Love as a Disease in _Happy Together_

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_Happy Together_ is about the essential loneliness of the human condition. Because we are unable to transcend differences and petty needs and wants, we launch into destructive relationships based on needs rather than transcending those needs and giving reciprocally out of genuine agape and Other-directed love for each other. The protagonists are unable to love because they are unable to transcend themselves. Their self-interests are at the heart of every conflict in the relationship and while it is true that Yiu Fai makes most of the sacrifices, he does not do so willingly because he is also doing it out of a grudging need for company and overcoming his own loneliness. Happy Together is then not so much about a doomed homosexual relationship but about the essentially selfish and solipsistic nature of humans who are unable to transcend themselves to love genuinely.

In Wong Kar Wai’s _Happy Together_, love is not treated as a form of fulfilment but a means to misery, pathology and indeed dysfunction. Yiu Fai and Po Wing are constantly seeking to re-invent their relationship in order to keep their passions alive, and do so by taking the brave step of migrating to Argentina, where they hope to ‘start over’, a recurrent motif in their relationship. However, their relationship soon sours when they fail to find the magical Iguazu falls. Their car breaks down and they soon find each other tiresome and part company. Yiu Fai finds a job as a doorman at an Argentinian club and Po Wing starts on a spiral of promiscuity with white men. Po Wing is wild, promiscuous and abusive, seeking Yiu Fai out when he wants sex and runs out of money. Eventually, Po Wing is badly beaten up by one of his lovers and seeks Yiu Fai’s care and company. In their time together, it becomes evident that Yiu Fai is the giver and Po Wing is the taker. Yiu Fai spends all his time and energies nurturing Po Wing back to health, but soon is abandoned by Po Wing when he recovers. Love is thus an obsessive pathology of dependence, indeed it is portrayed by the film as a disease, in which it brings out the worst in two individuals and mutual suffering rather than mutual edification. The absence of a clear male and female dichotomy also subjects the relationship to pathology as roles are not clearly defined though Po Wing comes across as the more feminine and fickle of the two. Love in this film is not intoxication but degeneration, disease, pathology, co-dependence and un-fulfilment. I will thus be discussing the pathological aspects of love in my paper.

The relationship is characterized by a series of jump starts and fizzes, with seething animosity throughout. The passion is at best described as grudging and tempestuous. Early in the film after Po Wing parts company with Yiu Fai after they fail to find the mystical Iguazu Falls, Yiu Fai receives a call from Po Wing to visit his apartment. Yiu Fai turns up bitter and hostile, angry that Po Wing has launched into a string of decadent affairs with white men. He drinks and rants at Po Wing that he is showing off his loot from his prostitution and demands to know why he had called him up. Po Wing makes an attempt to kiss him, but is fought off violently by Yiu Fai. When pressed further Yiu Fai makes an attempt to strangle Po Wing for landing them stranded in Argentina by spending all the money and leaving him to struggle on his own while he leads a decadent life of prostitution. Po Wing cries after Yiu Fai leaves in a rage, showing that he does feel affection for him even though he lives a promiscuous life.
There is little or no genuine affection between them and constant struggle and violence though it is quite apparent that Po Wing still desires Yiu Fai sexually.

The series of violence continues throughout their relationship. Po Wing continues cruising and promiscuity until one day he lands up on Yiu Fai’s doorstep badly beaten up by one of his lovers. Yiu Fai feeling compassion for Po Wing takes him in and starts nursing him, cooking for him and bathing him. However attempts at intimacy by Po Wing on Yiu Fai are all violently rejected and fought off. Yiu Fai refuses to be used sexually by Po Wing after seeing him abandon him and take on a string of lovers time after time. It is a curious state of affairs in which Yiu Fai is willing to care for Po Wing and nurse him back to health, cook and clean for him, feed and bathe him while rejecting all his sexual advances and attempts at intimacy, threatening for example not to fondle him when Po Wing eventually manages to coax him into sharing the bed for a night with him. It is clear that in the relationship Yiu Fai is the giver and Po Wing the taker. One night, after persuading Yiu Fai to trek in the cold with him, Yiu Fai falls ill with a violent cold and Po Wing instead of feeling sorry for Yiu Fai after causing him to fall ill demands that Yiu Fai cooks for him. There is thus a series of abuses in the relationship with Yiu Fai by Po Wing, with Po Wing using him for company, care and sex, while remaining blissfully unfaithful and uncaring for Yiu Fai’s well being.

