

A Psychoanalytic Study of Children Instinctual Aspirations and Desires and Social Boundaries in Charles Eze Nnaemeka's *Problem Child*

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Abstract

This paper explores children's misdemeanours and antisocial behaviours as psychological causations stemming from the dictates of the human psyche espoused by Sigmund Freud in his topographic model of the structure of human personality in psychoanalysis. Anchored on this premise, the paper explicates the overarching influences of the id instinct (the pleasure principle instinct) undergirding unfettered aspirations and desires as well as the restraining functions of the ego and superego (the reality principle instincts) cum the attendant implications in Children's literature with particular reference to Charles Nnaemeka's *Problem Child*. It explicitly delineates the overriding impulses of the id (the unconscious mind) towards the gratifications of its unfettered desires while undermining social norms and laws in its ideal characteristics while the ego (conscious mind) and superego (the social mores and laws) strive to ensure adherence to the socially shared values. It unveils how the perpetual struggle among these psychological compartments defines structure of human personality of the children characters Samson and Ngozi as propounded by Freud. Hence, the focus of the paper examines psychological causations beneath Samson's and Ngozi's overzealous aspirations and desires in conflict with the norms and mores of the society in the functions of ego and superego; the storehouse of social consciousness. In the same vein, it shows how antisocial behaviours and strivings of Samson and Ngozi are expressed through psychoanalytic prism of defence mechanisms. The paper submits that Samson and Ngozi are malfeasants caused by the id instinct.

Introduction

Children are dominated by aspirations and desires stemming from the working of the psyche. Evaluation of this has become subject of interrogation for better understanding of the rationality beneath their misdemeanoural and antisocial conducts through the ingenious analytical criteria of psychoanalytic theory. Conceptually, psychoanalytic theory is a set of analytical principles or criteria that deal with the study or evaluation of the workings of human psychology in relation to his thoughts and actions- consciously or unconsciously. It is an aperture to unraveling the nexus between the thought processes and fears, anxiety, agony, dispositions of characters either as literary elements or in relation to the authors. Accordingly Barry contends that, "Psychoanalytic criticism is form of literary criticism which uses the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature" (1995:96). In the process of its evolution, it has been deployed in the study of authors' or writers' psychologically motivated tendencies in their literary compositions. The deploying of psychoanalysis to literary interpretation is fundamentally relevant in many folds. It is a new vista into understanding the complexities that characterized the functioning of human psychology. From bringing to bare the relationship among the compartments of human psyches; id, ego and superego, it enhances the critics' understanding of the impact of the psyche on personality of individuals from infancy to adulthood. Hence, in the words of Aule and Kure: "this theory ennobles the revelation of the self which is at once "an-other" locked up almost in perpetuity within the body" (2019: 4). Hitherto in his delineation, Freud distinguished three parts or functional principles within the mind; id, ego and superego in typographic and later tripartite model. The dynamics of interplay between these functions determines one's actions and covert behaviours. These principles of psychic dynamism are central to the interpretation of abnormal behaviours in psychoanalysis. This is essential to this study being that it captures the conflict between psychologically motivated desires and social norms which is the focus of this paper. It explores psychic determinants of human behaviour in relation to children with specific reference to Charles Nnaemeka's *Problem Child*.

Freud's Psychic Structure of Personality as Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic theory designates a theoretical literary analysis first developed by the renowned Vienna psychologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in late 19th century. It delineates the dynamism and complexities that characterized the functioning and manifestation of human psychological instincts. The theory provides an aperture into understanding human personality and the rationality beneath vis-a-vis delineation of the various functions of the three compartments; id, ego and superego, of human psyche. It is in light of this that Habib posits that, "Freud's fundamental contribution was to open up the entire realm of the unconscious to systematic study, and to provide a language terminology in which the operations of the unconscious could be expressed..." (2011: 233). The three compartments, which Freud termed as tripartite model, are determiners of human individuality (personality) in their perpetual struggle for the control of human actions and inactions, define structure of human personality.

Thereupon, Freud avers the overriding influence of the id (the unconscious instinct) and the censoring and protective roles of the ego (conscious instinct) and superego (social consciousness and mores). It is on this note that Barry in asserting the central working force of psychoanalysis argues that: "...all of Freud's work depends upon the notion of the *unconscious*, which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions" (1995: 96). The above assertion is sequel to the fact that, first, Freud's study which culminated into the emergence of psychoanalytic theory evolved from the evaluation of the human unconscious mind in relation to mental disturbances; neurosis. Discernibly, psychic dynamisms are pivotal to interpreting abnormal behavioural tendencies in psychoanalysis.

