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Character Armor and Magic of Cinema: A Case Vignette

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While Freud described the anal character as a combination of stubbornness, stinginess, and conscientiousness, Erich Fromm described that as the way in which an individual structures modes of assimilation and relatedness, and noted that character structures develop in each individual to enable him or her to interact successfully within a given society and adapt to its mode of production and social norms, and may be very counter-productive when used in a different society [1]. lexically, character armor, a term coined by William Reich, denotes the defense an individual exhibits to others and to himself or herself to disguise his or her underlying weaknesses [2], or in brief, habitual pattern of organized defenses against anxiety [3]. Therefore, character armor is a metaphor referring to the muscular tension or position as a result of autonomic system activity, in addition to character attitudes, which an individual unconsciously develops to defend against the breakthrough of unwanted or intolerable feelings, sensations, emotions, or experience. Accordingly, while character armor may lead to emotional rigidity and poor contact with others, with such a metaphoric psycho-muscular armor in place, which is rather similar to hysterical paralysis or hysterical numbness, conscious control no longer has to actively

defend against certain impulses or desires [4]. When armor is fully in play, it is said that a person is exhibiting a 'character defense' and anxiety is fairly low. When armor has been weakened, either through therapy or chance experience, a person is said to be in an 'anxiety defense'. An anxiety defense can be thought of as a temporary state brought about by de-armorizing [5]. Anyhow, in the present article, which accentuates mainly the psychological aspect of character armor, it may be defined as compromised presentation of mental forces, which have been disguised by unconscious defense mechanisms and crystalized by conscious and subconscious processes of ego and superego, according to the necessities of real surroundings. On the other hand, though such a payout is inevitable because civilization and social life cannot be materialized without restriction, control and sublimation of instinctual wishes, such a refinement is not a concrete, complete or irreversible process. Likewise, though dreams and fantasies are typical discharging channels for partial release or presentation of the repressed or suppressed sexual and aggressive wishes, acting out, gaffes, and transference, too, are other possible discharging channels for presentation of a series of unconscious wishes, which are forced to be concealed, cautiously, for the sake of protection

against annihilation and ultimate survival of organism, which may occur due to unwise fulfillment of innermost instincts. Art, as well, is another similar channel for discharging of internal dynamics, which has been mentioned and analyzed before by many scholars [6, 7]. Accordingly, arts, artistic performances and artistic inventions, which are usually selected and created by romantic, pondering and creative persons, who by doing so decrease the gap between unconscious wishes and conscious perceptions, may be accounted for as alternative available means for maximum sublimation of the said instinctual wishes.

But, dissimilar to Machiavellianism, which is a tool for deception or exploitation of rivals, enemies or employees, art tries to increase the patience of impatient persons, to increase the creativity of able persons, to facilitate satisfaction of unsatisfied wishes, to express protest or resentment, to project internal upsets or to enhance motivation in desperate persons. Therefore, like natural divergence between outdoor presentations and indoor demeanor, character armor, too, may integrate contradictory features in the same person; a number of aspects which may be unfamiliar or perplexing for a person who may not understand causes of his or her own illogicalities, ambivalences or acting out, because character armor may act like *Pseudologia Fantastica*, which persuades a liar to have faith in truthiness of his lies. While in insight-oriented psychotherapies, like psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, short-term dynamic psychotherapy or cognitive-analytic psychotherapy, apparent character and assertions are comparable to manifest dream, which demands deep analysis for discovery of related latent implications, in non-analytic methods it may be formulated only as an outcome of interaction between temperament, conditioning or learning. However, the following case may show the obscured link between apparent charisma and hidden personality, which may be accounted for as the outcome of a kind of compromise between the dynamic unconscious, defense mechanisms and surroundings'

inevitalities, which are not free of natural and nurtured components, too.

### **Case Vignette**

A middle-aged guy had been referred covertly by his supervisor to a mental health service for psychiatric evaluation. According to the referral source, recently, some conflicts occurred between the said employee and other employees, which caused his colleagues to complain repeatedly and to ask their boss to respond officially and punish him. On the other hand, since, professionally, the accused employee was a virtuous member of staff and, also, he was in charge of an important section of the office, his superior preferred to ask for a mental evaluation before taking any decision which could hurt him formally. Anyway, according to accessible records and interviews, he was introduced by his colleagues as a hard-hearted person, who, habitually, responds in a hostile way to others' mistakes, requests, objections or criticisms, and he, as stated by them, was devoid of any sentiment, sympathy, empathy or compassion with regard to unconscious or unavoidable miscarries or obliviousness of his colleagues. On the other hand, as said by his relatives, he was behaving similarly in the house and his pitilessness was unbearable for his wife, as well, who had filed formerly for divorce due to the said severity, ferociousness and negativism. Accordingly, it seemed that, maybe, family conflicts, too, had exaggerated his moroseness. Recently, his colleagues were calling him little dictator, which irritated him so much. Anyway, a mental status examination and psychiatric interview showed some obsessive-compulsive traits in him, which was enough for a diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder [OCPD]. Also, in line with his past psychiatric history, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD] could be an appropriate diagnosis during his childhood, though some degree of attention-deficit was still evident in him.

