



PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCES AS A CAUSE OF VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF BUCHI EMECHETA'S *JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

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Abstract

*The Most times, the lower class in Africa are faced with overbearing emotional and physical pains due to the problem posed by the patriarchal nature of the society, obscure traditions and failed leadership, which causes mass poverty through the high rate of inflation, low per capita income, unemployment, underemployment and rapid population growth. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, exposes the above-listed hurting circumstances, their effect on the character's inner self and the character's outward reaction. Using Sigmund Freud's discusses on ego psychological defence mechanisms; the study identifies some defences that are prone to result in violence, which is common among young people, inexperienced and severely distressed individuals. Although the characters in *Joys of Motherhood* employ many defence mechanisms such as dissociation, denial, regression, intellectualisation, suppression, altruism and sublimation. However, this study, discoursed characters who employ some reactive primitive defences that enable them to transfer their psychological pains to themselves, some other items around them or to persons outside themselves. An instance is noticed in characters like Nnuego, who when in sever distress, acted out by trying to kill herself. On the other hand, Nnaife, tried to harm a neighbour during his emotional distress. It is noticed that by the use of mature defences, these painful anxiety-causing circumstances are subdued. The study, therefore, recommends a change of thought patterns and an improved standard of living for the people in other to quell their psychological pains and reduce the rate of violence in Africa.*

Keyword: Poverty, Acting out, Defence, Violence, Displacement.

Introduction

A The study shows that violence happens due to painful situations that are difficult to be repressed; in other words, one tends to attack hurting circumstances by using violence. Violent actions discussed in this study, are the type that is perpetuated by individuals against one's self, against another, that of a group against an individual and that of a group against a society. According to the Oxford's Advanced Learners Dictionary, violence is a behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill and this is most times borne out of a surging outburst of emotional pain. Jacquin opines that it is "an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological or both. In agreement, Krug et al record, that the World Health Organization also expresses violence as a physical force; "threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation". This indicates that violence is either threatened or actual physical force which may result in physical or emotional harm, injury, loss of lives, a state of extreme poverty or at the disadvantage of losing something.

According to Walby (2012), violence is in two forms: interpersonal violent crime and inter-state war. The latter is found in the field of criminology and war between one state or army and another. However, there is also organised violence called "a new war" which, unlike the old war, is between armies or states in conflict, includes terrorism, a genocide which is aimed at the vulnerable, civilians with a target of changing a way of life of a group and to weaken a personal or political conviction. Quoting Elias (1994) and Man-year (1998.). There is a reduction of violence as modernity increases, and this is made possible by the increase in self-control through the impact of economic growth. However, this is questioned by the research work that discusses interpersonal violence, governance and gender-based violence against women and minorities. Examples of such violence as rape and sexual assault forced marriages and sex slavery. The question is, can the citizens of a particular country become very aggressive toward themselves and can a state indirectly perpetuate violence against its citizens? To answer this question, there is a need to look at the causes of violence. Seifert (2006) opines that one of the causes of violence is the lack of self-soothing ability. This is a factor that concerns a child's potential for violence and the other cause is a neurological condition; a disorder caused by lack of care from anyone that is in the position to care thus one becomes emotionally withdrawn, lacks self-control, lacks trust for anyone and will refuse to obey rules and regulations in the society (pp.1/2). The next is low self-esteem, which Seifert expresses as being the cause of a violent reaction that seeks to comfort the inner self. All these causes of violence have a connection with the inner self. In this study, the couple, Nnuego and Nnaife expose not only their inability to sooth themselves when in emotional distress but also reveals their lack if self-control, which caused them to disobey moral and societal rule. This indicates that their ego's target, which is to sooth the hurting psychological pain caused by the hurting circumstances, pushes them into being violence.

