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UNVEILING THE UNCONSCIOUS: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF ADOLESCENT IDENTITY IN BOLAJI ABDULLAHI'S *SWEET SIXTEEN* AND KHADIJA ABUBAKAR JALLI'S *THE LIFE CHANGER*

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Abstract

Bolaji Abdullahi's Sweet Sixteen and Khadija Abubakar Jalli's The Life Changer have received considerable scholarly attention, particularly for their didactic orientation and cultural significance within Nigerian youth literature. However, existing studies have largely overlooked the psychoanalytic dimensions of these texts. This paper addresses this critical gap by offering a novel interpretation grounded in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It explores the unconscious structures of desire, repression, symbolic authority, and identity formation that shape the adolescent subjectivities of the texts' protagonists, Aliya and Salma. Through a comparative close reading, the study demonstrates that Aliya's psychological development is mediated by a nurturing paternal figure, which facilitates her integration into the 'Symbolic Order' and supports the formation of a coherent ego identity. In contrast, Salma's narrative arc is marked by resistance to symbolic authority, identity fragmentation, and the compulsive pursuit of unattainable desires; the textual unfolding reflects a deeper psychic disturbance and a dislocation from normative structures of meaning. Thus, the textual analysis foregrounds the latent unconscious dynamics within the selected texts and reveals how ideology, gender, and psyche converge in the construction of adolescent experience. The study therefore offers an original contribution to the fields of psychoanalytic literary criticism and African youth literature by illuminating the psychological undercurrents that inform female adolescent identity in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Keywords : Psychoanalysis, Adolescent Identity, Repression, Symbolic Order, Gendered Subjectivity

Introduction

Psychoanalytic literary criticism, rooted in the foundational theories of Sigmund Freud and later rearticulated by Jacques Lacan, offers a compelling framework for analyzing unconscious motivations, internal conflicts, and the formation of subjectivity within literary texts. Freud's structural model of the psyche, which comprises the id, ego, and superego, posits that human behavior is shaped by repressed desires and unconscious drives that often manifest through dreams, neuroses, or symbolic expressions (The Ego and the Id 34). Lacan extends and revises Freud's model by emphasizing the formative role of language and the symbolic order in constituting subjectivity. Central to his theory is the "mirror stage," wherein the individual's sense of self arises through a process of misrecognition, giving rise to an enduring sense of fragmentation and "lack" that perpetually fuels desire (2).

When applied to literature, psychoanalytic theory uncovers the latent psychological structures embedded in narrative forms, character development, and thematic patterns. As Peter Barry notes, psychoanalytic criticism "seeks evidence of unresolved emotions, psychological conflicts, guilt, and ambivalence" within the textual fabric of characters and plotlines (96). This lens proves particularly illuminating in the analysis of contemporary Nigerian coming-of-age fiction, where adolescent protagonists navigate identity formation within a fraught matrix of cultural expectations, familial pressures, and unconscious tensions.

This paper examines two notable examples from this genre: Bolaji Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen* and Khadija Abubakar Jalli's *The Life Changer*. Both novellas trace the psychological and moral development of adolescent female protagonists negotiating the liminal space between childhood and adulthood within the sociocultural and ideological context of contemporary Nigerian society. In *Sweet Sixteen*, Aliya's (the protagonist) maturation is shaped by a morally principled paternal figure, and this reflects the Freudian notion of the superego as an internalized authority that regulates ethical conduct and suppresses instinctual drives (Freud *Civilization and Its Discontents* 54). In contrast, *The Life Changer* presents Salma, the story's protagonist, as a rebellious figure whose fragmented identity and defiance of normative authority suggest deeper unconscious conflicts and symbolic alienation, concepts central to Lacan's account of subjectivity structured by lack and the symbolic order.

While Freud's framework has faced critiques for its Eurocentric, patriarchal, and culturally limited assumptions (Said, 2003, p. 5; Hook, 2007, p. 12), its concepts remain analytically productive when critically adapted to African contexts. Scholars such as Frantz Fanon localized psychoanalysis for colonial and postcolonial realities, while more recent critics emphasize that African literature reconfigures unconscious processes through the cultural logics of kinship, spirituality, and communal values. This paper therefore justifies the use of psychoanalysis not as a rigid Western import but as a flexible interpretive tool capable of illuminating the psychic dimensions of Nigerian adolescent identity.

