

# Artistic Immortality as an *Objet Petit a*: The Subject of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"

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## Abstract

This study presents a psychoanalytical reading of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" having eye on Žižek's theory of the subject. "Kubla Khan" contains a host of components providing illustration of Coleridge's psychological status. In such case, Žižekian approach to psychoanalysis could provide a suitable paradigm for an analytical reading of the poem. The works of Žižek conducted disputatious re-articulations of the subject/object, the displacement of an *objet petit a* (object of desire) with object-cause of desire, and parallax. Žižek, like Hegel, accentuates the one-to-one relationship of the subject and the object while introducing parallax and the ticklish subject which are later followed by tickling object. It is thus possible to illustrate the psychoanalytical status of Coleridge in the course of writing "Kubla Khan." The poem pictures a path to immortality while it is in search to immortalize its poet too. In this study it is demonstrated how Coleridge followed his *objet petit a*, which is 'artistic immortality,' in the lines of "Kubla Khan."

**Keywords:** The Ticklish Subject, The Tickling Object, *Objet Petit a*, The Parallax, Immortality, Psychological Status.

## Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge includes the subtitle "Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment" for "Kubla Khan" in its initial publication. The subtitle delineates a number of psychological aspects of Coleridge's subjectivity; its influence could be observed on individuals' most personal method of reading the poem (Silhol, 2006: p.I). On the other hand, Coleridge, in his poem, portrays a conflict in which he himself as a subject is encountered with Kubla Khan as an object; not only Coleridge's but also Kubla Khan's apprehensions, sufferings, and anxieties are all indications of their transformations as a subject to an object and as an object to a subject. The world of Coleridge's poem, is profoundly distinct from the real world in which the material

resident occurs. It is within this context that the present article demonstrates, on various levels, how the dominant psyche structure of Coleridge is represented in “Kubla Khan.”

Poetry has been widely regarded as a medium for representing inner emotional status, a medium through which poet reflects happenings in his psyche. Coleridge and other poets of Romanticism, in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, are celebrated regarding their flourished sentiments as a major factor of imaginary reproduction. As Sadjadi and Esmkhani maintained “Through imagination machinery, it provides the ground to engage with perspective of other; experiencing the same feelings and memories that a character goes through” (qtd. in Hosseini & Baghaei, 2020: p.132). Composed in 1797, Coleridge avoided publishing “Kubla Khan” up to 1816, which he included a preface to the poem that has led to a great controversy. The preface has been of a greater significance for Scholars than the poem itself and it has invoked a ‘psychological curiosity’ for the critics (Coleridge, 1912: p.295). Whether Coleridge’s preface is true or just another product of imagination under the influence of anodyne, is the subject for an ongoing debate amongst the scholars. Although the tone of duality has metamorphosed the totality of the poem, the true duality happens to be elsewhere; between the *objet Petit a* of Coleridge and that of Kubla Khan. “Psychoanalysis, as a nonmedical observation of human mind, zooms in on various ways of interpretation of an individual’s psyche” (Hosseini, 2019a: p.34); consequently, this reading endeavors to accomplish a thorough investigation of the poem’s duality under the Žižekian key concepts of the ticklish subject, the tickling object, and parallax.

Žižek is mainly concerned with the concept of parallax in studies of ideology, since he has a Marxist tendency. He defines parallax in terms of Marxism; however, as a psychoanalyst Žižek borrows ideas from psychoanalysis and applies them to the concepts of social and political studies. Concerning the discussion and the conclusion of this paper, it is found that the concept of parallax is easily applicable to the studies of literature and literary criticism under the shadow of psychoanalysis. Žižek defines parallax in a social context and uses this idea in the studies of reproduction, alienation, capitalism, and the fundamental Marxist terminology. After all, the finding of this paper is based on the treatment of parallax on the psyche of an individual concluding that the relation between *objet petit a* and an individual as a subject is a parallax. Therefore, in every individual a parallax could be found.

The present paper first examines a close review of the psychoanalytical studies of the poem. Thereafter, the critical approach and major concepts over which the argument is established are under consideration. The concepts include the ticklish subject, the tickling object, and parallax in the Žižekian psychoanalysis as the fruit

of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical approach toward human psyche. Afterwards, the paper provides a detailed reading of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" in terms of the Žižekian concepts introduced followed by a concluding section that summarizes the common grounds through which "Kubla Khan" delivers a basis on the psychological structure of Coleridge's subjectivity.

