

Indian aesthetic
interventions into
freudian "uncanny":
an investigation



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The science of Psychology has been far more success on the negative than on the positive side... It has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illness, his sins but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations or his psychological health. (Maslow 354)

Whereas Abraham Maslow critiques the science of psychology, for it tends to harp on pejorative sides of the human psyche; much before to it, Sigmund Freud intended to tread on the untraded path of the psyche in order to explore the strangeness and mystery associated with it. 1 By virtue of being a physician, Freud could come to terms with varied psychological aberrations at his disposal and gradually developed interests in the cryptic workings of the psyche. In 1919, Freud published his ground-breaking essay – “The Uncanny” which reveals Freud's take on the problematic dimensions of “uncanny”. The idea of “uncanny” deemed to Freud striking and startling so much so that he tended to render the enigmatic workings of unconscious mind uncanny. Whereas Keats in “Ode to Psyche” unleashes his aesthetic cravings for being the ‘priest’ of his mind and a fane “In some untrodden region of my mind” (Keats qtd. in Weekes 63); at the inception of “The Uncanny”, Freud lays stress on the compatibility between psychoanalysis and aesthetics by making this tellingly significant observation: “Only rarely does the psychoanalyst feel impelled to engage in aesthetic investigations, even when aesthetics is not restricted to the theory of beauty, but described as relating to the qualities of our feeling” (Freud 123). This observation can be interpreted in two ways – either a psychoanalyst may have inhibition to take recourse to aesthetics or he is bound to take it into account, for the notion of “uncanny” can best be explored and explicated from an

interdisciplinary viewpoint. The second interpretation seems plausible to me inasmuch as “ uncanny” is soaked in aesthetic suggestions. This paper is thus intended to delve deep into Freudian “ uncanny” to comprehend why this problematic term has been ceaselessly catering aesthetic pleasure to connoisseurs by taking resort to Indian aesthetic perspectives.

What is “ uncanny”? Where does “ uncanny” lie? How does it work as a liaison between psychoanalysis and aesthetics? Simply speaking, the notion of “ uncanny” deems at times baffling and at once intriguing, for it can neither be grasped in rational terms nor can be left out of our critical conjectures and apprehensions so far these two paradigms are concerned. Some people suppose that it ‘ belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread’ and some others reckon it as an amalgamation of dread, fear, mystery, strangeness, eeriness, unhomeliness, to name only a few. Etymologically, the word uncanny smacks of a sense of eeriness and is thought of to be an operational English rendering of its German origin “ Unheimlich”. As this German phrase is hardly translatable into

English, it gives birth to a number of feasible connotations thereby leaving ordinary men in utter confusion regarding the actual meaning of it.

Sometimes, we tend to situate “ uncanny” in liminal space simply because a feeling of “ uncanny” is triggered into being when the subtle discrepancy between reality and fantasy becomes blurry. A feeling of “ uncanny” can be generated out of any horrendous and ghoulish site. Sometimes, it is supposed that the idea of “ uncanny” remains quiescent in unfamiliar things.

When familiarity concerning a known object dissolves into air, unfamiliarity crops up as a consequence of it, and then it brings ‘ uncanny’ into
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comprehension. In a nutshell, it is an elusive notion and thus the experience of it can hardly be related in words. “Uncanny” can plausibly be reckoned as a conduit, as it were, in between the paradigms and therefore, it induces connoisseurs to approach it from the interdisciplinary perspective.

Freud conceptually splits up human mind into three different strata—unconscious, preconscious and conscious². Whereas id yields instinctual impulses, super-ego posits certain restrictions on them and it is ego that strikes a balance between them. What is noteworthy is that according to Freud, the unconscious mind seems at times unfathomable and thus is quite unfamiliar. He holds that the workings of unconscious mind give the impression of uncanny to him and thus he has to devise to step into the uncanny realm of the human mind by pursuing a dream. The enigmatic nature of the unconscious mind ignites a sense of “uncanny” in him and compels him to arrive at that unfamiliarity tinged with fright breeds a sense of uncanny though he has reminded us of that “not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening ...” (Freud 125). Since after the publication of this essay, psychoanalysts across the world have been making attempts to decipher the real nature of “uncanny”. Here one may reasonably ask why do psychoanalysts across the world still find interests in delving deep into it? Jentsch thinks that “intellectual uncertainty” could be the reason that accounts for the arousal of a feeling of uncanny in the minds of connoisseurs whereas Freud stands against it and implicitly holds that the cryptic nature of “uncanny” puts its meaning in a ceaseless deferral, as it were, which explains why; connoisseurs across the world find it to be a constant source of aesthetic pleasure and intervene into it time and again.

Bharatamuni in his *Natyasastra* laid down eight areas along with their corresponding permanent feelings. Bharata opines that the harmonious union among determinants, consequents and transitory feelings serve to produce *rasa* thereby leading connoisseurs to the realization of it. Terrible *rasa* is one of them among the eight *rasas*. The permanent feeling of it is 'horror'. When 'horror' gets mixed up with other transitory feelings such as trepidations, fright, wonder, to name only a few, it yields terrible *rasa*. He argues that each aesthetic exploration comes to an end with the comprehension of one of the eight *rasas*. One may find it important to take note of that an object of fright can well cater aesthetic pleasure to connoisseurs since aesthetics is not solely restricted to the vicinity of Beauty.