By employing Freudian concepts to analyze Aliya's moral development and Lacanian theory to explore Salma's fractured selfhood, this study contends that both characters exemplify the unconscious dynamics that shape adolescent identity in Nigerian literature. As Ellie Ragland (2004) asserts, "subjectivity is founded upon a lack," a structural void that organizes desire and ideological positioning within the symbolic order (11). Through a comparative analysis of Aliya's internalization of moral norms and Salma's resistance to symbolic authority, the paper demonstrates how psychoanalytic theory can illuminate the affective and ideological streams that shape youth subjectivity in Nigerian coming-of-age narratives.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing prominence of Nigerian coming-of-age fiction centered on female protagonists, critical scholarship has yet to fully engage with the unconscious psychological dimensions that inform adolescent identity in Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen* and Jalli's *The Life Changer*. Existing interpretations often foreground sociocultural, feminist, or moral frameworks, thereby overlooking the deep psychic structures, mechanisms of repression, and symbolic processes that underpin character development in the selected texts. This study addresses this critical gap by applying Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories to the texts. Specifically, the study examines how unconscious processes such as repression, desire, symbolic authority, and ego defense mechanisms contribute to the construction of female subjectivity. In doing so, the study interrogates how Nigerian youth literature articulates, negotiates, or subverts dominant ideologies and social anxieties surrounding adolescent girlhood through the representational language of the unconscious.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative and comparative approach grounded in psychoanalytic literary criticism. Using Freudian and Lacanian concepts, the study analyzes Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen* and Jalli's *The Life Changer* through close reading, with secondary support from psychoanalytic theory, feminist criticism,

and African youth literature scholarship. The method identifies and interprets textual markers of repression, desire, and identity conflict, then compares the protagonists' trajectories to reveal both shared and divergent patterns of adolescent subjectivity.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic literary criticism, rooted in the foundational work of Freud and later reconfigured by Lacan, offers interpretive frameworks for examining the unconscious structures of identity, repression, and desire within literary texts. Freud (2010), in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, posits that the unconscious governs human behavior through mechanisms such as wish fulfillment, displacement, and repression, rendering literature a symbolic realm where repressed psychic material may surface (Freud, p. 147). His structural model of the psyche: the id, ego, and superego, explains internal conflicts that shape human behavior, particularly during adolescence, a stage when the superego functions as an internalized moral authority mediating between instinctual drives and societal expectations (*The Ego and the Id*, p. 95).

Lacan extends and revises Freud's insights by reimagining the unconscious as structured like a language, foregrounding the 'Symbolic Order' as central to subject formation. His theory of the mirror stage describes the genesis of the ego through a misrecognition of an idealized external image, a formative moment that produces a split between the self and the image, thereby engendering a lifelong sense of lack that fuels desire and alienation (Lacan, 1977, p. 2). Upon entering the 'Symbolic Order,' comprising language, law, and sociocultural norms, the subject is constituted, yet simultaneously constrained. Ragland expands on this notion, arguing that "the subject emerges through loss and is perpetually defined by an absence that cannot be filled" (Ragland, 2004, p. 11). Together, Freud and Lacan establish a theoretical base for exploring adolescence as a site of psychic negotiation, repression, and symbolic fragmentation, where individual development is inseparable from unconscious desire and social inscription.

Feminist psychoanalytic theorists extend these frameworks by interrogating the gendered nature of subject formation. Julia Kristeva (1982), in *Powers of Horror*, explores the concept of abjection, the expulsion of what is unassimilable to the symbolic self, and situates subjectivity within the tension between the semiotic (maternal, bodily impulses) and the symbolic (law and structure) (Kristeva, 1982, 125). Hélène Cixous (1976), in "The Laugh of the Medusa," advocates for *écriture féminine*, a disruptive, bodily mode of writing that resists patriarchal linguistic structures and allows female desire to find expression (95). These feminist interventions reposition psychoanalysis as not only a theory of repression and identity but also a critique of linguistic and cultural systems that silence female subjectivity, thereby offering tools for reading adolescent female characters negotiating patriarchal pressures.

Postcolonial psychoanalysis further enriches this critical framework by accounting for historical traumas and ideological contradictions inherited from colonialism. Fanon (2008), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, interrogates the psychic consequences of colonial domination, arguing that racialized subjects internalize alienation through imposed cultural symbols and values (p. 12). While Fanon's central concern is racial identity, his insights into ideological constraint and symbolic dislocation illuminate the psychic realities of Nigerian youth navigating the complex interplay of tradition, modernity, and moral regulation. By integrating psychoanalysis with postcolonial critique, Fanon demonstrates that unconscious processes are inseparable from historical and political forces, a perspective that enables literary critics to trace how adolescent subjectivity in African texts is haunted by both personal repression and collective trauma.

The application of psychoanalytic theory to African literature, however, has historically faced challenges due to its Eurocentric origins and frequent reductive readings of African cultural expressions. Freud's theories, developed within a Western context, often pathologized non-Western societies, prompting critiques of psychoanalysis as ill-suited for analyzing African texts, which are deeply embedded in communal, spiritual, and historical worldviews (Coullie, 1995, 1–12). In response, scholars such as Abiola Irele and Yemi Ogunbiyi underscore the necessity of adapting critical frameworks to African cultural realities (Irele, 2001, p. 23; Jeyifo, 1985, 41).