Nonetheless, no other important clinical problems, like mood or thought disorders, substance abuse, or important problems with

vegetative functions were evident in him. Similarly, his cognitive estimates were completely normal. Therefore, it seemed that, for now, OCPD could explain his problematic interaction, which had been amplified, as well, due to his ongoing family conflict. Though he himself accepted that maybe his explicit behavioral habits could be responsible for his present conflicts, he believed that he could not change them because they were derived from his basic principles, and without them he might seem like a zombie or sinful liar. As stated by him, his world had been divided between right and wrong, or honesty and dishonesty, and he had no belief in the existence or necessity of a grey zone. So, as said by him, he could not be merciless and he was only trying to accomplish his responsibilities correctly, and, likewise, he expected others, too, to do their duties righteously. Therefore, his moodiness was only due to the occurrence of some conscious or unconscious slips, which his conscience could not ignore or tolerate. Also, he could remember that his parents and siblings had many times ascribed a quantity of characteristics, like cruelty, vindictiveness, jealousy and sadistic behavior to him, which he could describe only as a number of baseless allegations or jealousy. Likewise, he could remember that a few years ago a psychometric evaluation on a personality scale [Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory = MCMI], which had assessed all employees as a screening program, had demonstrated a high level of anxiety plus a sadistic-aggressive trait in him, which was surprising for the evaluator, as well. Correspondingly, with respect to the firing of personnel who, as said by him, had failed to do their tasks and responsibilities correctly, he was so cruel that no recommendation or arbitration could reverse his verdict. Anyways, after the interview, he suddenly asked his counselor that in spite of his punitive character and inflexibility, which he described as the necessity of a stable and thorough character of a moral fellow citizen, whether as an employee or as an employer, he had a disturbing problem that had been manifest since teenage years and was bothering him a lot. As stated by him, he was very emotive with respect to melodramatic scenes of movies and,

consequently, could be influenced deeply by their sensitive content, and as a result, many times, he could not conceal his non-verbal sympathy or even cry due to sufferings, romanticism, altruism, compassionate, victories or defeats of performers, though he knew that they were only sections of an imaginary story, and the related actors possibly had healthy and happy lives. Also, he had noted that the passing away of films' actors, whether famous players or nameless artists, could anguish him deeply, and, in this regard, his sorrow for that group of artists was remarkably more than, for example, singers, whose performances, songs and video clips, as well, were comparably interesting for him. Though he was usually reluctant to see romantic movies because they were, apparently, boring for him, such a kind of random romanticism existed in nearly every kind of cinema with unlike themes, like action movies, horror shows or romantic films.

Besides, he could remember a number of movies which he had seen repeatedly, with the same emotional reaction at every visit. As stated by him, his preoccupation with interesting scenes could prolong some days or weeks and during that period he could imagine himself as some part of the movie, like a performer. Furthermore, his hate or love towards the actors was not different from his hatred or affection towards real people in actual life. In the same way, he remembered that, a few years ago, a TV show had influenced him so deeply that he was amazingly in a state of continuous tension and alarm for around three months, till the end of the episode, because its story and physical or behavioral characteristics of its actors were shockingly comparable to his own relatives' lives and manners. On the other hand, it was surprising for him that why human beings' emotional relationships, which were ostensibly nonsense or illogical for him in real life, were so serious for him in shows, and the empathy with others, which was so hard for him to accept or realize in daily life, was easily turning into sympathy with regard to movies' players. In contrast, it was astonishing for him why other people or relatives, who were

apparently more romantic or empathic than him in real life, were not responding similarly to him with respect to the same movies or scenes. Correspondingly, he could remember that after the death of one of his blood relatives, he was, shockingly, so upset that he could not respond to a phone call, while his superficially passionate family members were bizarrely cooler than him. Additionally, he could recall that, during his childhood and early teenage years, the poverty and disability of some people could upset him so much, and could cause him to cry privately; a phenomenon which was uncommon after adolescence. Nonetheless, he confessed that though he was proud of his current unforgiving personality, which, according to him, was mandatory for the survival of a civilized community, he was doubtful that there was any difference between him and a robot, and was he a real heartless person? If so, then why could his seemingly unbreakable character so easily be influenced by a movie? What was the basis of the discrepancy between his fanciful domain and his factual realm? Also, while he showed no belief in the importance of dreams, he was nervous regarding his frequent anxious dreams, which could increase during conflicts or stresses. But then again, he looked at his sympathy with artists as a kind of flaw in his character, and asked the counselor to help him to overcome such feebleness or illogicality, which was humiliating for him; especially, in front of relatives or coworkers, who had usually identified him as a cold-blooded person. As stated by him, even some of his family members who had witnessed his emotional reaction thought that, maybe, he was manipulating or making fun of them by pretending pity or romanticism.

