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A Study of Li'l Bit's Self-Discovery Journey from the Perspective of Psychoanalysis

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Abstract: In *How I Learned to Drive*, American playwright Paula Vogel depicts a woman (Li'l Bit) exploring her "self" by disrupting the distorted patriarchal values in her psychological development, despite numerous difficulties in her growing-up process. According to Lacan, it is expected that women are marginalized and distorted in a patriarchal society. To find her "self", a woman should break up the misrecognized identity in the Mirror Stage. Besides, she can learn and grow by always looking back in her never-ending self-discovery journey.

Keywords: Jacques Lacan; self; identity; the Mirror Stage; name-of-the-father.

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the leading voices in contemporary American theatre, Paula Vogel(1951-) has created many plays concerning women on some controversial issues like homosexuality, AIDS, pedophilia etc. Among those plays, the most successful one is *How I Learned to Drive*, produced in 1997 and winning New York Drama Critics Award(1997), Drama Desk Awards(1997), the Pulitzer Prize for Drama(1998) and other prizes.

The play *How I Learned to Drive* touches the sensitive topic of childhood sexual abuse and tells an incestuous "love story" between Li'l Bit and her uncle Peck. It depicts Li'l Bit's self-discovery by looking back on her growing-up process, mainly focusing on the time from eleven to eighteen years old, a crucial period during one's growing-up process. During that period, she had complicated relationship with her relative, Uncle Peck, a man in his forties. Their relationship had different forms: father-daughter, teacher-student, and boy friend-girl friend etc. This unusual male-female relationship began when Peck actively took on the task of teaching 11-year-old Li'l Bit to drive a car. He sexually abused her that day. Li'l Bit then was forced to step into the learning-to-drive process. Car-driving lessons serve as a metaphor for the growing-up process, a process of discovering a woman's self in her life.

The growing-up process might be bitter, but it is no doubt necessary for people to become mature adults. As for Li'l Bit, she learned and grew in her painful "driving lessons" given by her Uncle, a perfect presentation of a woman discovering her real self in this patriarchy-rooted society.

Li'l Bit's driving process can be analyzed from psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives. Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), a French psychoanalyst, divided the psychic development of human beings into three stages: "the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, all conditioned by language" (Bressler, 2003, p. 157). More importantly, Lacan established his idea of the Mirror Stage: an indispensable stage beginning from the Imaginary realm and will last for long. It is in the Mirror Stage that people begin to distinguish Other or other from self, and try to find out their own identities (Lacan, "Mirror", 2001, p. 123). It is also in this stage that people have a desire to pursue the ideal ego: the image in the mirror, although this desire can never be fulfilled, as Lacan pointed out (Bressler, 2003, p. 158). Lacan's psychic development, especially the Mirror Stage, can explain Li'l Bit's self-discovery process.

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II. UNITY BEFORE DRIVING LESSONS: THE REAL REALM

Lacan asserted that in the Real realm, the baby is in a state of unity, a unity of its body and its mother, and that of its own body as a coherent whole (Lacan, "Mirror". 2001, p.123). The baby, however, does not know that it has no sense of distinction between self and other. The baby at this stage is driven by its needs which are satisfiable. For example, when it needs protection, its mother will hug it; when it is thirsty, it will get a breast or a bottle. Although this is a seemingly perfect stage for human beings, there is no self-identity and no language, so it will not last long. The unity in the Real realm is doomed to an end, since human beings have to enter a society structured by language, as Lacan maintained (Bressler, 2003, p.157). After all, human beings are social and civilized beings. There comes the Mirror Stage.