## Literature Review

Regarding the psychoanalytical studies of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," vast researches have been conducted from different points of view using various approaches of numerous theorists. Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Carl Gustave Jung –being the major figures in psychoanalysis– are the ones that offer the best conceptions for psychoanalytical reading of "Kubla Khan." In this section, the previous studies done on this subject matter will be examined and the objective of the present paper is to be introduced.

Allen Dale Widerburg in his 1975 thesis *'Kubla Khan' and its Critics* devotes its fourth chapter on psychoanalytical criticism referring to Freudian and Jungian critics. In his introduction on the mentioned chapter, Widerburg admits that he is more involved with the Freudian concept of interpretation. As he alleges in page 29, he "attempt[s] to indicate which interpretations, in my judgement, lead the reader away from the poem and which add to the meaning of the poem." Consequently, Widerburg brings the relevant ideas of Jung to literature and encounter it to Freudian mistakes of interpreting an art piece. Widerburg notes that the poem as a symbol can be interpreted "as a vestige of the collective unconscious by a Jungian [critic]" (p.32). However, in conclusion Widerburg labeled both approaches a failure in true interpretation of "Kubla Khan."

Beverly Fields in "Reality's Dark Dream: Dejection in Coleridge" as a Freudian study of "Kubla Khan" argues

'The connection between Coleridge's female sexuality and his unconscious desire for (and fear of) the phallic woman is that he wanted a woman who was like a man (or a man who was like a woman); and the archetypal object of his paradoxical desire was of course his mother... The explicit cause of danger in the narrator is that 'he hath ... drunk the milk of paradise,' a declaration that should remove any doubt about the maternal nature of this forbidden paradise or about the infantile nature of Coleridge's rivalry with his father. What he wanted was mother's milk.' (Fields, 1967: p.98)

This argument is derived from Freud's article "Wish-Fulfillment and the Unconscious." Throughout this article Freud introduces a brand-new definition of art in which he observes phantasy as a motivation for artists in the process of creating a work of art; an argument that Fields uses to justify the theme of dream vision in "Kubla Khan."

Gesang Manggala in a thesis entitled *Coleridge's Sexual Desire in the Poem 'Kubla Khan'*, investigates another Freudian aspect of "Kubla Khan" in terms of sexual desire and the poet's id, ego and super-ego. The argument is based upon the hypothesis that Coleridge's failure in one of the stages of personality development, has caused the poet to maintain his sexual desire repressed in unconscious. The author in the mentioned thesis consequently asserts that the increasing repressed desire, leads to its inevitable emancipation where the poet's id, ego and super-ego negotiate for a solution which in Coleridge's case administers to the creation of "Kubla Khan."

Moreover, Mark W. Rowe in "'Kubla Khan' and the Structure of the Psyche" delves into a Freudian psychoanalysis of Coleridge's personal life. Building his argument on Freud's conceptions about the society and the individual's subconscious, he indicates "The id is the true inner realm of subjectivity where the distinction between appearance and reality is of no account, and only the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain have any meaning" (Rowe, 1991: p.145).

Alongside Freudian Studies, Simeon Kahn Heninger, Jr. in the article titled "A Jungian Reading of 'Kubla Khan,'" illustrates "Jung's postulate of the collective unconscious with its archetypal patterns provides a much more inclusive system within which to consider the poem" (1960: p.358). Heninger addresses Jung's notions concerning poetry, indicating that poetry is the communication of archetypal patterns that lays in the collective unconscious. In conclusion, Heninger points out that "'Kubla Khan' is an extraordinary apt illustration of Jung's theory that the personality individuates itself through a process of integrating the conscious with the unconscious" (1960: p.367).

Lacanian terminology is of a great significance in the psychoanalytical study of Coleridge's poetry, specially "Kubla Khan." The terms symbolic pleasure, jouissance and object-cause of desire can be arguably applied to the poem. Pyeaaam Abbasi in his "Coleridge's Desire for Other Jouissance: Lacanian reading of 'Kubla Khan'" adduces the significance of desire in the creation process of "Kubla Khan." He declares that Coleridge's projection onto Kubla's garden is in order to experience a moment of jouissance. He then addresses the return of subjectivity by Coleridge's move between jouissance and Kubla's garden to accommodate the conflicting

desires of symbolic pleasure and real *jouissance*. Finally, he concludes "Although desire begins the quest for the maid's song as the lost object-cause of desire, the inspired poet returns to the Symbolic order to prove that he is trapped in desire for the maid as an ever-eluding signifier that has a foot in the Real and cannot be articulated by Coleridge." (Abbasi, 2018: p.1)

Another significant area of research regarding the psychology and psychosis of Coleridge has its roots in the works and theories of Julia Kristeva. In the article "Coleridge's Translucence: A Failed Transcendence?" Patrick Wright acknowledges the Sublime Imagination and manic-depressive psychosis concerning Coleridge's Psyche. Wright's aim in conducting this article is to problematize feminine or non-Oedipal sublime in the Romantic era. Furthermore, he claims his purpose is "to critique any overly optimistic valorisation of the excess or alterity it speaks of, and to claim that this otherness at least *risks* the possibility of psychosis" (2008: p.1).

