

Can Psychoanalysis Be Applied to African Settings?

The power and the threat of literatures in English that originate from outside of the British Isles is their ability to reconstruct frameworks of criticism, or to prove them redundant. Psychoanalysis, as a distinctly Eurocentric method of understanding, often encounters obstacles in the imposition of an analysis on African contexts, yet at the same time these postcolonial texts may help to rearticulate and refresh antiquated theories. The work of Freud is not only Eurocentric in its assumptions, but takes on a point of view that is essentially masculine and educated. Two texts which I think can reorder some of Freud's ideas are Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy, and The Cardinals by Bessie Head. The former follows an uneducated, black protagonist, while the later also presents the problematic of the female gender in the application of psychoanalysis; both emanate from Afrocentric centres of understanding, namely Nigeria and Botswana. In attempting to underscore the difficulties of psychoanalytical readings of these texts, I wish to look equally at the insights psychoanalysis lends us with regards to character, nation, author and narrative.

Before approaching Sozaboy, I shall outline three points of entry for each of the texts. Firstly, I will consider psychoanalysis as facilitating new understandings of the texts, principally concentrating on the work of Freud. Secondly, and in conjunction with this first idea, I want to try and indicate some of the problems and obstacles that stand in the way of psychoanalysis in African contexts, or perhaps more accurately, change the ways in which it is applied. In doing this I will take into account issues of postcolonial nations in relation to the text, gender and race differences and the role the author plays, if any, in the psychoanalysis of their text. Finally, I want to approach the psychoanalytical implications of writing a narrative, both from the point of view of author and character. In doing this I intend to discuss the consciousness of writing one's own story in these contexts, again drawing on Freud, and looking at the importance of both beginnings and endings of narratives in African contexts.

Freud's theories on narcissism formulate an interesting and revealing analysis of Ken Saro-Wiwa's narrator and centre character, the politically unaware

figure of Mene, or Sozaboy. According to Freud, the “narcissistic type” may replace normal object-love with a variety of forms of self-love, an inversion of the libido, one of these being love for “what he himself would like to be”¹. The narrative trajectory of Mene is dictated by the projection of ego-ideals, that is to say future projections of his own ego, which contradict, exaggerate or escape from his current reality. The following passage is one of the most complete of Mene’s future projections.

“And as I am marching with gun and singing, prouiding, all the people will come and look at me. They will say how I am brave man. Very brave man. Then Agnes will like me. And Zaza cannot make *yanga* for me again. [...] And no woman whether Simple Defence or no Simple Defence cannot begin to give me order on the road [...] And I will wear uniform!” (Sozaboy pp. 54)

Mene’s future projections also permit insights into his relationships with the other characters, his readings of power structures and his understanding of his community and its frameworks. For example, in the above quotation he reveals preconceived notions of gender roles by reversing the real incident, the disconcerting body search conducted by the women of the Simple Defence, so that in his future ideal they have no such control. Mene’s external object-loves are also complicated by narcissistic tendencies. The people and influences that surround him (his mother, his wife, Bullet, Zaza) are idealised in Mene’s present and future imaginations. However, these figures (the perfect mother, the perfect wife etc.) serve the dual function of amplifying Mene’s ego-ideals by casting him as ideal husband, son or pupil. Freud explains that, “[i]dealization is possible in the sphere of the ego-libido as well as in that of the object –libido”² and therefore Mene has at his disposal an entire cast of idealised figures with which to mould his ideal futures.

