



# Literary Horizon

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## Psychoanalysis of Ben Okri's *The Freedom Artist*

**Imran Hussain**

Department of Applied Linguistics,  
The University of Lahore,  
Lahore, Pakistan.

**Abstract:** This innovative attempt is meant to analyze a recently published novel *The Freedom Artist* (2019) by an illustrious Nigerian writer Ben Okri. For this intent Freud theory of psychoanalysis is kept in view as a theoretical framework by the researcher. The analysis is carried out through the actions performed by the major characters. Mental states of the major characters along with their certain behaviors are due to certain motives and consequences which are the major subject matter of psychoanalysis. Ben Okri has significantly created a bridge between psychotherapy and literature through fascinating language and crispy style. The study is qualitative in nature and is carried out through mental depiction and consequences of the said actions. Although, there are other mechanics of analysis, but the researcher has utilized Freud's psychoanalytical theory of analysis bearing in mind the objective of the study.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, freedom, unconscious, fears, tyranny

### Introduction

The *Freedom Artist* (2019) has narrated a state of affair where no one is without chain i.e. books, common people and artists. Here everyone was a prisoner though unconscious of the fact.

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Contact No. +91-8331807351

Email: [editorliteraryhorizon@gmail.com](mailto:editorliteraryhorizon@gmail.com)

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Hierarchy being the tyrant has entangled the everyday matter of the societal setup. Everyone who resists such oppression is tyrannized. Ignorance and state of unknowing is being cherished, artists are banned and an unannounced censorship. In addition, “The Freedom Artist is a penetrating examination of how freedom is threatened in a post-truth society. It's a powerful call to arms” (Head of Zeus, 2019). James (2019) while delineating the novel under view has encapsulated his view as “The Freedom Artist is an adventure story and an intense trip through the most esoteric corners of the human mind. It's also a beautiful and timely appeal for the importance of books, subversive stories and love”.

Freedom Artist is “An impassioned plea for freedom and justice set in a world uncomfortably like our own, by the Man Booker-winner Ben Okri” (Financial Times, 2019). Here, we come across a situation that a young woman is enchained merely because of her very simple, short four words question “who is the prisoner?” Later, it is the question that the readers have to inquire from him or her at the end of the novel. The answer of this question is the core or crux or the revelation within the story. As soon as she is taken away a man Karnak appears, and he is in pursue of her because he loves the former. Though desperate in the initial stage of his search but as soon as the realization is dawned upon him he is seen headed toward the arena of fear, doubts, violence and apprehension known as prison. We are entangled as her lover has to survive, struggle and fight in order to answer the question asked by the woman.

In addition, the novel Freedom Artist is powerful as far as style, theme and underlying thoughts are concerned. It has gripped the readers and don't let them go off from the beginning till the culmination of the event due to simple and crispy diction, short sentences and unmatched handling of the unspoken ideas within the contemporary world. Ben Okri has mingled ancient myth cum story telling narrational tradition with that of the modern political jumbling and tyranny. Ben Okri an influential Nigerian writer, novelist and poet is deemed as the most illustrious African writer who has written eleven novels, numerous essays and abundance



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numbers of poetry and plays. Due to his artistic craft ship that he won Man Booker Prize at a mere age of 32 for his masterpiece *The Famished Road*. The chief traits of his writings are included as simplicity of prose, short but crispy sentences, ever griping short chapters and political relevance of the message (The Guardian, 2008).

The inevitable facets of human concerns are the chief vista as far as the literary interpretation and analysis are concerned. For such intent various approaches are mechanics are coined over the time. The chief and the most renowned among them is the theory or approach we termed as “psychoanalysis”. In this regard the theory of Freud is propagated by Tyson (2006) when he asserted that other than unconscious in term of Freud (1900) “the notion that human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware” (p. 14-15). Freud asserted his personas of unconscious and its relevant facet as a driving force behind the actions and reactions of human as “the unconscious wishes always remain active is quite true”. So, it can be established that the psychoanalysis or psych study is reliant on human relations and behavior among themselves in general and with societal norms and terms.

## Statement of the Problem

The current study is meant to find out:

- What are the illustrious psychoanalytical features in *The Freedom Artists*, by an illustrious African novelist Ben Okri, through the analysis of the major characters?
- How is Freud’s theory applicable to analyze the major characters and events in the story of the novel under analysis?
- What are the motives and consequences of certain actions performed in the text or the episodes?

