

Original Article

Guilt as the Operating Force in Fleabag: Delving into the Psyche of the Protagonist in BBC Dark Comedy Series Fleabag

Dr. Prathibha P

Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Providence Women's College, Calicut, Kerala, India.

Received Date: 01 August 2024

Revised Date: 02 September 2024

Accepted Date: 03 October 2025

Abstract: *Fleabag* which is BBC's tragicomedy television series adaptation of a one-woman act becomes a shattering heartbreak of a comedy, reminding the audience of the tricks and tactics of our own familiar defense mechanisms. In her societal interactions, the protagonist Fleabag, experiences the highs and lows of family dynamics, including moments of tense silence and sudden bursts of intense emotion born from the complex mix of love, dependency, anxiety and guilt. Psychological trauma and memory which is imagined as both an external agent that shocks the unprepared system and an internal action of defense against overstimulation plays an important role in shaping the individual identity of Fleabag. This article analyses how Fleabag is about coming to terms with loss, with anger, with one's imperfections and limitations and the psyche's constant wrestle with guilt.

Keywords: Guilt; Trauma; Repression; Dysfunction; Black Humour.

Fleabag made its debut as a one-woman act in 2013 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe before it was adapted for UK's BBC Three television as a tragicomedy television series on 21 July 2016. Its second season premiered in early 2019 and received widespread acclaim from critics, for its writing, acting, and the uniqueness of the title character. It went on to win top honors at Television Critics Association Awards in all three categories in which it was nominated - Individual Achievement in Comedy for Waller-Bridge, Outstanding Achievement in Comedy and Programme of the Year. The show revolves around a woman named Fleabag, who is an angry, confused and sexually active woman in her thirties living in London. It stars Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Sian Clifford, Olivia Colman and Andrew Scott as the main lead.

Fleabag has been widely praised for its accurate portrayal of female experiences. But it is "a show that just as truthfully depicts loss: its nonlinear nature, the moments that make us feel inconceivably guilty, and – sometimes – the beauty of it all" (Chloe). Audience and readers have commented that it "wasn't a flawless piece of writing", while some called it "contrived", "wearisome" and "alienating". Some people have dismissed it as the daring exploits of a feminist who is fearless and bold. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the slight pangs of emotional intensity within it. This was well thought out drama, and surprisingly a depiction of believable people, in believable situations. Television critic, Mary McNamara, of the Los Angeles Times wrote:

Developed on stage as a one-woman show, *Fleabag* is instantly engaging but also, initially, a bit infuriating. Why, you wonder as Waller-Bridge's wide eyes and admirable comedic timing sweep you along, do so many comedies about women require this soundtrack of self-loathing/aggrandizement? Who decided that female characters must be either tightly wound or at destructively loose ends? And when did a mercurial mix of courage and self-destruction, frankness and utter delusion – fueled, of course, by loads of boundary-less sex and lots of alcohol – become the standard definition of the young urban experience?

The human psyche is a fascinating, endless domain which can never be completely understood. As it rolls out, *Fleabag* becomes a small but shattering heartbreak of a comedy, reminding us of the tricks and tactics of our own familiar defense mechanisms. In her interactions with Claire and her father, Fleabag experiences the highs and lows of family dynamics, including moments of tense silence and sudden bursts of intense emotion born from the complex mix of love, dependency, and anxiety. She is a woman drowning in sorrow. Long after the show has pulled the audience in with its feral energy and its slap-in-the-face attitude of irreverence, beguiled with its cutting wit and messily human characters, it reveals that it's actually an enticing tragedy. It is not surprising that former United States President Barack Obama named *Fleabag* among his favourite films and television series of 2019 (Lampen).

Waller-Bridge's depiction of the eponymous Fleabag spearheaded a seismic shift in the way women could be portrayed on TV – because Fleabag is flawed and contradictory. The protagonist frequently "breaks the fourth wall to provide exposition, internal monologues, and a running commentary to the audience" (Wilson). Fleabag directly communicates to the audience, thereby giving the female narrator a whole new voice. Speaking to the camera, she explains the events in her chaotic life with a wry mix of self-mockery, resignation and defiance that we could recognize as the



articulation of the real 'modern heroine'. She is not just a millennial Bridget Jones; instead, Fleabag dares you to think that you know her, and gradually guides you to your own self which has remained captive deep beneath. Waller Bridge rightly states, "There's a little Fleabag in all of us, saying and doing things we shouldn't"(Meyers).