Ultimately, the review of the previous studies clarifies that "Kubla Khan" has undergone a mass of psychoanalytical readings; Freudian, Jungian, Lacanian, Kristevaian and other psychoanalytical concepts are analyzed in "Kubla Khan." Linear to what has been said, new psychoanalysts like Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Alain Miller and Jean-Luc Nancy have paved the way for new concepts and terms in the twenty-first century. In this attempt Slavoj Žižek is considered as a theorist whose concepts –the ticklish subject, the tickling object and parallax– are going to be the proper method of reading Coleridge's "Kubla Khan."

Although a lot of studies have been conducted on Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", a few has read the poem as a psychological map of poet's subjectivity. The current paper attempts to draw the path that Coleridge gone through while composing the poem. This is to magnify the role of desire and, linearly, *objet petit a* in the structure of "Kubla Khan." This magnification leads us to be aware of the poet's desire for artistic immortality. In fact, what the paper aims to illustrate is that Coleridge finds a failed attempt toward an artistic immortality in the case of Kubla Khan's palace, while he is trying to create his own idea of the artistic immortality.

### **The Subject/Object in "Kubla Khan"**

The subject and the object as two major terms due to the philosophical thinking, particularly in twenty and twenty-first century, bear various definition through their non-literal existence. The very primary meaning of subject/object is merely known to every single existing individual. "[I]n order to express his ideas and interpretation of individual and psyche, [Žižek] highly builds his theory on ... big other, desire,

*objet petit a*, fantasy, reality, and subjectivity” (Hosseini, 2019b: p.34). Nevertheless, in order for eliminating the shadow of the complexity on this matter, a general definition of the term subject that is introduced in Žižek’s most extended book, *The Parallax View* (2006), is under consideration.

In his Notes in *The Parallax View*, Žižek identifies the subject “as an autonomous agent; subject as this same agent submitted (“subjected”) to some power; topic, “subject matter”” (2006: p.386). In later lines, Žižek claims that between each of his definitions of subject and the Lacanian defined orders (Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real), there is a tangible relevance. Adjoining to what has been said, it is worthy to mention that the often used terms (subject/object) in the Neo-Marxist approaches should be distinguished from a psychoanalytical view; however Žižek’s treat toward the subject is more of a combined version.

As it may seem strange, defining ‘the object’ has never been a simple task; in this case, Levi R. Bryant’s words can be the best reliable words in defining the object. Levi R. Bryant is a Professor of Philosophy at Collin College to whom Žižek refers on different occasions regarding the subject. In *Democracy of Objects* (2011), Bryant notes, “The object, we are told, is that which is opposed to a subject, and the question of the relation between the subject and the object is a question of how the subject is to relate to or represent the object” (p.14).

In Bryant’s justification of object, a significant concern of subject/object relation is appeared. Subsequently, the Žižekian theory verifies the claim and attends to expand it with innovative terminology by alluding the Ticklish Subject and The Tickling Object. These two key concepts would direct us to later definitions of parallax and further debates.

It is acknowledged that Coleridge as a poet in the very first view is the subject who created a poem called “Kubla Khan.” Therefore, “Kubla Khan” is an object to Coleridge’s objective. Accepting this as a truth, it is proved that there is an influential ‘correlative’ relation between these subject and object (Bliss, 1917: p.395). The aim of this article is to shed light upon the inquiry of how the mentioned relation works. The response to this question will be elaborated on, in the following sections.

### **Coleridge and Kubla Khan as the Ticklish Subjects**

In 1999 Slavoj Žižek published a book titled *The Ticklish Subject: The Absence Centre of Political Ontology*. John Wakefield in his review “*The Ticklish Subject* Book Review,” asserts “*The Ticklish Subject* claims (on the back cover) to unearth a

subversive core in the spectre of the Cartesian subject; finding a philosophical point of reference in it for a genuine emancipatory politics" (2010: p.1). In his process, Žižek deals with a number of definitions and reasonings about the subject. Moreover, he refers to various philosophers, theorists, and scholars who mainly can be categorized as Marxist or psychoanalysts; namely, Martin Heidegger, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou, and Judith Butler.