## Theoretical Framework



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Psychoanalysis is deemed as a modern vista to analyze literary text in order to comprehend the developmental growth, knowhow and traits of characters inner as well as outer self as a whole. Though chief concerns still remain the inner being. It is the dynamics views and features of those characters which enable the readers as well as the critics to formulate the overall impact. It is regarded as a marvelous mechanic to interpret and analyze literary texts at one hand and to bring to light the underlying ideas and features within the texts and events of the story on the other hand. In addition, psychoanalysis also aids the readers and critics to have a glimpse as far as the overall persona and impact relevance to the writer with respect to the literary text under view. Above all, this sort of analysis especially in a literal piece of art enables to get to know diverse psychological groundings of the various actions, motives behind them and the consequences these brought.

The trend of psychological analysis with a view to analyze and scrutinize literary texts emerged and evoked in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the concept was coined by Freud for neuroses therapy but later it is significantly implied by various fields of activity like sociology, cultural studies, literature, critical analysis and arts. Its relevance with respect to literature is extended to underline the mindset, behavioral reactions and attitudinal responses of the literary personas in any given piece of text either oral, semiotic or written. Psychoanalysis enables the critics to pinpoint the reasons and motives behind the reactions, responses and various actions of the characters and their relevance with the recurrent views of the environ as a whole. To Monte (1977) “psychoanalytical theories assume the existence of unconscious internal states that motivate an individual’s overt actions”.

It is asserted to note the striking fascination that exists between literature, literary texts and the psychology in term of criticism and texts analysis. It is an established fact that human is social beings and cannot be isolated from societal norms and surrounding. McConnell (1980) is asserted enough to underline the fact that “we are self-conscious and capable enough of



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improving ourselves and the world around us” (p. 250). As it is evolved around personal, mental and cognitive domains hence it is related with thought process and mental faculties of the individuals and the critics. Further, it is conscious enough to bring to light the nexus of meanings and identity with respect to psychic and societal consideration. Above all, psychoanalytical study aims to unearth the most personal anxiousness, their cultural relevance and literal perspectives of the various actions and reactions of the characters in any piece of art especially written as under view novel *The Freedom Artist*.

Shaffer (2009) is of the notion that the concept of personality and its interpretative role in psychoanalysis is dependent on diverse directive forces of the environ in which the characters of any piece of literary text are residing other than the settings and internal ambiance of the text. In this regard, Freud (1920) has cropped up with the theoretical underpinning which is deemed as a standard as far as the theoretical grounding of psychoanalysis which respect to literature, art, criticism and cultural diversities are considered. Unconscious and dreams are often regarded as the determining forces behind certain actions and responses with respect to human behavior. As is stated by Heller (2005) “The unconscious outside of our awareness is the major determinants of our personality and the intra psychic mysterious of the mind” (P. 184). Tyson (1999) asserted in clear terms that literature in either form is the outcome of the unconscious breeding of the mental faculties of the author, the readers “and in our society as a whole” (p. 32)

## Review of the Related Literature

Since psychoanalysis is an illustrious theory of literary analysis hence significant amount of research has been carried out utilizing this mechanic of analysis. Keeping in view this vista of analysis the researcher has quoted some of those previously done studies in this regard. Zhongming & Zhao (2015) analyzed “*Good Country People*” by implying the concepts of libido, defense mechanic of life and its relationship with death to scrutinize the main character of the text o’ Connor. They of the view that Freudian theory enables critics and researchers to bring to



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light the actions, responses and mental working of the characters as well as the anxiousness of the author as well which instigated him or her into compiling such a piece of literature or art. Mental states of the characters also give insight to the mental state of the author and society in a larger context of the comprehension (p.88-93).

Fozia (2016) dissected the emotional and mental isolation of Celia a character in *The Color Purple* who was a victim of isolation and meekness but later on turned into a bold and expressive individual. So, that study highlighted the concept of being and thus turning into becoming. To researcher, it as the psychological and mental upbringing that turned her into a new state of mind and physical apparent. So, patterns of individual attitude and responses are mainly dependent on constructive or destructive aroma of the mind and society. Fathi (2017) unearthed the psychological dilemmas of the main character in *The Kite Runner* implying Id, Ego and Superego. The researcher deemed ego as the paramount motivation behind psychological undergoing of the main character who took rational decisions though egotistical in nature and essence. Moreover, he brought to light the fact that there are always hidden motives and instigation that are responsible behind various action and deeds we do perform.