Blanchot writes of the Other:
In the relation of myself to the Other, the Other exceeds my grasp, The Other, the Separate, the Most-High which escapes my power- the powerless, therefore; the stranger, dispossessed. But, in the relation of the Other to me, everything seems to reverse itself the distant becomes the close-by, this proximity becomes the obsession that afflicts me, that weighs fown upon me, that separates me from myself- as if separation (which measured the transcendence from me to the Other)- did its work within me, dis-identifying me, abandoning me to passivity, leaving me without any initiative and bereft of the present. And then, the other becomes rather the Overlord, indeed the Persecutor, he who overwhems, encumbers, undoes me, he who putsme in his debt no less than he attacks me by making me answer for his crumes, by charging me with measureless responsibility which cannot be mine since it extends all the way to ‘substitution,’ So it is that, from this point of view, the relation of the Other to me would tend to appear as sadomasochistic, if it did not cause us to fall prematurely out of the world- the one region where ‘normal’ and ‘anomaly’ have meaning. (Blanchot, 1995:19)

In the above passage Blanchot raises the Other to absolute, as the persecutor and oppressor of the self which leaves the self encumbered, overwhelmed and bereft of identity.

Applying Blanchot to a reading of Happy Together, it is seen that Po Wing is the oppressor of Yiu Fai, and leaves him robbed of his identity as he lords over him and refuses to allow him any autonomy or opportunity to assert or express himself. What ensues is a seething bitterness in Yiu Fai. Yiu Fai is heavily victimised and abused in the relationship. Indeed, it is an assymetrical relation of dominance in power of Po Wing over Yiu Fai as Po Wing uses Yiu Fai sexually and emotionally, battering him until he is bled dry.

To consider the metaphor of Iguazu Falls as a symbol of their relationship, their passion is indeed torrential, destructive and pounding to the edge of destruction as the falls head and spiral towards a doomed end. Based on little else than mutual needs and sexual pacification, it is no wonder that the relationship spirals downward towards its destruction. Indeed, the relationship does not lack intensity, but it lacks mutual recognition and regard for the Other as Blanchot recognizes. Indeed the relationship is very much like Blanchot’s
Disaster in *The Writing of the Disaster*. Disaster is all-consuming and overwhelms one like a blanket force. Disaster is an encounter in which one suffers trauma and is victimized, in Blanchot’s context it is particularly acute in encountering the Other. The Disaster for Blanchot is the situation in which one is relegated to a position of passivity and victimization in encountering the Other. Disaster effaces subjectivity and leads one to suffer in the Oppression of the other. Blanchot’s account of suffering is demonstrated through his readings of the disaster and suffering of the afflicted in the aftermath. Active forgetting is the conscientious effort made to expel traumatic experience from memory, which one, according to Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, is doomed to repeat.

As Blanchot puts it:

> If forgetfulness precedes memory or perhaps founds it, it or has no connection with it at all, then to forget is not simply weakness, a failing, an absence or void (the starting point of recollection but a starting which, like an anticipatory shade, would obscure remembrance in its very possibility, restoring the memorable to its fragility and memory to the loss of memory. No, forgetfulness would be not emptiness, but neither negative nor positive: the passive demand that it neither welcomes nor withdraws the past, but, designating there what has never taken place (just as it indicates in the yet to come that which will never be able to find its place in any present, refers us to nonhistorical forms of time, to the other of all tenses, to their eternal or eternally provisional indecision, bereft of destiny, without presence (Blanchot, 1995:85)

Alterity is the space beyond experience that is brought about by forgetfulness; it is the step beyond experience in the effort to transcend suffering. “The disaster ruins everything,” writes Blanchot. Disaster is a phantom that has destroyed and yet its marks of destruction are invisible, leaving suffering and trauma in its wake.