A review of *Joys of Motherhood*, by Willey (2000) tries to express the severity of the patriarchal subjugation that is capable of hurting the emotion of a character. Willey cites an example using Ona's father, who kept her unmarried so that she will bear a male child for him. On the other hand, the same patriarchal pressure affected Ona's sex life since she is partly raped by her lover Agbadi or left unsatisfied (pp. 164). Buttressing the distressing circumstances in which the women found themselves, Kharbe (2017) expounds on the pressure to bear male children by the women, become good daughters, to become good wives, pressure to be good mothers and the pressure to fit

appropriately in the society (Pp. Ak7). The effect of the pressure, which Hethcox (2016) calls “the marriage of two oppressive system” (colonial and cultural) produce two types of women. The one that accepts the culture while she struggles against the colonial influence like Nnuego and the other that rejects the culture that tries to frustrate her because of her inability to bear a male child (pp. 1842). From the above reviews, one can deduce that there are evidences of hurting psychological pain causing situations surrounding the characters, however, much is not said about how the characters withstood the offending emotional pains. To withstand an emotional pain is to defend one’s inner self and when the pain is severe, characters apply primitive defences, which is prone to violent acts. The question then is, how did the application of primitive defences, cause an increase in the rate of violent related situations.

Theoretical Framework

The hurting psychological pains identified in the text of our study is an aspect of Psychoanalytical literary criticism which hinges on the Psychoanalytical literary theory propounded by an Australian neurologist, Sigmund Freud who finds that it is a theory of the mind and human psychic development. To Freud, psychoanalytic literary critical theory connects authors to their creative work. It investigates the psychological dispositions and conflicts in the literary work and expresses that art and literature are related to the unconscious, fears and anxieties. Although Freud did not presume that psychoanalysis has the final description of artistic creation, he looks at the creative writer's dream as a projection of the author's ego. According to Habib M. A. R. (2011), Freud's literary analysis started around 1907 when he viewed Sophocles' play Oedipus Rex as a work that expresses the law of mental life (pp. 236). He also analyses the characters of fictional works by scrutinizing the motives, fears and memories of a character hidden under the text (these memories are sometimes unspoken, painful, fearful and even abominable (Gbenabor & Okoroegbe, 2011, pp. 111). Hubs and Blank (1989) on the other hand, state that Freud describes the human mind as consisting of three entities: the id, the ego and the super-ego.

The ‘id’ acts on impulse for self's gratification without giving many restrictions or much thought to the consequence. However, there is an attempt to define the real state of a situation by the ‘ego’ by becoming the battleground of personality since it operates on reality principle. The third part of the unconscious, which is the super-ego, is the internal and pastor-like part, which represents the social moral rule (pp. 53). The ego, therefore, tries to stop the internal effect of an emotionally hurting circumstances by the use of ego psychological defence mechanisms that expresses themselves in various conscious responses. This is to state that conscious activities point out the behaviour of the unconscious. Castle in his 1923 and 1933 diagrams of the structural model suggests that “there is no limen or threshold separating consciousness from unconsciousness, but a fuzzy region in which the two merge” (Erdelyi, 2006, pp. 501). This indicates that the unconscious (the repressed thought) has the capacity of influencing the conscious and vice versa.

The purpose of the defence mechanism is therefore to refer to the way the mind operates (Mok and Morris 2013, pp.177). On the other hand, Anne Freud expresses that a defence mechanism is a tactic used by the 'ego' to deal with the 'id' and the 'supper-ego'. Anne Freud further expands the concept in chapter three of her work, *The Ego and the Mechanism of Defence* that the ego is to supervise, regulate and oppose the ‘id’ through varieties of defences. Although defence styles and coping styles are used interchangeably, Cramer (2006) in *Protecting Self* opines that both can be the same because both coping mechanism and defence mechanism “are aroused by situations

involving psychological disequilibrium. In this sense, they are similar in that both are “adaptational processes”. Defence mechanism; functions to diminish the negative effect, (like the coping mechanism) but they do so without the conscious intent or awareness of the inn person” This indicates that both coping styles and defence mechanism: is a fight against the discomforting emotion, against all forms of anxiety, painful feeling and traumatic thoughts that attempt to harm one’s inner being and can be used interchangeably. There are various ways of defending one’s inner self against hurting circumstances. There is *dissociation*, which helps one to disconnect or detach from the source of pain, there is the *denial* of the existence of the pain, a *projection* of the ill feeling on others, the use of *humour* to stop the effect of the pain or the use of *sublimation* defence which transfer the libido to activities that can be beneficial. However, some primitive defences resort to violence by fighting the hurting feeling or the presumed source of the pain to get back at it. The violence identified in the texts is revealed in the form of acting out and displacement, which are reactive primitive defences. These two defences will be used to analyse the causes of violent acts by the two major couple in the text, identifying the possible implications of such to their own wellbeing and that of others around them.

