

INHERITED SHAME AND IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION IN KENZABURŌ ŌE'S *THE SILENT CRY*: A FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

This article examines the psychological disintegration of Takashi, the central character in Kenzaburō Ōe's *The Silent Cry*, through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's structural theory of the psyche—particularly the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego—this study explores how identity crisis, generational trauma, and defense mechanisms shape Takashi's internal conflict and destructive behavior. The analysis reveals that Takashi's revolutionary actions are not driven by coherent political ideology, but by inherited shame, repressed grief, and the failure of ego mediation. His descent into violence and mania is interpreted as a symbolic enactment of psychological collapse, wherein inherited guilt and unresolved trauma override rationality and self-regulation. The superego, as portrayed in the novel, functions not only as a moral compass but as a punitive legacy passed through family and cultural memory. This study also highlights the interplay of defense mechanisms—such as projection, rationalization, denial, and sublimation—that ultimately fail to contain his psychic distress. By interpreting *The Silent Cry* as a narrative of personal and national trauma, this paper demonstrates how literature can serve as a site for exploring deep psychological wounds, especially those stemming from unspoken histories and familial burden.

Keywords: *Freudian psychoanalysis; Identity crisis; Intergenerational trauma; Ego defense mechanisms*

1. Introduction

Kenzaburō Ōe's *The Silent Cry* (1967) has been widely recognized as a landmark in Japanese postwar literature, exploring the intricacies of human psychology, family trauma, and national identity through dense narrative symbolism and philosophical introspection. Central to the novel is the psychological conflict between two brothers, Mitsusaburo and Takashi, whose divergent responses to inherited trauma evoke a deeper commentary on Japan's struggle with memory, guilt, and postwar identity. Scholars have increasingly turned to psychoanalytic criticism—especially Freudian theory—to decode the novel's complex representations of unconscious motivation, repression, and identity fragmentation (Bukhari, 2022; Nadjari, 2022).

Freudian psychoanalysis provides a compelling framework for understanding Takashi's erratic behavior, as it elucidates how unconscious drives and unresolved childhood trauma shape adult pathology. The triadic model of the psyche—id, ego, and superego—offers insights into the internal tension between instinctual impulses and socially conditioned repression. According to Freud (1961/1923), the ego functions as a mediator between the primitive drives of the id and the moral constraints of the superego. In Takashi's case, this mediation collapses under the weight of intergenerational guilt and suppressed historical memory, resulting in destructive behavior masked as rebellion.

More recent studies underscore the relevance of psychoanalysis in interpreting narratives of postwar dislocation and trauma. Nadjari (2022) emphasizes the role of repressed national trauma in shaping postwar Japanese protagonists, while Bukhari (2022) explores how identity crisis in modern fiction often emerges from the failure of psychic structures to contain inherited loss. In *The Silent Cry*, Takashi embodies such a failure; his actions reflect a symbolic reenactment of familial and cultural trauma transmitted through generations. Literature becomes a medium for exposing and reimagining the unconscious wounds of history.

This article investigates how Freudian psychoanalysis can be applied to Takashi's character, interpreting his identity crisis as a manifestation of unresolved trauma and the breakdown of ego defenses. By tracing the psychic mechanisms underlying his rebellion and collapse, this study aims to demonstrate how *The Silent Cry* dramatizes the psychological inheritance of shame, guilt, and memory—revealing literature's capacity to give voice to the silences of the unconscious.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Freud's Structural Theory and Literary Analysis

Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche—the id, ego, and superego—has long provided a critical framework for analyzing fictional characters in terms of their unconscious motivations and psychological conflicts. According to Freud (1961/1923), the ego functions as a mediator between the instinctual desires of the id and the moralistic demands of the superego, a tension often central to character development and narrative progression. In literature, this framework allows for deep exploration of internal struggles, particularly in texts where identity is fractured by trauma or repression.

Abdollahzadeh and Gholami (2022) argue that many postwar fictional characters, especially in trauma literature, exhibit a dysfunctional ego unable to reconcile primal drives and social expectations. This failure often manifests in erratic or self-destructive behavior—such as that displayed by Takashi in *The Silent Cry*. Freud's theory thus enables a nuanced reading of Takashi's rebellion as a psychological symptom rather than ideological resistance.