During his initial state of naivety he is informed by the narratives of other characters, such as Zaza’s war experiences, and incorporates them into his own

¹ Sigmund Freud, On Narcissism (1914) ‘Africas of the Mind’ Handout pp. 84

² On Narcissism pp. 88

realities/unrealities. As Maureen Eke suggests, Mene romanticises Zaza's story so that it forms the basis for his own adventure plot:

“[H]e believes he must undertake a quest to conquer or slay the “dragon” that threatens his damsel in distress (Anges), save the land (Dukana) from starvation, and return the hero.” (Ken Saro-Wiwa pp. 99)

The “dragon” in Mene/Zaza's tale is “Hitla”, who is adopted by Mene as a mental image of the ideal “Enemy”. Mene's imaginary and personal “Hitla” is one of the many “as-if (unreal) personalities”³ that make up his idealisation of reality, in which his ego-ideal is central and around which the external ideals revolve. Britton classifies this type of narcissism as a “*defense against* adverse object relations”⁴. Even the idealisation of an “Enemy” plays a defensive role as this external ideal is created and controlled by Mene himself and is therefore harmless. Mene enacts “the transformation of reality into carefully processed and packaged images”⁵, and internalisation of what he perceives to be his role/position in society. Narcissism represents a method of conforming to these ideals when the restrictions of reality prevent him from doing so. Freud recognises this external pressure, admitting that “in addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or nation”⁶. This then begs the question; does Mene's idealism originate from his own ability to cope with his reality, or due to the extreme pressures of surviving in Nigeria's war-torn, transitional context?

According to Freud, the tendency towards narcissism reveals itself clearly in “the mental life of children and primitive peoples”⁷ and, permitting a Eurocentric racial gaze, Sozaboy opens up the possibility that Mene conforms to both of these categories. Sozaboy begins his narrative as socially naïve and his progression resembles a coming to maturity, the movement from childhood to adulthood. Anna Freud suggests that “the attachment of the mature ego to reality is in general stronger than that of the infantile ego” thus the child's ego “refuses to become

³ Ronald Britton, Sex, Death and the Superego (London, Karnac, 2003) pp. 147

⁴ Sex, Death and the Superego pp. 152

⁵ Harry Garuba, Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy and the Logic of the Minority Discourse () pp. 234

⁶ On Narcissism pp. 96

⁷ On Narcissism pp. 67

aware of a disagreeable reality”⁸. But is preservation of the ego from trauma Mene’s only motive for the performance of fantasy? If Mene remained within Freud’s narcissistic boundaries then Sozaboy would seem to enable psychoanalysis of character/narrator that follows a rigid European model, despite its African context. Yet this would ignore three facets of Mene’s supposedly narcissistic character. Firstly, his future projections are not restricted to a positive transformation of a painful reality. Here Sozaboy imagines an enemy attack:

“Suppose as the soza captain come talk, enemy begin enter Iwoama? Then he will kill all of us plus myself. Then he will enter every place plus Dukana. Then they will carry away my mama plus Agnes and then begin to use Agnes.” (Sozaboy pp. 87)

Secondly, the ego-ideals do not completely vanish from Mene’s psyche as he reaches ‘adulthood’, implying that his narcissistic state is imposed not by a primary narcissism inherent to his primitive/infantile condition, but by external forces. Even in the eighteenth ‘Lomber’ Mene tells us how “[he] will just get a license and [he] will find lorry to drive. Then [he] will get plenty money and my mama and Agnes and myself will be happy”⁹. By the end of *Sozaboy* Mene’s future projections lose their earlier certainty and become hopeful and desperate, beginning projections with “we must” rather than “we will”. They are no longer informed by Mene’s misreading of the narratives that he encounters, but by a necessity to strive towards an improvement in his current situation. The perpetuation of Mene’s narcissism after his movement to maturity may suggest that his resistance to reality is necessitated by the social reality that surrounds him. The effects of war and the difficulties of an Africa in transition are perhaps greater factors in the stimulation of Mene’s narcissism because they obstruct the path towards the realisation of his ego-ideals.