Fleabag next brings us along as she travels through London and a series of frank sexual and emotional encounters. Drunkenly flirting with a stranger in a bar ,cracking graphic jokes about sex, a disturbing moment when she unintentionally flashes to the bank manager, a meeting with her hyper-tense sister Claire, making a faux-pas at a feminist lecture are all accompanied by the voice inside her head made vocal. Fleabag's breaking the fourth wall may seem as an extremely honest, almost an act of over sharing, it seems as if these humorous, funny scenes are meant to cover up her insecurities, guilt and trauma, and instead shift the focus to something that may be seen as taboo-breaking or outrageous to society. She is frantically trying to hide the truth, rather than being honest or vulnerable.

Waller-Bridge leverages all the standard belated-coming-of-age tropes and more: Fleabag's failing business is a cafe that she started with her best friend Boo, who has just died/accidental suicide. Claire has a high-powered job but a weird hound-dog of a husband who has many control issues. The two share an oblivious father, controlling stepmother and an inability to properly grieve their dead mother which remains the fresh wound in their souls. Each of these experiences get turned inside out, which makes the truth in the comedy quite devastating. Despite cracking laughs all the way, it becomes clear that Fleabag is riddled with a malignant guilt and her sexual liberalism has grown into a deeply unhealthy replacement for kind human interaction.

It turns out that Fleabag's hedonistic pursuits does inflict a few bumps in her life, the most noticeable one being the complex feelings of guilt tied up with the death of her best friend Boo. We see that lightning bolt of guilt occasionally etched on Fleabag's face; "Not now," she grimaces to the audience as a confessional flashback momentarily dances across the screen. Moments like this allude to a character who, despite her apathetic wit and a wry smile, isn't quite holding it all together. Fleabag's frequent asides to the camera seem catty and conspiratorial. But the way Waller-Bridge sees it; they were a symptom of Fleabag's innate guilt. "The rule I had was that she only needed the camera there because she was constantly on the verge of needing to confess," she told *Indiewire* in 2017.

When we meet Fleabag, a very chaotic, unorganized person, with no clear perspective she is not only grieving her mother, who passed away two years before, she is also grieving for Boo, who died very recently. The cafe they used to run together is now on its way to bankruptcy, the relationship Fleabag has with her family is dysfunctional, and her relationship with her boyfriend Harry is barely more than entertainment for her, considering the on-and-off nature their love has. Overall, her life isn't really going great and all her relationships are impaired.

"Clever and viciously funny, Fleabag is a touching, wildly inventive comedy about a complicated young woman navigating the aftermath of trauma." Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker* described the series as "a precision black-humor mechanism, a warped and affecting fable about one single woman's existence." Similarly, the psychic shocks and disillusionments incurred by the deaths and the innate guilt translates into the kinds of pathology (flashbacks, recurring nightmares and compulsive repetitive behaviour) put forward by Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis which aids in comprehending the myriad ways in which individuals are shaped by their experience . Psychological trauma and its role in one's memory plays an important role in shaping individual identities. Trauma is imagined as both an external agent that shocks the unprepared system and an internal action of defense against overstimulation.

Freud states that traumatic experiences are repeated compulsively, divide the psyche, influence memory differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past. This explains how trauma influences memory and identity in Fleabag and helps in analysing her emotional suffering, troubled power dynamics, cycle of toxic relationships, rage, disruption, and fragmentation. Although the experience was never narrated or identified clearly by her, it acts like a tumor in her consciousness that wounds her internally. "Fleabag's a control freak who wants to convince you everything's OK. It's a kind of tortured complexity...."(Bullimore). The angry, grief-riddled woman tries to heal while rejecting anyone who tries to help her. Fleabag continues to keep up her bravado through the rollercoaster ride of life. The show is heralded as a refreshing interpretation of modern womanhood, from the perspective of a rude, skint millennial, on the surface but one with a spine weighed down by grief and guilt. After losing her mother and best friend in the space of a year, there is darkness at the heart of Fleabag, as she is constantly haunted by grief.

"The superego manifests itself in criticism of the ego, which results in the person feeling guilty...the superego uses energy from the death instincts to turn on the ego with its criticisms of the inadequacies of the person...the superego manifests itself essentially as a sense of guilt..." (Bocock 78). Fleabag may proudly wield a smirk as she slyly comments on the disasters in her life however, she doesn't shy away from exploring life's losses. "Truly, I just want to cry. All the time" (Series One, Episode Four). "Cry for who, though, it is not clear. Her mother? Boo? Herself? The only certainty is that these

quiet, beautiful moments of shared loss are as integral to Fleabag as breaking the forth wall and using sex to deflect from the screaming void inside an empty heart”(Chloe). Sigmund Freud along with Joseph Breuer, a Viennese clinician developed what they called ‘the cathartic method’ which was also termed as ‘the talking cure’ in the case studies of the famous painter Bertha Pappenheim alias Anna O. The purpose of the treatment was to purge the mind of thoughts and convictions that bound the patient to her suffering. It involved talking about the internal conflict of the patient. The aim of this method was to achieve the discharge of intellectual and physical energy so as to reduce the persistence of mind boggling thoughts (Slade 5). Talk can cure- is the basic conviction of the cathartic method. Fleabag is the ‘patient’ who can sense her own conflicts. Her conversation with the audience is in fact her mind’s way of catharsis. Later her inner monologues and soliloquies is her own take on the ‘talk can cure’ method. This is what sails her through the difficult times with great ease and later enables her to take heads on, the tragedy that befalls her, with a brave face.

