A FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC READING
OF KILLMONGER’S CHARACTERISTICS IN BLACK PANTHER

THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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INTRODUCTION

*Black Panther* is a movie that tells us about a hero and a king of Wakanda named T’Challa. This story narrates about the journey of T’Challa in becoming the king of Wakanda and a Black Panther. Despite T’Challa’s power and success, there was a person who wanted T’Challa to be dead and took his position as the king of Wakanda. He was Killmonger, the son of N’Jobu. His motivation to kill T’Challa and replace his position as king of Wakanda was to revenge for his father who was killed by T’Challa’s father when Killmonger was still a kid.

Revenge is considered to have a negative connotation. However, many stories describe revenge, and seem to justify, if not support, their character who struggle to take revenge for their parents’ unnatural death, especially if the murdered parents are kind characters. *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* are only two examples of revenge in canon literature and popular culture, in which a son would like to take revenge for their father's death. Although Prince Hamlet was also killed in his efforts to revenge for his father's death, readers feel sympathetic to him. Similarly, in *The Lion King*, Simba successfully killed his father's murderer but he is not described as one who has done something evil.

In *Black Panther* T’Challa inherited his position as a king from his father, who murdered Killmonger’s father. In other words, Killmonger was T’Challa's father's victim. He did not only lose his father, but also had to live outside his home country. When he returned to Wakanda to take revenge for his father's death, he did not cause any trouble to the people nor the country. He killed T’Challa in a fair challenge. Because those who won the challenge deserved to be the king of Wakanda, his success should be justifiable. However, most people in Wakanda felt disappointed when they realized that Killmonger was their new king. For them, the best king was T’Challa, although Killmonger deserves to be the king after he had defeated T’Challa in a fair battle.

Killmonger seems to be ambiguously described. He is pictured as a hero who successfully revenges for his father's death through a fair duel. This narration should make readers feel sympathetic to Killmonger. In contrast, he is not described as a 'lovable' character because Wakanda people preferred to have T’Challa as their king. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine what Killmonger is actually like or what his characteristics
are because characteristics is a feature or quality belonging typically to an individual which makes them different from others.

Since this study would particularly examine one of the main characters of Black Panther, i.e. Killmonger, it would borrow the theory of character and characterization to help the researcher focus her examination. Besides, to dig out the characteristics of Killmonger, it is necessary to look into his id, ego and superego deeply. These three elements greatly influence an individual’s characteristics. The balance between id, ego and superego can cause an individual to have healthy characteristics but their imbalance can lead to an individual with maladaptive characteristics. As Freud states, the human psyche (personality) has more than one aspect and that the psyche is structured into three parts; i.e. the id, ego, and superego (qtd. in Barry 70).

Therefore, this research would focus on answering the question of what Killmonger is actually like or what his characteristics are as depicted in Black Panther seen from Freud’s psychoanalytic criticism. In other words, this research aimed to find out Killmonger’s characteristics as revealed through his id, ego, superego, anxiety, and core issues to find out what shape them.

The findings of this research will contribute to the discussion of literary criticism. They are also expected to help the students of English Language and Literature to better understand the theory of psychoanalytic criticism and its application. This study is expected to help the readers be more aware that an individual’s characteristics may be influenced by some factors. They do not appear with no reason. In turn, they will understand themselves as well as other people better.

There are many researchers who have analyzed Black Panther. One of them was done by Euodia Inge Gavenilla and Yohanes Arsadik P.H. in their research titled “Code Switching in Black Panther Movie as a Result of Afro-Futurism in Films”, they examined the Afro-futurism factors affecting code switching in Black Panther and the code-switching repertoires.

One of the previous studies which analyzed a novel using Freudian Psychoanalytic Criticism was done by Fitri Nur Khoiriyah. In “A Psychoanalysis of The Main Character Dilemma in Richard Prescott Officially Dead”, Nur Khoiriyah aimed to describe how the id,
ego, and superego of two characters in the novel “Officially Dead” by Richard Prescott influence them in making decision. Unlike Nur Khoiriyah’s study, this study had a different research object, i.e. Black Panther, and would focus on examining Killmonger’s id, ego, and superego to find out his characteristics. Characteristics, or also known as traits, is a feature or quality which differentiate an individual from others and makes them easy to recognize.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character and Characterization

According to Bacon, character refers to the people, animals or objects that a story is about. It is divided into two types, protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist is the main character in the story and it becomes the main focus of the audiences. It is usually in conflicts with the antagonist, who is always againsts the protagonist and causes problem for it (1).