Indeed what Yiu Fai experiences is very much a sense of Blanchot’s disaster. It is a lingering trauma that he can only express through refusing sex to Po Wing and hiding his passport. In the scene in which he breaks down and cries into the audiorecording it is shown that he is deeply unhappy and broken by the relationship. Indeed Yiu Fai’s experience is that he cannot forget the trauma that has been inflicted on him by Po Wing. The relationship is what he invested mightily in by making the decisive step to move to Argentina with Po Wing to ‘start over’ but every attempt at starting over is met by the selfish thwarting of Po Wing with his hedonism and promiscuity. Indeed his subjectivity is effaced and he is reduced to a situation of passivity in which he suffers the victimization of Po Wing for sex and money. Po Wing bleeds Yiu Fai dry by making sexual, emotional and financial use of him at every turn. Indeed Po Wing is left effaced and bereft of his identity of which he has been robbed by persecutor Yiu Fai.

The repeated and doomed attempts to ‘start over’ are symptomatic of a broken relationship that cannot be mended since it is based on an asymmetrical assertion of power and abuse. Blanchot’s disaster is very much what Po Wing inflicts on Yiu Fai because he has no consideration of his needs and uses him only for sexual gratification. Claiming that he loves Yiu Fai is a farce considering the way that he treats him, turning up on his doorstep only when injured and abandoning him once he is well and bleeding him dry of money, emotions and resources. The trauma that Yiu Fai experiences is seen in his emotional breakdown in the audiorecording scene and the fact that he wants to murder Po Wing for ill treating him and bleeding him dry to the point of exhaustion, refusing to return his passport thereafter.

The film seems to comment that the relationship is fuelled by emotional dependency and need rather than genuine love. Both men use each other to placate their sense of loneliness and the result is resentment at the other for failing to fill the void that each of them desperately senses. The film seems to comment on the emotional sterility of relationships that
are based on emotional needs and dependency rather than mutual love and respect. Indeed, respect is not a word that describes their relationship. They are constantly shouting at each other, attacking each other, verbally abusing each other because they resent being thrown together for lack of options.

This is not to say there are no tender moments between the two. Eventually Yiu Fai quits his job as a doorman and takes on a job as a cook in a restaurant and regularly calls Po Wing to check on him and ask what he wants for dinner so he can cook and take away the food for him. There is a very tender scene between the two in which Po Wing teaches Yiu Fai to tango. After a series of blundered steps by Yiu Fai, he gets the hang of it and they share a passionate dance sequence in which they tango, pressed closely against each other and caressing each other, landing up in passionate French kissing. But these moments between the two are rare. More often than not, they are seen quarrelling and stoking up flames and misery between themselves.

There is also a series of jealousies and pettiness. One day Po Wing calls up the restaurant where Yiu Fai is working and Yiu Fai is temporarily called off to get some eggs. Yiu Fai’s colleague picks up the phone to find out who Yiu Fai is chatting incessantly with and finds out it is Po Wing, a male, much to his shock as they seem intimate. Po Wing then begins questioning Yiu Fai on the male voice he heard on the other line when he called and asks him how many times they have had sex. Flabbergasted, Yiu Fai pushes Po Wing to confess to the number of boyfriends he has had, and it turns out to be countless. There are thus double standards in the relationship. Po Wing expects Yiu Fai to be faithful to him while he can continue having numerous affairs. The abuse thus continues. Po Wing is possessive and controlling towards Yiu Fai, ill-treating him on many accounts.

