



Article Type: Review Article

Article Ref. No.: 20071500257PF

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0301-a013>



POST-STRUCTURAL MEDITATIONS OF JACQUES LACAN ON HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract:

The present article explores psychoanalytical discourse of Jacques Lacan on human subjectivity. Jacques Lacan is an important psychoanalyst who extends Freud's ideas about the human mind. If closely seen, Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis is far different from Freud's psychoanalysis. As stated above, Freud's emphasis was on intra-psychic processes that take place during childhood and their role in making an individual to be a member of the civilization. They have greater impact on entire life of the individual. Freudian theory of psychoanalysis was later expanded by Jacques Lacan. He, like Freud, made his contribution to the development of psychoanalysis. Poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Louis Althusser (1918-1990), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Jacques Lacan, disagreed with the humanistic notion of an individual as rational being capable of thinking and understanding the outer reality and as separate from the ideological structures. The individual becomes subject of unconscious with the imposition of language and culture which are already there before the birth of an individual, says Lacan. The present article also unfolds his analysis on the three registers of human life i.e. imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The role of unconscious into psychic development of human subject is also discussed.

Keywords: Psychoanalytical, Unconscious, Language, Culture, Symbolic

Jacques Lacan is an important psychoanalyst who extends Freud's ideas about the human mind. If closely seen, Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis is far different from Freud's psychoanalysis. Freud pays much attention to intra-psychic processes like libido, Oedipus complex, penis envy etc. On the other hand, Lacan concentrates more on the role of language and culture on the overall maturity of the subject. Lacan makes psycho philosophical interpretation of the human condition in which he seems to look at humans as incapable to gain knowledge and truth about the human life.

As stated above, Freud's emphasis was on intra-psychic processes that take place during childhood and their role in making an individual to be a member of the civilization. They have greater impact on entire life of the individual. Freudian theory of psychoanalysis was later expanded by Jacques Lacan. He, like Freud, made his contribution to the development of psychoanalysis. Poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Louis Althusser

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(1918-1990), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Jacques Lacan, disagreed with the humanistic notion of an individual as rational being capable of thinking and understanding the outer reality and as separate from the ideological structures. They criticized age old discourse that gave the primacy to the conscious mind. The 17th century scholar, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was the precursor of this line of thinking. He asserted that 'I think, therefore I am'. In Descartes' view, human existence has its roots in the thinking capacity of man. Thinking provides the evidence that we exist. Descartes promoted the idea that meditation about the human existence leads towards the knowledge and truth. However, poststructuralists, disagreeing with the notion of thinking man, proposed the notion of 'subject' who is a part of the social structure and is subjected to its power relations. It is held that one is born as an individual, but becomes subject dominated by power structure. The whole poststructuralist thought revolves around the human subjectivity. It has created the discourse about the subject who is subjected to social and psychological processes. In their stance over the issue of human subjectivity, the poststructuralists also hold that the idea of knowledge and truth is essentially a social construct determined by discourse and power.

As one of the most influential poststructuralists, Lacan talks of human subjectivity. The individual becomes subject of unconscious with the imposition of language and culture which are already there before the birth of an individual. Lacan has been critical of Jean Piaget who gives more focus on the ego and innate mental processes. Piaget holds that innate mental processes create the 'schema' in the child. He defines *scheme* or *schema* as 'any action pattern for dealing with the environment, such as looking, grasping, hitting, or kicking' (Crain 129). This *schema* helps the children gain knowledge to cope with outer reality. Piaget constructs his idea of the 'mental processes' and 'schema' on the basis of cognition. However, Lacan disagrees with Piaget. He regards the ego, the mental processes and schema as secondary. While opposing Piaget, Lacan mentions that 'knowledge is indeed a "process" but one which divides itself into unconscious, repressed knowledge as "truth" and conscious knowledge which flees from "truth" in the name of rationality, wisdom and convention' (Ragland-Sullivan 90). In other words, Lacan thinks that what is normally assessed as rationality, wisdom and convention is not a true reality. Rather, the true knowledge lies in the unconscious. Therefore, he argues that the ego or conscious mind should not be the focal point of psychoanalytical investigation of human mind; rather it must be unconscious mind.