Bacon defines characterization as a technique that the author uses to help the audiences get know the characters in the story and what the characters are like. It aims to acquaint characters’ values, feeling, goals, etc. to the audiences. There are two kinds of characterization used by authors. They are direct characterization and indirect characterization. When an author applies the direct characterization, they will tell the informations of the characters directly through the narration. Whereas, when an author applies the indirect characterization, the characters are described through their actions and the audiences themselves must interpret what the action reveal about the character (1).

Characterization has four levels to help the audiences understand the characters. The four levels are physical level, social level, psychological level, and moral level. The physical level informs the characters’ external traits only such as sex, age, and size. The social level includes economic status, profession, religion, family, and social relationship which determine the characters’ place in their environment. Psychological level helps the audiences to reveal the characters’ habitual responses, attitudes, desires, motivation, like and dislike that influence the characters’ action. It is the most essential part of characterization level. Moral level refers to the characters’ effort to get what they want. It also contains the information about the characters’ values, beliefs, and true nature (Koesnobroto 67).
Psychoanalysis

Freud believed that events in someone’s childhood have great effects on someone’s adult life and shape his/her personality. Because psychoanalysis aims to help individuals resolve their psychological problems, it focuses on patterns of destructive behavior. It is said as patterns because individuals’ repetition of destructive behavior reveals the existence of some significant psychological difficulty that has probably been influencing them for some time without their knowing it. Hence, Freud’s works depend on the notion of the unconscious. It is the part of mind beyond consciousness which has strong influence upon an individual’s actions. The unconscious appears when an individual used to experience repression, the expunging from consciousness, and unhappy psychological events (Tyson 12).

Three Levels of the Mind

Aside from the conscious and unconscious, Freud also introduces a term called the preconscious. These three terms are known as the three levels of the mind.

The first level is the conscious. The conscious mind includes everything that individuals are aware of. It is the aspect of the mind which can be thought and talked about rationally. The second level of the mind is the preconscious. It is a kind of the unconscious which is latent but capable of becoming the conscious. It represents ordinary memory. Generally, individuals are not consciously aware of the information contained in the preconscious, but it can still be brought out into consciousness at any time. The third level of the mind is called the unconscious. The unconscious is the level of the mind which is repressed and incapable of becoming conscious in the ordinary way. The unconscious mostly contains unpleasant memories, such as feeling of pain, anxiety, and conflict (Siegfried 1 & 2).

The notion of unconscious is very important in the works of Freud, knowing that all of his works depend on the notion. Freud obtains the concept of the unconscious from the theory of repression. Repression is a state in which an idea has existed before it becomes or be brought out into conscious. The repressed is the prototype of the unconscious (Freud 3 & 4). Repression also can be defined as the forgetting or ignoring of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events, so they will not arise as a conscious awareness, but they will remain in the realm of unconscious (Barry 70). Therefore, the unconscious is
a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of individual’s conscious awareness and Freud believes that it continually influences behaviour and experience although there is no awareness of the influences (qtd. in Siegfried 2).

Freud then applied the three level of minds: consious, preconscious, and unconscious into his structure of personality: id, ego, and superego.

**Id, Ego, Superego**

Freud states that the human psyche (personality) has more than one aspect and that the psyche is structured into three parts; i.e. the id, ego, and superego (qtd. in Barry 70). The id is the part of the psycho which is unorganized and contains a human’s instinctual drives. The id is present at birth and it is the source of human’s bodily needs, wants, and desires especially sexual and aggressive drives. The id is an entirely unconscious aspect of the psyche and, according to Freud, it is the source of human physic energy which makes it as the primary component of personality. Freud also stated that the id also contains libido, which is the primary source of instinctual force which is unresponsive to the demand of reality. The id is driven by the pleasure principle which seek immediate satisfaction of all needs, wants, and desires (qtd. in Siegfried 1).