Finally, Mene demonstrates, on occasion, great awareness of the object/ego-ideals which direct his narrative and is able to manipulate them effectively and intelligently in order to obtain what he desires, or at least to place

⁸ Anna Freud, The Ego and Mechanisms of Defence (London, The Hogarth Press, 1961) pp. 85-87

⁹ Ken Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English (Port Harcourt, Saros International Publishers, 1985) pp. 138

him in a position where his ego-ideals encounter the possibility of becoming reality. Eke describes Sozaboy “casts Agnes [] and his mother in gendered roles as wife and mother [and] cunningly manipulates their “gendered” desires and perceptions of his duty as a man.”¹⁰ This careful and conscious manoeuvring of his ego-ideals eventually gives him what he wants; his marriage to Agnes and the opportunity to join the army. It is one of the “survivalist tendencies”¹¹ which Mene exhibits during his pseudo-heroic narrative. He is more often found running, rather than facing, his “Enemy”, whether it be physically fleeing from the air raid on his encampment or internalising his “Hitla” in an act of mental retreat.

Before widening this attempted psychoanalysis to the author and the narrative of Sozaboy I want to approach The Cardinals through a similar character based analysis, looking at the elusive figure of Mouse. Johnny describes her as “a psycho-case”¹², but she certainly does not fit into Freud’s narcissistic frame easily. Freud theorises that women experience an “intensification of the original narcissism” found in children and, in place of favourable object-love choices, “develop a certain self-contentment”¹³, or self-love. Mouse, both woman and child, seems to deny the narcissistic type not by forming normal object attachments, but by a negation of the libido, an inability to love anyone, including herself. She has “withdrawn so completely that it’s practically impossible for [Johnny] to reach her.”¹⁴ Freud’s belief that “such [narcissistic] women have the greatest fascination for men”¹⁵ is also resisted by Bessie Head’s novel, as Johnny finds himself drawn to Mouse despite her inability to love. “I have to find a way to reach her”¹⁶ he declares, showing desperation to understand the intrigues of Mouse’s psyche. She does not fit with previous female types that Johnny has been exposed to and therefore a new method of attack must be adopted.

It is in Johnny choice of weapon and in their relationship that some psychoanalytical handhold may appear. “There is only one thing she responses

¹⁰ Maureen N. Eke ‘The novel’ in Ken Saro-Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist ed. Craig W. McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail (London, Lynne Rienner, 2000) pp. 97

¹¹ Ken Saro-Wiwa pp. 96

¹² Bessie Head, The Cardinals (Heinemann, Oxford, 1995) pp. 58

¹³ On Narcissism pp. 82

¹⁴ The Cardinals pp. 58

¹⁵ On Narcissism pp. 82

¹⁶ The Cardinals pp. 58

to,” Johnny tells PK, “Writing”¹⁷. Just as Sozaboy idealises future situations (‘endings’) Mouse, through writing, wants to narrate her origins (‘beginnings’). She is denied knowledge of her parents and birth by the society she lives in, and therefore writes herself into an ideal past, using Johnny as a point of entry. Although it is Johnny himself who begins the reverie into his past, we can perhaps assume that it is Mouse who has edited and embellished it, given that the narrative matches the sentimental, ‘feminine’ style that PK criticises her for. Most notably, we also read about the manner of Ruby’s death, an event that Johnny could not have known about. The language depicts the beauty, violence and wildness of the scene, aspects of love that Mouse yearns for, but that she can only express in words. The landscape replaces the human in the idealised sexual union of Johnny and Ruby:

“...his love was as fierce as the savage, battering beat of a high sea; or, like a storm beating down on the dry, hard earth of her body and she absorbed its pounding drive, lost in an elemental ecstasy.” (The Cardinals pp. 45)

The narration touches on the unreal, such as Johnny’s call on the beach, which one can only assume Ruby hears in her head and comes, “running along the beach towards him”. “I was in bed already,” she says, “but I heard you so clearly that I got up and came immediately.”¹⁸ This romanticism could have its source in the series that Head wrote for the *Golden City Post*, “True Romances”, but Head offers various twists to the genre, which “constructed feminine sexuality in certain ways”¹⁹. Ruby’s awareness of her sexuality and desires “contrasts starkly with the caste representation of ‘True Romances’”²⁰ and her eventual suicide denies the castigation society wishes and the recognition of guilt for her deviant sexual behaviour. However, despite Head’s critique of the genre, she fully understands the use of romanticism in the search for a true origin. In Eilersen’s biography, she reveals how Bessie Head used to tell the story of how her white mother fell in love with the family stable hand, yet her “family had no