From the very day she was born to the day when she was eleven, Li'l Bit's psychic development was in the Real realm, a situation where unity and satisfiable needs could be found. When she was just one day old, her family were happy to see her. Her mother said: "We were so excited to have a baby girl that when the nurse brought you and said, ' It's a girl! It's a baby girl!' I just had to see for myself' (Vogel, 1997, p. 12)¹. Uncle Peck also held Li'l Bit in his hand and gave her the nickname: Li'l Bit, meaning her little bit genitalia. Although the forty-something Li' l Bit did not mention much about her days before eleven, it can be assumed from her one-day scene that in her first eleven years, Li'l Bit's psychic was in the Real stage. She was still a baby in her mother's arms and could not distinguish self from other. Undoubtedly, her needs could be satisfied. It was really a happy time. However, it did not last long, for she had to enter society sooner or later. This brief enjoyable period, however, makes a sharp contrast with the later growth process. According to Lacan, people in their adulthood desire to return to this unity for the rest of their lives, but their desires can never be fulfilled (Bressler, 2003, p.158). That is the reason why the growing process is so painful.

III. LEARNING-TO-DRIVE PROCESS: THE MIRROR STAGE

Lacan held that the Mirror Stage begins in the Imaginary realm (Lacan, "Mirror", 2001, p.123), but he did not define its end. Therefore, it is believed that the Mirror Stage begins somewhere in the Imaginary realm and ends somewhere in the Symbolic realm, or it never ends. With that assumption, the Mirror Stage is taken as the substitution for the two realms.

In the Mirror Stage, Lacan explained that the baby develops a sense of distinction between its body and anything else (Lacan, "Mirror", 2001, p.123). It starts to be aware of others before self. Li'l Bit is a case in point: she got to know others, her uncle and her image in her uncle's eyes, in particular, before she finally understood herself.

Lacan gave an example to show how the baby recognizes others and misrecognizes itself. In front of a mirror, the baby sees its mother and starts to know that mother is the "other", but it does not know that the baby in the mirror is its own image. When the mother (the "other") points to the image and tells it, "Look, baby, it is you!" The baby thus begins to establish a sense of self-identity, but this identity is a misrecognition forced by others. By "misrecognition", Lacan meant that the baby in the mirror is only an external image, not the baby itself (Lacan, "Mirror", 2001, p.123). Consequently, the baby is alienated, for there is an external image called the Ideal Ego and the real self— its own body. In this alienation, the baby's body and mind are separated. It is based on this alienated condition that the baby tries to find out its "I"dentity, ego or self. Li' Bit, with her body and mind separated since the age of eleven, went on a long journey to find her own identity to drive a life of her own. As a woman, Li'l Bit's journey is very challenging in the world which is ruled by the name-of-the-father, as Lacan concluded (Bressler, 2003, p.158). The name-of-the-father now can be loosely used to "refer to any (normally PATRIARCHAL) external and unchallenged source of authority" (Hawthorn, 2000, p.223). In this play, the name-of-the-father is used in its broad sense, namely, male dominance and external authority.

A. Learning to Drive in a World Dominated by Name-of-the-Father

The name-of-the-father, according to Lacan, is a pure signifier, representing the male power and supremacy and centre which rules the world (Hawthorn, 2000, p.223). It is an essential concept in the Mirror Stage. Lacan held that in the formation of "I", people always desire to identify with the centre of the symbolic realm, namely, the name-of-the-father (Hawthorn, 2000, p.223). Furthermore, Lacan stated, "it is in the name-of-the-father that we must recognize the support of

¹ Hereafter, only the page number of the quotations from the play will be mentioned.

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the symbolic function which [...] has identified his person with the figure of the Law" (Lacan, "Symbolic", 1998, p.186). In other words, name-of-the-father can stand for Law, power and domination.

The term of name-of-the-father has constantly been challenged by feminists who refuse to recognize such a male centre, criticizing Lacan for his ignorance of women's power. Hélène Cixous took a woman-centred position in her writing (Jones, 1985, p.83), while Julia Kristeva deconstructed the name-of-the-father, the male authority (Jones, 1985, p.85). It is believed that even today, women are, to a great extent, repressed by the name-of-the-father, although we try to deconstruct this conception. That is why it is more difficult for a baby girl to find out her own identity, for she is unconsciously repressed in this patriarchy-rooted world.