The desires of the id cause the ego to exist. The Ego ensures that the desires of the id are actualized in acceptable ways in the real world. It prevents individuals from behaving based on their inner desire or urge, which is created by their id. It works with the individuals’ moral and idealistic standard which is created by their superego (Freud 10). In other words, the ego operates based on the reality principle. It also distinguishes between fantasy and reality. It organizes thoughts and makes sense of the world. It represents reason and common sense. Its job is to serve the three masters: the external world, the id, and the superego (Siegfried 1 & 2). Therefore, the ego operates in the conscious as well as unconscious realms to tie the id’s wildness (Freud 10).

Then the third structure of the psyche is superego. Superego works according to the moral principle. It is something that individuals learned and get from their parents. This something enables them to internalize the cultural rules. Striving to act in socially acceptable manners, superego often contradicts to the desires of the id, so the ego has to mediate between the two (Siegfried 2). It is influenced by processes which are unknown to the ego.
It is possible to discover the repressed impulses which are really at the bottom of the sense of guilt. Thus, superego knows about the unconscious id better than the ego (Freud 28).

**Anxiety and Core Issues**

When the ego struggles to bring about harmony between the impulses of the id and the restrictions of the superego, it will break out into anxiety (Siegfried 3). Anxiety is an important experience which reveals individual’s core issues. Core issues consist of negative feelings which stay with individuals throughout their life, unless they are effectively addressed. They determine the behavior in destructive ways unwittingly. They may take the forms of fear of intimacy, fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, Low self-esteem, Insecure or unstable sense of self, and Oedipal fixation or oedipal complex. Fear of intimacy is a chronic or emotionally feeling of an individual which considers that emotional closeness will seriously hurt or destroy them and they can remain emotionally safe only by remaining at an emotional distance at all times. Fear of abandonment takes the forms of physical abandonment and emotional abandonment. Physical abandonment refers to an individual’s unshakable belief that their friends and loved ones are going to desert them, while emotional abandonment is an individual’s fear that their friends do not really care about them. Fear of betrayal is an individual’s feeling that their friends and loved ones cannot be trusted. Low self-esteem is belief that an individual is less worthy than other people and does not deserve attention, love, or any other life’s rewards. Insecure or unstable sense of self is an inability to sustain a feeling of personal identity, to sustain a sense of ourselves. The last, oedipal complex is a dysfunctional bond with a parent of the opposite sex that we do not outgrow in adulthood and that does not allow an individual to develop mature relationship with their peers (Tyson 16 & 17).

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

**Black Panther**

Killmonger, whose true name was N’Jadaka and American name was Erik Stevens, lost his father when he was still a kid. He and his father lived outside Wakanda, their motherland, and they spent their life in America. Living outside Wakanda had made his father realized that the people like them, the black people, all over the world were living in
poverty. Thus, his father had mission to make black people more powerful than white people. He helped Klaw, the enemy of Wakanda, spreading the secret treasure of Wakanda named vibranium to all the world. By thus, he hoped that he could arm black people with vibranium weapon. This leads King T’Chaka, T’Challa’s father, to visit Killmonger’s father in America. King T’Chaka questioned his motivation to betray Wakanda and finally killed him.

**Psychoanalytic Reading of Black Panther**

To find out Killmonger’s characteristics, this study would examine his id, ego, and superego. The discussion would start with his id because id is the primary component of personality which is the source of human’s bodily needs, wants, desires, and impulses (Siegfried 1). To fulfill the desire of id, ego appears to ensure that the id are actualized in acceptable ways (Freud 10). However, superego often contradicts to the desires of the id, so the ego has to mediate between the two (Freud qtd. in Siegfried 2).

The discussion would be continued by the examination of Killmonger’s anxiety and core issues. Anxiety happens when the ego fails to bring harmony between the impulses of the id and the restriction of the superego (Siegfried 3). Anxiety will reveal an individual’s core issues. Core issues consist of negative feelings which stay with individuals throughout their life, unless they are effectively addressed and they determine the behavior in destructive ways unwittingly (Tyson 17).

