

# Women and Psychoanalysis

by Alma Miller

Psychoanalysis and Feminism is an attempt by Juliet Mitchell to defend psychoanalytic theory from objections that have arisen out of the feminist movement. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis has been criticized for its concentration on a masculine model of development and for its concomitant relegation of women to an inferior social position. Mitchell feels that vulgar popularization, misconstrual of the language and isolation of part of Freud's essays from the broader theoretical context have resulted in misapprehension of a theory that may ultimately contribute to an understanding of the development and socialization of females within our culture.

Mitchell's goal is to discuss Freud, Reich, Laing and women in order to prove her argument. Unfortunately, she runs out of steam as she moves towards the end of the line. Freudian theory is exhaustively presented in the first major part of the book. Then the contributions of Wilhelm Reich and Ronald Laing are analyzed. These men were both radical therapists trained in the psychoanalytic tradition, and their views are not only in vogue among radical social thinkers, but also important extensions of Freudian concepts. In the third major part of the book, Mitchell briefly poses counter-arguments to Firestone, de Beauvoir,



*Chai Person*

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Greer and other feminist critics of Freud, whose work, Mitchell claims, suffers from faults ranging from historical inaccuracies to conceptual inadequacies. Finally, the reader is led to Mitchell's own perspective on the social ramifications of femininity. This last section is more a diminution than a denouement. It is unfortunately short, undeveloped and irrelevant to an understanding of contemporary life.

Mitchell's argument concerning the relevance of psychoanalysis for an understanding of female socialization is the most consistent theme in her book and will be the main concern of this review.

Freud recognized the powerful influence of sexuality in personality development. He observed that children sought sexual gratification in less restricted ways than did adults. The infant was a polymorphous perverser, and the various orifices of the body became stimulants and receptacles for self-gratification. In the poetic words of Mitchell, new solids were sought for new hollows. Both females and males were bisexual in their orientations. All variations and permutations of sexual phantasies with the mother were available to both sexes alike. Freud regarded falling in love with the mother and subsequent jealousy of the father as a universal event of childhood. The Greek legend of Oedipus Rex

. . . seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he feels its existence within himself. Each member of the audience was once, in germ and phantasy, just such an Oedipus, and each one recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the whole quota of repression which separates his infantile state from his present one.

(Freud, 1966, p. 265)

The term "Oedipus complex" was used to describe the fateful attraction towards the mother and the resulting necessary repression of this sexual desire and its mental representations into the unconscious. According to Freud, sexual attraction to the mother was resolved differently in the two sexes. However, for both sexes the Oedipus complex was an important phase in a young individual's life, for it marked the transition from the egocentric, autoerotic world of the child to the socially conforming world of the adult. Exit free sexual expression, enter adulthood. As idiosyncratic sexuality was lost, conventional attitudes and behaviour were acquired.

Freud regarded the assumption of unconscious mental processes, repression and sexuality as the foundations upon which a theory--perhaps an edifice complex--of personality development must be built. The substance of

the complexity of this theory was revealed within case-histories. Freud's early clinical work with hysterical female patients seminally contributed to his appreciation of the concepts of sexuality and the unconscious. These patients were talented, bright, ambitious women who were discouraged from activity and deprived of rewards or recognition commensurate with their energy, interests, intelligence and skills. As adults, they evidenced peculiar symptoms such as paralysis or anesthesia of hands; impairment of sight, speech, or smell; bodily pain; inability to speak. These afflictions were without discernible physical causes. Not only did these women seem free from physical defects but also the symptoms appeared nonsensical from a physiological point of view. (The so-called glove anesthesia, for example, could not be explained on the basis of injury to the nervous system, because injury to the nerve tracts would produce more widespread defects than in the hands alone.) With the aid of hypnosis and free recall, the unconscious mental associations of these women were explored. Eventually it was discovered that these women knew and understood and remembered less about themselves than was true of people free of these symptoms. The physical pains represented repressed psychic pains concerning such themes as incest and seduction. In one patient, for example, erotic thoughts toward a

brother-in-law formed an unbearable idea which was excluded from consciousness. Through a series of events, the unconscious erotic thoughts became associated with unbearable pain in the legs. Freud deduced that hysteria was another language to express repressed sexual ideas which were not consciously acknowledged and dealt with.