¹⁷ The Cardinals pp. 58

¹⁸ The Cardinals pp. 46

¹⁹ Colette Guldemann, ‘*The Cardinals*: Reclaiming Language through the “Permanent Revolution of Language”’: Literature’ in Critical Essays on Bessie Head ed. Maxine Sample (Westport, Praeger, 2003) pp. 100

²⁰ Critical Essays on Bessie Head pp. 107

racehorses"²¹. For Mouse the love that she can not express finds an outlet in Johnny and Ruby's passionate romance, an ideal of the mother and father she never met.

Another way of facilitating psychoanalysis in The Cardinals is through the incestuous union of Johnny and Mouse, the replaying of a father/daughter relationship which was denied to both characters. Here Freud can implicate Johnny; "If we look at the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, we have to recognise that it is a revival and a reproduction of their own narcissism."²² Even though Johnny is unaware of the family tie between himself and Mouse, Head hints at his capacity for incest ("...it's just as well I have no daughter. I'd probably make love to her too"²³) and his parental desire to nurture and care for Mouse (telling her that she awakes in him "a paternal protectiveness"²⁴). But this is reciprocated by Mouse's desire for a father-figure, and it is important that the father-figure (firstly the old man who teaches her to write, and secondly Johnny) is linked to the creative act. Returning this to Mouse's origins, Freud explains how the "child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out"²⁵. At the point of embarking on their incestuous union, Mouse is able to re-enact the romance of her parents, in a way that combines origins and endings. As Brooks tells us, incest is an ending which must be avoided because "its fulfilment would be too perfect"²⁶, a confusion of narrative would result. With this in mind, what is the possibility of psychoanalysis, or resistance to psychoanalysis, of narrative?

Peter Brooks, in his book Reading for the Plot, discusses the links between narrative and its drive towards ending with Freud's speculations on the aim of life in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Freud argues that the "*goal of all life is death*"²⁷, a return to a previous, inorganic state. Narrative for Brooks performs that objective; it gives us "the knowledge of death which in our own lives is denied to

²¹ Gillian Stead Eilersen, Bessie Head: Thunder Behind her Ears (London, James Currey Ltd., 1995) pp. 26

²² On Narcissism pp. 84

²³ The Cardinals pp. 68

²⁴ The Cardinals pp. 113

²⁵ On Narcissism pp. 85

²⁶ Peter Brooks, Readings for the Plot: design and intention in narrative (Oxford, Clarendon, 1984) pp. 109

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle (London, The Hogarth Press, 1948) pp. 47

us"²⁸. For Head's narrative to end in an incestuous confusion of endings and new beginnings resists this very instinct towards death, removes the relief that ending would give the reader.

Sozaboy too refutes the sense of ending, although slightly differently. Derrida says that analysis is "untangling, untying, detaching, freeing, even liberation – and thus also, [...] *solution*."²⁹ Fannon psychoanalytical solution to the problems of postcolonial Africa is violence, a cathartic exorcism colonialism, the "impatient violence of the masses"³⁰. Ken Saro-Wiwa's representation of the Nigerian-Biafran war entirely rejects this notion. Violence is an internalised, destructive process, which is perpetuated by the black middle-classes who assume the place of the colonisers. Solution in *Sozaboy* does not present itself; the horrors of war kill Mene's wife and mother, and finally drive him from his home village. Instead, the novel represents a progress, a working-through of the Nigerian situation so that the ending is merely an acknowledgement that there is no quick solution.