Secondly, the entirety of Freud's postulations is rooted on the workings of human psychology. He thus describes workings of the psyche as flux. This is aptly captured in Freud's book entitled *New Introductory Lectures* thus:

The majority of conscious processes are conscious only for a short time; very soon they become latent, but can easily become conscious again... in the condition of latency they are still something psychical. We call the unconscious which is only latent, and thus, easily become conscious, 'the preconscious' and retain the term 'unconscious' (1991:102-103).

This accounts for the perpetual changes in human individuality as the various instincts strive for control over human actions and inactions.

Significantly, the formations of individual and social notations of the governing system of society begin at individual level of physical and psychological processes. The formation of individual's personality and notions of right and wrong is perhaps subject to adjusting to the dictates of the society's values. This dominates the Oedipus complex/electra complex process of the child. For the child is presented with a figure of social order and authority in the image of father. This is aptly put by Eagleton (1999: 136) in re-echoing Freud's contention: "The Oedipus complex is for Freud the beginnings of morality, conscience, law and all forms of social and religious authority. Father's real or imagined prohibition of incest is symbolic of all the higher authority to be later encountered; and in 'introjecting' (making its own). Through patriarchal law, the child begins to form what Freud calls its 'superego' the awesome, punitive voice of consciences within it." Implicitly, one import discernible from this excerpt is that; this symbolic figure severs the body instituted psychological desires of the child. Also, it is within this frame that consciousness of the social values and norms are instilled in the child. To this end, it thus culminates into the formation of superego.

More importantly, Freud's psychoanalytic postulations have offered profound criteria to analysing literary texts via pontification of psychically motivated tendencies in literary characters. Ultimately, application of psychoanalysis on literary characters offers another dimension to grasping the aesthetics of the theory outside the medical realm from which it evolved. For literary characters are replicas of human beings existing in the artistic world of literary creativity. Perhaps it is a laudable endeavour relevant in literary discourse. Emphasizing the ingenuity of psychoanalyzing literary characters, Tyson argues that:

Psychoanalyzing the behavior of literary characters is probably the best way to learn how to use the theory. Furthermore, this practice has been defended by many psychoanalytic critics on two important grounds: 1. when we psychoanalyze literary characters, we are not suggesting that they are real people but that they represent the psychological experience of human beings in general; and 2. it is just as legitimate to psychoanalyze the behavior represented by literary characters as it is to analyze their behavior from a feminist, Marxist, or African American critical perspective (1999: 29).

Interestingly, Tyson's contention presupposes that literary works are replete with human experiences and psychological impulses which can be unearthed using the poetics of psychoanalysis. This is largely because literature mirrors society in all spheres as further articulated by Tyson: "...literatures, indeed all art forms, are largely products of unconscious at work in the author, in the reader, or, for some contemporary psychoanalytic critics in our society as a whole" (1999:31-32). Hence, literature is a collective conscious and unconscious production of society and its citizenry.

Accordingly, Freud provides literary analytical criteria for psychoanalytic criticism. These include defence mechanisms and parapraxes; uncountable slip of tongue, failures of memory, bungling, misreading and mislaying which are traceable to unconscious wishes and intensions. Barry (1995: 97-98) highlights Freud's psychoanalytic parameters in the following words:

Several key terms concern what might be called psychic processes, such as *Transference*, the phenomenon whereby the patient under analysis redirects

the emotions recalled in analysis towards the psychoanalyst; thus, the antagonism or resentment felt towards a parental figure in the past might be reactivated, but directed against the analyst. Another such mechanism is *projection*, when aspects of ourselves (usually negative ones) are not recognized as part of ourselves but are perceived in or attributed to another; our own desires or antagonisms, for instance, may be 'disowned' in this way. Both these might be seen as *defence mechanisms*, that is, as psychic procedures for avoiding painful admissions or recognitions.

Invariably, the dictates and excesses of the id manifest through anxiety and defence mechanisms in their encounter with the delineations of the ego and superego. It is worthy to note that defence mechanisms are unconscious activities often unknown to the person. Defence mechanisms are expressed through denial, projection, fantasy, compensation, displacement, regression, reaction formation, repression amongst others. All these are psychical impulses instigated by the id.