Žižek in his devoted chapter on the Hegelian ticklish subject in *The Ticklish Subject* opens a consultation in which the Hegelian negation of negation is discussed through examples of both modern era and the Old Kingdom of Egypt. Žižek elaborates the Hegelian 'negation of negation:

'Its matrix is not that of a loss and its recuperation, but simply that of a process of passage from state A to state B: the first, immediate 'negation' of A negates the position of A while remaining within its symbolic confines, so it must be followed by another negation, which then negates the very symbolic space common to A and its immediate negation [...]' (Žižek, 1999: p.71).

Then, he relates it to Marx's theory in *Das Kapital*, which is out of purpose in this article. However, one might ask what is the aim of Hegelian negation of negation in the understanding of The Ticklish Subject? Precisely like negation, subject is never an 'Absolute Subject.' In other words, in a process while subject is reaching to its end another process is discovered, which prevents the subject's completeness.

Both Coleridge and Kubla Khan are subject to their desires; for Coleridge his poem stands as a desire and for Kubla Khan in the poem building "A Stately Pleasure doom decree" (Mellor and Matlak, 1996: p.2). What is obvious here is the instability of both subjects, for through a psychoanalytical perspective it is the desire that flourishes the motivations beyond Coleridge's and Kubla Khan's decision. Coleridge as a subject is active while the poem itself is a passive object. Although in process of creating the poem, it is the passivity of the object that activates the subject; "Kubla Khan" activates Coleridge, therefore, due to the definition of The Ticklish Subject, Coleridge acquires this tendency. In addition, regarding the creation of "A Stately Pleasure doom decree," the process is same as the process of the poem's birth. In fact, it is not Kubla Khan who attempts to build a palace; rather it is the palace which puts tension in Kubla Khan's action. In this sense it is reasonable to label Kula Khan as The Ticklish Subject, for all the features of the concept is apparent in him.

### ***L'Objet Petit a: Immortality as the Tickling Objects***

Žižek in the very beginning of “The Parallax View” notes that he was many times asked about the source of the ticklish subject. In order to elaborate, he gives a fathomable answer that rises his further elaboration. In his answer, Žižek asserts that the ticklish subject is the object. Moreover, he alleges, “the subject is defined by a fundamental passivity, and it is the object from which movement comes—which does the tickling” (2006: p.17). The statement reveals a situation that was less concentrated on.

The matter in Žižek’s statement can be solved by having an eye on ‘oneself.’ He believes that the true meaning of subject and objects lays beneath their verbs “to subject (submit) oneself and to object (protest, oppose, create an obstacle)” (p.17); to submit oneself to a mode of object’s passivity, is the activity of a subject. In other words, the subject is active for its dependence to the object. At this point he rises another question; “what object is this?” (p.17) Žižek’s response to this question is the fundamental basis of the parallax or parallax object. Desire in Lacanian perspective has roots in object; hence, the object is the cause of an individual’s desire. Lacan demonstrates that, not in any situation, a human’s desire is of his/her own, rather it is of other’s desire (both objectively and subjectively). Žižek in *How to Read Lacan* (2007) while elaborating Lacanian objet petit a maintains that it is “a tiny feature whose presence magically transubstantiates its bearer into an alien” (p.67).

Later in *The Parallax View*, he parallels Lacanian *l’objet petit a* to Kantian Transcendental Object, for both terms go beyond the appearance of an object – phenomenon– to its ‘noumenal core’ –the inaccessible feature of objects–. Finalizing, the objet petit a is not the frame of an object but its essence; that which works as the main motivation for an individual’s desire as a subject. In a sense, making a connection between the tickling object and the object-cause desire gives birth to another psychoanalytical term that Žižek entitles ‘object of my desire.’ Additionally, he asserts:

‘The same object can all of a sudden be “transubstantiated” into the object of my desire: what is just an ordinary object to you is to me the focus of my libidinal investment, and this shift is caused by some unfathomable X, a *je ne sais quoi* in the object which can never be pinned down to any of its particular properties’ (Žižek, 2006: p.180).

An object is never the stable and absolute object. Therefore, the Lacanian *objet petit a* identical to other objects, changes through its existence as a process; that is the reason which delineates Žižek’s rationale for the concept of object of my desire.

Hence, *objet petit a* bears a kind of parallax gap underneath its duality of causing desire or being the desire itself.