According to Lacan, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real are three registers of human life. For this, Lacan explains his theory of ego formation in the child in his paper 'The Mirror Stage' (1949) which was later translated into English in 1968. Whereas the paper has been influenced by the studies in phenomenology, existentialism, experimental psychology and ethology, it proved influential in the fields like cinema and literary studies. Lacan elaborates the development of the ego in the child which, he claims, takes place between 6 and 18 months. From the birth until 6 months, the child has no sense of selfhood. It has a fragmentary self and sees his own body in pieces. This phase is 'the imaginary', because, as Ragland-Sullivan explains, it is "a newborn infant's perceptive state' in which child's 'first images are corporeal, therefore and are perceptually prior and resistant to conscious symbolization" (141). However, the moment, the child sees its image in the mirror, it loses a sense of being fragmented. He begins to look at his complete body with jubilation. It results in the development of 'I' or ego. Thenceforward, the child takes itself as a separate entity and differentiates itself from the mother and others. The mirror stage embarks the child's entry into, what Lacan calls, 'the Symbolic'. Darian Leader describes 'the symbolic':

From the start of the 1950s, Lacan stressed more and more in his work the power and organizing principle of the symbolic, understood as the networks, social, cultural, and linguistic into which child is born. These precede a birth of a child, which is why Lacan can say that language is there from before the

actual moment of birth. It is there in the social structures which are at play in the family and of course, in the ideals, goals and histories of the parents. Even before a child is born, the parents have talked about him or her, chosen a name, mapped out his or her future. This world of language can hardly be grasped by the newborn and yet it will act on the whole of a child's existence (43).

In Lacan's view, it is family that plays a crucial role in early human subjectivity. It places a newborn in the symbolic realm of language and imposes the culture in which the child is born. It is mother's interaction with baby that gradually puts him or her in the familial lineage and social structure. The child learns language through it and begins to take colors of his family. In the beginning, the child is closely attached to its mother. However, as the child learns language and enters the symbolic realm, it is 'The Name-of-the-Father', which is defined as 'the structural symbolic element' breaks mother-child dyad (Leader 100). This intrusion of 'The Name-of-the-Father' is what Lacan calls 'Paternal Metaphor' (101). It is called a metaphor because it replaces the desire for the mother with 'The Name-of-the-Father'. In Lacanian version of Oedipus complex, the child attempts to seduce the mother with his games. He realizes that the object of mother's desire is possessed by father. So the child tries to be the phallus. However, with the interference of 'The Name-of-the-Father', the child learns that one can never become a phallus. Thus, male and female child have to renounce phallic identification with the mother (95). The desire for the mother is substituted by 'The Name-of-the-Father' (101). Here, 'The Name-of-the-Father' is not essentially analogous to the father who, as a member of the family, takes care of the family members. Rather, what Lacan means by 'The Name-of-the-Father' is a 'symbolic function, less a person than a place, which is responsible for separation from the mother' of the child (102). Eventually, the child gets separated from the mother and leaves its desire for her. The child realizes that it is highly impossible to be the object of mother's desire, because it is always beyond the reach of the child. The object of mother's desire is the phallus and this object is assumed to be lost by the child with his entry into the symbolic realm of language. So, the phallus stands as the initiator of the process of signification. Hence, the phallus, in Lacanian discourse, is a privileged signifier. Further, realizing that one can never be the phallus, the boy pretends to have the phallus that he does not have in the first place and the girl pretends to be the phallus which she is not and both hope that they will receive the phallus in future (95). This pretence on the part of the boy and the girl can be seen as the compromise that one has to make in life. However, it should be kept in mind that the acceptance of the fact that the phallus as a lost object and the abandonment of the idea to become a phallus mark the symbolic castration on the part of both male and female. In Lacanian version of Oedipus complex, the castration takes place at the symbolic level. In Lacan's opinion, 'The-Name-of-the-Father is simply absent from the mental universe of the psychotic patient' (106). But this symbolic element that is 'The Name-of-the-Father' plays a very crucial role in the psyche of the normative subject. In Lacan's view, it is very important that the subject should have the presence of 'The Name-of-the-Father' for normal subjectivity.

The third register of human reality, 'the real' is, as Lacan opines, something that refutes the complete signification. It is unsymbolizable; therefore, it cannot be explained in terms of language. In Ragland-Sullivan's words, 'The "real" Real is both beyond and behind imaginary perception and symbolic description.' (188). The real is out of the periphery of symbolic order and therefore, it is unknowable.