**Killmonger’s Id, Ego, and Superego**

The id aspect performed by Killmonger seems to be influenced by his father’s death. His needs for love indicates his id. His id can be seen through his statement toward T’Challa when they were fighting.

“The world took everything away from me! Everything I ever loved.” (*Black Panther* 1:50:44)

His statement expresses his anger and disappointment because he lost everything he loved. He emphasized the phrase “everything” which refers to his father and the affection of a father that he should get if his father was not dead. The phrase “Everything” also refers to the things he lost along with his father’s death. He lost his Wakandan family and the right
as a royal family because King T’Chaka left him outside Wakanda after killing his father. Killmonger also expressed his deep anger when he used the phrase “the world” which refers to King T’Chaka as the main cause of his suffer. Because of King T’Chaka, he must grow up without the love from people. His anger and disappointment have showed how strong his need for love, especially from his father and family.

His desire to have affection from father has indicates his instinctual drive as a son (Siegfried 1). However, he could not get the immediate satisfaction for his id since his father died. Even, he could not obtain affection from his Wakandan family because he was left alone outside Wakanda by his father’s murderer. He then repressed his id in the realm of unconscious because he could not resolve his id to get love when he was a kid (Barry 70).

As grown up, Killmonger’s ego appears to actualize his id (Freud 10). He could not get affection from his father so he sought affection from his Wakandan family in form of recognition. His ego then tries to satisfy his id by being an insider of Wakanda.

His ego to be an insider is form of his attempt to get affection from Wakandan in form of recognition. He needs to be considered as an insider again after being considered as an outsider in his entire life. His ego to go back to Wakanda is evidenced by his request to Klaw, his partner, to drop him off in Wakanda.

“Oh, I ain’t worried about the money, bro. I know you good for it. On our way back, just drop us off in Wakanda.”

“You don’t want to go there, boy.”

“Yeah, I do.” (Black Panther 1:02:22)

He seemed to brave himself to go back to Wakanda although he had never been there since his father’s death. Klaw had warned him not to go there but he insisted reflecting how he tried hard to realize his id.

However, his superego warns him that he might not be welcomed as a Wakandan as his father’s spirit told him.

“But I fear you still may not be welcomed.”
“Why?”

“Well looked at what I’ve done. I should’ve taken you back long ago. Instead, we are abandoned here.”

(Killmonger shed a tear) “Well maybe your home is the one that lost.” (Black Panther 1:27:11)

As superego learned and get from parents (Siegfried 2), his father had told him that the Wakandan would not receive them for what his father had done. His father used to betray Wakanda for helping Klaw stealing vibranium, a valuable mineral of Wakanda. This means, his superego tells him that he could not get affection from his Wakandan family.

Killmonger’s superego has contradicted to his id, so his ego tries to mediate between the two (Siegfried 2). However, Killmonger seemed to ignore his superego since he insisted to encourage himself to go back to Wakanda. It can be seen from his ignorance toward Klaw’s warning that he should not go to Wakanda (Black Panther 1:02:22). His ego then justifies all means to make sure that the Wakandan are willing to accept him by killing Klaw who was the enemy of Wakanda. However, Killing Klaw was not easy because he was a wily enemy. Klaw was a genius planner and deceiver because he had managed to escape from Wakandan’s authorities for almost thirty years (Black Panther 36:11). Acting based on reason and common sense, Killmonger then set up a trick to deceive Klaw. He joined Klaw’s team and helped Klaw steal a Wakandan artifact (Black Panther 16:24). Being Klaw’s partner would ease him to kill Klaw without getting any resistance. By killing Klaw, Killmonger does two things at one time. First, his family’s name would be rehabilitated because he had killed the Wakandans’ enemy. In result, he changed his family’s label from being a traitor to a hero. Second, the Wakandans’ could not object to his return because he had shown his loyalty to Wakanda. Thus, he got his need of affection in form of recognition from the Wakandan.