2.2 Trauma, Identity, and Ego Defense Mechanisms

Freudian concepts such as repression, denial, projection, and sublimation are essential in understanding how trauma distorts identity. Farahani and Derakhshan (2023) demonstrate that characters experiencing unresolved trauma often undergo psychic splitting or dissociation—phenomena in which the self is divided to shield the conscious mind from unbearable experiences. In Takashi's case, his adoption of a

revolutionary persona can be viewed as a defense mechanism—a sublimated expression of inherited grief and shame.

Takashi's identity fragmentation aligns with what Freud (1957) referred to as "repetition compulsion," where unresolved trauma is re-enacted through compulsive behaviors. His erratic leadership, violent tendencies, and antagonism toward social institutions reflect not just external rebellion but internal psychic disarray. This interpretation is supported by Fikri (2021), who explores how trauma shapes literary protagonists through symbolic violence and fractured narrative structures.

2.3 Transgenerational Trauma and Cultural Memory

A significant body of scholarship has addressed how trauma can be inherited through generations—what Abraham and Torok (1994) term "transgenerational hauntings." In *The Silent Cry*, the trauma of Takashi and Mitsusaburo's family—particularly the suicide of their older brother and the lingering memory of their ancestors' failures—acts as a psychological burden shaping their adult choices.

Hori (2020) highlights how Japanese postwar fiction, including Ōe's work, reflects cultural memory embedded in silence, guilt, and shame. This transgenerational transmission of trauma, often unspoken yet deeply felt, leads to the breakdown of identity and interpersonal relationships. Takashi's internalization of historical defeat and familial expectations reflects the weight of such memory, influencing his descent into delusion.

2.4 Literary Debates on Psychoanalytic Readings of Ōe

While psychoanalysis remains a powerful tool for literary interpretation, not all critics agree on its primacy. Sasaki (2018) contends that Ōe's fiction, including *The Silent Cry*, is deeply political and that reading it solely through a psychological lens risks overlooking its sociopolitical commentary. However, as Nadjari (2022) notes, psychoanalysis and politics are not mutually exclusive—indeed, trauma theory often bridges both by showing how political events leave psychic residues.

Recent scholars have embraced this integrative view. For instance, Bukhari (2022) argues that identity crises in literature often stem from intertwined personal and national traumas, which are best understood through a hybrid of psychoanalytic and historical lenses. In Takashi's case, his personal turmoil cannot be separated from the national context of postwar disillusionment and suppressed memory.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative psychoanalytic literary analysis, **drawing on** Sigmund Freud's structural theory of the psyche—specifically the triad of id, ego, and superego—as a conceptual framework to interpret the psychological dynamics of Takashi in *The Silent Cry* by Kenzaburō Ōe. The purpose of this approach is to uncover the unconscious motivations, internal conflicts, and trauma mechanisms that inform the character's behavior, ideology, and identity formation.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The psychoanalytic theory used in this research is grounded primarily in Freud's (1961/1923) *The Ego and the Id* and supplemented by additional Freudian concepts such as defense mechanisms (Freud, 1957) and repetition compulsion. The study also draws from Abraham and Torok's (1994) theory of transgenerational trauma and

psychic inheritance, which helps contextualize Takashi's behavior as a symptom of familial and cultural memory.

These theoretical tools allow for a detailed reading of literary symbols, character actions, narrative structures, and internal monologues, aiming to decode the psychological processes that are often embedded beneath the surface of the text.

3.2 Textual Selection and Analysis Procedure

The analysis focuses on key scenes from *The Silent Cry* (Ōe, 1996), especially those involving Takashi's interactions with his brother Mitsusaburo, his revolutionary posturing, and his recollections of past trauma. Passages are selected based on their relevance to:

1. Identity formation and crisis
2. Expression of trauma (individual and transgenerational)
3. Manifestations of Freudian defense mechanisms
4. Conflicts between id, ego, and superego

The selected excerpts are subjected to close reading, paying attention to language, symbolism, dialogue, and character psychology. Each passage is analyzed to interpret how Freudian principles are dramatized within the character's internal and external worlds.

3.3 Justification for Methodology

The psychoanalytic approach is appropriate for this study because *The Silent Cry* is deeply introspective and rich in psychological depth, dealing with themes such as shame, guilt, repression, and familial legacy. Previous scholarship (e.g., Nadjari, 2022; Farahani & Derakhshan, 2023) has demonstrated the efficacy of applying Freudian analysis to postwar literature as a means to access latent content related to trauma and identity.

Furthermore, qualitative textual analysis offers the flexibility and depth required to interpret the nuanced inner life of characters, especially when the narrative resists straightforward interpretation. Rather than generalizing findings across multiple texts, this study aims for depth over breadth, providing a focused analysis of a single complex character.

