International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Unravelling the Impact of Psychological Deterioration on a Desired Woman in Cynthia Ozick's the Puttermesser Papers

Ms. Swati Vaishya

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow

Abstract
This research article primarily embarks in-depth analysis of the mental and emotional disintegration of an independent woman who is facing the conflict between the thoughts of illusion and reality in Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers.* Cynthia Ozick is one of the well-recognized contemporary American novelists and short story writers, known for discussing the themes of Jewish identity, the effects of the Holocaust, trauma, individuality, and the role of woman in the society through her writings. Her novel *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997) talks about the satirical life of an empowered woman Ruth Puttermesser and her inner struggle with career, relationships, and the sense of identity. It basically deals with the protagonist's mental collapse or fragmentation of thoughts and complicated feelings, which creates disconnection, loneliness, and chaos in her behavior from the society. The main aim of this paper is to contextualize the dissolution of personality through the themes of the rejection of traditional gender roles, desire for mother-child relationship, the drastic effect of imagination on reality, psychological and professional struggles in an enthusiastic woman's life.

Keywords: Woman, Psychological deterioration, Illusion, Reality, Identity.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary literary world, American novelist and short story writer Cynthia Ozick is well-known. *The Shawl, The Cannibal Galaxy, The Massiah of Stockholm, The Puttermesser Papers,* and *The Foreign Bodies* are among her well-known works that examine pain, the aftermath of the Holocaust, the combination of humour and social commentary, and the people's Jewish identity. She carries on the legacy of well-known Jewish American authors like Roth, Bellow, and Singer. She has won the National Book Critics Circle Awards and the O. Henry Prize for her short stories among other achievements in her field. She was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the Man Booker Prize.

Her 1997 book *The Puttermesser Papers* explores the satirical life of Ruth Puttermesser, a strong woman who struggles internally with her identity, relationships, and profession. It primarily addresses the protagonist's mental breakdown or fragmentation of thoughts and complex emotions, which leads to her conduct becoming chaotic and alienated from society. This book majorly discusses about the life of Ruth Puttermesser, a lawyer in New York City with a Jewish heritage, in a picaresque and sarcastic manner. Its primary focus is to present the contrast between illusion and reality. Ruth is an idealist, forty-six years-old woman, who frequently indulges into her studies and intellectual interests as a way to cope with the

disappointments in her life. Despite being an independent woman, she feels isolated and frustrated in both her personal and professional life.

1.1 Representation of Mental and Emotional Struggle of a Desired Woman

We are all aware that both man and woman are equally important for creating an ideal world. Women are the inseparable part of the society whether she performs her role as a housewife, mother, daughter, sister, and leader etc. They always try to give their best in each responsibility in the house as well as the workplace. But sometimes it seems that their efforts become ignorable by the other persons because they do not treat them equally as men. They do not find well respect and honesty which they deserve according to their work which harms their mental and physical health very badly yet some women have courage to make their self-identity. They want to be independent and desirable to achieve everything which they want in their successful life. They do not think about the criticism of the society after facing many difficulties and harsh conditions. They do fight for their dreams so that they can also survive as a respectable person of the society. They have enthusiasm and hope for their well deserving future but sometimes it can be observed that if a woman tries to live her life as her own way, some people of the society always try to stop her. Even she may get disastrous result after chasing her dreams.

Same thing happens with the protagonist of Cynthia Ozick's present novel. As in the beginning of the novel, Ozick describes about the novel's protagonist, "Puttermesser was thirty-four, a lawyer. She was also something of a feminist, not crazy, but she resented having "Miss" put in front of her name; she thought it pointedly discriminatory; she wanted to be a lawyer among lawyers (3)." Thus, Ruth tries to break the chain of traditional norms and wants to live an independent life, but eventually she faces mental and emotional struggle throughout her life, still not find solace even at the end.

1.2. Portrayal of Illusion v/s Reality

Its well-known example of her faith in illusion is Ruth's construction of Xanthippe, a female golem. "She believed in the uses of fantasy. "A person should see himself or herself everywhere," she said. "All things manifest us (36)." According to Ruth, we can easily do everything and achieve anything by creating fantasy in our mind about a particular thing or behaviour. As she herself uses earth and a plant to build this creature with the help of her imagination and knowledge.

In an attempt to become a mother without marriage, she uses her creative skills to create Golem, her ideal submissive daughter, who is excellent and quick at taking care of her household duties. "She imagined daughters. It was self-love: all these daughters were Puttermesser as a child. She imagined a daughter in fourth grade, then in seventh grade, then in second-year high school (36)." Thus, initially Golem fulfils Ruth's mental and physical requirement as a best daughter and caretaker. Even she cannot speak but through writing in the piece of paper, she talks Ruth directly. Ruth also named her Xanthippe. She also employs golem to help her realize her impractical ambition of becoming mayor of New York City, which she believes that will enable her to turn the city into a perfect place devoid of crime and evil. However, Golem suddenly demonstrates its destructive power, transforming Ruth's lovely surroundings and image into a disorderly and disastrous scenario. Golem attempts to live a woman's life and establish romantic relationships. Golem totally transforms herself to fulfill this need, even becoming attracted to Roth's beloved Rappoport. Ruth takes her mistake very seriously at this point.