Li'l Bit's driving lesson was proposed by Uncle Peck. That means her arduous journey of finding her identity is enforced by the other. At the age of eleven, she did know that she was too young to drive by law, although she seemed to be interested.

Peck: There's no traffic here. Do you want to drive?

Teenage Greek Chorus²: I can't drive.

Peck: It's easy. I'll show you how. I started driving when I was your age. Don't you want to?

Teenage Greek Chorus: - But it's against the law at my age!

Peck: And that's why you can't tell anyone I'm letting you do this -

Teenage Greek Chorus: - But- I can't reach the pedals.

Peck: You can sit in my lap and steer. I'll push the pedals for you. (57)

That is how Peck seduced Li'l Bit to the Symbolic realm where the name-of-the-father is the centre. He asked Li' Bit to drive at the age of eleven just because he did so at this age. Peck took the name-of-the-father as the centre of the world. Women should do the same as men since men are closer to the centre of the world, for they have a penis (Bressler, 2003, p.158). Peck tried to persuade the 11-year-old girl to drive so that he could become her teacher or instructor who had the power and dominance over her. That is one level of understanding of Peck's intention.

Peck's evil plot was revealed as the self-discovery process went further. After Li'l Bit moved into Peck's lap and put her hands on the wheel, Peck began to "put his hands on her breasts" (57). It can be assumed from the stage directions that he raped her. This sexual intercourse is the direct presentation of male's supremacy over a female. "Sexuality is the primary sphere of men's power" (Andersen, 2014, p.393). In the "accidental" sexual intercourse, Peck was active, experienced and controlled the whole situation, whereas Li'l Bit was passive and inexperienced, only to accept Peck's doing anything on her body. The sharp contrast reveals the male power and domination in the world. Li'l Bit had to begin her first driving lesson which was also a lesson in the patriarchal world dominated by the name-of-the-father.

It is a painful lesson for a girl. Just as Li'l Bit told the audience, "That was the last day I lived in my body" (58). She was alienated in this sense. Henceforward, Li'l Bit left the unity in the Real realm and began to enter the symbolic world with the centre of name-of-the-father.

This first lesson was enforced by her uncle with the representation of male power. It indicates that in her following driving process, she would be greatly influenced by the name-of-the-father, accompanied by pain and bitterness.

In a society with the name-of-the-father as its centre, a woman is taught to drive like a man. That is what Peck did to Li'l Bit. A typical driving lesson occurred one day in 1967 when Li'l Bit was sixteen.

In that lesson, Peck shared his own theories of driving with Li'l Bit. One was on pleasure and the other was about manly techniques. That lesson reveals the authority of the name-of-the-father.

Peck intentionally taught Li'l Bit to get pleasure from driving a car from a man's viewpoint. By pleasure, Peck meant two kinds of it: one was the sensual and visual pleasure, and the other was the sense of power. Peck called his car "baby",

 $^{^{\}rm 2}$ Teenage Greek Chorus speak for Li' I Bit. This is Vogel's dramatic technique.

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indicating the pleasure of looking, touching, and feeling. Additionally, the gender of this "baby" was "she" because he imagines "someone who responds to your touch— someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for" (35) when driving a car. The other pleasure was the sense of power. Peck felt more powerful himself in his car than anywhere else. In short, these two kinds of pleasure both represent male power and domination over females, as Peck's perception of driving a car is like playing with a woman's body.

Apart from pleasure, Peck applied some techniques to manipulating Li'l Bit. Those techniques can be called manly techniques. First, Peck wanted Li'l Bit to have power, only with which a driver could control his car. Peck told her, "when you are driving, your life in your own two hands" (34). That is why power is so indispensable in terms of driving techniques. That is precisely what Peck wanted to give Li'l Bit for he thought that a woman did not have such power until a man imparted it to her. The second technique is manly confidence. Peck only talked about men: "Men are taught to drive with confidence, with aggression. The road belongs to them. They drive defensively— always looking out for the other guy." (35) This "confidence" is marked by aggression, possession, and defence for oneself against others. The meaning of "confidence" is traditionally referred to masculine qualities. The third technique is scientific attitude and professional knowledge. Peck emphasized that driving is "serious business", demanding Li'l Bit not play jokes (34). Moreover, he taught her to check the car carefully before driving and focus their whole attention on the road when driving. He also taught her on a manual, hoping Li'l Bit could drive a car with professional knowledge like a man who could control everything and drive any car.