Building upon this imperative for theoretical adaptation, Ikechukwu Aloysius Awuzie (2020) redefines psychoanalysis through an African epistemological lens. He argues that the African unconscious is not an individual repository of repressed desire but a collective psychic continuum grounded in ancestral memory, communal ethos, and spiritual cosmology (*Psychoanalysis and the African Literary Tradition*, p. 54). This reconceptualization situates repression and desire within communal rather than purely intrapsychic frameworks, transforming Freudian individuation into a relational, intersubjective process. Similarly, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) challenges the masculinist and Eurocentric bias of psychoanalytic paradigms, proposing an "STIWANIST" (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) reading of the psyche that merges feminist consciousness with African sociocultural realities (*Re-Creating Ourselves*, p. 23). For Ogundipe-Leslie, African women's subjectivity is negotiated not only through patriarchal repression but also through layered encounters with tradition, colonialism, and economic constraint. Together, Awuzie and Ogundipe-Leslie advance a decolonized psychoanalytic hermeneutic, one that honors African communal identity, gendered experience, and historical trauma as integral components of psychic life.

Extending this theoretical reorientation, this intellectual movement aligns with the decolonial vision articulated by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike (1980) in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. They call for the dismantling of Western critical orthodoxies that marginalize indigenous modes of thought, insisting that African literature must evolve from its own cultural and mythopoetic matrix (Chinweizu et al., p. 12). Correspondingly, Wole Soyinka's (1976) *Myth, Literature and the African World* reinforces this by asserting that African creative consciousness is sustained by a living mythic imagination that bridges the visible and the spiritual, the individual and the communal (p. 27). When read alongside Awuzie and Ogundipe-Leslie, these perspectives emphasize that any psychoanalytic engagement with African texts must reckon with the continent's mythic structures, collective memory, and cosmological order. In this way, African psychoanalytic criticism becomes not a mimicry of European theory but a re-inscription of the unconscious within African mythopoesis and cultural self-definition.

In furthering this decolonial psychoanalytic discourse, Allan and Mugambi (2007) caution that African literature resists unmodified Western psychoanalysis and call for culturally sensitive adaptations that balance universal psychic mechanisms with local cultural logics (p. 4). For instance, the "we-self" in many African cultures contrasts with the individualistic focus of Western psychoanalysis, necessitating a reconceptualization of identity, subjectivity, and agency in literary analysis (Serpell, 2014, p. 1). This adaptation process signals not a rejection but a transformation of psychoanalytic thought, enabling a decolonized criticism that foregrounds African epistemologies while remaining theoretically rigorous.

Building on this adaptive framework, African literary texts frequently engage with trauma, identity formation, and colonial histories, themes that resonate with psychoanalytic notions such as repression, the unconscious, and the return of the repressed. By integrating these concepts with an understanding of

African communal experiences and spiritual frameworks, scholars develop a more nuanced psychoanalytic criticism that honors cultural specificity (Helgesson). Localized psychoanalysis, therefore, becomes a dialogical practice that reshapes Western theory while deepening the interpretation of African texts.

This theoretical trajectory finds concrete expression in Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen*, which exemplifies a narrative that privileges moral instruction and paternal mentorship in adolescent development. The protagonist, Aliya, is often interpreted through a didactic lens that emphasizes moral uprightness and emotional stability. However, this reading underplays the deeper psychic dynamics underpinning her identity formation. A Freudian reading highlights how the superego, shaped by her father's authoritative presence, regulates instinctual drives and mediates her engagement with social norms. From a Lacanian perspective, the father functions as the "Name-of-the-Father," anchoring Aliya's entry into the "Symbolic Order" where repression, sublimation, and symbolic obedience structure her identity. Aliya's apparent stability is therefore revealed as the product of negotiated psychic conflicts rather than an innate moral disposition.

In contrast, Jalli's *The Life Changer* presents a more psychologically ambivalent portrayal of female adolescence. Salma, the central character, oscillates between rebellion and compliance, flirtation and restraint, revealing an unstable ego formation marked by unconscious conflict and symbolic alienation. A Lacanian reading exposes deeper fractures: Salma's yearning for recognition and repeated misrecognition of self in others recall the mirror stage, while her resistance to fully entering the "Symbolic Order" signals a refusal of paternal and institutional authority.

Moreover, Kristeva's notion of abjection further clarifies Salma's fragmented identity: she occupies a liminal space between maternal impulses and restrictive gender norms, particularly those enforced within the university and family systems. Her narrative voice, marked by contradictions and affective intensities, echoes *écriture féminine*, suggesting a textual struggle to articulate a feminine subjectivity beyond patriarchal containment. Such an interpretation situates Salma not only within her immediate sociocultural environment but also within the unconscious terrain of resistance, desire, and symbolic fracture, foregrounding her as a complex site of psychic contestation.

Thus, *Sweet Sixteen* and *The Life Changer* emerge as critical sites for psychoanalytic inquiry. The protagonists' journeys of identity formation encapsulate not only overt moral and social dilemmas but also latent psychic tensions marked by repression, alienation, and unconscious desire. Foregrounding these localized intrapsychic dynamics positions this study within an emergent African psychoanalytic criticism that both appropriates and transforms Western theory. Ultimately, the adolescent female psyche in these narratives is revealed not as a passive recipient of social conditioning but as a contested site of repression, desire, symbolic struggle, and cultural negotiation, where the unconscious becomes a crucial locus of literary significance.

Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalytic Reading of Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen*

Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen* is apt for psychoanalytic exploration of adolescent identity, repression, and symbolic authority. The novel intricately dramatizes the psychological terrain of Aliya, a sixteen-year-old girl navigating the pressures of coming-of-age in a society saturated with moral expectations and gendered norms. Freud's structural model of the psyche: id, ego, and superego intersects effectively with Lacan's theory of the 'Symbolic Order' and the 'Name-of-the-Father' to illuminate Aliya's internal conflict and

psychic development. The relationship between Aliya and her father, Mr. Bello, serves as the axis around which the protagonist's moral consciousness and emerging selfhood revolve. This father-daughter dynamic does not merely offer a site of didactic moral instruction but becomes a psychic theatre where unconscious desire, repression, symbolic authority, and ego formation play out. Through Freudian and Lacanian lenses, *Sweet Sixteen* reveals itself not simply as a coming-of-age narrative, but as a layered portrait of adolescent subjectivity entangled in the forces of desire, language, and the law.

Ego Formation, Superego Authority, and Symbolic Identification in Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen*

The narrative of *Sweet Sixteen* foregrounds Aliya's psychological maturation as she confronts the psychic demands of adolescence, a phase Freud identifies as charged with heightened conflict among the id, ego, and superego. Aliya's assertion, "I am not a child. I am a lady" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 11), exemplifies this psychological tension. Her assertion signals a significant shift in ego development and reflects her desire to assert a stable identity distinct from infantilization. Freud theorizes that the ego must constantly mediate between unconscious instinctual desires and the prohibitions of the superego (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 15), and Aliya's rejection of being labeled a "child" exemplifies this negotiation. Her reaction encapsulates not merely a struggle for recognition but a psychological effort to recalibrate her position within the social order as a rational and autonomous subject. This moment initiates the ego's emergence as a mediator of both internal drives and external expectations.

Mr. Bello, her father, assumes a dual function: both as the voice of the superego and as Lacan's 'Symbolic Father.' His sixteenth birthday letter to Aliya, described as "a textbook on life" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 16), performs the function of symbolic transmission, passing down the cultural, religious, and ethical codes that mark Aliya's entry into the Law. The letter offers more than advice; it interpellates her as a moral subject within a defined symbolic system. In Freudian terms, this aligns with the internalization of the father's authority as the superego, which guides moral decision-making and represses illicit desires (Freud 34). Lacan extends this idea, arguing that the 'Name-of-the-Father' installs the subject into language and culture, and Mr. Bello's teachings act as signifiers that inscribe Aliya into the 'Symbolic Order' (*Écrits*, 1977, p. 230). Thus, Aliya's ego develops through a paternal narrative that carries the weight of both psychic and cultural authority.

The pedagogical relationship between Aliya and her father is marked by tension and negotiation rather than passive compliance. When Mr. Bello tells her, "Your mind is like a beautiful room… be careful what you let in" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 15), he offers a metaphor of mental hygiene that encapsulates the superego's regulatory function. Aliya's acceptance of this advice demonstrates the ego's capacity for sublimation, redirecting instinctual energy into culturally valued behavior. Yet, her identity formation is not without resistance. Her interjections: "Why, what's funny?" and "No, Daddy, that cannot be true!" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 13, p. 48), reveal her active role in interrogating the 'Symbolic Order' rather than simply absorbing it. This dynamic mirrors Ragland-Sullivan's view that Lacanian subjectivity is not achieved through mere obedience, but through critical engagement with symbolic authority (p. 78). Aliya's resistance is thus an essential part of her psycho-emotional evolution.

Aliya's ability to reflect on peer pressure and sexual integrity is emblematic of the Freudian superego's successful internalization. When she says, "Most young adults have boyfriends," but immediately rejects the idea for herself (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 31), she performs what Freud describes as repression: excluding desire from consciousness under the pressure of moral constraint (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 148). This is not, however, an example of neurotic repression; rather, it is a case of sublimation where desire is transformed into self-discipline. Her father's injunction: "Don't allow anybody… to touch you in your private parts" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 16) serves not only as moral warning but also as cultural inscription

that frames Aliya's sexual subjectivity within a regime of modesty and self-restraint. Freud believes the superego to be the heir of the 'Oedipus complex,' preserving the father's moral law (p. 34), while Lacan views the paternal function as structural, embedding the subject within legal and linguistic norms.

The culmination of these dynamics is the emergence of a stable, though not unconflicted, adolescent ego. Aliya navigates a psychic terrain shaped by instinctual impulses, parental expectations, social norms, and gendered ideologies. Her moral compass, honed by paternal instruction, does not result in unthinking obedience but reflective self-awareness. In Freudian terms, she achieves ego strength: the capacity to function realistically while managing internal tensions. From a Lacanian angle, her critical engagement with symbolic injunctions reveals her subjectivity not as fixed, but as a site of continual re-signification. Through Aliya's psychological evolution, *Sweet Sixteen* maps a journey where identity is not imposed but dialectically negotiated within the psychic matrix of desire, repression, and the law.