Although hysterical symptoms illustrated the importance of concepts such as sexuality and the unconscious, Freud did not develop his theory to reflect the experiences of these women. For instance, some of his female patients claimed to have been seduced by their fathers at a very early age. Freud replaced the seduction theory with a fantasy theory. He felt that unconscious mental processes follow their own logic and are not bound by external reality. In the process, he vindicated fathers but implicated daughters by suggesting that the daughters desired an incestual relationship, not the fathers. One writer (Rush, 1977) has suggested that the fantasy theory was a reflection of Freud's own conflicts and needs. Whatever motive led to the fantasy theory, Mitchell does not attempt to give new life to psychoanalytic thought by a re-examination of the histories of these women. Rather, she simply reiterates the conclusions that Freud himself reached concerning the unconscious sexual desires of these women.

Although she fails to realign it, Mitchell's interpretations render psychoanalytic theory more plausible. At least she gives a more figurative and less literal interpretation to the controversial penis-envy theory. In his 1924 paper titled "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex," Freud wrote that when a little girl discovers that her clitoris is not comparable to the prize with which a boy is endowed, the girl suffers from penis-envy. The little girl rejects the imputation of inferior status and tries to compensate symbolically by desiring a baby from the father. In Kate Millett's words, the baby represents a feminine-coated penis. As a means to fulfillment of this desire, the female acquires conventional sex-role behaviour such as passivity and the arts of love and conciliation. In the process, the pleasures of clitoris are abandoned in favour of those of the vagina.

This description of female socialization, Mitchell claims, may be seen as a metaphor. Freud described a subjective process within the mind, not an objective event or fact. "Penis-envy" referred not to the desire for an anatomical organ, but to the attitude towards males held by people within the general culture. In a patriarchal society, the penis is valorized and the bearer has power, authority and privilege within the social group. Naturally, the little girl does not want to be relegated to second class

status.

Mitchell also makes the distinction between a physical referent and a psychological symbol, which she applies to the supposed issue of clitoral vs. vaginal orgasm. Mitchell asserts that, when Freud wrote that the little girl must transfer the sensitivity of her clitoris to the vagina, he described a psychological process and a change in value orientation; and that he was not prescribing the normal mode of sexual expression for women. (As a result of their research, Masters and Johnson (1966) reported that a clitoral orgasm is physiologically indistinguishable from a vaginal orgasm. Thus it seems reasonable that the clitoral-to-vaginal shift describes an attitude and not a somatic need.)

Psychoanalysis is concerned with mental representations in the unconscious, and the language of and about the unconscious is symbolic. The problem with psychological symbols is that they can still be very powerful determinants of attitudes. Mitchell's explanation of symbolization does not completely allay the charge of prejudice. Symbols may be a major means of repressing women, as in the use of "chairman" rather than "chairperson." Although "penis-envy" may represent desire for patriarchal prerogative the term connotes an inferior person's unreasonable desire. This con-

notation does not accurately represent the feminine predicament.

Mitchell leaves unresolved other large issues within the Freudian framework, for example, Freud's conclusion that, in comparison with men, women had a weaker superego. He surmised that the young girl did not have an incentive for identifying with the father or for acquiring his moral control and ego-ideal characteristics. The ludicrous implication was that women were therefore less moralistic. In the light of pervasive statistics concerning the higher incidence of unsocialized behaviour among males, one is left wondering about the relevance of the theory. How does one explain, for example, the fact that boys outnumber girl delinquents by five to one; that they are 300 times more likely to join gangs and have always presented greater problems to the educational system; that males are implicated in 90 percent of the arrests for murder, negligent manslaughter, vandalism, weapon possession, drunkenness, assault and sexual offenses. (McNeil, 1973) In a later obscure inference in the book, Mitchell explains the women's Oedipus complex as resulting in stronger dependence on authority figures. This would seem to be a more accurate explanation of even the above statistics. One only wishes that Mitchell would discriminate more trenchantly the reasonable from the unreasonable in Freudian theory.