Anyhow, the counselor, who had studied some set of courses in psychodynamic fellowship, as well, based on available results of interview and mental status evaluation, tried to describe some analytic concepts, like consciousness, the unconscious, defense mechanisms, repression, isolation, reaction formation, identification, internalization of objects, instincts, analyzability of dreams, and inter-relationship

between Id, Ego and Super-ego, as symbolic representatives of instinctual wishes, realities and supervising ideals, respectively. Accordingly, the correlation between a harsh super-ego, the unconscious defense mechanism of isolation of affect and the necessity of making a decision, which could echo in the shape of cold-bloodedness or heartlessness, had been described for him. Similarly, the counselor pointed to him that though the outcome of compromise between ego, super-ego and defense mechanisms, disregard to genetic factors, may be formulated as the best possible accommodation between an organism and his or her surroundings, it does not mean annihilation of innate emotions or instincts, which may demand every possible channel for discharging or presentation, whether straightforwardly or disguisedly. So, his seemingly senseless sympathy for movies' actors was nothing except a legitimate presentation of some isolated affects in an imaginary world, which was open to their presentation, not in the real world, which was locked and substituted beforehand by an unconsciously designed character armor. As a result, while the severity of the super-ego could not permit him to express his emotions freely in the genuine world, the imaginary realm and dreams were appropriate for releasing of postponed feelings and wishes, though they are not, as well, without restrictions. For example, while some movies were initially very interesting for him, he was reluctant to see them again because they could excite, scare or irritate him too much, in spite of their imaginary nature. This could show that unconscious identification with actors, which might occur automatically due to some physical or psychological similarities or characteristics, could not happen without associated emotional processes, which are part of the daily life of every human being at all times and in all places. Sex, aggression, love, hate, competition, ambition, hegemony, jealousy, mating, etc., are a series of pre-programmed emotional, cognitive or behavioral processes, which can be materialized partly or completely, directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly, straightforwardly or disguisedly, individually

or jointly. So, while the character of a person should be formulated according to the existent balance between his or her manifest conduct and undisclosed desires, typically, only its explicit fragment, which Wilhelm Reich labeled ‘character armor’ gleams. Accordingly, though, in general, ‘character armor’ could be accounted as a liable, seeable and measurable part of character, it has hidden roots, also, which are not easily assessable personally or by others, and may only be subjectively deductible. Now, such kinds of explanations might explain a bit his unexplainable, episodic or impulsive aggressions towards some of his relatives, which may have roots in repressed erotic or incestuous wishes towards them, and could exhibit itself by turning into its opposite pole by the unconscious defense mechanism of reaction-formation. Likewise, he had noted that, usually, there was a gap between some of his internal desires and his later awareness or acceptance of their presence. For instance, he could not discover his love or erotic feelings towards some women until after viewing them in a dream or some occurrence, which could happen even months or years later. Thus, it was surprising for him why he could not realize his inner feelings rightly; a problem which possibly could be formulated again according to a dynamic triangle of harsh super-ego, isolation of affect and repression. In this regard, though he had no belief in the analyzability of dreams, it was surprising for him that, with respect to the said emotional gap, many times immediately after a dream he could feel a serious subjective interest in himself towards an external object. Consequently, he admitted that his feelings were never parallel to existent realities and such an erratic gap may have caused the loss of some important occasions in his life, which he could not disregard or forgive ever.

On the other hand, while he assumed that such incongruity between his apparent character and his erratic inclinations could be due to some daily stresses or a tired mentality, the counselor tried to explain the process of determinism in mental life and denoted to him that essentially no mental activity happens without a series of

external or internal reasons, and repeating sequence of events shows operative patterns which are not easily observable, but are plausibly deductible. Finally, at the end of the counseling, which was not more than a few sessions, while he was still doubtful regarding the actuality of the unconscious mental dynamism, he accepted that maybe such a formulation could answer his queries a bit. In the last session, he remembered that sometimes when his hostility towards others was irrational, huge and problematic, he could decrease or control it by imagining them dead in their graves, which could turn immediately the said blown up ferociousness into compassion and condolence. This could show him that while the said bellicosity was not devoid of unreasoned bases, it was more an ambivalence feeling and was simultaneously attached to its opposite pole. Accordingly, maybe he was not totally heartless, and his mercilessness was rather an instrumental tactic, not an unbreakable trait, and his erratic feelings were somewhere in his own mindset, which could be ultimately exposed. Furthermore, he recalled that, in contrary to his older brothers, who had always introduced him as a hardhearted or coldblooded person, he could not ever hunt animals for leisure, except during childhood when he had severe interests in killing insects, or to abuse, lie or bully siblings or friends for the sake of personal benefits; characteristics, which had caused his Mom to label him as a kind and conscionable stubborn. In the end, he stated that now he had a better concept regarding character armor. Also, though he stated that his wife’s separation was not important for him because he could not regret losing a careless and sloppy spouse, he asked the counselor to have a dialogue with her for an explanation of his character, because he was reluctant to deprive himself of a second chance; a request which was accepted keenly by the counselor.

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