The trend of possessiveness and jealousy is seen in Yiu Fai as well. As Po Wing recovers, he begins dressing up and cruising for sex again. Yiu Fai, frustrated and jealous, buys many cartons of cigarettes to stop Po Wing from using buying cigarettes as an excuse to go out and cruise. When faced with the boxes of stored cigarettes, Po Wing throws a tantrum and flings the boxes to the floor. Po Wing is also chased out of the apartment by Yiu Fai for being, in Yiu Fai’s terms, a slut.

In response to the repeated abuse dealt out to him by Po Wing, Yiu Fai retaliates by hiding Po Wing’s passport. When confronted, Yiu Fai denies keeping his passport until it becomes undeniable and finally defiantly tells Po Wing that he will not be returning the passport to him. This is in retaliation to the multiple let downs and abuses that Po Wing has dealt him in the relationship, using him for money, sex, care, companionship. The result is an impasse between them in which the relationship turns bitter and cold. Yiu Fai reflects that the happiest days were when Po Wing was still recovering and under his care, too weak to be promiscuous. There is a scene of him tenderly stroking Po Wing while he is sleeping, showing that, despite being abused on multiple levels, he still cares for Po Wing.

The result is a deep unhappiness in Yiu Fai. He cares for Po Wing, but cannot accept the constant ill-treatment, abuse, and being taken for granted. He exhausts himself in giving and caring for Po Wing, who is ungrateful and uses him only for sex and when he needs money and care. He goes drinking with the colleague who he develops a close friendship with, who notices his deep unhappiness and asks him to leave a voice recording as a memento of him since he is leaving Argentina to journey to the end of the world. Yiu Fai is eventually heard sobbing deep sobs of unhappiness, because he has failed to find fulfilment in a relationship. The destructive impulses in the relationship have left him lonelier than ever,
and in one scene he succumbs to having sex with a stranger and realizes he is no different from Po Wing, because at the heart of the matter lonely people are all the same.

One possible reason the relationship breaks down is because there are no clearly defined gender boundaries between the two. Indeed Po Wing is the more passive of the two, but he is not the more nurturing or caring of the two, this would be Yiu Fai. Po Wing is also the more sexually aggressive of the two even though he is supposed to be a passive, he is constantly making sexual advances at Yiu Fai while Yiu Fai spurns them like a woman. So in many ways, though Po Wing is the ostensible female and passive in the relationship, he also possesses masculine traits. So there is no clearly defined male and female dichotomy or complementarity between the two.

The key feature of the relationship is its abusive nature. Po Wing plays mind games with Liu Fai, and seeks to isolate him from other lovers by getting possessive even though he takes liberties to be promiscuous himself. He also controls Yiu Fai by ordering him to do all the cooking and household chores, to bathe and feed him, while he passively lives off Yiu Fai, and tries to use him sexually by making advances at him whenever he is lustful or lonely. Yiu Fai in return receives virtually nothing from Po Wing and does not benefit from the relationship at all, indeed it causes him much aggravation and harm instead. He has many outbursts of anger at Po Wing for taking him for granted and using and manipulating him.

Also key in the relationship is its degenerative nature. Both men cannot live and stand each other, yet they repeatedly ‘start over’ destructively in a relationship that does not thrive on much other than sex and pacifying each other’s loneliness. It is a relationship heavily based on need. Po Wing approaches Yiu Fai only when he needs him for money, care and sex. Yiu Fai in return cares for Po Wing, but grudgingly as he is often bitter and hostile to him for manipulating and using him so heavily. Po Wing uses and abandons Yiu Fai repeatedly and exhausts him of all his emotions and resources. The result is that Yiu Fai, shell-shocked and emotionally battered, hates Po Wing and will not return his passport. The so-called love between the two men degenerates into mutual hostility, violence and ill-will towards each other. The film is ironically named Happy Together when both partners bring each other more misery and suffering than genuine companionship. They are constantly flinging things at each other, accusing each other, acting violently towards each other, rarely bringing each other any fulfilment. It is a battle of wills and manipulation to suit each other’s needs, though Po Wing emerges as the clear winner in terms of taking advantage of situations and manipulating Yiu Fai.