Freud himself was very uncertain and tentative about femininity. Most of the Oedipus complex theory concerned the young male's development. Female development was an offshoot of this theory concerning males, although not a parallel one. Alas, the reader must look elsewhere than in Mitchell's book for an interpretation of femininity that results from a refashioning of old threads such as sexuality and the unconscious. Mitchell slipped into the trap of many true believers who so busily lecture on the master's theory that they lose critical judgment. We have already discussed Mitchell's failure to re-examine Freud's case-histories concerning hysterical women in order to develop a more plausible theory of feminine development. This failure to revamp an inadequate form is also apparent in the chapter titled "The Oedipus Complex." Almost all of the references pertain to men, and yet the title of the book would suggest that we might seek some information about women. As it is, Mitchell's material on psychoanalysis can be found in any conventional textbook on that topic.

Freud became famous for his emphasis on sexuality and its importance in personality development. However, a colleague of his named Wilhelm Reich was even more radical in examining the social significance of sexuality. A medical doctor, who later trained as a psychoanalyst, Reich was convinced

that social and political suppression of sexuality resulted in neurosis.

Reich insisted that sexual inhibitions were constant causal factors in the etiology of neuroses, that certain political groups furthered these inhibitions for their own aims, and that a free and natural sex life was most beneficial to the individual. He established various clinics and groups that advocated abolition of laws against abortion, birth control and homosexuality, reform of marriage, free contraceptives, sex education and counselling. In his book entitled The Mass Psychology of Fascism, Reich illustrated the exploitation of the family by Nazi ideologues. The father, like the Führer, made his children subservient and in his image. Women were relegated to kinder, küche and kirche and were excluded from independent economic activity. Family life was extolled and marriage became compulsory. This resulted in sexual regulation and suppression; compensation was found through notions such as honour and duty. The family became emotionally identified with the state and nation.

Whereas Reich demonstrated the repressive influence of social and political institutions on the family, another psychoanalyst, Ronald Laing, demonstrated the potential for pathology that may exist between family members themselves. His detailed accounts

concerned schizophrenic women who failed to establish their own personal and sexual identity. Mother-daughter conflict over the younger woman's sexual emancipation and an ineffective or absent father was a recurrent theme in Laingian histories. The significance of this situation may be understood within the context of psychoanalytic theory. The mother and daughter relationship is not attenuated by the daughter's entry into the Oedipus complex, because the father is not available as a source of sexual attraction and as a third party to an otherwise dyadic bond. In the normal course of development the daughter's Oedipal father-love should transfer to husband-love, but this is impossible when the mother is so powerful and controlling.

The strengths and weaknesses of Mitchell's writing style are repeated within the chapters concerning Reich and Laing. Although both are important in understanding the problems of women in sexuality and the family, Mitchell's approach exhibits perambulation of the mind and the end goal of the circuitous approach is often not apparent. For example, the evolution of Laing's theory concerning the agent provocateur of psychosis is fairly extensively discussed. Laing has shown that psychosis often seemed to occur within the context of disjunctive relationships. If the person was disturbed, the family may be

disturbing. The nexus of social relationships might render a person pathological. Mitchell develops and then drops Laing's arguments concerning the situational constraints on behaviour. Yet, this should be an important contribution to any discussion on reform of current social structures, such as laws or family structures that discriminate against women.

After wandering through 350 pages of theoretical and philosophical discussion and dialectical analysis, one might expect that at last Mitchell would attempt to provide some new understanding of contemporary female experience. Alas, this expectation is not met. Instead, Mitchell attempts to illustrate the universality of the psychoanalytic interpretation of feminine development, not in terms of political, psychological or social events of the present, but in terms of anthropological speculations about the origins and necessity of the family. In her discussion, Mitchell emphasizes kinship organization, which concerns the rules and laws by which person A becomes sexually related to person B within the social group. The incest taboo represents one example of such a law. This law ensures cooperation between family units; if sister married brother or father, then there would be no sharing between families and therefore no social organization outside the nuclear unit of mother, father, children.