There are arrays of avenues through which the various compartments of the psyche manifest. For superego which represents reality principle manifests itself via administration of punishment and reward for antisocial behaviours and acceptable ones. On the contrary, the pleasure principle is the pleasure seeking instinct and has no regards for social mores. Its desires and wishes are housed in the unconscious part of the psyche which Freud terms the id. For Freud cited in Bressler (2003: 121) "Pleasure principle craves only pleasures, and it desires instantaneous satisfaction of instinctual drives, ignoring moral and sexual boundaries established by society" censored by the ego in consonance with the demands of the superego; the reality principle. Consequently, the id, ego and superego are part of the human psyche and always in conflict over the control of the human actions. Freud explains this,

This system is turned towards the external world, it is the medium for the perceptions arising thence, and during its functioning the phenomenon of consciousness arises in it. It is the sense organ of the entire apparatus; moreover it is receptive not only to excitations from outside but also to those arising from the interior of the mind... The ego controls the approaches to motility under the id's orders...(1964:107).

This psychological conflict in the life of children and its attendant actions and consequences are explored in children's literature by writers of children literature. This constitutes human personality. Hence, it is on the basis of the foregoing that this paper appraises Charles Eze Nnaemeka's *Problem Child*.

The Psyche and Children's Actions and Behaviours in Charles Eze Nnaemeka's *Problem Child*

The entirety of the children characters; Samson and Ngozi actions' and behaviours in Charles Eze Nnaemeka's *Problem Child* emanates from the psyche. In psychoanalytic discourse, the psyche is fundamentally the realm in which human actions and inactions evolve. Essentially, all aspirations and longings are the creations of the various instincts, particularly the id, of man. This is because the id is primarily the psychological instinct that is much more preoccupied with satisfying the desires and needs of the body. In pursuant of this, anything viewed as constrained to achieving such is visited with a sort of aversion by the individual, who is unconsciously unaware of the impulse of the id behind such quests. With the view to ensuring survival of both the individual and the society, the other parts of the psyche: ego and superego regulate and checkmate excesses of the id. It is within this context that psychical conflict ensues. This is because ego and superego are representations of the society and its values in the psyche. In doing this, either these irrational and pleasure driven desires are forcefully repressed or redirected into socially acceptable ventures. It is within this psychical process that Eagleton posits: "One way in which we cope with desires we cannot fulfil is by 'sublimating' them, by which Freud means directing them towards a more socially valued end. We might find an outlet for sexual frustration in building bridges or cathedrals" (1996: 132). What is more interesting in Eagleton's contention is the fact the individual in this state ignorantly believes to be acting under self-consciousness and being aware or in control of his/her dispositions. Charles Nnaemeka's *Problem Child*, which is subsequently abbreviated as PC, is laced with psychologically motivated desires and longings. Perhaps, the entire misdemeanours of the characters- Samson and Ngozi are resultant effects of instinctual aspirations of the id. Though as children, overwhelmed by id's quests for respect and domination among their peers, they develop serious hostility to the social values, which no doubt, supersede their individual values. And by implication, they are being tamed by the ego and superego in the manifestations of the various mechanisms through which the ego and superego function. For instance, in the text, Ngozi's words to Samson after breaking Bobo's head is replete with id's sadistic impulse. This demonstrates remorselessness and indifference which are essential attributes of the id. In an indifference tone, Ngozi expresses the undertone rationality of the psychological desire for respect and domination that characterized hers and Samson's instinct thus: "Forget it; you have already succeeded in your plans. All of them will be afraid of you now. They won't find

your trouble again” (PC, 33). It is expedient to note that the confrontation between Samson and Bobo is a creation of the former who is driven by desire to show power over his peers in school. And this is apparently a psychical desire for supremacy and authority over others. Hence, this is somewhat a re-enactment of anal stage in the growth of a child, where the child strives to control people around him/her via crying and aggressiveness.

Imperatively, Ngozi’s statement, “They won’t find your trouble again” underscores apt manifestation of projection, one of the outlets of defence mechanisms. This is captured in Barry’s citing of Freud, “Another such mechanism is *projection*, when aspects of ourselves (usually negative ones) are not recognized as part of ourselves but are perceived in or attributed to another; our own desires or antagonisms, for instance, may be ‘disowned’ in this way” (ibid). What this suggests is Ngozi’s justification of her and Samson’s brutality by blaming their victims of their misdemeanours as fomenters of trouble. Again, this points to the pleasure driven impulse of the id by admitting to the desire for respect from their peers as the motivating rationale beneath their actions.

