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F. J. R. Ramazan

Postgraduate student at the Foreign Literature Department, Institute of Philology, National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv

ORCID: 0000-0003-0319-2418, e-mail: farmanjawhar@yahoo.com

Discourse of the Other in Agatha Christie's An Autobiography

The paper discusses Jacques Lacan's discourse of the other, relevant to the authority of societal influence and the creation of a person's ego and alter egos. In this theory Lacan refers to the little others (i. e. the ego and alter egos) and the big Others (i. e. points of authority, societal expectations, and cultural norms). Studying one's psychological makeup and development is a process that can be quite invasive and lengthy. However, there is a genre of literature that focuses directly on authors' personal and introspective views of their own lives. Autobiographies are books in which authors write about their own personal experiences. They can include information about a person's childhood, their upbringing, the beginning of their career path, or any other life periods they deem notable enough. Thus the paper will look at Agatha Christie's autobiography from the perspective of Lacanian ideas. Christie's childhood is an exceptional example of how Lacan's theories explain children's desires and how they are shaped by the environment and authority figures around them. Christie would not have begun reading books well before her mother wanted her to if Nursie had not begun reading her stories. Likewise, she probably would not have been interested in doing math problems at such a young age if her wealthy father had not given her such positive feedback over her desire to learn academics as a young girl. The developments of Christie are unique to her own environment and situation; and there are many other people who have developed in other ways due to the authority figures around them. In the future, Lacan scholars may want to look at more autobiographies to see if the discourse of the Other presents itself.

Key words: *discourse of the Other, big Other, little other, ego, alter ego, autobiography, concept, woman-based society, authority.*

Introduction. One of the major contributions of Jacques Lacan to contemporary thought was his discourse of the Other, a concept that explains how people perceive the world around them. These perceptions are often shaped by the relationships they experience and the societal influences and expectations they interact with throughout life. Many of Lacan's theories match those of Sigmund Freud. These commonalities can be seen in both scientists' focus on children's relationships with their caretakers and how people's egos can manifest themselves by way of

one's desires and imagination [2, p. 3]. Many of the studies Lacan and Freud performed are heavily theoretical, and it would be difficult to replicate their results and recommendations in practical settings. However, there is a medium of literature that can allow researchers to look into the lives of real human beings and evaluate whether or not Lacan's discourse of the other is something that can be practically identified in everyday life. Autobiographies are books in which the authors tell an account of their own lives. These accounts can be as in-depth as an author decides to make them; and Agatha Christie's *An Autobiography* is an example of an autobiography that gives psychiatrists and psychologists a great deal of research material to delve into.

In her autobiography, Christie gradually exposes her own ego, desires, and perception of life as she writes her prose. Much like Lacan and Freud hypothesize, Christie's autobiography shows that she was greatly influenced by her relationship with her parents. Interestingly enough, Christie's introspective work also shows that her mother was heavily influenced by her interactions with her biological mother (note: this person can also be referred to as Christie's grandmother/biological grandmother). By the time Christie had begun working on her autobiography, she had already had a very successful professional career writing novels where she created her own characters and worlds [1]. However, reading one's autobiography gives readers, scholars, and researchers an opportunity to analyze a person's thoughts and perspectives in an open and ethical manner. With that in mind, this paper will analyze Christie's autobiography and identify which aspects of the book fall in line with Lacan's discourse of the other.

Lacan's Concept of the Other. It can be seen early on in Christie's autobiography that she was greatly influenced by her parents' marriage and way of living life. The identification of this trend is important, as her parents' marriage also influences how she describes and views other people as well. While many works describing Lacan's concept of the other do not explicitly mention the institution of marriage, the societal and cultural expectations of Christie's lifetime could be viewed as an example of the big Other. The preface of Christie's book is dated in 1950, and this is a time period where the traditional idea of marriage was still firmly in place. While Christie's preface includes a great deal of introspective reflection, it also gives an idea of the societal structures that Christie respects enough to adhere to in her life. These structures include her own ego and identity as a writer and her development as a woman in a society that expected women to get married whether they had careers or not. These two structures are examples of the little other

and big Other that Lacan often discussed in his publications. Both concepts explain how a person's desires manifest themselves but the similarities end there for the most part.