The audience’s heart goes out to her, when Fleabag actually utter the words “I love you”, at the end, to the man (the priest) who has chosen God over her. It is a rare moment of Fleabag letting her guard down and being emotionally vulnerable. Fleabag ends up crying at a bus stop; then picks herself up and walks away from the camera which serves till that moment as her sole accomplice. But in a way, she is the one who emerges triumphant. In allowing herself to experience and express love, she had finally relinquished herself from her own sense of worthlessness; she didn’t need to confess any more. It was time for her to leave the guilt behind and also the shared relationship with the audience who were her constant companion and confidante. She’s ready to face her life and all its good things and bad things on her own.

People who have lost a loved one would empathise with Fleabag’s coping mechanisms for grief. “There’s a polarization of choice that appears when your life is altered by death. You can either let it consume you and embrace what it is or run in the complete opposite direction, ignoring it completely,” writes Raven Ishak, observing that Fleabag chooses to run very hard(Chloe). To hammer that metaphor home, there’s literally a scene where she runs through a graveyard.

Fleabag, who has been guilt-ridden and scared of being a bad person because of the mistakes she has made, scared to the point that distracting people with her vulgar, horny, cynical side, seems like the better alternative, than being vulnerable and owning up to those mistakes. Equal parts kind and cruel, self-hating and conceited; Fleabag is often blamed for the misadventures of those around her. And because she was haunted by guilt at being the catalyst for Boo’s suicide, she silently suffers all of it. She was called a slut by the bank manager, was constantly belittled by her stepmother and was ostracised by her family when her brother in law makes a move on her. In her eyes, she was unworthy of anything better: “Oh fuck it, I have a horrible feeling that I’m a greedy perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist”, Fleabag says during a conversation with her Dad (Series One, Episode One). Guilt heaps up and she tries to repress it. This makes her a woman who has no control over her senses, cannot take sensible decisions and finds solace in the cycle of toxic relationships. Guilt can either paralyze or catalyze a person into action. It does both to Fleabag who is struggling with her emotions and has episodic bouts of self-loathing and behavioral problems. The sexual liberation which she sought as an outlet, never absolves her of guilt. “As women, our identities coexist with ascribed guilt, but almost never are we supposed to acknowledge it...we are supposed to drink it, drown it, eat it, love it, cherish it, celebrate it. Without ever addressing it, guilt ascribed or prescribed has an isolated process which is twice as burdensome when you’re a woman” (Bhoker). In an attempt to disguise her underlying fears, resentments, anxieties and unhappiness, Fleabag projects herself as an introvert and never really opens up to others. She always carried the feeling that she was flawed and unwanted.

Life plays out really tricky when paternal protection, support and resources are absent. The impact of her mother’s death and her father’s immediate affinity to the kids’ godmother affects her at a major developmental phase of life. This loss causes emotions that were too difficult to handle and thus, were pushed underground, not being adequately dealt with at the time of the loss. These repressed emotions tend to bubble to the surface as a result of another significant trauma, the death of Boo and abandonment by her family. This lack of understanding of her current emotional reaction -- often seen as *over-reaction* to others -- leaves her feeling guilty, isolated, misunderstood, and sometimes out of control.

“I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, and who to love, and how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I’ve been getting it wrong. [...] I know that scientifically nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway, I’m still scared! Why am I still scared?!” (Series 2, Episode 2). Fleabag expresses the pain and longing she holds inside her; how she aches for comfort and guidance; something, or someone, to hold on to in life. “I quite like the idea of coming back to her...but I think for now, she’s been through enough. We got to let her go”, said Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who is the writer, creator, and star of the BBC dark comedy series Fleabag, reiterating the end of the series after two seasons, on Late Night with Seth Meyers (Meyers).