Females in capitalist society are usually relegated to secondary and inferior status. Instead of analyzing this dilemma in terms of the concepts that concern the bulk of her book, Mitchell resorts to a hoary explanation presented by Freud concerning the primal horde. In an imagined pre-social epoch, the father had all the power and all the rights over clan women. In order to obtain their share of the goodies, the sons murdered the father. However, the brothers discovered that no one person could inherit the father's right to all the women and they also felt quite guilty about their nefarious deed. The result was the establishment of the incest taboo. Thus the father became far more powerful in death than in life, and patriarchy was begun. Furthermore, the women were forced to marry outside the nuclear family unit. This situation is represented by the Oedipus complex and it is the beginning of social law and tradition.

This myth again assumes the inferiority of women. The sons are active in the primal murder, the daughters are not. The only explanation given is that women lack a phallus. But the female's pre-Oedipal desires are bisexual. She, like the brother, wants to speak and live within society, wants to take the father's place. Both sexes also desire the mother and desire to be the phallus-baby for the mother. However, since

the daughter cannot accomplish this by direct means, femininity is supposedly repudiated by both sexes. Thereafter, females either repress their sexual interests, as in the hysterical patients, or express their sexual interests passively through love and conciliation. Mitchell claims that these are the women's only alternatives. As they cannot take their father's place, the daughters cannot regulate and organize the social order.

But social order is expressed through ideas and laws. And women can understand these as well as men. The social order is a cognitive institution, not a biological one. Mitchell resorts to a biological explanation for socially-derived custom. The situation, even in the myth, might otherwise have been examined to yield some interesting perspectives on women. For example, the perspective may be that women were too adaptable to the status quo or that they identified with the immediate power structure. Whatever the ultimate explanation, Mitchell gives us only one based on biological differences.

There is a further irony in this account. In discussing the Oedipal complex, Mitchell repeatedly makes the point that myth must be interpreted symbolically, not literally. Yet, she presents another myth, that of the murder of the primal father, and uses

it as a literal explanation for the characteristics of femininity.

The final chapters on psychoanalysis and feminism are speculative and ultimately frustrating. Mitchell fails to examine implications or applications of her ideas. For example, she develops the argument that the incest taboo may be irrelevant within economically advanced societies. The large numbers of workers and the high frequency of their interaction render it improbable that workers would marry their own kin or that such a marriage would have socially disruptive consequences. Mitchell hints that marriage may not be advantageous for working women anyway. As shown by British wartime experiences, the family as presented in dominant ideologies virtually ceased to exist. Yet, society functioned efficiently and effectively with large numbers of women in the labour force. There are other statistics to indicate that the traditional form of the family is changing. The family's role as purveyor of social conventions has been rendered obsolete by the media, social mobility and different life styles. In California today, more people under 30 are living together unmarried than married. In the United States, about one out of every four marriages ends in divorce. (McNeil, 1973) However, Mitchell fails to give any information about meaningful change. The Oedipus complex and the incest taboo are supposedly uni-



versal events. In what new form will they be expressed? More analysis is needed, but the reader will have to search elsewhere than in this book,

Psychoanalysis is concerned with the operation of thoughts, customs and culture. Mitchell has shown that psychoanalysis is a description of the mental representations of women. Envy for penis, fantasy of incest and vaginal sexuality are interpreted as statements of psychological orientation, not literal statements of fact. They are a child's way of expressing desire for adult male prerogatives within the culture. Although Mitchell is able to clear up some misconcep-

tions concerning psychoanalytic theory, the end result of a rather lengthy book is that the theory has not been critically examined in an internal or external sense. Internally, Mitchell fails to modify the theory's more ludicrous conclusions, such as the conclusion that, in comparison with men, women have a weaker superego. Externally, its applicability to contemporary life has not been realistically treated. In a capitalistic, patriarchal society, the Oedipus complex has been perpetuated by the family and aided by the incest taboo. However, the times they are a-changing. Mitchell has failed to demonstrate the pertinence of psychoanalytic theory for these changing times.

#### NOTES

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