4. Discussion

This section examines Takashi's psychological unraveling through the Freudian lens of ego dynamics and trauma inheritance. The selected passages from *The Silent Cry* are analyzed to reveal how Takashi's rebellion masks deeper psychic ruptures related to shame, repression, and unresolved family trauma.

4.1. The Collapse of Ego Mediation

Freud (1961) conceptualized the ego as the rational structure mediating between the primitive drives of the id and the prohibitive demands of the superego. Ideally, the ego maintains psychological balance by negotiating between internal desires and external social expectations. In *The Silent Cry*, however, Takashi's psychological development increasingly reveals a collapse of ego mediation, as his behavior becomes more impulsive, erratic, and governed by unconscious drives.

This breakdown is evident in Takashi's open disdain for introspection and preference for action: "I'm not interested in being an intellectual who just remembers things. I want to act. I want to change things." (Ōe, 1996, p. 79) At first glance, Takashi's declaration appears to promote agency and transformation. However, from a Freudian perspective, it reflects the ego's surrender to the id—a relinquishment of rational control in favor of instinctual release. Freud (1961/1923) theorized that the id operates according to the pleasure principle, demanding immediate satisfaction without regard for consequence. Takashi's need to "act" emerges not from clear political conviction, but from an underlying psychic compulsion to relieve internal tension. He substitutes external upheaval for inner reflection, demonstrating the failure of the ego to filter and redirect his impulses constructively.

Takashi's preference for myth over reason further exposes the id's dominance: "You bury yourself in history books. But the villagers have myths—living things, not fossils." (Ōe, 1996, p. 86). Here, myth represents the unconscious, symbolic realm, while history embodies structured knowledge and ego-based interpretation. Takashi's dismissal of history in favor of myth suggests a psychological regression—a retreat from ego-anchored reasoning into fantasy-laden unconscious material. This resonates with Freud's (1957) concept of regression, where the individual reverts to earlier developmental modes to avoid present conflict.

A more extreme indication of the ego's collapse appears in Takashi's projection of emasculation onto society: "We've all been castrated by this decaying country. That's why I have to act—somebody has to." (Ōe, 1996, p. 123) This metaphor of castration—a cornerstone of Freudian theory—symbolizes the perceived loss of potency, authority, or agency. Takashi attributes his internal sense of inadequacy to external political decay, displacing inner anxiety onto the collective. His "need to act" is thus not a rational political initiative but a defense mechanism, enabling him to avoid confronting his own psychic wounds.

His descent into delusion is described in visceral terms: "His eyes were shining like a madman's, as if something was burning inside him that had nothing to do with the others." (Ōe, 1996, p. 145) This moment vividly portrays psychic fragmentation. Takashi is no longer in control of his behavior; he is consumed by unresolved emotion—likely guilt and grief—that the ego can no longer repress. Freud (1915/1957) described this phenomenon as the return of the repressed, where previously buried trauma re-emerges in distorted, pathological forms. In Takashi, this return manifests not through healing, but through grandiosity and destruction.

These examples illustrate Freud's nightmare scenario: a psyche in which the ego fails to regulate, the id dominates behavior, and the superego acts as a haunting force of judgment. Takashi's trajectory—from philosophical critique to manic instability—suggests that his revolutionary ideals are not conscious political choices but unconscious expressions of psychological disintegration. He becomes not an agent of change, but a vessel for ancestral guilt, unacknowledged shame, and repressed pain.

4.2. Projection and Idealized Rebellion

One of Freud's fundamental defense mechanisms is projection, a process in which repressed or unwanted feelings—such as guilt, shame, or fear—are displaced onto others, allowing the individual to avoid direct confrontation with internal conflict (Freud, 1957). In *The Silent Cry*, Takashi's revolutionary zeal is not rooted in genuine

ideological clarity, but in psychological displacement. He externalizes his private feelings of emasculation and inadequacy by framing them as a collective crisis.

This process is evident in one of Takashi's most ideologically charged statements: "They have turned us into eunuchs. We've lost the ability to act like men. That's why this uprising matters." (Ōe, 1996, p. 103) Takashi's invocation of emasculation here is deeply symbolic. The metaphor of castration—central in Freudian theory—typically represents a perceived loss of power, control, or identity. Rather than confronting his own wounded masculinity and personal failures, Takashi reinterprets his internal vulnerability as a shared historical injury. By doing so, he projects his private emotional anguish onto society, transforming psychological distress into a political crusade.