Repression, Dream Logic, and the Adolescent Unconscious

Freud's concept of repression, which involves the unconscious exclusion of unacceptable desires, is key to understanding Aliya's oscillation between curiosity and denial, especially around themes of sexuality. In a telling moment, she says, "I think I should have a boyfriend… Because I am now a young adult… Because most young adults have boyfriends" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 31). Here, the repetition of "because" signals rationalization: a defense mechanism that masks unconscious desire in socially acceptable reasoning. Aliya's libidinal longing is not stated explicitly; it is displaced into the language of normative expectation, reflecting Freud's idea that the ego censors the id's desires through rational substitution (*The Ego and the Id*, p. 32). When Mr. Bello questions her directly, she responds with rapid denial: "Me? No, I don't have a boyfriend" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 31), and this exposes the tension between desire and repression.

This repression does not however remain inert; it returns as affective ambivalence, confusion, and psychic discomfort. As Madelon Sprengnether asserts, repression leaves behind "psychic traces… that resurface in behavior and slips" (p. 44). Aliya's defensiveness, emotional swings, and reflective monologues indicate the unconscious at work, manifesting through hesitation and contradiction. Her father's moral injunctions, particularly concerning sexual purity, take on the role of what Freud calls the superego's "moral overseer" (Freud 34). For a young female subject, these strictures embody both protective concern and patriarchal surveillance, echoing wider societal expectations around gender and sexual conduct. Lacan's theory complements this view by positioning such injunctions as symbolic signifiers that inscribe the subject within the linguistic and cultural codes of femininity.

Despite these internal conflicts, Aliya does not succumb to repression in a destructive form. Instead, she engages in what Freud termed 'sublimation:' the redirection of repressed desires into higher-order activities such as moral reflection, intellectual growth, and emotional maturity (*Civilization and Its Discontents,* p. 44). Her self-questioning and choice to forgo romantic involvement are framed not as losses but as assertions of self-respect. Mr. Bello's metaphor of the mind as a "beautiful room" becomes a symbolic injunction to safeguard psychological integrity by resisting the contamination of vulgarity and moral decay (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 15). In this sense, Aliya's character performs a successful sublimation of desire into virtue, echoing Freud's notion of culture as a byproduct of rechanneled instincts.

Though *Sweet Sixteen* lacks explicit dream sequences, it enacts what Freud describes as "dream logic:" the mechanisms of displacement, condensation, and symbolic substitution that characterize unconscious thought (*Introductory Lectures* 189). Aliya's linguistic aversion to the word "child," which she equates

with "stupid" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 1), represents displacement, where a signifier (child) carries a surplus of repressed affect. This rejection reveals latent anxieties about powerlessness, infantilization, and lack of agency. Rather than through night-time dreams, the unconscious expresses itself in Aliya's metaphors, slips, tone shifts, and contradictions, what Maud Ellmann calls "the emotional register" of displaced psychic conflict (p. 93). Her subjectivity becomes a narrative site where the unconscious finds voice not in fantasy but in language.

Anna Freud's analysis of adolescent defense mechanisms is useful here. Aliya's sarcasm, deflection, and rationalization reveal an ego under pressure to manage both internal drives and external rules. As Anna Freud (1993) notes, adolescence is marked by the need to "defend against both the id's drive-impulses and the newly intensified superego prohibitions" (p. 134). Aliya's inner world is marked by contradiction: she respects her father's moral codes yet questions them; she desires autonomy yet seeks approval. These polarities reflect a psyche navigating what Lacan describes as the split subject – divided between conscious self-perception and unconscious desire. Her voice, often monologic and uncertain, is saturated with the affective residue of this internal division.

Ultimately, Aliya's psychological arc reflects a non-linear path of adolescent subject formation. Her identity is forged not in spite of repression but through its sublimation and symbolic negotiation. Freud's and Lacan's frameworks allow us to see *Sweet Sixteen* not just as a didactic tale but as a psychoanalytic case study in the making of the modern subject. Through repression, sublimation, symbolic inscription, and critical engagement with paternal law, Aliya emerges not as a finished moral agent, but as a dynamic subject navigating the interstices of desire, authority, and ethical agency.

A Lacanian and Freudian Psychoanalytic Reading of Jalli's *The Life Changer*

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly his concepts of the 'mirror stage,' the 'Symbolic Order,' the 'Real,' and desire as structured by 'lack' offers a powerful framework for interpreting the psychic and social contradictions embodied by Salma, the protagonist of *The Life Changer*. Rather than viewing Salma as a merely wayward adolescent who learns a moral lesson, a Lacanian reading reveals her as a divided subject formed through alienation in language, dependent on the gaze of the 'Other,' and haunted by the fantasy of a coherent identity. Her journey from imaginary' self-construction through symbolic disruption to moments of confrontation with the 'Real' demonstrates how subjectivity is never fully whole, autonomous, or self-possessed. A close reading of Salma's experiences through Lacanian concepts reveals how her desires, crises, and moral appeals express these deeper unconscious structures.