Before drafting the theories of the little other and big Other, Lacan worked as a medically trained psychiatrist. His theory was an expansion of his previous publications and discussions about humans' tendency to personify their egos and the environments around them. In an article profiling Lacan and his theories, Johnston [3] writes that the smaller other (the one with the little 'o') is often used to refer to the ego and its various alter-egos. Johnston writes that Lacan's personification of the ego and its alter-egos highlighted their alienating statuses – meaning that those who utilize Lacan's discourse of the other and mirror theories often do so with the intent to highlight how someone will develop or differentiate themselves from others. When specifically discussing alter-egos, Johnston writes that people often imagine how their alter-egos would be like them. While imagining this, they may consider which thoughts, thinking patterns, characteristics, and mannerisms their main egos and alter-egos will share with one another.

The "discourse" aspect of Lacan's discourse of the other is discussed greatly in [1]. In the article discussing Lacan's thoughts on desire, Felluga writes that people's desires are the result of their egos and alter-egos manifesting themselves on an imaginary level. This is why people's unconscious desires are a primary example of Lacan's discourse of the other, as one's ego will never materialize into flesh. However, one's ego and alter-egos can make their desires known and act within the regulations of the environment around them. When elaborating on this phenomenon, Felluga writes that people's unconscious thoughts and desires often match the linguistic, cultural, and societal constraints of the environments they live within [2]. These constraints and structures are what Lacan referred to as the big Other [2; 3].

The big Other is often manifested within the first form of authority that a child interacts with. Sharpe writes that this form of authority is what guides a child during their first years of life and influences how they will think in the future [6]. While children's relationship with their parents was something that both Lacan and Sigmund Freud studied extensively, Lacan's big Other concept also explained how society could take the role of the authoritative figure in one's life. When expounding on this, Felluga writes that "[One's] unconscious desires are... organized by the linguistic system that Lacan terms... "the big Other." In a sense... [one's] desire is never properly [their] own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies" [2].

These cultural ideologies can involve a focus on God, nature, and other similar things and ideas. Books like Christie's autobiography show how people can let multiple cultural ideologies and authority figures influence their lives and desires. A person can idealize their mother as a person and as a wife; and, in Christie's book, there is evidence that Christie desired to have a loving and successful marriage like her mother's without necessarily wanting a man who is just like her father. This shows that Freud's theories of initial sexual attraction may not manifest themselves in a traditional sense. This aspect of Christie's autobiography also shows that there is evidence that sexual attraction to one's parents is not a necessary prerequisite to adoring them and wanting to be like them.

Sharpe writes that Lacan's big Other involves a subconcept called the Oedipal complex [6]. During this stage of a child's mental development, they begin realizing themselves biologically. This stage is also when Lacan begins to distance himself from Freud in terms of sexual identity and theory, as many of Lacan's theories for this stage relate to how children's desires are shaped by their mother's. This distinction may be why Christie's biography feels more like a research project for Lacan than Freud, as her speech towards her father is not as endearing as it is for her mother. Also, Christie makes a habit of focusing on various women throughout her life story, as she also identifies the circumstances that led to her grandmother giving her mother up for adoption. This desire to trace her maternal line's way of thinking of psychological and social development may be a sign that Christie's big Other is heavily focused upon her mother, her mother's style of thinking, and her mother's way of dealing with relationships.

As Christie's autobiography progresses, more women-based patterns and events develop that shape Christie into being a different type of person. At first, Christie is a loner that creates imaginary friends to socialize with. However, after having time to learn more about the world and literature around her, the second stage of Christie's childhood leads to her evolving into a young scholar that still needed to learn how to be a young lady. As time continues to pass, this young lady will eventually evolve into a woman that will have her own professional career as a writer and a personal life as a wife and mother. These identities feed off one another but are all reliant on the true Agatha that Christie identifies in the preface of her autobiography. Thus, there is an unconscious form of communication that must exist between the true Agatha, her alter-egos, and her big Others in order for her to navigate through life in a social and psychological sense.