His needs for love also drives his ego to be the king of Wakanda. Being a king should make him receive love in form of honors, obedience, and service from the Wakandan. His ego can be seen through his statement when T’Challa asked his purpose going to Wakanda.
“I want the throne. Y’all sitting up here comfortable. Must feel good.” *(Black Panther 1:14:16)*

He considered that having a throne means he would get privileges as a king. When he said that T’Challa sit in the throne comfortably, it means that he saw T’Challa got obedience and service from the Wakandan which he actually wants to be his. His ego is also showed when he was fighting T’Challa.

“Your reign is over! You sat up here, safe and protected.” *(Black Panther 1:50:28)*

He assumed that T’Challa got protection from Wakandan in his whole life, while he lived unprotected since he was a kid. Protection is one form of affection that he needs. As T’Challa’s position fell in his hand, all the privileges as a king would belong to him.

T’Challa’s expression that they could resolve their conflict in another way has risen Killmonger’s superego that he should not fight T’Challa and kill him.

“This is your last chance. Throw down your weapons, and we can handle this another way.” *(Black Panther 1:18:01)*

T’Challa did not want any bloodshed between him and his cousin only to fight over the throne. He asked Killmonger to act based on moral principle (Siegfried 2) which is not to kill anyone. However, Killmonger’s ego still listens to his id more than his superego. He insisted to kill T’Challa and overthrow his throne *(Black Panther 1:18:17)* so the honors, obedience, and service of the Wakandan would belong to him. Furthermore, he also realized that T’Challa was not easy to defeat indicates that he had acted based on reality principle. This means, he is able to differ the fantasy of defeating T’Challa from the reality (Siegfried 2). Therefore, he ensures that he was as strong as T’Challa who had the strength of Black Panther. He spent his life to prepare himself and train very hard until he got a lot of accomplishment, especially in the army. He graduated from Annapolis when he was nineteen years old, joined the SEALs which stands for The United States Navy Sea, Air, and Land, and went straight to Afghanistan where he wrapped up confirmed kills like it was a video game so that he was then called Killmonger *(Black Panther 1:12:45)*. He assures that he was more powerful than the person with Black Panther’s strength.
Killmonger’s id reappear when it comes for his needs for justice. His desire for justice is rooted from his unconscious mind which contains of unpleasant memories (Siegfried 2) when his uncle, King T’Chaka being unfair to him. After killing his father, King T’Chaka should not leave him alone outside Wakanda because he was still only kid and innocent. He might have his right as a royal family if his uncle did not leave him. Instead, King T’Chaka chose not to bring him back to Wakanda because he must cover his wickedness (Black Panther 1:07:16). Thus, Killmonger was King T’Chaka’s victim.

Then, he seemed to identify himself with the unfortunate black because the black also treated unfairly by the white. He protested the white’s domination through his statement to the white museum keeper who refused to sell black’s artifact to him.

“It was taken by British soldier in Benin, but it’s from Wakanda. Don’t trip. I’ma take it off your hands for you.”

“These items aren’t for sale.”

“How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid for a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else.” (Black Panther 16:23)

Killmonger expressed his anger because the white had been acting unrighteously toward his kind. They took everything from black people without giving proper appreciation to them. They even considered black’s artifact as their own. Killmonger became angry when the white did not allow him as the black to take back the things that the white stole from his kind. This indicates how he valued justice very much.

His ego to arm the black people with vibranium then satisfies his desire for seeking justice. He thought that the black needed tools to fight against their oppressor. He could actualize his desire when the black could break the white’s domination. In turn, they could dominate the white as the white did to them the whole time.

However, Killmonger’s superego should consider that his desire for justice will lead the Wakandan to a war as Okoye, one of his general, stated.
“Wakanda has survived for so long by fighting when only absolutely necessary.”

*(Black Panther 1:30:49)*

The statement indicates that Wakanda refused to arm the black outside Wakanda. Wakanda had been safe for using the vibranium for the country’s necessity only. It means that the previous Wakandan kings used vibranium only for the sake of their own country, and they did not concern about the black’s life outside Wakanda. Killmonger was the first king who initiated and was willing to spread vibranium outside Wakanda. Yet, Killmonger’s ego still listens more to his id since he insisted Wakanda to contribute vibranium to black people.