Symbolic Collapse and Gendered Identity Formation in Jalli's *The Life Changer*

Lacan's psychoanalytic framework is apt for interpreting Salma's psychological and social disintegration in *The Life Changer*. Central to this is Lacan's notion of the 'Real;' that which is beyond symbolization, the traumatic kernel that resists integration into meaning. Salma's encounter with the 'Real' occurs in a moment of institutional rejection and public disgrace. Her failed attempt to manipulate academic outcomes through bribery and flirtation - "She was endowed as a woman and was too willing to flaunt her elegance" (Jalli, 2020, p. 28), marks the point at which her 'Imaginary' identifications collapse. The seductive image she projects loses all efficacy; she is expelled from the university, and the loss is not simply reputational but rather ontological. Her expulsion means she eventually ceases to exist within the coordinates of symbolic legitimacy.

Salma's expulsion from university signals a violent ejection from what Lacan terms the 'symbolic order,' enacting symbolic castration, and this serves as a reminder of her inability to circumvent the Law, figured in Lacan as the 'Name-of-the-Father,' the symbolic function that prohibits certain desires and organizes

social meaning. However, her desperate prayer, "Please God do not let me be rubbished like this... I promise to renew my ways..." (Jalli, 2020, p. 54), becomes less a religious appeal and more an unconscious cry to the 'Big Other,' Lacan's term for the imagined locus of symbolic authority. Her plea reveals a desire to be reinscribed into the 'Symbolic Order,' to regain a legible identity within the law's gaze. Yet in the same breath, she displaces responsibility: "You made us fallible" (Jalli, 2020, p. 54). This illustrates defense mechanisms such as denial and projection. She cannot fully accept her own complicity, oscillating between guilt and rage, revealing herself as the divided subject governed by unconscious conflict.

Lacan's mirror stage further illuminates Salma's fractured subjectivity. In this developmental moment, the subject misrecognizes itself in the mirror, forming a coherent image that conceals inner fragmentation. Salma's self-image is shaped similarly through imaginary identifications with external symbols of desirability. Her dependence on male validation is evident: "She reveled in the hunger she saw in the eyes of men" (Jalli, 2020, p. 28). This gaze confers a false sense of wholeness. Even her rejection of Dr. Dabo: "Even if the world is bereft of men, I would never go out with a man such as you" (Jalli, 2020, p. 30), for example, is structured within this symbolic logic. Her defiance does not originate in autonomy but is articulated in relation to male desire. Lacan's dictum that "desire is the desire of the Other" becomes relevant here: Salma desires to be desired, not as a subject of her own volition, but as a reflection of social fantasies.

Her disillusionment: "No man ever treated her for her essence; they all related to her based on her looks" (Jalli, 2020, p. 62), reveals a psychic impasse. While resenting objectification, she remains invested in the very economy that objectifies her. Feminist psychoanalysts such as Luce Irigaray argue that female subjectivity within the phallocentric Symbolic is either fetishized, silenced, or erased. Lacan's provocative claim that "Woman does not exist" points to this structural exclusion: woman is not represented as a coherent subject in language but as a lack, a signifier for male desire. Salma becomes this blank space, made visible only through her sexuality or her failure. Hence, her tragedy is not simply personal but systemic. She is not a flawed individual but a symptom of a Symbolic Order that grants women visibility only through beauty, seduction, or collapse. As theorist Joan Copjec (1994) notes that "female subjectivity is misrecognized through the screen of male fantasy", and Salma's entire psychic structure unfolds within this logic.

The moment of 'jouissance,' Lacan's term for transgressive and excessive pleasure, compounds this collapse. Salma's seductive manipulation: "I would give you one hundred thousand... If it does not work, I would so scream..." (Jalli, 2020, p. 61), is not merely strategic. It reveals a pleasure in defying symbolic authority, in violating the very norms that structure her subjectivity. Jouissance, in this context, is both a high and a trap: she enjoys her transgression, but it ultimately overwhelms her. As Lacan notes, jouissance begins where pleasure ends, becoming guilt-ridden, painful, and destabilizing. As such, Salma's enjoyment lies not in success but in the performance of risk. When this fantasy collapses, she becomes not a desiring subject but the castrated object of social ridicule. Her despair: "I have been duped. She told herself and began to cry" (Jalli, 2020, p. 63), marks the psychoanalytic moment of symbolic death, where the imaginary no longer sustains the illusion of coherence, and the 'Real' erupts as unbearable failure.

Superego, Repression, and the Real

Salma's psychological unraveling intensifies following her examination malpractice scandal, and this provides a rich context for a Freudian-Lacanian exploration of guilt, repression, and the superego. Her

emotional reaction to an unconscious slip of mentioning Kolawole's name before the Examination Malpractice Committee: "Salma's stomach sank... Why did she make a slip like that?" (Jalli, 2020, p. 62), is a textbook instance of parapraxis. Freud, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, explains that slips of the tongue are not random but the return of the repressed: moments when unconscious guilt pierces the ego's defenses. Salma's body reacts before her mind rationalizes, a signal that the superego has been triggered. This inner agency, derived from cultural and parental authority, functions as a "harsh master" (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 15), condemning the subject for moral transgressions.