Fleabag's ability to blend serious subjects such as grief, honesty, and life's struggles with humor and a female perspective creates an exceptional viewing experience. We need more people like Waller Bridge, “to write about an honestly

flawed perspective of a woman ironically in a society where a woman's portrayal on screen is the only thing flawless about a woman's existence" (Bhoker). *Fleabag* is not about 'coming of age.' It's about 'coming to terms': with loss, with anger, with one's imperfections and limitations and with the fact that the voice in your head is often the real you. The likeable mess of a lead drives home the idea that " the biggest joke of the human comedy is that, as the poet once said, we are all wobbling naked, under our clothes and our cheeky personas"(McNamara).

I. REFERENCES

- [1] Bhoker, Smrithi. "An ode to the brilliant *Fleabag* and the feminist guilt it explores." *Feminism in India*, 3 October 2019, <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/10/03/brilliant-fleabag-feminist-guilt-explores/>
- [2] Bockock, Robert. *Sigmund Freud*. Routledge, 2002.
- [3] Bullimore, Emma. "Seven reasons why feminist comedy *Fleabag* will be your latest TV addiction". *Stylist*, 19 July 2016, <https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/tune-in-to-britains-answer-to-girls-fleabag-bbc3-7-reasons-lena-dunham-phoebe-waller-bridge-tv-netflix/65176>
- [4] Burgess , Sanya. "Fleabag review: Malignant guilt, sexual liberalism and laughs all the way." *Newssky*, 26 August 2019, <https://news.sky.com/story/fleabag-review-malignant-guilt-sexual-liberalism-and-laughs-all-the-way-11790262>
- [5] Chloe. "Fleabag: Guilt and Beautiful Grief." *The Slice*, 1 September 2020, <https://theslicemovie.wordpress.com/2020/09/01/fleabag-guilt-and-beautiful-grief/>
- [6] Lampen, Claire and Amanda Arnold. "Burning Questions: Obama Also Loves *Fleabag*". *The Cut*. 5 Jan 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/01/barack-obama-names-fleabag-in-best-television-shows-of-2019.html>
- [7] Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Sigmund Freud and the Trauma Theory." *Literariness.org*, 21 June 2017, <https://literariness.org/2017/06/21/sigmund-freud-and-the-trauma-theory/>
- [8] Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Trauma Studies." *Literariness.org*. 19 December 2018, <https://literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies/>
- [9] McNamara, Mary. "Phoebe Waller-Bridge created "*Fleabag*" and stars as its likeable mess of a lead." *Hindustan Times*, 15 September 2016, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/phoebe-waller-bridge-is-writing-a-book-based-on-tv-show-fleabag/story-1ppDYBd8lnY89klrTobh3M.html>
- [10] Meyers, Seth. "Phoebe Waller-Bridge Compares the London Tube to the NYC Subway", *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, You Tube , 2 October 2019, <https://youtu.be/geczhuqEJgM>
- [11] Nussbaum, Emily. "Fleabag, an Original Bad-Girl Comedy". *The New Yorker*. 25 September 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/26/fleabag-an-original-bad-girl-comedy>
- [12] Pollard, Alexandra. "Farewell, *Fleabag*: The show's 'greedy, perverted, selfish' protagonist let go of her guilt – now we have to let her go." *Independent*, 9 April 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/fleabag-series-two-final-episode-phoebe-waller-bridge-andrew-scott-priest-guilt-confession-sian-clifford-claire-a8860101.html>
- [13] P.Prathibha, "'I am the girl that things happen to': The Unapologetically Articulate Modern Heroine in *Fleabag*". *Recherche: A Digest of Multidisciplinary Explorations*. Insight Publica, 2022, pp 12-22.
- [14] Robin . "On Honesty, Guilt and Sisterhood : *Fleabag*." *TBA Journal* , <http://tbajournal.com/?p=9802>
- [15] Slade, Andrew. *Psychoanalytic Theory and Criticism: By Way an Introduction to the Writings of Sigmund Freud*. Orient Blackswan, 2016.
- [16] Steinberg, Peter K. and Karen V. Kukil, eds .*The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 1: 1940-1956* . Harper, 2017. Print.
- [17] Waller-Bridge, Phoebe, creator. *Fleabag: Series One*. Two Brothers Pictures Limited, 2016.
- [18] Waller-Bridge, Phoebe, creator. *Fleabag: Series Two*. Two Brothers Pictures Limited, 2019.
- [19] Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. *Fleabag: The Scriptures Hardcover*. Ballantine, 2019.
- [20] Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. *Fleabag: The Special Edition (The Original Play) Paperback – Special Edition* , Nick Hern Books, 2019.
- [21] Wilson, Benji. "Fleabag, Episode 4 review: another superb, poignant episode that was both shocking and shockingly good". *The Daily Telegraph*. 25 March 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/2019/03/25/fleabag-episode-4-review-another-superb-poignant-episode-shocking/>