Therefore, Ruth's creation of the golem seems to be an attempt to refute the idea that God created the universe through the creation of new life. As time goes on, it turns out to be a terrible decision for her life. Ozick employs the golem, a real creature in Jewish tradition, as a magical tool to analyze the sin of idolatry,

which is forbidden by God. This demonstrates a complicated mother-child bond in which she becomes the victim of her own goals or aspirations. As Ozick remarks in the novel,

"Mayor Puttermesser is finished. She can never be re-elected. She is a disgrace; her Administration is wrecked. Distrust. Desolation. It is all over for Mayor Puttermesser and the life of high politics. The prisons are open again. The press howls. Mayor Puttermesser is crushed. The golem has destroyed her utterly (87)."

Ruth views her as a perfect daughter who can accomplish what she was unable to, but the golem's independence eventually turns into a danger. Thus, It clearly shows Ruth's experience of mother-child relationship and how the imagination can create disastrous future in the real world.

1.3. Fragmentation of Thoughts and Loss of Desires

On the other hand, this novel also portrays the disappointing reality of the world in which Ruth always struggles with her fragmented thoughts and unhealthy mind. Though Ruth is a modern intellectual and ambitious woman, who challenges traditional gender roles where woman have to be bound for marriage and household duties. She prefers her own decisions first in her life. But in the male dominated world, she is also continuously facing gender biasness and ethnic barriers in her professional life as well as in personal life. It gives her frustration, loneliness, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. "Puttermesser is blighted with melancholy. She fears. She foresees (84)." Thus, she feels a lot of chaos in her mind due to the multiple complexities in her relationships.

As her love life also creates problem as she engaged with an married man, Morries Rappopport but he leaves her alone because of her much political indulgence. She also makes romantic relationship with her young artist, Rupert but it also fails. As she cries and says in her heart "O lost New York! And she calls: O lost Xanthippe (101)!" Thus, all incidents like Ruth's experience of being mother, lover mayor of New York city create a lot of psychological turmoil in her mind. About the critical choices and conditions of Ruth, Ozick further says in the novel, "The lost, the missing, the wished-for. The unfinished and the unachieved. Not the record of her life as she had lived it, but as she had failed to live it (222)." This seems her deep sadness for losing her relations, love, career, and hopes which sometimes makes her hollow from inside.

The novel also presents the theme of loss of humanity in the modern world at the end of the section where Ruth is brutally raped and murdered by an unknown person. It shows the complete destruction of her intellectual and independent life. It is not clear in the novel that why it happens with her but at the end, the novel turns into her afterlife, where Ruth wants to get solace from the disappointment and loneliness but still she does not find any peace in the paradise. After facing difficulties in her earthly life, she has hope for living peacefully in the paradise but unfortunately, she finds this place same as the un-utopian world like earth. As she describes heaven according to her, "The secret meaning of Paradise is that it tool is hell (234)." Thus, she also faces sorrows and bad experiences in the heaven too, later Ruth states some intellectual lines at last to describe her whole life,

> "At the point of knife
> I lost my life.
> Butter, butter, butter,
> Butter knife.
> If I were alive I wouldn't fault
> Anything under the heavenly vault.
> Better, better, better.

Better life.
Better never to have loved than loved at all.
Better never to have risen than had a fall.
Oh bitter, bitter, bitter
Butter knife (236)."

Indeed, Ozick clearly depicts Ruth Puttermesser's life's crucial journey in these last lines, demonstrating how each event has a profound psychological and emotional influence on her thoughts and feelings that complicates her ideal existence as an independent woman.

2. Conclusion

Here, we find that the present work stays away from the standard narrative of a strong woman overcoming a patriarchal society. It clearly shows the complication between Ruth's high intellect and her emotional isolation, which provides a more complex and somewhat cynical perspective of a woman whose difficulties emerge as much from her own thoughts as from the outside world. It majorly highlights the constant psychological and professional obstacles that women faced in the workplace during the time period of the story. Thus, the work simultaneously challenges the romanticized concept of female empowerment and criticizes the limitations of society places on women.

References

1. AI- Sammarraie, Farah Amer Jabbar. "Gender Conflict and its Effect on Women before and after the World War II." *International Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 17-26,2023. https://www.academia.edu/112209386/Gender_Conflict_and_its_Effect_on_Women_before_and_after_the_World_War_II
2. Ozick, Cynthia. *The Puttermesser Papers: A Novel*. Vintage International Publication, 1998.
3. Paris, Bernard J. *Psychological Approach to Fiction*. Indiana UP, 1974.
4. Sanai, Leyla. "The Puttermesser Papers, By Cynthia Ozick- Review." *Review of The Puttermesser Papers*, written by Cynthia Ozick. *Independent*, 28 Dec 2013.
5. Tudose, Miruna Teona. "Representations of Mental Illness in The Great Gatsby and The Beautiful and Damned by F. Scott Fitzgerald." *Buletinul Institutului Politehnic Din Iasi Publication,* Vol. 71, No. 75, pp. 139-49, 2025. https://dppd.tuiasi.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Vol.-SSU-1-2-din-2025.
6. Zaritt, Saul Noam. *Oxford Studies in American Literary History: Jewish American Writing and World Literature*. Oxford UP, 2020.