “If you keep cooking like this, I’m going to bloat up completely,” (Malladi 58). Her always

complaining mother also now relishes the taste of biriyani. The entire situation of the house changes thus, “Devi was cooking like a veteran chef ... now everyone was afraid that they were putting on weight. Girish and Shobha were coming for dinner every night, the family was sticking together, ensuring that the “mute in the kitchen”—as Shobha called Devi—would have all the support she needed.” (Malladi 59) Devi’s transformation takes place little by little as her family members extend their helping hands for her fast recuperation. She starts realizing her mistakes of her past and vents out in her journal thus, “*I have decided to live, and now I need to find out how to make it happen. A pinch of hope, with a dollop of family-inspired guilt, plus a tablespoon of sense should get me there, hopefully. I will work on myself. I will make the wrongs of my past right.*” (Malladi 74) Though Devi is diverted from her act of suicide, she has not come out of it completely. As she is not accepted by her family members she tries that suicide. Now, by her art of cookery she becomes expert in cooking which draws attention of everyone. She is supported by her family members. Thus, her ego changes her unacceptable thought of committing suicide into acceptable art of culinary.

Devi realizes her mother’s accomplishment as a successful homemaker as cooking is an uncomplicated area. She understands her mother’s efforts to try her best to satisfy every need of her family members and so, Devi stops expressing grudges on her mother. Devi finds, “*Her food tasted different from her mother’s but she had learned to cook from Saroj and that made Devi feel closer to Saroj in a way she never had before. Silence and the kitchen had brought them together, and it was a time and place that Devi had started to relish.*” (Malladi 83) Her life style completely takes a turn. Every day she prepares breakfast, lunch and dinner. Malladi discusses the transformation of Devi beautifully thus:

Everyone has to have a role in society, and in her book of definitions a homemaker was defined as a lazy woman who sat home pretending to have a full-time job. So it seemed ironic to Devi that she was spending

most of her time in the kitchen, chopping and baking and stirring. She, who had never cooked, never been part of the kitchen militia, was a general now. She loved it. And she realized that she owed her culinary epiphany to her mother. (Malladi 83)

Devi does not let her be alone and idle. She is fully committed herself in cooking and in buying the grocery things in supermarket along with her grandmother. It breaks her monotony. There is an abrupt change in her dull tone of life. When she takes the act of *Sublimation*, her mind starts condescending that she wants to thank her family members for their care but the words are failing. Gradually she comes out of her suicidal thought and breaks her silence by talking freely with everyone of her family. Knowing her aspiration, her father Avi helps her join the culinary school.

Through her novel *Serving Crazy with Curry*, Malladi sheds light on the different dimensions of the psyche of the character Devi how she diverts her harmful feeling of suicidal into a sublimed wish of cooking. Devi vents out her harmful emotion by turning her mind into the art of cookery and by accounting her family’s responses and their recognition through her journal writing technique. Her family members’ positive responses give her hope and encouragement which transcends her mind to stick to the sublimed act of cooking. That is why she starts trying various dishes in the name of ‘fusion cuisine’. Finding her suicidal thought unacceptable and useless, her ego has taken a form of defense mechanism in order to protect her from the insensible act of her id. Her ego diverts her by showing interest in an unknown field of cuisine and thus her cooking action acts as *Sublimation* by which she is able to transcend her useless thought of suicidal. Thus, Devi’s act of *Sublimation* makes Devi accepted and recognized by her family members and motivates her to live better by mending her past errors.

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