This moral reckoning is projected onto her relationships with men: "Except for her father, no man, indeed no man, was worthy of being called a man" (Jalli, 2020, p. 63). Her father, idealized and untouched by desire, becomes both superego figure and ego ideal: the impossible standard by which all others (and herself) are judged. Feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin observes that daughters often construct the father as a fantasy of moral order to ward off inner conflict (82). In Salma's case, this results in emotional rigidity: others are either protectors or predators, while she floats in a liminal state between victim and transgressor. Unlike Aliya's father in *Sweet Sixteen*, who functions as a dialogic mediator of moral and symbolic codes, Salma's father is emotionally and discursively absent; symbolically present but imaginarily fixed.

Thus, Salma's psychic instability is shielded by Freudian defense mechanisms: repression, projection, and rationalization. She represses her own culpability, projects blame onto men like Kolawole and Dr. Kabir, and rationalizes her behavior with moral outrage: "They claimed they were helping her by exploiting her" (Jalli, 2020, p. 62). Freud describes rationalization as a technique the ego uses to reframe anxiety-producing actions in acceptable terms (*The Ego and the Id*, p. 23). Salma's self-perception shifts from agent to victim, preserving her sense of moral coherence. However, these defenses collapse when the father, who is supposed to serve as the 'Name-of-The-Father,' the metaphor that anchors symbolic identity, fails to function. Lacan argues that the 'Name-of-The-Father' separates the subject from maternal dependence and installs the law of difference, allowing full symbolic integration. Salma's father, idealized but passive, does not fulfill this role. He becomes a 'dear signifier:' revered but silent, leaving Salma stuck in the imaginary, unable to mediate contradiction or regulate psychic tension.

Salma's confrontation with the 'Real' and psychological breakdown, "She told herself and began to cry" (Jalli, 2020, p. 63), represents not a moment of catharsis, but a psychic rupture. Bruce Fink (1995) writes, "The subject comes face-to-face with the Real when the symbolic scaffolding collapses" (p. 96). For Salma, this collapse entails the loss of all organizing fantasies: beauty, manipulation, superiority, and moral innocence. Her psyche has no symbolic frame to contain the failure. The 'Real' is not the event itself but the inassimilable affect it produces – an anxiety beyond representation. Her tears are not redemptive but symptomatic of her exclusion from meaning. In Lacan's terms, she does not recover; she is unmade as a subject.

Salma's tragedy, then, is not merely moral or social. Rather, it is structural and psychic. Her subjectivity is forged through a phallocentric symbolic that both fetishizes and punishes her femininity. Her unconscious is saturated with gendered contradictions: she is asked to be beautiful but modest, desirable but moral, seductive but innocent. She fails not because she is inherently flawed but because the discursive frameworks available to her do not allow for a coherent female subject position. She is spoken before she speaks, gazed at before she gazes, and judged before she acts. *The Life Changer*, under Freudian and Lacanian analysis, becomes a case study in female alienations, dramatizing the psychic toll of navigating a 'Symbolic Order' in which the woman, at least as a fully articulated subject, does not exist.

Adolescent Identity in *Sweet Sixteen* and *The Life Changer*: A Comparative Analysis

A psychoanalytic reading of *Sweet Sixteen* and *The Life Changer* reveals contrasting trajectories of adolescent psychological development, embodied in the characters of Aliya and Salma. While both girls navigate patriarchal expectations, moral injunctions, and the turbulence of sexual maturation, their responses mediated by symbolic authority and internal psychic structures diverge sharply. Aliya's development reflects a relatively integrated ego, nurtured through moral dialogue and benevolent superego mediation. In contrast, Salma's subjectivity unravels in the absence of symbolic containment, fragmenting across a terrain marked by imaginary identifications and unregulated desire. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theory, this section explores how the psychosexual maturation of these protagonists is shaped by the presence, or foreclosure, of symbolic scaffolding.

Aliya's psychic formation in *Sweet Sixteen* is anchored in what Freud describes as a balanced and mediating ego. Her capacity to reconcile internal drives and external norms is facilitated by her father, Mr. Bello, whose dialogic and reflective paternal role provides a grounding moral structure. Rather than exercising punitive authority, he engages Aliya in meaningful conversations about values, sexuality, and responsibility. This discursivity is captured in one of Mr. Bello's remarks, "It is normal for parents to want their children to follow in their footsteps, I suppose. However, it is important that parents allow their children to choose" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 5). In Freudian terms, Mr. Bello functions not as a repressive superego, but as an ego ideal: an internalized model of moral reasoning and restraint (Freud, 1960, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 34). His presence exemplifies the symbolic father: one who mediates the law without invoking shame, allowing the adolescent subject to internalize norms without neurotic repression.