Hossain (2017) asserted the notion that theory of psychoanalysis is an illustrious move to analyze a text for interpretation of the piece of literary text. It also enables the critics and readers to bring to light the mental states, psychological motives and reasons behind various deeds by individuals. To him the role of conscious and unconsciousness is indispensable as far as the modification or alternation of behaviors is concerned. Moreover, this theory of analysis enables literary figures and critics to have insight to the internal working of mind and psychological factors responsible behind such phenomenon. Herouach (2019) bridged the notion between literature and psychology in order to have better comprehension of how recurrent events of childhood, accompanied by various adulthood experiences modified and furnished the



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culminative trends of the events which are usually tragic in nature and essence. So, socio-psychological complications are damaging factor behind the actions and deeds.

Shahwan (2019) delineated the role of Lacan in order to study *The Old man & the Sea* and asserted the concept that “desires, conscious, unconscious, subconscious, psychology and others” relevant issues are interpretative forces and determining factors in unearthing the literary texts and fragments. Here role of nature in deciding the fates of human beings is indispensable and unavoidable. The sense of realization towards the impending doubts, fears and worries remain sublimation. Gholipour & Sanahmadi (2013) illustrated the concept that “the affection of Unconsciousness mind, feeling(s) of inferiority, Sexual sublimation Id, ego, and superego obviously have seen in the story” *The Great Gatsby*. Koseli (2013) asserted the fact that “The childhood experiences of the hero of the novel have been inspired from the life of the author to a great extent. Hence this interaction between the two lives is one”.

Katsoulis (2019) while talking about Freedom Artist of the view that “it is an adventure story and an intense trip through the most esoteric corner of the human mind. It is also a beautiful and timely appeal for the importance of the books, subversive stories and love”. Apostolids (2019) while commentating about the novel under discussion remarked it as “The Freedom artist represents just such a heady jumble of influence and inspiration”. Ben Okri prose style is more prone to political message of relevancy. Massie (2019) illuminated the concept that it was the mind and the heart of that land which is prison not mere chain and boundaries. Likewise, a prisoner is the one who has no independent thinking and actions other than the norms being followed in the same territory. Morton (2019) distinguished it by suggesting it as “The Freedom Artist has a compelling power and energy that wouldn’t let the readers go.”

## Methodology

The researcher has adopted and coined an approach termed as psychoanalysis to unearth certain facets of the novel *The Freedom Artist* which is deemed as a major and renowned



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mechanic of analyzing literary text. Moreover, it is coined from Freud's theory of psychoanalysis especially that of personality development. The study is qualitative descriptive in nature. *The Freedom Artist* is taken as a data for analysis. Psychoanalysis is implied as a theoretical framework for analysis. Sampling of relevant data from the novel is used as a tool and technique for the analysis. Data is analyzed, and findings are extracted in descriptive form in the subsequent part of the study.

## Results & Discussion

After the data is being analyzed subsequent features are highlighted and pinpointed by the researcher of the study being carried out. Each research question is given below followed by relevant analysis and discussion.

**RQ1** *what are the illustrious psychoanalytical features in the Freedom Artists, by an illustrious African novelist Ben Okri, through the analysis of the major characters?*

### Discussion:

The major characters in the novel *The Freedom Artists* are analyzed and enlisted through self-analysis mechanic, behavioral modification of the characters and by mean of personality test.

**Self-analysis:** It is the major chunk of analysis in psychoanalysis. The author is committed enough to come across the realization of self. How things are censured and how artists and writers are being barred and put into chains. It is not desirable or an ideal situation prevailing in a society. In fact, Ben Okri through the characters and events wanted to persuade the notions to free the society from such barriers and need for self-correction of individual and society and whole is the pre-determined realizationally implicated feature of awareness. It has been done through the projections of the personal experience and exposure of the major characters i.e. the woman and her lover Karnak.





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**Behavioral Modification:** Alteration and modification as far as behavior of human is concerned is the key facet in psychotherapy and same is implemented in analysis of literary text. In the story we come across a major alternation in behavior when we come across Karnak in peruse his beloved after she is being arrested desperately but later on, he comes across the actual situation and has gone through realization. She was not the only one in prisoner rather the common people in whole are in prison of fear, doubts, ignorance, lack of courage and lack of instigation to reverse the existing situation since long. The question of Amalantis also indicates the slight change and modification of the general behavioral concept that have started to question.

**Personality Test:** Freud has drafted a personality test in order to assess the mental state of an individual, so he can get access to his or her motives behind certain actions and behavior. Ben Okri has implemented the same notion in The Freedom Artist when we come across his major character Amalantis and Karnak during the events. Amalantis is representative of aggressive state of mind when she asks the question who is the prisoner? While Karnak after realization shows the behavior, which is indicative of the receptive state of mind. While Ben has violated the technical neutrality as the actions and behavior of the characters are the representation of the writer own thoughts and feelings.

**RQ2** How is Freud's theory applicable to analyze the major characters and events in the story of the novel under analysis?