Some Reactive Primitive Defences and their Meanings

In the *Joy of Motherhood*, there are two main causes of violence, the first is the acting out primitive defence, an immature defence style that expresses an unconscious wish or impulse in a character's action. Acting out defence mechanism is used when one is unable to manage a conflicted mental content through thought and putting it into words". This may come in the form of quarrels, use of abusive language, destruction of properties and even self-injury and usually, the individual is not aware of what drives the expression of such behaviour. Schick (2011), opines that Acting out involves a compulsive and repetitive re-living of trauma; individuals who act out have difficulty distinguishing the past and the present and struggle with notions of the future. This indicates that they are hunted and trapped in the past that wounded them. Schick further states that the symptoms of acting out include being in the mode of flight or fight and intrusion. On the other hand, the second cause of violence in the book of study is the displacement defence mechanism, which redirects ill feelings to another person that did not cause such feelings. For instance, after a parental scold, a young girl takes her anger out on her little brother. This is a misdirected anger that is moved by fear (Grohol: Displacement). Displacement defence, is sometimes called displaced aggression, which shifts anger from the real target to another that is less threatening.

In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joy of Motherhood*, the patriarchal tradition, increase in the quest for male children, determination of marital choices and sexuality for women is questioned. The patriarchal policy being doubled for women who will also contend with the effect of colonisation is also discussed as it creates two types of women, one who will attempt a revolution and adjust to the new policy and the other who will stand by the culture that victimises her. The same double patriarchal policy also played out in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* where the psychological pain of sex and domestic slavery place Fola and Alice in a fight mode (pp. 137).

How Primitive Defences Cause Violence

Emecheta’s *Joy of Motherhood* presents Nnuego as a character that acts out due to the pain of her child’s death. Nnuego, who has once been in the traumatised position of a childless woman in the home of her first husband, finds it hard to believe the reality of the death of her first child from her new marriage. According to Emecheta (1979), in the chapter entitled ‘First Shock’:

Then one morning, the morning when this story started, when Nnuego came to put her baby before going to her stall at the railway yard to sell her wares, she saw him, her baby Ngozi, lying there where she had laid him only a short while before. Stone dead. She did not scream; she did not call her husband. She simply left the room, walking gingerly backwards, until she whirled round like a fierce hurricane and ran(pp.54-55).

Nnuego runs straight to the lagoon and is to jump into it, except for the timely intervention of the people around there. The character reacted irrationally according to the manifestation of her repressed thought, which she was made to believe. The thought that her angry chi (the slave girl who was buried alive with her late stepmother), is responsible for her misfortune. Killing herself could not have raised her child from the dead, but it presents itself as a means of comfort; going over to the land of the dead to confront her chi, to meet with her child and to have rest at last, which are the things she longs for and that is her way of protecting her inner self. This, in a way, explains the reason for various suicide incidents and indicates that when one cannot soothe oneself, that individual may be at risk of hurting himself or another.

Nnuego also exhibits another characteristic of acting out defence when she angrily addressed Igbonoba's wife, a richly dressed female visitor who wishes that Nnuego allows her into her small home for shelter on a rainy afternoon. Nnuego stares at her and thinks over the possibility of living in affluence in Lagos considering her present state of poverty and her experiences when she tries to make money, which will only be enough to put food on the table for the numerous children in her care. Without knowing what is in Nnuego's mind, the visitor tries to make herself comfortable and to pacify Nnuego who looks at her with much disdain. But Nnuego retorts; "Shut up! Shut up and go away! You can't stand here – my baby is crying – go away!" Nnuego's voice was more thunderous than the rain." The little ones came in and Nnuego banged the door shut (pp.184). Nnuego's reaction is compulsive behaviour which is a characteristic of acting out. Her unconscious intention is to pacify her inner self, though she is not aware of what drives her antagonistic attitude towards the stranger. This is also the reason behind the use of derogatory language by commercial bus drivers, motorcyclist riders and motor park loaders. The discomfort that accompanies poverty blinds them and stops them from seeing the good in others and this has caused many street fighting incidents. If Mrs Igbonoba's wife had responded to her outburst in the same aggressive manner, both could have fought and may have injured each other. This is in agreement with Seifert's third cause of violence, which comes as the result of low self-esteem and which seeks to comfort the inner self. Here, Nnuego seeks to comfort herself from the pain of abject poverty.