Referring to the poem, 'the palace' as an object for Coleridge and Kubla Khan, brings the concept of desire to the mind. "Language appears the most elegant aspect of the unconscious" (Hosseini & Rajabi, 2019: p.79). In Žižek's terms "What is the reason for the desire? Obviously *objet petit a*" (1999: pp.106-107). Coleridge's and Kubla Khan's psyches as a mean of desire give a material existence to *objet petit a* for the core feature of the creation process. What is considered as the *objet petit a* for both Coleridge and Kubla Khan can be 'immortality.' As it is mentioned in various reviews and analyses, for instance in Onita Vaz-Hooper's article "'If dead we cease to be': the logic of immortality in Coleridge's 'Human Life,'" the major theme of the poem is 'Immortality' (2009: pp.529-544). This theme for Coleridge is an unconscious tension that is borrowed from previous generations of poets. In general, for him an unlimited existence relies on the creation of an artistic piece of literature. While for Kubla Khan becoming immortal is a proof for his power against other Emperors of the world. Accordingly, the desire of God-like life rushes its effect in the minds of Coleridge and Kubla Khan and brings them activity. Thus, the immortality can be considered as a subject that submits itself to objects –Coleridge and Kubla Khan–; object-cause desire becomes object of their desires. This redefinition of the object clarifies the notion of the tickling object in itself.

### **Parallax of "Kubla Khan"**

The parallax is the duality that sheds light on a gap separating the two perspectives considering a subject/an object. The parallax shares much with "the well-known visual paradox of the 'two faces or a vase': one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them—one has to make a choice" (Žižek, 2003: p.128). To be precise, the parallax is based on a paradox; on the one hand, the differences between the object/subject are the creator of the parallax gap and on the other hand, the existence of both opposed perspectives and their correlative impacts are the pillars of a pure parallax. Thereafter, a simplistic definition of the parallax can be what Žižek composed in his 2003 review on *The Return of the Dancing Master* by Henning Mankell: "any attempt to posit the 'truth' of one from the perspective of the other" (p.26). In addition, due to the concepts of the tickling object and the ticklish subject every subject and object is reversible. Linearly, every individual with an *objet petit a* cannot be considered as an absolute subject who is about to stand with his/her *objet petit a*. Thus, an individual and his/her desire are always already in parallax.

It has been clarified that “Kubla Khan” in its inner layers hides an *objet petit a* that is the same for both the poet and character of the poem. Nevertheless, from the two distinct views of the subjects –Coleridge and Kubla Khan– the same *objet petit a* –immortality– locates entirely separated meaning. Parallax gap between these two points of view is clear due to their essential differences; being an immortal artist or an immortal emperor.

The parallax view that one can have toward this significantly composed poem, paves its way for the reader’s mind when the author and the persona are considered. This parallax view reaches its climax in the paradoxical existing situations of Coleridge and Kubla Khan; that is Coleridge living among other people but Kubla Khan just in Coleridge’s mind and lines. The whole parallax discovered here raises this question: is it the poet whose handwrite remains on paper or the poem remains its mark on poet’s psyche? Actually, the question is of no importance and never could be answered, because neither the poet nor the persona is prior to the other one. In fact, the only notable consequence of these two matters is the poem “Kubla Khan;” in which both of the subjects –Coleridge and Kubla Khan– gently meet the immortality through this parallax.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

This research sought to illustrate how “Kubla Khan” represents the psychological status of Coleridge’s subjectivity. In the poem Coleridge illustrates the vision he had in a dream about Kubla Khan building a palace. He describes the features of the palace and its characteristics in an epic tone of magical and psychedelic qualities. In the last stanza, Coleridge addresses how he would recall his dream, referring to ‘a damsel with a dulcimer’ and how Coleridge and Kubla Khan are immortalized with the creation of the poem and the building of the palace. Thus, it is observed that there is a close relationship between Coleridge’s psyche and Kubla Khan’s as the persona of the poem and a historical figure. This line of argument shows how the study of a subject/object relation –or in this case a creator/created opposition– can lead to the excavation of a deep psychological gap. Borrowing Žižek’s terms, this parallax view helps to determine the tickling object and the ticklish subject therefore elucidating the interchangeable nature of the subject/object relation. In this respect, Kubla Khan functions as an object of desire for Coleridge fulfilling his longings for immortality as a poet and Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan” is the tickling object for the persona of the poem leading towards the desire for immortality as an emperor. Coleridge being the subject, “Kubla Khan” (the poem) becomes the object and Kubla Khan (persona) being the subject in the poem, “Kubla Khan” or in other words Coleridge

(the poet/creator) becomes the object. The *objet petit a* for both being immortality. Ultimately, this parallax view is a gateway to the subjectivity of the poet.

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