The quest for recognition and domination in which one’s authority and command is not challenged or contended with is a psychological matter purely associated with the pleasure instinct. In such situation, any form of antagonism or contention would be attacked with the view to affirming or asserting power and authority. Having been taught fighting skills coupled with seeing action films, Samson develops the desire to coerce his classmates into respecting and obeying his dictates vis-à-vis threat and molestation. It is thus under such driven desire that he approached Bobo as captured: “One day, Samson went to school and decided to practice what Ngozi had been teaching him. He asked one of his classmates to give him water to drink but the boy refused. “Give me or I take it by force!” he commanded. The boy still refused and he took it by force and poured it on the ground” (PC, 18-19). This therefore exemplifies Dobies’ (2012: 57) postulation that: “Obviously, the id can be a socially destructive force unrestrained, it will aggressively seek to gratify its desires without any concern for law, customs or values. It can even be self-destructive in its drive to have what it wants.” This is so considering the effect of the action on Bobo and Samson himself. From his action, he gets a serious beating of his life from his peer as put thus “The boy still refused and he took it by force and poured it on the ground. Unknown to him, Bobo was very strong. The boy got annoyed and beat him black and blue. He could not believe” (PC, 19). What this buttresses is simply the destructive consequences of the id in its drive to satisfy desires.

In another dimension, Ngozi being an accomplice of Samson in the perpetration of stubbornness, no doubt, in her character, embodies one of Freudian’s psychoanalytic mechanisms referred to as projection. Projection in the psychoanalytic paradigm is the perception of one’s desires or longing as that of other(s) while they are apparently ours. For obvious reasons discernible from Ngozi’s actions and thought processes as expressed in the voice of the omniscient narrator here: “It was when Ngozi went to his class that his classmates told her what had happened. Of course, she was happy in her mind that Samson did exactly what she taught him. After searching everywhere in school for him, she smiled...” (PC, 26). One of the reasons is the fact that Ngozi’s happiness is not hidden or denied. This instance correlates with Freud’s concept of projection as described by Barry (1995:97-98) in his delineation of mechanisms and terminologies opined by Freud: “Another such mechanism is *projection*, when aspects of ourselves (usually negative ones) are not recognized as part of ourselves...; our own desires or antagonisms...”. What this projects is that all Samson’s misdemeanours are somewhat hidden or disguised desires or longings of Ngozi. This presupposes her sense of happiness and satisfaction which are sort of psychological satisfaction. Barry’s contention is corroborated in the words of Eagleton (1996:138) thus: “The nub of the core of Freudian theory is what is known as ‘transference’ a concept sometimes popularly confused with what Freud calls ‘projection’. Or the ascribing to others of feelings and wishes which are actually our own.” This is premised on the fact that Ngozi is committed to not only training Samson but also encouraging him as well as expression of her joy and happiness over his misdeeds.

Interestingly, both Ngozi’s and Samson’s admittance and running away or hiding not to be punished apparently reveal the confliction of desires and social mode of correcting misconduct. It thus suffices to posit that their instinctual desires are conflicting with social reality- administration of punishment, which is one way through which the superego; the house of social mores functions. This is succinctly captured in the following words by Ngozi: “Maybe he has run home to avoid being punished” (PC, 26). This statement is made after she is told of Samson’s fight with Bobo whose head is broken by Samson as puts in the following words: “What happened? It’s like you taught the naughty boy a lesson,” Ngozi asked Samson. “Yes I did. I poured the sand in his eyes and he stopped seeing. I then used the class dust bin and broke his head. He screamed and I ran away,” Samson narrated jubilantly” (PC, 27).

The desire for respect is one central motive behind Samson’s aggressiveness and misdemeanour. And this disposition is a creation of the id, the immoral and unconscious part of the psyche. In his quest for this, just as the id, Samson has no regards and recognition for law and order as exemplified in the manner he ordered Bobo to

surrender his water bottle and how he dragged it from him. Covertly, Samson's action is instinctually motivated and aimed at coercing his peers into respecting and be afraid of him as expressed in the following words after he is punished by his parents and school authority by Ngozi: "So, this all they could do? Forget it; you have already succeeded in your plans. All of them will be afraid of you now. They won't find your trouble again" (PC, 33). The last sentence: "They won't find your trouble again" of the citation captures expression of projection by Samson in a bid to give his actions false sense of rationality.

Also, reward and punishment for good and bad conducts are a reflection of instinctual impulses and social ethics. In every society, moral attitudes are generally acknowledged and encouraged by all; the old and young. The applause and condemnation could be individualistic and collective. This is because both the old and the young are stakeholders in upholding shared moral values. It is to this end that Samson is not only being rebuked by the parents and the teachers but also his classmates. Samson's classmates' open mockery and laughing at him while serving punishment for breaking Bobo's head exemplifies the above contention. And it is meant to compel him to change for good in the society like the parents' reprimand and punishment. This scenario is captured in the following words: "The next week, Samson went to school and the school authority punished him severely for his act. He was asked to cut grass in the field after which his teacher asked him to sit on the air for an hour. It was too painful for him; he could no longer endure the pain and he started crying. His classmates laughed at him and he became very ashamed and angry" (PC, 32). And this singular incidence portrays the conflict of instinctual desires and set moral standard.