Nnaife on the other hand, expresses a violent reaction when he uses displacement defence to shift his anger against poverty to his wife because of his daughter's plan to marry the son of a Yoruba Muslim. First, he uses curse words to indicate his anger towards his wife as she brings his food. "Damn you and your food Nnuego," he repeated aloud, "I shall curse till I die the day you came to my threshold. I wish I had never met you; I have the mind to tell you and your brats to leave this house immediately, I was not created to suffer for you" (pp. 205-206). To Nnaife, his wife's fault is giving birth to stubborn children. However, his outburst comes from his hatred for his wife, poverty and his anger against the Yoruba family, which shows his self-centeredness (he feels that it is not possible for him (a real-born Ibo man) to give his dear daughter to a Yoruba Muslim in marriage). However, he neither talked his daughter into obeying him nor did he contend himself with his state of poverty, which also indicates a lack of self-soothing ability. To establish the

expression that the displacement defence mechanism shifts interest from the real target to a less threatening one and, since he can't lay his hand on poverty nor soothe himself, he attempts to kill the Yoruba butcher whose son is in love with his daughter, but he is arrested. Again, as he is being taken away by the police, he shifts the blame once again to his wife and says: "You see, you see, Nnuego, you see what you have done to me! One of your daughters is responsible for taking me to jail" (2 10). Nnaife's reaction further confirms the patriarchal policy that subjugated women. This is because Nnuego, like property and less threatening, I will not rise against her husband. Thus, he is at liberty to inflict any form of violence against her-domestic or emotional. Abakare in his discussion about domestic violence, explains that "Domestic violence is any act or physical, sexual or psychological abuse, or the threat of such abuse, inflicted against a woman by a person intimately connected to her through marriage, family relation, or acquaintanceship"(38). Nnaife's reaction above implies that some of the remote reasons behind most domestic violence in some African homes today are the pang of poverty. An activity of this sort is capable of causing a complete feud that targets the death of the members of the opposing group.

Conclusion

Using the Freudian psychological critical theory to analyse Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, the study finds that in the bid to block the id's response to external hurting events, the characters' ego uses some, reactive primitive defences. The study finds that violent reactions happen with the intent of suppressing a hurting psychological situation and that the violent acts are unconsciously intended to cause physical or mental hurt in others to get back at the supposed source of mental hurting circumstance. It is observed that through the pang of a child's death, childlessness and poverty, characters employ acting out defence mechanisms by using abusive language, being in fight mode and attempting to kill themselves or any other person perceived to be the source of the hurting emotion. In the same vein, characters use displacement defence to calm their inner self by transferring their anger to a less threatening object or individual around them thereby revealing the remote cause of some murder cases and domestic violence against women. It is also identified that the cause of these violent actions is low self-esteem, the lack of self-soothing ability and the pain of not being cared for by the person who is in the position to do it.

The work therefore recommend that African leaders should be conscious of the needs of the masses in order to reduce the psychological pain that comes from poverty, poor health conditions and insecurity. Religious leaders and leaders of various ethnic groups should also try to avoid the spread of hate speeches and evil messages about the members of an opposing group. The study, proposes the application of mature defences such as, humour, which enables one to see the humorous aspect of a hurting circumstance and sublimation defence, which directs the surge of emotion against a hurting circumstance to something else that is more beneficial to oneself and the society: this will help to reduce the increasing rate of violence in the society. The work therefore, recommends a study of defences in war novels such as Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

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