**Killmonger’s Anxiety and Core Issues**

The inability of Killmonger’s ego to bring harmony between his id and superego has lead him to experience anxiety (Siegfried 3). His ego always listens to his id, i.e. he ignored his superego that he might not be welcomed by Wakandan, and should not kill anyone nor create a war. His ego tries to fulfil his id without considering the moral principle. In other word, his ego fails to bring harmony between his id and superego.

His anxiety, which showed from his ego that only satisfy his id and ignore his superego, has revealed his core issues, which is fear of abandonment. His fear of abandonment is in the form of emotional abandonment. Tyson states that emotional abandonment is an individual’s fear that their friends do not really care about them (16). Killmonger afraid that he was ignored. His anger to the heart-shaped herb keeper reveals his fear of abandonment.

“Another king? Yeah go ahead and burn all that.”

“My King, we cannot do that. It is our tradition.”

*(Choke the heart-shaped herb keeper) “When I tell you to do something, I mean that shit. Burn it all!”* *(Black Panther 1:28:49)*

He became anxious when the heart-shaped herb keeper refused to do his order because he thought that the keeper had ignored him as her king. It makes him relieve about his lack
of care, in this case lack of affection from his father and family when he was a kid. There is a connection between the two events. He felt abandoned by the heart-shaped herb keeper because he was wounded by feeling of abandoned from his uncle, King T’Chaka, when he was a child. He became anxious because he could not admit to himself that he was abandoned by his family. Therefore, he became angry with the heart-shaped herb keeper without consciously knew the reason. His anxiety appears because something that he repressed, which is his painful experience of being abandoned, is resurfacing when the heart-shaped herb keeper ignored his order. His anxiety also exists because he wanted to keep his fear of abandonment repressed.

He listens more to his id than his superego so that his ego would do anything to realize his id. Killmonger is a person with a very strong id. Killmonger’s anxiety and core issues controls even overwhelmed him so that he would do anything to realize his id. He would kill or harm those who prevented him from realizing his id. He repeated his destructive behavior, in this case harmed many people, such as killing Klaw to be accepted as a Wakandan, preparing himself for years to defeat T’Challa and seize his position, and also choking the heart-shaped herb keeper so that she would do his orders.

CONCLUSION

The examination of Killmonger’s id, ego, and superego as well as his anxiety and core issues have revealed his characteristics. He is one who listens more to his id. However, in realizing his id, he has acted based on reason and common sense so that his id and ego have a greater influence for his characteristics. This is intensified when he ignores his superego and makes use of immoral ways, such as deceiving and killing, to realize his id.

His needs for love has driven him to be an ambitious and cunning person to realize it. His ego justifies all means to kill Klaw by deceive him so he can achieve his desire to be welcomed and recognized by the Wakandan. His other ego to overthrow T’Challa’s position as the king, also shaped his ambitious characteristics. He does anything to actualize his purpose and makes sure that he is well-prepared to kill T’Challa so the throne falls into his hand. He is also ruthless for repeating destructive behavior such as killing Klaw and T’Challa. His anxiety and core issues which is fear of abandonment also shapes his ruthless characteristics. His anxiety and fear of abandonment make him threaten the heart-shaped herb keeper because she ignored his order as a king. Killmonger is also a logical person
considering the way he actualize his desire. He killed Wakandan’s enemy to be welcomed and get recognition from them. He also overthrew T’Challa’s position to be a Wakandan king so he got honors, obedience, and service from the Wakandan.

However, Killmonger also tends to be an empathy person because he concerns about the justice that the black should get from the white. He was willing to arm the black with vibranium to equalize their power with the white. He was unlike the previous Wakandan king who never concerned about the black outside Wakanda.

In conclusion, there are five characteristics of Killmonger found in the study which are seen from Freud’s psychoanalytic criticism. He is an ambitious, cunning, ruthless, but empathetic and logical person. His id, ego, and superego have shaped who he really is and they are also supported by his anxiety and core issues. However, since his ego listens more to his id than his superego, his characteristics are influenced more by his id and his ego.

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