From this instance, it is also discernible that the school's administration of punishment with the classmates' laughter is social mechanisms to checkmating and correcting antisocial behaviours, which are the manifests of the functioning of the psyche. Ultimately, this is aimed at taming the excesses and misdemeanours of the id. Although quite aware of the shared value system of the school but overwhelmed by id's influence like Priest Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Samson is still focused on pushing further accomplishment of his desire for dominance among his mates with the encouragement of Ngozi. This accounts for Samson's resolution to fight and molest further despite the severe punishment meted on him by his parents and the school. This is expressed herein: "If any of them challenges you again, deal with the person so that they will stay away from you permanently," Ngozi advised and Samson smiled mischievously. He thus becomes more stubborn than ever" (PC, 34). Samson's resolution is predicated on his mischievous smile at Ngozi's counselling. And this is more of a catalyst to his aspiration; a sort of fuelling to the beastly expression of the id.

Despite the severe punishment meted to him by his parents and the school, Samson is still focused on achieving his psychological desire of dominating the people around. Hence, he is determined to eliminate whatever stands in his way. This is responsible for his antagonism and aggressiveness to anything that seems to be an aversion to it just like Ezeulu's dispositions in *Arrow of God* described by Odiwo (2009: 95) from a psychoanalytic point of view thus:

Ezeulu's anger is a reaction to the threat to his subconscious desire. Consequently, his anger is directed against "who poke fingers into his face", those who are up against his ego. As such, he is convinced that the success of his dominance rests upon the idea of crushing agencies and institutions of a society into submission.

The import of this is that Samson like priest Ezeulu is fighting social norms for the purpose of maintaining dominance over his peers just as Ezeulu. This implies that Samson is apparently responding to his subconscious desire for domination. This desire is lucidly summed up in these words: "So, this is how people learn? Okay, I know what to do; I will teach more people lesson in my class so that nobody will disrespect me again," Samson said... (p42). This summarizes the entire motive beneath Samson's unholy attitudes. And this is largely the quest for respect and control over his peers.

The exquisiteness of the foregoing evaluation is enhanced and made very apparent and convincing via the appropriateness of the style and diction deployed by the writer Charles Eze Nnaemeka in *Problem Child*. The text story is rendered in a linear plot structure with simple diction and straight forward expressions which, no doubt, pose no difficulty to children readers. This consequently gives clear insight into the thought process of children characters in relation to their actions and dispositions as captured in the various citations drawn from the text in the pursuit of thrusts of the article.

Imperatively, the in-depth revelation of the overbearing influence of the id instinct and social restriction and mores maintenance of the ego and superego is premised on the ingenuity of the narrative technique deployed. Charles Nnaemeka's *Problem Child* is told in a third person narrative voice using he, she, him, her, they, it, them and

proper nouns. For example: “Mike Ekeh and his wife were so busy with their work that they hardly had time for their only son, Samson. They were both bankers, working with different banks. It really disturbed them that they did not have enough time for their only child but they could not help it” (PC, 6). All this fosters children’s appreciation, hence, making the texts appealing to them.

Conclusion

Freud’s psychoanalytic postulations offer analytical criteria for exploring the various psychological impulses or forces behind the antisocial dispositions and misdemeanours of children in *Problem Child* within the social context in which they live. His delineation has equally demonstrated how children respond to psychological desires and longing through their unguarded actions and behaviours. These dispositions, psychologically motivated, are in conflict with the socially shared values of the people. It is within this ambient that the longings and desires of Samson and Ngozi in *Problem Child* meet the bricks; law, values and ethics formulated and vehemently strived to be sustained by society using its institutions: family, school and collective efforts of its members for the survival of the society. Implicitly, the aggressiveness, hostility and fierceness of Samson and Ngozi are resultant effects of the functioning of the unconscious part of the psyche which they are deluded or unaware of. Or simply put, they are responses to the manipulation of the id; which has no regard for law, custom and shared moral values of the people. With the quest to maintaining orderliness and decorum in the society, the other parts of the psyche; ego and superego checkmate and apply due measures in curtailing the excesses of the id via the institutions of the society. Through the narrative voice, on the one hand, the characters’ desire for satisfaction is expressed. On the other hand, it reveals the trauma, pain and fear of the characters ensuing from the confrontation between the move to achieve those desires and the social institutions and individuals saddled with the tasks of inculcating the shared social values.

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