This unconscious communication is rarely ever spoken of in Christie's book; but there are moments where she acknowledges her consciousness forcing her to think more about certain situations. This can be an example of how the unconscious others communicate with each other and the main ego of a person, as many people's desires are subconscious and not yet explained. These subconscious desires and communications can become more developed over time; but Christie shows in her preface that she still does things unconsciously that she does not fully understand. Thus, Christie's case matches the current research surrounding Lacan's concepts, as there is no clear statement that people fully realize all of their little others and big Others over time.

Post Colonialism and its Influence on Agatha Christie's Personality and Writing Style. Postcolonial literature can be described as the writings of those who were colonized at a certain point in time, those who were the direct descendants of people who lived in a colony, the people who were the citizens of colonizing (a. k. a. Empire) countries, those who helped their countries usurp sovereignty from other nations, and/or those who visited nations that were under colonial rule. In other words, postcolonial literature and post colonialism are two terms that can be used to refer to any literature that relates to the social, cultural, economic, and artistic consequences that colonialism and imperialism spread across the world [5]. In Christie's case, she came from a family that got to reap the benefits of living in an imperial country that amassed a great deal of wealth and established itself as a world power. Being a White person who was born in a Western country was enough to make her more privileged than the majority of the world, but her autobiography makes it clear that Christie and her family came from a very wealthy and socially affluent background.

In the preface of her autobiography, Christie places herself in Nimrud, Iraq and speaks of her stay within the country from the perspective of a safe tourist [1, p. 4–5]. Even though Christie was of English origin, she appeared to have no problem being in a Middle Eastern country during the beginning of the 1950s – which was not too long after the completion of the Second World War. Christie's description of her home and the activities going on around her is incredibly calm and innocent, as her experience in Iraq appears to be nothing like how the country has been reported by American media. The workmen who were outside of her house had a sense of joy in their voice while they performed hard labor and the policemen that were patrolling in her area were not aggressive at all. Perhaps, Christie's upbringing in a wealthy home allowed her to see through the political and social stereotypes that were placed onto non-Western people.

These political and social stereotypes could include portraying people as savages or otherwise undeserving of respect or their own independence. In a similar vein, authors from colonized countries often portrayed Western characters as heartless, aggressive, brutal, and oppressive [5]. Linares writes that Christie's life experiences may have influenced her ability to view non-Western countries in a non-stereotypical light [4, p. 11]. In the thesis, Linares states that Christie's life was full of experiences that fed off of her second husband's career as an archaeologist in the Middle East. Linares also writes that spending this time in the Middle East with her husband allowed her to create characters that challenged Great Britain's global superiority and allowed readers to "see a commonality with the people of Iraq beyond race and culture" [4].

Linares produces an interesting theory, as her non-fictionalized views of the world and her childhood are on full display in her autobiography [4]. Linares' theory may be indirectly proven by a brief childhood memory that Christie includes in the preface of her autobiography. In this memory, Christie is hit so hard by a boy carrying a large basket of stuff cannons that she is knocked to the ground. While she is crying very loudly, Christie's mother tries to tell her of their "brave soldiers in South Africa" [1, p. 7] to motivate her to stop crying and toughen up. In response to her mother's encouragement, Christie states that she does not want to be anything like the soldiers and instead wants to be a "cowyard" [1, p. 7].

While Christie was probably much too young to understand that her statement was very powerful, it appears that she does realize that the United Kingdom's imperial exploits in the past were not as grand as history tries to make them seem. Perhaps, Christie's frequent interactions with the house workers who took care of her home helped her break down the walls of classism that were often present in English society during her time. While classism is still very much a thing, Christie's childhood gave her multiple opportunities to look down on the world around her, as she never understood how her father made his money but did understand that it led to a great life as a socialite. Also, Christie was afforded an education during her childhood at a time where women were still very limited in society from a professional sense. A colonial household that had already achieved generational wealth had no reason to rush their daughter into a world that would probably tell her to stay home, but her parents' open mindedness may have helped her break down the walls of classism, racism, and stereotyping that shackled many Western people during Christie's lifetime.