Indeed it is a wonder Yiu Fai maintains any feelings of affections towards Po Wing given that he is so heavily ill-treated. It is astounding that Yiu Fai remembers the time that Po Wing was recovering the happiest moments of his relationship with him because he was able to care for him and protect him. It is a heavily non-reciprocal relationship with all the giving and sacrifices made chiefly by Yiu Fai and Po Wing bleeding him dry. It is amazing that Yiu Fai is not relieved rather than saddened when Po Wing eventually leaves given that he has taken him so heavily for granted and used and manipulated all his energies and resources dry while emotionally battering him all the while by being jealous and possessive as well as controlling.

The highlight of the relationship is then just the pacifying of each other’s loneliness and the fleeting satisfaction of each other’s need. The love between the two men does not transcend needs, wants and ameliorating each other’s loneliness. The hostility between the two men arises from the fact that they are trapped together in a foreign land with no money to
return to Hong Kong. Their attempt at reviving their relationship in an exotic location like Argentina fails miserably because they do not love and respect each other, perhaps because of internalized homophobia. They lunge at each other destructively, reuniting only in a desperate attempt to escape loneliness and failing to find comfort in each other’s company, only amplifying each other’s loneliness. At the heart of the relationship is thus the void of loneliness which both parties strive but fail to fill, because there is no genuine love between the two, it is one based on satisfying the fleeting moment of need and companionship. They lack respect and goodwill for each other. They are constantly fighting because they resent being thrown together for lack of options.

Yiu Fai then sums the nature of the relationship up neatly when he says all lonely people are the same. They desire companionship, but in this situation the companionship is not at all comforting because one party is heavily making use of the other and using him to satisfy all his needs and wants without giving anything in return. While Po Wing fulfils the void by taking on a string of lovers, Yiu Fai fills the void by caring for Po Wing even when he receives no regard or respect in return. At the heart is thus the fundamental loneliness of the human condition. We are all essentially alone, and getting a partner will alleviate the distress of loneliness momentarily but not for long because we all are different and have conflicting desires and interests. Yiu Fai makes all the sacrifices and appeasing in the relationship, but exhausts his giving of the caring to the point of resentment and hatred for Po Wing. He hates Po Wing for destroying his life so much that he refuses to return him his passport as revenge for all the pain and suffering he has caused him. At one point he comes close to killing Po Wing for sucking him dry and manipulating him like a puppet and leaving him stranded in Argentina. A high level of pathology thus exists in the relationship. They regard each other more as enemies than lovers, and come very close to murdering each other quite a few times. Very much like Blanchot’s disaster, it is an abusive relationship of assymmetric power with Po Wing as dominator and persecutor and Yiu Fai as victim. Po Wing is constantly criticizing Yiu Fai for being boring and yet he does not stop making use of him sexually, emotionally and financially. Like Blanchot’s disaster, Yiu Fai is traumatized in its wake and cannot forget having himself being robbed of his identity and self-worth. This is expressed in the scene in which he breaks down and expresses a deep unhappiness within him that has been brought about by the relationship.