## Discussion:

Freud's theory is applied through pinpointing major features of the theory which include in depth questioning, crisis, conflict, fear faced by major characters, dreams, repression and unconscious working of mind of the major characters i.e. women and her lover.

**In-depth Questioning:** Keeping another significant feature of psychoanalytical study the novel is based on the very question "who is the prisoner"? Though the question seems to be



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simple and short but when we analyzed the overall events that simple inquiry is the base behind all the events taking place in the novels. Such in depth questioning has far reaching consequences in the life of the people in the said society vocalized by means of the characters and events in the story *The Freedom Artist*.

***Crisis, Conflicts and Fear:*** The state of affair in the text is indicative of the fact that society in general and the characters in particular are in a state of confusion, crisis and conflict because books, artists and common mobs are within the chains. Ignorance and lack of courage have further diminished the gloomy situation. Very few have the courage to speak about and majority is the follower of what is being imposed and enthused upon them by the tyrants and societal existing norms because of the fears, anxieties and burden of bars.

***Unconscious:*** It is perhaps the most influential feature of Freudian theory of psychoanalysis. To him, it is the portion of mind that is the residents of each and every phenomenon that we can retrieve and recall. It instigates all our actions and deeds. In the novel under analysis unconsciousness is insulated by means of major characters. In the events, it is being pushed deep into the abyss through the repression of tyrants in the form of fear, doubts, anxieties, imprisonment and wounds that the characters in the text and common mobs in society have to undergo since long.

***Dreams & Repression:*** Another significant feature of Freudian concept is the relevance of dreams and repression. It is a drift from real content towards obvious contents within a text. Text in the story represses the real content behind the obvious content due to the monopoly of the tyrants. In *The Freedom Artist* the dreams for freedom and denial of the tyranny is being is being highlighted through the woman who ask question but rest of the characters who are the representative of the people in general are not bold enough to take such steps. So, actual dream is being repressed behind the veils of fear, imprisonment and lack of courage.



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*RQ3* What are the motives and consequences of certain actions performed in the text or the episodes?

## Discussion:

Subsequent are the motives of the actions followed by their consequences in the story. These are enlisted under motives and their consequences, envisioned projection of the event on the part of the author and underlying thought provoking ideas the description carries.

**Motives and Consequences:** Freudian was of the notion that all the actions, deeds and responses of the human have reasons, motives and consequences. Similar notion can be applied to the text under analysis. The actions of the characters especially that of Amalantis and Karnak have certain motives and hence consequences. The question of Amalantis is motivated with the desire to bring about change in the society. The consequence of the question is also indicated, and she is put in the chain. Karnak was in search of her because of the motive i.e. love and intimacy. The consequence of his pursuit resulted in self-awareness which was badly needed in the society in general to break the barriers of tyranny.

**Envisioned Projection:** Another important psychoanalytical feature is the depiction of the mental states of the people through characters in the text which are in fact the views being held by the author Ben Okri himself which are indicative of the envisioned leader and that of the motivator who is foreseeing the destructive consequences of the societal norms being propagated by the tyrants. So, he wants to save the society from complete collapse and reformations need to be taken and that will begin from questioning which is exactly done by the woman in the novel *The Freedom Artists* under analysis.

**Underlying Thoughts:** As indicated by Freud actions of the humans are due to certain motive and have consequences. These are highlighted through the analysis of underlying thoughts and notions. People are oppressed because of fears and censorship. Ignorance is cherished to avoid imprisonment and arrest. Self-discovery is hinted by means of peruse of truth



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that is dawned upon. Freedom is threatened, and people are enslaved which is a phenomenon of modern society. The novel is an authoritative voice for up wake. Mental state of the characters along with the conflicts in the events and society in general heading towards destruction are the key realistic approach.

## **Conclusion**

Psychoanalysis is not a mere branch of psychology or psyche related medicine rather it assists a great deal to comprehend, interpret and analyze diverse fields of activity like art, music, culture and above all literature and literary texts. Though other approaches are there and can be utilized to scrutinize the text but keeping in view the objectives of the study the researcher has implied psychoanalysis as theoretical framework to analyze *The Freedom Artist*. The analysis is being carried out through the analysis of the major characters of the novels and the incidents took place during the action. The results indicate that in depth questioning, self-analysis, projection of conflicts, repression of dreams, unconscious working of the major characters, envisioned projection of Okri, as the way of demonstration on the part of writer is always a key in literary analysis (Hussain & Manssor, 2017) behavioral modification, personality test and motives and consequences of underlying thoughts are the key features of psychoanalysis being indicated by the researcher.



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