All the three important driving techniques Peck mentioned belong to masculine qualities. He held that only with these masculine qualities could Li'l Bit drive very well. Otherwise, she would fail because "women tend to be polite— to hesitate", and "that can be fatal" (35). In all, women do have such qualities for they have been stereotyped as irrational and imperfect men (Irigaray qtd. in Jones, 1985, p.94).

In this typical driving lesson, Peck took the role of a teacher, teaching Li'l Bit how to drive like a man in a man's world. Li'l Bit's identification was barely shown. There is every reason to interpret this driving lesson as a manifestation of a world with a centre of the name-of-the-father. Obviously, Peck was one of the disciples of this centre. This can be seen from the pleasure he got from a car and the driving techniques he taught Li'l Bit above. In this lesson, Li'l Bit's objection to the name-of-the-father could be barely found. She is passively taught by Peck and gradually accepts his instructions. It can be interpreted that Li'l Bit is taught to identify with the false image in the Mirror, a mirror set up by a man. Like the baby before the mirror, Li'l Bit misrecognized her "self" by another person (Peck) who reinforced this misrecognition. A woman learning to drive a car is a metaphor for a woman learning to live a life in the patriarchal world. She had no way to find out her own identity because a man led her to misrecognition of an external image made up by him. In short, a woman should act like a man.

What could Li'l Bit do in this patriarchal world? Fortunately, Li'l Bit did not fully accept this false image. She was a clever girl who had her way of "driving a car". As Liu(2017) stated, "Li'l Bit's struggle and attempt to escape from her complex family and the lost-control relationship with Uncle Peck finally lead to the rebuilding of her new identity." (44) The following part will explore her awareness of her identity as a human being, in an attempt to get rid of the false image.

B. Desire to Drive Independently: Self-Discovery Journey

Li'l Bit was not completely submissive and passive although she entered the patriarchal world ruled by the name-of-thefather. She had her mind which is separated from her body starting from the very first driving lesson. That separation is beneficial in this respect: her body was primarily controlled by Peck and had to passively accept his sexual control, whereas her mind, luckily, was free from any control. In this sense, Li'l Bit's mind could work independently. The point is that she had to put it into her body to achieve the unity when she once had. That is the desire her mind embraced.

This kind of desire in the Mirror Stage, according to Lacan, is the desire that people will strive for the rest of their life for the sense of unity (Bressler, 2003, p. 158). In Li'l Bit's case, the unity is her body and mind. Only when her mind returns to her body can she find her own identity and live her life completely independently. Her constant efforts find their full expressions in the following two scenes: the photo shoot and the conflict between Li'l Bit and Peck in a hotel room.

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The photo shoot happened in 1965 when Li'l Bit was thirteen. As a girl of thirteen, she had "a body a twenty-year-old woman would die for" (42). Her body had matured and was sexually attractive to Peck. Peck enjoyed gazing at her body and likes looking at her moving her body for him. It quickly reminds us of his attitude toward his car: treating a car like a woman with respect for he can get visual and sensual pleasures. In this sense, Li'l Bit is similar to Peck's car that he can look at, touch, feel and love. However, a car has no mind at all. Li'l Bit owns an extraordinary body and a great mind although the two parts are separated. It is her great mind that possesses the desire to get out of the name-of-the-father. Li'l Bit looked at Peck "defiantly" (42) when she got to know Peck's evil intention of submitting work to *Playboy*, the pornographic magazine famous for selling sexy girls' photos. She became angry. She disagreed with the women's traditional characteristics of to-be-looked-at-ness. This tradition is what many feminists reject. They think the society has made "sex a new commodity— something to be bought and sold and that uses women as sexual objects in a new, although still demeaning, manner (Andersen, 2014, p. 77). She declared that "I'm never doing anything like that!" (45). Instead, she underlined education because education can beautify and enrich one's mind and a woman should be proud of her beautiful mind, not a sexy body. She felt sad on hearing Peck's real intention in stead of encouraging her to university.