Through this sustained moral discourse, Aliya learns to sublimate her emerging libidinal energies into self-awareness and intellectual curiosity. Mr. Bello's treatment of sexual desire, "People have desires for different gratifications… [Sex] is naturally desirable… but the price… is just the time you have to wait" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 27), promotes ethical self-regulation rather than guilt. This reflects Freud's notion of 'sublimation,' whereby instinctual drives are redirected into culturally acceptable forms. By affirming her agency while framing desire within moral reflection, Mr. Bello facilitates Aliya's symbolic integration. As a result, Aliya constructs a 'self' grounded not in external validation but in internalized moral coherence: "To me these qualities are even more difficult to find in people than the physical beauty" (Abdullahi, 2017, p. 49). Her psychic architecture allows for the negotiation of adolescent conflict without falling into repression or fragmentation.

Salma, by contrast, occupies a fractured psychic terrain in *The Life Changer*, one dominated by imaginary identifications and a fundamental lack of symbolic mediation. Her subjectivity is shaped primarily through external images of beauty and social desire. Her performative femininity, "tight-fitting jeans trousers and body hugs top... men... shamelessly ogled her" (Jalli, 2020, p. 28), reflects Lacan's *mirror stage*, wherein the ego is formed through a misrecognition of the self in an idealized reflection (*Écrits*, p. 94). Salma constructs her identity in response to how others perceive her, especially through the male gaze, rendering her ego highly unstable and vulnerable to symbolic rupture. She does not desire in her own right; rather, she becomes the object of the Other's desire.

Crucially, Salma's world is marked by the foreclosure of the 'Name-of-the-Father,' the Lacanian term for the symbolic function that introduces the subject into the law of difference, language, and prohibition. Her father, though admired retrospectively, "except for her father, no man was worthy of being called a man" (Jalli, 2020, p. 63), does not perform this symbolic function. He is absent from the narrative as a dialogic or moral force, leaving Salma's psychic development without mediation. In Lacan's schema, such foreclosure leads to a failure of symbolic inscription, rendering the subject vulnerable to 'jouissance,' unbounded desire, and psychotic collapse (*Seminar III*, p. 321). Salma operates outside a stabilizing

symbolic structure, and instead engages with the world through commodified and visual codes: "When it comes to money, every man has his price… ours [women] is a given" (Jalli, 2020, p. 59). Her pursuit of the *objet petit a,* Lacan's object-cause of desire, is endless and unsatisfying, caught in a loop of seduction and rejection that yields no stable identity (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 103).

This psychic dislocation culminates in a symbolic breakdown when Salma is caught in an examination malpractice scandal. Her plea: "you should have allowed me be… the matter would have died in the class" (Jalli, 2020, p. 53), reveals her misapprehension of authority and her resistance to institutional regulation. It also signals her encounter with the 'Real,' the Lacanian concept of the traumatic kernel that resists symbolization. As Fink observes, the 'Real' erupts when the symbolic scaffolding collapses, leaving the subject without coordinates of meaning (p. 96). Thus, Salma's implosion is not merely emotional or disciplinary: it is structural. The absence of paternal law, the dominance of the gaze, and the failure of imaginary coherence produce a subject vulnerable to disintegration.

As such, the contrast between Aliya and Salma dramatizes broader cultural tensions in Nigerian society, especially around adolescent femininity, sexuality, and moral regulation. While both characters are shaped by gendered norms, Aliya's experience is buffered by symbolic inclusion and ethical dialogue. Salma, in contrast, is subjected to a contradictory cultural script that objectifies women while punishing their agency. Her inner conflict exemplifies what Benjamin calls "the split between assertion and submission" in female development (p. 90). She is celebrated for her allure, yet condemned for acting on her desire. Her psychic oscillation between self-assertion and shame is not a personal failing but a symptom of patriarchal symbolic economy, where femininity is both commodified and pathologized.

Ultimately, these contrasting psychoanalytic portraits illustrate the stakes of symbolic integration in adolescent identity formation. Aliya's development shows the possibilities of ego cohesion when paternal mediation and ethical discourse are present. On the other hand, Salma's trajectory reveals the psychic consequences of symbolic foreclosure: a subject formed through misrecognition, fragmented by desire, and shattered by the gaze. Both narratives attest to the deep psychic investments at play in female adolescence and the structural importance of symbolic authority in shaping desire, morality, and selfhood.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated how adolescent female identity in contemporary Nigerian society, reflected in Abdullahi's *Sweet Sixteen* and Jalli's *The Life Changer,* is shaped by unconscious structures, symbolic mediation, and cultural scripts of gender and desire. In *Sweet Sixteen*, Aliya's stable ego emerges through the ethical presence of her father, whose dialogic authority enables symbolic integration and psychic balance. In contrast, *The Life Changer* portrays Salma as a fragmented subject: overdetermined by the gaze, estranged from symbolic law, and undone by unmediated desire. These divergent trajectories have exposed the psychic costs of gendered socialization and underscored the central role of symbolic containment, paternal authority, and cultural discourse in adolescent development.

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