Linares writes that Christie gave her non-Western characters numerous opportunities to speak to those that wished to oppress them within her novels [4, p. 32]. According to Linares, these opportunities allowed the non-Western characters to show that they could think for themselves and that they did not need a Western power to come save them. Christie's desire to give her house workers a voice and identity within her autobiography is an example of this work in a feminist sense, as she breaks many of the stereotypes that people had about domestic workers in that era.

While many authors would have domestic workers be silent and focus on Christie and her family members, Christie instead tells multiple stories about her domestic workers and how they influenced her personality and way of thinking. The development of her thinking from the moment she gains consciousness to when she is a seasoned woman writing in her Iraqi home is a very complex process and her autobiography is an interesting document that doubles as an example of Christie giving a voice to the voiceless and focusing on how she can learn more about the world without her while shirking the British lens that she was born with.

Analysis of Agatha Christie's *Autobiography*. Christie's autobiography maintains a happy voice throughout; which may be an identifier that Christie began working on this project at a time when she felt very accomplished and satisfied. In the preface of the book, she concedes to herself that it will probably take her a long time to finish the book because of the piecemeal method of writing that she will be using to write its manuscript. However, she does not loathe the prospect of her autobiography taking a lengthy amount of time, as she corrects herself when she notices that she calls the writing of the book a task instead of an enjoyable journey.

Christie's preface also shows readers and scholars that Christie's ego as a writer was strong and developed by this point in her life. Many of the references and quips that she makes are akin to the comments that a writer would jot down while they were outlining their next project. This includes how she describes herself as "the true Agatha" and states how she "[does] not know the whole Agatha" [1, p. 7]. A statement like this is a major highlight of Christie's ego and little other, as it shows that she has a central ego that she identifies with and a number of alter-egos that she knows exists. These alter-egos include little Agatha Miller, big Agatha Miller, Agatha Christie, and Agatha Mallowan – Christie's Big Others

Christie's ability to list her alter-egos as a cast of characters is notable, as it is apparent that her idealizations and desires changed as her life progressed. One of the first examples of this is how Christie's

voice changes between the end of the preface and Part I of the book. The preface was written with the voice of a veteran writer reflecting on their last major project. In contrast, Part I was written from the mindset of a woman that adores her parents and is extremely grateful for the life they were able to give her.

Christie's ability to profile her mother and other characters throughout her autobiography shows that she has been able to learn important lessons from them and glean important parts of her personality from them. In the first section of Part I, Christie heavily focuses on her mother's background. Much like a novelist fleshing out the details of a key side character early on, Christie explains her mother's adoption by her aunt and step-uncle and how being given up by her biological mother negatively affected her psyche from then on.

This aspect of the book appeals directly to Lacan's big Other theory, as Christie's mother was shaped by a major event that happened during her and her mother's relationship. While Christie's grandmother thought she was giving her mother the best chance to succeed in life, hindsight may show that separating a child from their biological parents may be more damaging than not. In the case of Christie's mother, she eventually felt so unwanted that she fell in love with the first male that ever complimented a single thing about her appearance. Confusingly enough, she also rejected this man's first proposal of marriage because she thought that she was "dumpy" and that he would be "disappointed in her" [1, p. 15]. Even after accepting his proposal for marriage the second time around, Christie's mother still felt as if she would lose him in the future due to a lack of desire.

This profile of Christie's mother was intriguing, as it began with Christie describing how beloved her father was by his family and his community. Unsurprisingly, Christie's discussion of her father is short and to the point. Whether or not she meant for the chapter to turn out this way is left up to question, as the lack of depth she gives her father compared to her mother is strikingly clear. In terms of conflict and balance, the only negative traits she gives her father's character are having "no outstanding characteristics" and "not [being] particularly intelligent" [1, p. 11]. Even these traits are cleaned up, however, as Christie immediately goes on to write about how her father's "loving heart" and "great sense of humor" made up for these deficiencies [1, p. 11].