From the photo shoot scene, Li'l Bit began to show a desire to live a life of her own. Meanwhile, she firmly refused to be a looked-at sexual object, demonstrating that she started to discover her own identity, different from the stereotypes concerning women. That desire, unfortunately, is only a failure attempt to escape the name-of-the-father. She still remained a sexual object to be looked at by Peck.

Li'l Bit's stronger desire to live her life independently is shown in the conflict with Peck in a hotel room just before she was eighteen. It may be because both her body and mind became stronger as she got older. More importantly, thanks to the college education, her mind grew mature, resulting in a strong desire to establish her own identity to drive her life independently. That night, Li'l Bit was "furious, edgy"(49). She disliked Peck's sending mails with a desperate love for her. Unlike before, she expressed her dissatisfaction directly to Peck: "I am so pissed off at you, Uncle Peck" (49). For Li'l Bit, it is the manifestation of her desire to break up with Peck and drive her life alone. Then she relentlessly unfolded Peck's seemingly good but actually wicked intention. When Peck counted down to her eighteenth birthday, she said, "So statutory rape is not in effect when a young woman turns eighteen and you and I both know it" (49). At that time, equipped with knowledge, Li'l Bit was ready to confront Peck, a representation of male power and a disciple of the name-of-the-father.

Li'l Bit's strong desire found its full expression in her inner conflict when Peck lied down on the bed with her, with their clothes on. Peck finally intended to control Li'l Bit's mind by asking her to think with her body. He proudly assumed that she would return to his arms with a "close" body relationship. Successful in controlling her body from the very first driving lesson, Peck hoped that this time the body control would still work. Nevertheless, unexpectedly for him but not for Li'l Bit, Li'l Bit had got a mind strong enough to control her body, the original place where her mind lived. When lying with Peck on the bed, Li'l Bit felt confused. Uncle Peck after all was attractive to her for he knew a lot about her childhood, and his tenderness and fatherly love were also desirable. Her spiritual communication with Aunt Mary, Peck's wife, made Li'l Bit even more confused and a little lost. She asked herself many questions about her complicated love with Peck. These are the inner conflicts when Li'l Bit stroke a spiritual communication with Aunt Mary. Although she seemed lost, her mature mind gave her instructions to her body: stop thinking, get up from the bed and leave Uncle Peck. She followed her own mind. That is a celebrating success just before the celebration of her eighteenth birthday. Henceforward, she went on her way of driving independently, free from Peck's control. Her strong desire led to the unity of her body and mind.

C. Never-Ending Learning Process

Li'l Bit's separation from Peck is no doubt a great success of her desire to drive alone, but it does not mean the driving lesson comes to an end. It is just a beginning of the next lesson. Without a male instructor, who can teach Li'l Bit in the future? Determined to drive alone, she must teach herself. How does she do that? In the way of always looking back. This is an effective way to be your own teacher. This is the message Paula Vogel intended to convey in the play. It is of great significance for us to look back according to Vogel. Firstly, we can learn from past experience to strive forward. Secondly, we can get a true picture of our complicated identities and ever-changing society.