We thus see that the relationship is more based on mutual hostility and antagonism than goodwill and love for each other. They fight with each other out of frustration that they do not manage to overcome their loneliness in the relationship in the end. The film would thus be more aptly titled Lonely Together or Miserable Together. Because they have conflicting desires and needs and one party makes all the sacrifices to the point of murderous resentment and hatred the relationship spirals destructively and inevitably towards its death. An abusive and pathological relationship ends up with both of them bearing murderous intentions towards each other even though they occasionally desire each other sexually. The key element of the failure of the relationship is the lack of complementarity and the monodimensional sacrifice that is demanded on the side of Yiu Fai who cares for Po Wing to the point of exhaustion only to be abandoned by him ungratefully when he recovers. The internalized homophobia between the two individuals also translates into a lack of respect and goodwill for each other. Because society has marginalized homosexuals they are unable to love themselves and thus each other genuinely. The relationship thrives on mutual suspicion and jealousy. The possessive nature of both individuals towards each other and suspicious nature taken towards each other indicates a lack of trust and respect. Happy Together is them not so much about the failure of homosexual love as the failure of achieving a reciprocal relationship that transcends needs, wants and petty desires and jealousies. Po
Wing and Yiu Fai are unable to achieve fulfilment in the relationship because they are unable to transcend their pettiness towards each other and move beyond a relationship that goes beyond momentarily ameliorating one’s loneliness. Indeed, the film is less about the failure of a homosexual relationship than a relationship that is based on emotional dependency and need. As they do not manage to transcend themselves to genuinely love each other, they batter at each other in resentment that their needs are not fulfilled and their sense of loneliness fails to be pacified by each other’s company. It is to be noted that aside from the casual flings that they have outside the relationship, both men seem to lack the company of genuine friends. This is perhaps due to the homophobia of society, and this is a large factor that contributes to the destruction of a relationship. To be in a taboo relationship is to be in a relationship that is not visible and lacks the support networks that are available to those in heterosexual relationships. The high level of toxicity and pathology that accompanies the relationship can be derived from the lack of social acceptance and the stigma of homosexual relationships. Indeed, the men are barely even friends, just sexual companions and lovers in times of loneliness and need.

Indeed Wong Kar Wai affirms this when he says of the film that it is not a gay film but a film about being lonely with someone else. The highlight of the film is thus the lack of connection that takes place even in the midst of high amounts of interaction and time spent together. There is no emotional connection because the relationship is abusive and based on need. The film is essentially about two lonely people who imagine that they might be less lonely in each other’s company only to find themselves lonelier than ever before because they do not derive comfort from each other’s company. This is because they are unable to transcend themselves and genuinely love each other. It is not that Yiu Fai does not attempt to do this but as an oppressor in Blanchot’s sense Po Wing crushes and suffocates all the emotions that Yiu Fai holds for him by using him emotionally, financially and sexually. Happy Together is then about the essential loneliness of the human condition. Because we are unable to transcend differences and petty needs and wants, we launch into destructive relationships based on needs rather than transcending those needs and giving reciprocally out of genuine agape and Other-directed love for each other. The protagonists are unable to love because they are unable to transcend themselves. Their self-interests are at the heart of every conflict in the relationship and while it is true that Yiu Fai makes most of the sacrifices, he does not do so willingly because he is also doing it out of a grudging need for company and overcoming his own loneliness. Happy Together is then not so much about a doomed homosexual relationship but about the essentially selfish and solipsistic nature of humans who are unable to transcend themselves to love genuinely. Because they do not transcend the nature of needs and move into the sphere of mutual respect and agape, the relationship is doomed to fail because there will be a conflict of self-interests when it comes to satisfying mutual needs and wants. Happy together is then a study in solipsism and narcissism in relationships that brings these relationships to destruction. The narcissism of Po Wing in particular is what brings the relationship to its doom as Yiu Fai is bled to death of his emotions by Po Wing. And yet it cannot be said that Yiu Fai is not narcissistic as he is equally violent to Po Wing and uses Po Wing for companionship. To constantly use each other out of emotional dependency and need is what brings the relationship to its inevitable doom. Were they able to trust and respect each other or transcend themselves into seeing the Other for what it is in a Buberian sense, in an I-Thou rather than I-It relationship, they would be able to last longer as a couple. Wong Kar Wai then captures the miseries of relationships in which two people are lonely together rather than happy together. This is not a comment on the nature of homosexual relationships but relationships that are based on emotional dependency and need. Heterosexual relationships are subject to the same problems if both
parties are using their companions just to pacify their loneliness and unable to genuinely care for each other or respect each other. Happy Together is then a study in abusive relationships and emotional dependency of characters that are unable to find solace in each other’s company because they are unable to transcend themselves and their petty needs, desires, wants and egos. Happy Together is then a universal film about human loneliness that cannot be transcended because of solipsism.

Works Cited: