# PRIMITIVE DEFENCES AND VIOLENCE IN AFRICA: AN ANALYSIS OF EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD* AND EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED*

**Ejie Ifeoma Ogbonnaya**
Department of Languages, School of General and Basic Studies,
Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Unwana, Ebonyi State
Ifeomaejie@yahoo.com 08115676078

**Abstract**
Most times, the lower class people in Africa are faced with overbearing emotional and physical pains and this is due to the problem posed by the double patriarchal nature of the society, obscure traditions and failed leadership, which cause mass poverty through the high rate of inflation, low per capita income, unemployment, underemployment and rapid population growth. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, expose 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 defense mechanisms; the study identifies some defenses that are prone to result into violence, which is common among young, inexperienced and severely distressed individuals. In this case, characters employ some reactive primitive defenses that enable them to transfer their psychological pains to themselves, some other items around them or persons outside themselves. However, it is noticed that by the use of mature defenses, 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.
**Keywords***: Poverty, Anxiety, Defense, Violence.*

The study expresses that violence happens due to painful situations that are difficult to be repressed; in other words, one tends to attack the hurting circumstance by using violence. Violence discussed in this study is the type that is perpetuated by individuals against one's self, another, that of a group against an individual and that of a group against a society. According to the *Oxford 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 (2022), states that it is "an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm and that the damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological or both. In agreement, Krug et al (2002) 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 an organized violence called "a new war" which, unlike the old war, is between armies or states in conflict, rather it includes terrorism, a genocide which is aimed at the vulnerable, the 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 such as 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 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. The next is low self-esteem which Seifert expresses as being the cause of violent reaction that seeks to comfort the inner self. All these causes of violence have a connection with the inner self, this study, therefore, will rely on these three causes of violence since the target is to soothe a hurting psychological pain caused by the hurting circumstances in the environment.

The hurting psychological pains identified in the two texts 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. 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 and Okoroegbe, 2011). Trying to recreate the point above, Bennette and Nicholas express

that there is another angle through which a work can be looked at, and express that the psychoanalytic critical theory does not only study the intention of the author but also concentrates on the reader's psychic response to a literary work depending on the language used, where ' I didn't mean to hurt you' can mean 'I did mean to hurt you'. This language viewed here is the language of the author and the reader (Gbenabor and Okoroegbe, 2011).

(Hubs, and Blank, 1989) on the other hand, states 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 the reality principle. The third part of the unconscious, which is the super-ego, is an internal and pastor-like part which represents the social moral rule. The ego, therefore, tries to stop the internal effect of an emotionally hurting circumstance by the use of ego psychological defense mechanisms that expresses themselves in various conscious responses. This is to state that conscious activities point out the behaviour of the unconscious. Castle (2007) 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). 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 (Mokand Morris 2013). However, Anne Freud expresses in clearer terms that a defense 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 Defense* that the ego is to supervise, regulate and oppose the 'id' through varieties of defenses. Although defense styles and coping styles are used interchangeably, (Cramer, 2006**)** in *Protecting Self* opines that both

can be the same because both coping mechanism and defense mechanism "are aroused by situations involving psychological disequilibrium. In this sense, they are similar in that both are "adaptational processes. Defense mechanism functions to diminish the negative effect, (like the coping mechanism) but they do so without the conscious intent or awareness of the person" This indicates that both coping styles and defense 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. The few examples below are taken from the three groups of defense mechanism used by (Grohol, 2016): primitive, less primitive and mature defenses. There is the primitive defense of *dissociation*, which helps one to disconnect or detach from the source of pain, the less primitive defense of *denial*, which denies the existence of the pain, a *projection* of the ill feeling on others and the mature defense of *humor* that is used to stop the effect of the pain or the use of *sublimation* defense which transfer the libido to activities that can be beneficial. However, some primitive defenses resort to violence by fighting the hurting feeling or the presumed source of the pain to get back at it. The primitive defenses identified in the texts as being reactive are acting out, displacement and splitting.

**Some Reactive Primitive Defenses and their Meanings**

Acting out is an immature or primitive defense style that expresses an unconscious wish or impulse in a character's action. Acting out defense 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 displacement defense mechanism is the type of defense that 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, 2016). This is sometimes called displaced or transferred aggression, which shifts anger from the real target to another that is less threatening. Finally, the splitting defense mechanism is a primitive defense where negative impulses are split; that is, there is a remarkable line drawn between good and evil. (Salters, 2021) expresses that splitting allows the user to discard bad things and embrace things considered good even though those things may be harmful. It interferes with relationships and may lead to self-destructive behaviors. People who split are often dramatic especially when they think that something has gone out of hand. 'Black and white, all or nothing thinking' is the name given to the splitting defense style since the individual who splits, views other people as either innately good or innately evil, rather than as an individual who is defined by his or her activity.

In (Buchi Emecheta, 1979) *The Joys of Motherhood*, she express the patriarchal tradition, the increase in the quest for male children, the determination of marital choices and the questioning of women's sexuality. The patriarchal policy being doubled for women who will also contend with the effect of colonization 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 victimizes her. (Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008) also, expresses *Trafficked* on the other hand, poses the issue of post-colonization where the impact of western lifestyles increases materialism that birthed poor governance, economic downturn, non-payment of salaries and gratuities and

mass poverty. These as well give a strong foothold to the already existing patriarchal policy that subjugates the female gender, which also leads to human trafficking and sex slavery. Mention is made of the psychological trauma faced by these women and other characters around them; however, much is not said about how the characters were able to withstand the emotionally hurting situation. In the bid to resist the offending emotional pains, some of the characters use these defenses, which have in one way or another further affected the entire society by the increase in the rate of violent related situations.

**How Primitive Defenses Cause Violence**

How acting out, splitting and displacement defenses may result in violence by causing the character to react irrationally. By using the acting out defense, for instance, a character may cause harm to oneself or to another. Emecheta's *The Joys of motherhood* presents Nnu-ego as a character that acts out due to the pain of her child's death. Nnu-ego, who has once been in the traumatized position of a childless woman in the home of her first husband, finds it hard to believe the reality of the death of her child from her new marriage. According to Emecheta in the chapter entitled 'First Shock', when she sees her child lying there "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). Nnu-ego runs straight to the lagoon in order to jump into it, except for the timely intervention of the people. The character reacted irrationally according to the manifestation of her repressed thought. The thought that her angry chi (the slave girl who was buried alive with her late stepmother), is responsible for her misfortune; is a thought that she was made to believe. Killing herself could not have raised her child from the dead, but it presents itself as 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 oneself or another.

Nnu-ego also exhibits another violent characteristic of acting out defense when she angrily addressed Igbonoba's wife, a richly dressed female visitor who wishes that Nnu-ego allows her into her small home for shelter on a rainy afternoon. Nnu-ego 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 under her care. Without knowing what is in Nnu-ego's mind, the visitor tries to make herself comfortable and to pacify Nnu-ego who looks at her with much disdain. But Nnu-ego retorts; "Shut up! Shut up and go away! You can't stand here – my baby is crying – go away!" Nnu-ego's voice was more thunderous than the rain." The little ones came in and Nnu-ego banged the door shut". Nnu-ego's reaction is a 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 of them 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 emotional pain that accompanies poverty.

Characters that act out in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* are Fola and Alice; the two roommates of Nneoma and Efe. They find it hard to bear the painful experiences of their past but they allow it to affect the way they handle their relationship

with each other and their general disposition to life. Having seen themselves in an emotionally hurting situations as a sex slave and a domestic servant in a foreign land, Fola and Alice's become trapped in the present that brings no hope due to the poor standard of living in their home country, causing them to enter into the fight mode. In one of their fights, Efe tries to grab Alice out of the scene, Alice yelled"

> "Efe leave me alone let me teach this rat a lesson, just look at this odibo (slave), You are below my notice, let me tell you" . "I have not finished with you witch", Fola fumed, breathing hard. "Prostitute, I am glad I was trafficked as domestic servant and not a sex slave like you, *ashawo"* (prostitute)."Yoo! You are too ugly to be a sex worker". Gbere girl." (pp.137)

A very important characteristic of acting out primitive defense mechanisms in the example above is that it inhabits accumulated pains that have no hope or thought for the future. This accumulated pain when it becomes unbearable erupts like a volcano affecting everything around it including self. The outburst of Nnu-ego, Alice and Fola, indicate that they are already frustrated into hopelessness – no hope for a better tomorrow due to the high level of Nnu-ego's poverty and for Alice and Fola, there is no hope for a new life without the dent of domestic and sex slavery. One cannot be this hopeless when the home country has a stable economy that is void of corruption, injustice and insecurity. Although the acting out defense employed by these characters relieves their inner tensions and from there wards off the instinctual demands of impulse, it can result in self-hurt, manslaughter, physical injury, emotional injuries and hate speeches, which can lead to further misunderstandings and feud between individuals, families and tribes.

In *Trafficked* still, the demonstration and protest by the University students who were tired of the corrupt practices and

extortions which is seen in the school is another form of acting out. In the words of the student union president:

> We are tired of our education and welfare being trifled with by both government and the University authorities," he fumed. "Our country is richer by far than many African countries, yet their educational institutions are better funded than the ones here. What is responsible for this? Corruption, pure and simple". "Why should hostels be privatized? How many students can afford to pay higher charges? The money this government gets from oil is enough to give a scholarship to every student in the country." "True!" yelled many voices. (pp.159-60)

At the end of the protest, many people were injured, properties were damaged, a life was lost and the school closed down (pp.172-76). The above instance indicates that a group of people can agree to act out violently in other to express their grievances towards the hurting emotional situation that affects them and this time it is due to the effect of economic instability and bad leadership fuelled by corruption and poverty. This is the kind of violence that is caused by the lack of care from the government and the university authority.

Nnaife in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, on the other hand, expresses a violent reaction when he uses displacement defense to shift his anger against poverty and his daughter's plan to marry the son of a Yoruba Muslim, to his wife – whose fault is to give birth to stubborn children. Nnaife's outburst is as a result of two threatening anxieties in which he finds himself. In other words, the cause of his hatred for his wife is poverty and his anger against the Yoruba family is a result of his self-centeredness because he feels that it is not possible for him (a real-born Ibuza 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; an indication of the lack of self-soothing ability. To establish the expression that the displacement defense mechanism shifts interest from the real target

(poverty) to a less threatening one, he attempts to kill the Yoruba butcher whose son is in love with his daughter. Again as he is arrested and is being taken away by the police and cannot attack them directly, he shifts his verbal attack towards his innocent wife and says "You see, you see, Nnu-ego, you see what you have done to me! One of your daughters is responsible for taking me to jail" (210). Nnaife's reaction further confirms the patriarchal policy that subjugates women as Nnu-ego is looked at as property which is also less threatening. She is not expected to rise against her husband in any way, thus he is at liberty to inflict any form of domestic violence against her. In his discussion on domestic violence, Abakare (2021) 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". This is further buttressed in *Trafficked*, where prophet Elias involved himself into domestic violence. Adimora-Ezeigbo explains that Hannah, "kept as a concubine in the harem of ten women, she was the only one to remain childless. She had to look after the children of Prophet Elias's wife and eight other concubines and was used as a punching bag when the prophet needed to unburden his pent-up emotion (pp.171). Nnaife and prophet Elias's reaction above implies that some of the remote reasons behind most domestic violence in some African homes today are the pang of poverty and the high tension produced by insecurity.

Splitting is on the other hand another severe primitive defense that sometimes makes its user react violently when in use and it sometimes presents one as having a personality disorder because it thinks in black or white. In Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* Lebechi's application of splitting defense mechanism starts when her family denies Ogukwe; her husband's brother, a portion from the block house, which he contributed to building. As a result, Ogukwe's family is pushed to live in a rat-infested thatch hut that is traditionally his place due to primogeniture. The quarrel

between Ogukwe and his brother's family triggers guilt in Lebechi and in the bid to stop the guilt from harming her inner self, her ego makes her to look at Ogukwe and his entire household as enemies. Thereafter, she sees all their actions as evil even when their intention is for good.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo states that one day, when Ogukwe was brushing his teeth, Lebechi sees it as an opportunity to bring up a fight which she starts by calling Ogukwe "Dirty old man". "Why don't you just die? You are not a man; you are a waste of space.' (pp.45-6). As a result of this, both families begin to fight to the extent that Ogukwe who is also the head of the house is pushed to the ground - a taboo in African society. Nevertheless, the men of the kindred give Lebechi a fine of one cock to be given to Ogukwe. The judgement, instead of serving as deterrence against further misbehaviour, triggers more of her hatred towards the Ogukwes and to the men of the kindred. Ezeigbo records further that sometimes, Lebechi rattles and shouts all through the night hurling insults at the Ogukwes. This keeps Ogukwe thinking that she may run mad one day if she does not stop. As stated earlier, the characteristic of a severe type of splitting defense mechanism is that it marks out one as having an aspect of personality disorder and this comes to reality on the day Ogukwe prepares to go to St John's where he works as a churchwarden; there, outside the gate, he sees Lebechi digging the ground. She stood upright, "I am digging your grave," she said, her eyes wild and hostile. Pointing, she continued, 'These two are for you and Adaeze; that one is for Hannah. The one I am digging now is for Mma. You will be buried today. You are too evil to live in this compound." (pp.227-8). One may wonder why someone, a particular religious or ethnic group will decide to wipe off the other without much thought except that the "other" has been labeled 'evil', thus should be annihilated. Lebechi's actions and words show that although splitting is a defense mechanism, which she employs to stop the pain of guilt from her hurting inner self, it can course physical harm to others, affect one's relationship with people, lead to the destruction of

properties and can represent one as one with a pathological disorder. This is a significant characteristic of splitting defense mechanism when it sees only the positive or negative attributes of another. In this case, Lebechi sees everything about Ogukwe as evil and demonizes others who do not agree with her opinion.

An activity of this sort is capable of causing a complete feud that targets the death of the members of the opposing group. A typical example of such in the *Trafficked* is seen when the Amala worshipers and Ihite-Agu youths decide to burn down Prophet Elias's church and attempt to kill the prophet. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo records that "the entire building was up in flames people milled around stoking the fire by throwing dry twigs and branches into it and pouring more fuel. . . that is prophet Elias on the ground, receiving his baptism of fire". This is what happens when there is a lack of self-soothing ability in an individual or a group and the reason for the increase in ethnic and religious crises all over Africa. It is therefore possible that an entire religious or ethnic group could employ the splitting defence, which makes them see other ethnic and religious groups as evil. This is made possible through the indoctrination of the members of such a group.

In conclusion, the study expresses 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 other to get back at the supposed source of mental hurting circumstance. Using the Freudian psychological critical theory, the study finds that in the bid to block the id's response to external hurting events, the ego uses some reactive primitive defenses. The study finds that in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, the pang of a child's death, childlessness and poverty, make some characters to employ the acting out defense mechanism by using abusive language, violent protest, being in the 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 defense 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 domestic violence against women. There is also the use of splitting defense which characters use when they convince themselves that others are evil or are indoctrinated into believing such. It is identified that the causes of these violent actions are 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. Thus African leaders should be conscious of the needs of the masses in other 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 members of opposing groups. The study, therefore, proposes the application of mature defenses such as humour, which enables one to see the humorous aspect of a hurting circumstance and sublimation defense, which directs the surge of emotion against a hurting circumstance to something else that is more beneficial to oneself and the society. All these will help for sustainable development and economic stability in Africa.

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