Much later to Bharata, the eminent rhetorician Anandavardhana in his astounding work *Dhvanyaloka* moots that the comprehension *rasadhvani* in at the end of an aesthetic exploration gives immaculately aesthetic pleasure⁴. In other words, connoisseurs take up aesthetic journeys to reach the 'suggestion' and in course of it; they exact and extract aesthetic pleasure. When the function of suggestion is triggered into action, connoisseurs slowly but surely slip into the world of pure aesthetic pleasure through their constant pursuits of aesthetic implications. Since familiarity and unfamiliarity are complementary to each other, Anandavardhana insists connoisseurs rely on the familiar understanding of something for the time being by asking them to reckon the denotative and connotative meanings of it. He ultimately induces them to keep on heading towards the suggested meaning of something until it is comprehensibly grabbed.

Kuntaka in his *Vakroktijibitam* puts forward that 'vakrokti' is the tellingly distinctive trait of an aesthetically charged word, which accounts for the aesthetic pleasure in which connoisseurs indulge while pursuing it. In other words, 'vakrokti' is the aesthetic force that allures connoisseurs to the 'signified'. The idea is that had the meaning of something been expressed in conspicuous terms, it would not have been equally pleasing and gratifying to what vakrokti is. So the oblique meaning of something induces connoisseurs to take up aesthetic voyages until the suggested meaning is gripped. Kuntaka thus is of this opinion that the understanding of 'vakrokti' is the crux of any aesthetic exploration.

Human emotional responses across the world hardly differ and it prompts me to think of making inroads into the problematic and aesthetic construct, i. e. "uncanny", taking resort to Indian aesthetic perspectives. Denis Dutton in "Aesthetic Universals" foregrounds, "In the twentieth century, research into the existence of universal aesthetic values came primarily from psychology..." (Dutton qtd. in Gaut 206). Dutton underscores that empirical psychology requires the perceptive ability of the psychoanalyst who needs to be equipped with aesthetic power as well. In the domain of psychoanalytical research, aesthetic prowess is requisite for critical inquiries and interventions. Freud, too, had long before propounded by contending that "... Yet now and then it happens that he has to take an interest in a particular area of aesthetics ..." (Freud 123).

Freud implicates that as familiarity and unfamiliarity cannot be torn apart, aesthetic pursuits culminate in the unfathomable depth of unfamiliarity thereby triggering a sense of uncanny in the minds of connoisseurs. Taking <https://assignbuster.com/indian-aesthetic-interventions-into-freudian-uncanny-an-investigation/>

recourse to Rasa theory, one may pertinently put forward that Freudian uncanny is steeped in terrible rasa. A site of horror consisting of determinants, consequents, and transitory feelings stir up fear – the corresponding permanent feeling of horror and it ultimately leads connoisseurs to revel in terrible rasa. For instance, when one experiences something “uncanny” on the stage while watching a performance, he is immediately taken aback in fright and gradually rubs shoulders with terrible rasa due to the union among the trio – determinant, consequent and transitory feelings.

Following Anandavardhana one may explore the problematic facets of “uncanny”. It denotes unhomely feeling or eeriness. Apparently, connoisseurs are quite used to this feeling and have some sort of familiarity with it. But the word uncanny cannot be properly realized in terms of eeriness because it does not always bear the exact meaning of it in a given context. Therefore, it raises the necessity of connotative meaning to come into play. In specific contexts, “uncanny” sometimes refers to something horrendous and rouses fear in us. Again it will not suffice for connoisseurs who intend to get to the bottom of “uncanny”, for the suggestion of it gets deferred for the time being. Here one may reasonably ask: Is something spooky always tantamount to a feeling of “uncanny”? This query can be answered by making direct reference to the pertinent observation of Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*: “The uncanny is not just a matter of weird or spooky but has to do more specifically with a disturbance of the familiar ... As an adjective ‘familiar’ means ‘well acquainted or intimate ... but as a noun, it carries the more

unsettling ...” (34) implications to connoisseurs. The aesthetic infiltration into the virtual familiarity of something gradually uncovers multifaceted unfamiliarity lying latent in it. Thus, connoisseurs are forced to take resort to the suggestion of it. The repeated attempts to “ uncanny” over the years prove that it is elusive in nature and nobody has been able to decipher its actual meaning as of now. But connoisseurs still retain their interest in it owing to its aesthetic potentials.

Taking Kuntaka’s view into account, one may plausibly put forward that had “ uncanny” been something conspicuous, it would not have been as intriguing as it is now. It implies that the obliqueness of “ uncanny” adds aesthetic grandeur to it. In other words, as “ uncanny” turns out to be a cryptic construct, for it appeals to the aesthetic sensibility of connoisseurs thereby persuading them to approach it time and again. P. V. Kane in History of Sanskrit Poetics has understood vakrokti as “... striking mode of speech [that] ... differing from the plain matter of fact an ordinary mode of speech” (384). Taking a cue from it, one may argue that as Freud unearths multiple oblique suggestions of “ uncanny” from several points of view, it persuades connoisseurs to delve deep into it with the help of aesthetic insights.

The varied interpretations of “ uncanny” can be compressed into the following observation: a sense of “ uncanny” is an aesthetic experience that can hardly be grasped in words. It is an all-pervasive phenomenon that lies latent under the cover of familiarity and springs up when familiarity dissipates. In a nutshell, the reassessment of “ uncanny” divulges that though it hails from an altogether different register, it is indisputably and

unequivocally replete with aesthetic ingredients and thus has been subject to critical apprehensions over the decades.