Lacan believes, like Freud, that 'the human subject is split into conscious and unconscious parts' (Ragland-Sullivan 2). Lacan conceives the subject as 'fundamentally split or divided entity: split by the laws of language to which he is subordinate and divided to the extent that it does not know what it wants' (Leader 65). What Lacan did for understanding the human subjectivity is that he married Freud's unconscious with Saussure's Structuralist notion of language as a sign system. He declared that the unconscious is structured like a language, because unconscious dream processes

'condensation' and 'displacement' link with literary tropes 'metaphor' and 'metonymy' respectively. Taking further Saussure's idea of language as a sign system, Lacan shows inadequacy of Saussure's model to achieve the meanings from signs. In attempt to achieve signifieds of signifiers, what we keep receiving are only signifiers. Signifiers do not have final signifieds. Therefore, unconscious is full of signifiers which do not have fixed or stable signifieds. Hence, the process of signification can never be complete. In Lacan's words, there is 'an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' (Homer 154). There is never ending chain of signifiers that make the process of signification remain incomplete. This incompleteness of signification has its linkages with the coming-of-age or maturity of the subject. In our world what we call maturity and adulthood is what Lacan assesses basically as a 'biological being' that has attained an identity due to language and culture.

As language and culture are part of symbolic order, they bring with them the secondary desires that replace primary desires of the human subjects. Lacan defines the primary desires as the desires that child has while it is in pre-symbolic stage. The primary desire of the child is with the part objects associated with the initial universe of its mother. The part objects are 'the breasts, the excrement, the gaze, the voice' which are lost at the entry of child into the Symbolic realm of language (Ragland-Sullivan 75). The child desires for these part objects that it is strongly associated with. These part objects fulfill the child's primary desires during pre-symbolic stage. However, in symbolic order, these lost part objects are continuously sought out and are substituted with other 'objects, activities, and goals' (80). Subject struggles to achieve these lost part objects during his life time. He feels that these objects would bring him, what Lacan calls *jouissance*, which means 'pleasure or ecstasy, and orgasm' (81). According to Lacan, the human subject goes on chasing many goals and objects in order to get *jouissance* and fulfill his desire. However, these substitute part objects never give the *jouissance* that he experiences as a child during pre-symbolic stage. He can never achieve final satisfaction after every achievement of symbolic objects of desire. Ragland-Sullivan understands this unquenchable desire in this way: 'But no object – be it person, thing, sexual activity or belief – will finally and permanently quell desire' (ibid). In symbolic realm, the secondary desires that subject tries to fulfill are never, in Lacan's view, his own desire, but the desires of the Other (the symbolic realm that offers the subject his identity before even his birth and imposes its desires on him). Subject embraces them and accepts it as his reality. But he never understands who he is, what he wants, where he wants to go, and what he wants to do; because the human subject can never absorb the symbolic order completely due to its evasive nature. Mary Klages calls attention to the process of becoming adult in Lacanian discourse. In her view, Lacan says that 'the process of becoming adult, 'a self' is the process of trying to fix, to stabilize, to stop circulation of chain of signifiers so that stable meaning – including, and represented by, the meaning of the word 'I' – becomes possible.' (76). However, this possibility to have stable meaning of 'I' and attaining a complete knowledge of one's existence is impossible. In order to describe human condition, Lacan uses a French term *a la derive* which means 'afloat' (Ragland-Sullivan 75). Ragland-Sullivan explains human life in Lacanian terms as, 'a boat cut loose from its moorings. Detached from any direct access to its own unconscious knowledge, the human subject is adrift.' (ibid). According to her, what Lacan suggests from his discourse of unconscious is that human subject is 'the creature of contingency' and not the 'creature of Knowledge and certainty they imagine themselves to be' (Ragland-Sullivan 85). Lacan believes that the human subject can never have the knowledge and certainty about his existence.

Hence, in Lacan's view, the mental process of maturity through *schema* that Piaget advocates can never be complete, since it is difficult for the conscious mind to know true reality. The process of gaining complete knowledge of our existence is an illusion. What conscious mind believes in and takes it to be true knowledge is not the real knowledge of the human existence. It forces the

individuals to accept the subject positions. Since the subject does not have direct access to the unconscious, the unconscious is never reached. Thus, subject remains uninformed about what he actually wants and never understands the significance of life. Human subject can never gain a psychic maturity. At familial, social, cultural and linguistic level, he makes a compromise. He has to accept the subject positions offered by a symbolic order without any choice.

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