As Sharpe writes, many of the similarities between Lacan and Freud end once children reach the stage of socialization [6]. Lacan's openness to allow various types of big Others in one's life is one example of this. However, the example shown in Christie's profile of her

parents is that Lacan's view of the mother (and primary caretakers in general) triumphs over the controversial desires and thought processes that Freud explains in his theories. At its base, Lacan holds that the desires and personality of one's primary caretaker will influence the desires and ego of the child they are caring for. This seems to be true for Christie after reading her autobiography, as she rarely spent time with her father during the day. Many of the people Christie spent time with when she was younger were women. This roster of women included her mother, her nurse, Nursie, and her housemaid. Christie's father did not work but he was an avid socialite who also served as a board member for various organizations. This lack of attention during the daytime may be why Christie appears to favor her mother more, as her father did not do much to sway her opinion of him either way.

Christie's Little Others. Christie's parents and career as a writer are two of the more significant big Others that can be identified in her autobiography. However, Christie's little others are actually much larger in number after reading through the book. In fact, there are some alter-egos that Christie does not even mention in her condensed list found in the preface. When she was a child, Christie created imaginary friends that she could play with while she spent time in her nursery. The kittens were the first group of imaginary friends that were "seen" by somebody other than her; and this deeply upset her and her main ego at the time. According to Christie, it was a "horrible shock" to hear Nursie and her housemaid talking about her and The Kittens [1, p. 20]. This blow to the ego led Christie to ask herself why she got so offended when she learned that other people saw her playing with her imaginary friends. This appears to be a very introspective question for a three year old, but Lacan's theories give younger children a great deal of credit when it comes to their socialization [6].

There were other imaginary friends that Christie would create after this experience; and one of them had over one hundred children [1, p. 21]. However, Christie's vivid imagination would begin to apply itself in her ability to read at a very young age. The discovery of Christie's ability to read by Nursie led to a new stage of her childhood. This stage involved her education in socialization and in academics, as Christie begins to introduce even more female characters that grew to influence her and leave an impact on her life. During this stage of her life story, Christie only mentions her father when she is praying for his salvation after playing sports on Sundays and after he gives her extra academic work to complete.

The Discourse of the Other in *An Autobiography*. Christie's interactions with the women in her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood subconsciously developed her personality and outlook on life. This subconscious development is the work of many unconscious narratives and interactions with these same influential figures. While the concepts of the little other and big Other can be identified with examples and metaphors, the discourse of the other is a more abstract concept that can only be understood after the little others and big Others in a person's life are clearly defined. The big Other of womanhood influences how Christie's various little others develop throughout life. Womanhood can be shown in different ways, as Christie was exposed to numerous examples of housewives and working women who did not or could not rely on their husbands' salaries and pensions.

Having these influences around her gave Christie the confidence and ability to freely develop into the person that she wanted to become over time. This is evidenced in her learning how to read well before the age of eight even though her mother wished against it. If her mother's desires was the only big Other in her life, Christie may have followed a set schedule of development. However, being around working women who interacted with her almost as much as her parents gave her different messages and narratives to adhere to. This is the simplest way to explain how the discourse of the other functions, as the desires and goals of a person are shaped by the narratives, messages, and goals that are put in front of them. Thus, if a person grows up with two parents that are in a successful marriage, they will probably want to get married as well. Likewise, a person that grows up with multiple examples of working women who are able to maintain their femininity while also supporting their families may want to have their own professional career as well.

Conclusion. Agatha Christie's autobiography is a deeply introspective tale about the author's various stages of life. From a literary perspective, the book feels more like a realistic first-person novel than a factual text. However, this should be expected from someone who is considered to be one of the best writers in history. While rich in a literary sense, *An Autobiography* is also a book that gives psychological scholars and researchers a lot to investigate. Jacques Lacan's discourse of the other is a theory that includes egos, alter-egos, societal constructs, and the relationship between children and their primary caregivers.