As for the first reason, Vogel considered the past as gifts, no matter who send them to us. She saw *How I Learned to Drive* as a play "about the gifts we receive from people who hurt us" (Evans, 2003, p. 297). These gifts consist of survival skills and valuable experience for reference. Li'l Bit took a step back, learning from her painful experience. Looking back on her

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complicated relationship with Peck, she knew it was a long and arduous journey to escape from the name-of-the-father and to put her mind into her body. After doing this, she could drive "with pleasure" (58). More importantly, she had a distinctive sense of her "self". At the end of the play, she always used "I" to suggest her unified subject and identity. Li'l Bit's complete sense of the subject "I" shows that she successfully found her identity in a world centred by the name-of-the-father. That is possibly what Lacanian theory excludes since it reserves the "I" position for men and she "smiles at" the spirit of Peck sitting in the back seat of the car (Jones, 1985, p. 83). It is fantastic that she could handle her past with tolerance. Her smile suggests that she happily received the gifts from Uncle Peck, the man who once hurt her. The tolerance and forgiveness is a vital skill for a happy life. In short, Li'l Bit's case demonstrates Vogel's message forcefully.

The second reason for looking back is even more fruitful. It helps us to get a true picture of the sophisticated society and our own complicated identities. Our life is constantly changing with the society, and so are our own identities. When we look back, we can trace the development of our identities. We may be surprised by the true picture of life since we can be clear-minded after we get older. Take Li'l Bit as an example. She did not depict her past as a simple revolutionary or celebrating growing-up story. In her depiction, she was not a girl who simply rejected all the things Peck taught her because he was a representation of the name-of-the-father. She kept the habit of checking the car before driving until now. That is just what Uncle Peck had taught her. One different thing is that she still insisted on turning on the radio as the crucial step when driving, which was criticized by Uncle Peck. Uncle Peck in her depiction was not a traditional tough masculine man who only knew to repress women. He was a soft and nice family member who understood and loved Li'l Bit. He thought all women were beautiful and treated them with respect. Sometimes we may get confused by the idea of what else should be changed in this "peaceful" world. However, it should be noted that most women (like Li'l Bit) are controlled by the name-of-the-father, and men (like Uncle Peck) have their ultimate end to possess women, either rudely or modestly. If we become aware of that fact, we will be able to see through the complicated life and take up our appropriate identities, free from other's control. Li'l Bit now can see the life as it is and clearly knows to drive her car and her life independently. Life has never been simple. We will understand it better and deeper if we always look back.

Look back and move forward. This is a never-ending learning process when we drive alone. Vogel, a feminist, encourages women to discover their identities in a patriarchal world with its centre of name-of-the-father.

IV. CONCLUSION

Looking back on the whole learning-to-drive process, we see a girl's struggle and bitter growing-up experience in the Mirror Stage. First, her body and mind were in unity. Next she was alienated and enforced to enter the Mirror Stage by Uncle Peck with his representation of the name-of-the-father. During the driving lessons, she was taught like a man in a patriarchal society. She thus misrecognized her identity. When learning to drive a car, she was also learning to drive a life of her own. She had a desire to find out her own identity and drive the car and her life independently. Finally she succeeded in freeing herself from the patriarchal control by Uncle Peck and obtaining inner freedom by refusing Uncle Peck's car as a gift(Shen, 2015, p. 32). But the driving lessons would never end. She taught herself by always looking back on her past when driving alone, because her past sometimes would teach her to drive better in the future.

That is Li'l Bit's driving process, providing sort of guidance for all women, teaching them to find their own identities in the Mirror Stage and to live their lives alone. The whole driving lesson consists of two parts, the struggle to discover a woman's identity and teaching herself by always looking back.

The learning process is not easy at all and will never end until the last minute of our life. However, the process is indispensable because all of us have to enter the civilized society. The Mirror Stage is a crucial stage of our psychic development. It is more difficult for girls, as is shown in Li'l Bit's case, to recognize their identities, for Lacan concluded that the center of the society is the name-of-the-father. That is the reason why women should get rid of this centre and drive a life of their own.

Last but not least, women should learn to drive and live independently and teach themselves by looking back. It is an everlasting learning-to-drive process since women are still in a world largely governed by the name-of-the-father. What women can do is to discover their identities and become the masters in their own life.

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