This is not to say that the death-drive is absent from either novel. It is even possible that the death wish is amplified due to the very fact that ending is denied to the characters. Mene's future projections offer him a form of death, narrating his future because reality will not allow life to follow a natural course. Mouse longs for a death, or perhaps a birth. She attempts suicide, and urges Johnny to kill her in order to end the torture of living. These actions seem to stem from the desire for a "choice of ends"³¹, Johnny describing his life as a "slow death", the only way of preventing "a sudden violent death"³² that would be beyond the individual to control. Brook cites the "compulsion to repeat"³³ as a method of delaying death/ending, of dying correctly. "Narrative" he says, "always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition"³⁴, something which sharply characterises Mene and Mouse's stories. Mouse and Johnny retrace their steps over the same argument countless times and Mene repeats like a mantra his hopeful visions of

²⁸ Reading for the Plot pp. 95

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, Resistances of Psychoanalysis (California, Stanford University Press, 1998) pp. 3

³⁰ Franz Fannon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York, Grove Press, 1966) pp. 49

³¹ Reading for the Plot pp. 98

³² The Cardinals pp. 42

³³ Reading for the Plot pp. 99

his future. The language of Sozaboy, due to its limited forms of expression, creates a feel of constant repetition. Repetition is “absolute resistance” to analysis, but “is in itself *analytic*”³⁵. It signifies both a working-through and a static refusal to cooperate with psychoanalytical norms.

Finally, in talking about psychoanalysis of narrative, it seems impossible not to examine the role of author in this context. We have already noted the cracks in The Cardinals where Bessie Head’s autobiography peeps through Mouse’s narration, but Ken Saro-Wiwa also can not hide behind the mask of his narrator. Despite the distance implied by the apparent linguistic divide between educated author and Mene, even in the title itself Saro-Wiwa betrays his identity by using his own register to tell us *Sozaboy* is a novel written in ‘rotten’ English. As Inyama points out, “the subtitle itself [is] an admission that the author knows much better English than what he assigns to his narrator”³⁶. More importantly, Saro-Wiwa’s strong political and social critique is an aspect of the text that *Sozaboy* himself is unable to articulate, in spite of various displays of social awareness and a definite progression towards an enlightened view of his nation. Both authors are interested in the act of narrating the nation, of narrating a context whose beginnings and endings are confused.

As Johnny tells Mouse, “A new way of life is emerging in Africa and you and I, and many others, fit in somewhere.”³⁷ It is not the task of the writer to find solutions; the writer’s job concerns the “very possibility of talking about life – about its very ‘narratability’”³⁸. For Mouse and Head “[w]riting is the interpretation of life through words”³⁹, it is the outlet that allows Mouse to search for somewhere to “fit in”. Writing in Africa is a politically loaded task, an act that often opens up the individual as a representative of his nation, class or race. As a representative of the Ogoni people in Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa undertakes the “[re-inscription of] the concrete and historical into the linguistic world”⁴⁰, narrativising the situation the

³⁴ Reading for the Plot pp. 97

³⁵ Resistances of Psychoanalysis pp. 23-24

³⁶ Nnadozie Inyama, ‘Point of view in Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*’ in Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* ed. Charles Nnolim (Port Harcourt, Saros, 1992) pp. 104

³⁷ The Cardinals pp. 62

³⁸ Reading for the Plot pp. 97

³⁹ The Cardinals pp. 93

⁴⁰ The Logic of Minority Discourse pp. 231

Ogoni inhabit and providing a space of resistance. Similarly, Head creates a position of resistance for the black, female writer in South Africa. "It is a great responsibility to be a writer at this time"⁴¹; Saro-Wiwa and Head are willing to take on that responsibility. Just as Brook links Freud's theories on the aims of life with the nature of narrative, Bessie Head and Ken Saro-Wiwa reverse this logic so that narrative/literature becomes the medium by which life in postcolonial Africa can be narrated.

⁴¹ The Cardinals pp. 62

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