Christie's childhood is an exceptional example of how Lacan's theories explain children's desires and how they are shaped by the environment and authority figures around them. Christie would not have begun reading books well before her mother wanted her to if Nursie had

not begun reading her stories. Likewise, she probably would not have been interested in doing math problems at such a young age if her wealthy father had not given her such positive feedback over her desire to learn academics as a young girl.

The developments of Christie are unique to her own environment and situation; and there are many other people who have developed in other ways due to the authority figures around them. Some executives may be driven by alter-egos that know how to compartmentalize the various aspects of running a company and building a brand. In a similar manner, painters that want to make a living before death must simultaneously be great artists, marketers, and salespeople. In all these examples, there are overarching structures and institutions that influence how one must act throughout their development and career. In the future, Lacan scholars may want to look at more autobiographies to see if the discourse of the other presents itself. Stories about individuals who did not come from a wealthy background will develop much differently than Christie's. Thus, could possibly give researchers a chance to use Lacan's theories to explain some individuals' negative behaviors and desires.

From a postcolonial perspective, Christie's ability to give a voice and identity to those who would be viewed as lower class is something that she would do throughout most of her novels. Her ability to portray her family's domestic workers as strong and capable businesswoman is a real-life example of how she would give non-Western people the ability to think for themselves and combat the racist ideals of the colonists who tried to paint them as savages. Postcolonial literature can be studied from multiple angles, and Christie's biography fits into a literary subcategory that involves hearing from the people whose countries won during the imperial age.

Christie had the enviable luxury of being able to travel the world and live in an Arab destination as a Western woman who was a celebrated author that married a man that explored Middle Eastern artifacts for a living. This privilege did not seem to be lost on her, as she understood at an early age that Britain's military exploits were not as impressive as history made them seem. Her home education may have influenced her ability to be one of the more progressive postcolonial authors in literature. However, it should not be forgotten that an English woman like herself would have been expected to marry wealthy and stay at home like her mother did. Her desire to live a different life could also have led to her more liberal postcolonial views and literature; but this is a theory that would need to be proven with more research and a deeper analysis of all her novels.

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Ф. Дж. Р. Рамазан

аспірант кафедри зарубіжної літератури Інституту філології Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка

Дискурс Іншого в "Автобіографії" Агати Крісті

Стаття присвячена аналізу ідей французького психоаналітика Жака Лакана, пов'язаних з концепцією "іншого", яка займає ключове місце у працях мислителя. Інший має пряме відношення до механізмів реалізації суспільного впливу, формування та розвитку его та альтер его людини. Згідно з теорією Лакана, існують маленькі інші (тобто его та альтер его людини) та великі інші (тобто влада, соціальні очікування та культурні норми). Дослідження психологічного складу та розвитку людини – це досить тривалий та інвазивний процес, однак існує жанр літератури, який безпосередньо зосереджується на особистих та інтроспективних поглядах на власне життя. Автобіографія – це не просто опис життя у хронологічній послідовності, це ретроспективна оповідь автора про свій життєвий досвід, яка може включати інформацію про його дитинство, виховання, початок кар'єри чи будь-які інші значні періоди життя. Автор статті ставить за мету проаналізувати "Автобіографію" Агати Крісті крізь призму ідей Лакана. Дитинство Крісті – яскравий приклад того, як теорії Лакана пояснюють дитячі бажання і як вони формуються оточенням та авторитетними постатями навколо них. Крісті не почала б читати книги задовго до того, як її хотіла мати, якби нянька не почала читати їй історії. Так само їй, мабуть, не було б цікаво займатися математичними задачами в такому юному віці, якби її батько не поставився позитивно до її бажання вчитися. Ситуація Крісті дещо унікальна для її оточення та соціального середовища, адже багато людей отримали інший життєвий досвід через вплив авторитарних постатей, зокрема, батьків. У майбутньому послідовники Лакана, можливо, звернуться до більшого числа автобіографій, досліджуючи впливовість і функціональність дискурсу Іншого.

Ключові слова: дискурс іншого, великий інший, маленький інший, его, альтер-его, автобіографія, концепція, жіноче оточення, авторитарність.