This act of projection serves several psychic functions. It provides Takashi with an outlet for repressed rage and shame, reframing these affects as righteous anger. It also allows him to construct a narrative of victimhood that implicates the entire village, thus legitimizing his desire for upheaval. As Freud (1957) argued, projection is a defense mechanism that protects the ego from inner threat by casting unacceptable emotions onto external sources.

Takashi's projection is further illustrated by his use of mythic and militaristic language: "They're sheep. Trained to bow their heads, not raise their fists. But we will wake them up. We will lead them into the new age." (Ōe, 1996, p. 108) In this passage, Takashi dissociates from his own paralysis by creating a messianic persona—one who leads others to reclaim agency. Yet ironically, his "leadership" is rooted not in coherent strategy but in deep-seated emotional confusion. The revolutionary rhetoric masks internal fragmentation. His rebellion is not directed outward from a stable self, but arises from psychic collapse.

In Freudian terms, Takashi's actions are not guided by a healthy ego ideal but by unresolved conflicts reconstituted as moral imperatives. His identification with heroic myth, and his insistence that others share in his vision, indicate an unconscious need to validate his internal chaos through external affirmation.

Thus, Takashi's idealized rebellion is less a political movement than a defense mechanism—one that channels psychic pain into collective narrative. By projecting his fears and insecurities onto the village and cloaking them in the language of resistance, Takashi avoids confronting the deeper emotional truths buried within his fractured identity.

4.3 Sublimation and Failed Transformation

In Freudian theory, sublimation refers to the psychological process by which socially unacceptable impulses—such as aggression or sexual desire—are redirected into acceptable, often culturally valued forms of expression (Freud, 1920/1957). This defense mechanism allows the individual to transform raw instinct into art, politics, or moral achievement. However, in *The Silent Cry*, Takashi's attempt to sublimate his inner aggression into political activism fails. Instead of mastering his psychological pain through meaningful action, he channels it into delusional rebellion that ultimately exacerbates his instability.

This failure is dramatically expressed in Takashi's accusatory outburst toward his brother Mitsusaburo: "You think you're a sane man, hiding in your books and silence? You're the real coward. I'm the one facing the truth." (Ōe, 1996, p. 141) Takashi frames his rejection of reflection and dialogue as an act of bravery, contrasting

it with Mitsusaburo's supposed intellectual cowardice. Yet from a psychoanalytic standpoint, this statement illustrates a breakdown of sublimation. The aggression that should have been sublimated into reasoned leadership becomes personalized hostility. The "truth" Takashi claims to confront is not objective reality but a distorted psychological projection. His identification with revolution masks an unresolved trauma that resists symbolic integration.

Rather than processing his inner conflict through symbolic or socially productive means, Takashi externalizes it violently. His revolutionary fervor lacks ideological coherence and is propelled instead by personal disorientation. Freud (1957) described such cases as failures of sublimation, where repressed emotions re-emerge in distorted or compulsive behaviors—a phenomenon known as the return of the repressed.

Takashi's descent into increasingly erratic behavior demonstrates this principle. The narrator observes: "There was a moment when his voice cracked, and it was no longer a speech—it was a scream disguised as words." (Ōe, 1996, p. 143) This line reveals how Takashi's ideological posturing collapses under the weight of emotional excess. His speech ceases to function as rational communication and instead becomes a container for raw psychic discharge. The scream, masked in rhetoric, signifies the failure of sublimation to transform pain into purpose.

Takashi's political performance, then, is not evidence of higher transformation but of deeper fracture. His inability to sustain constructive sublimation turns the revolutionary stage into a theater of psychic breakdown. In Freudian terms, rather than elevating the instinctual into the ethical or aesthetic realm, he regresses into the chaotic and compulsive—a man undone not by political failure but by the unresolved ghosts within.

4.4 Trauma, Family Legacy, and the Superego

Freud (1961/1923) described the superego as the internalized voice of parental authority, cultural law, and moral regulation. In a balanced psyche, the superego helps guide ethical decision-making by integrating social norms and familial values. However, when the superego becomes rigid or punitive, it may transform into a source of internalized guilt and psychological distress. In *The Silent Cry*, the weight of family history—particularly the suicide of Takashi's older brother—triggers such a transformation, with the superego functioning less as a moral compass and more as an oppressive force.

This transformation is captured in a haunting recollection: "He died with his eyes wide open. Like he was accusing us. I can still see him, every time I close my eyes." (Ōe, 1996, p. 66)

This passage suggests that Takashi is haunted not simply by the event of his brother's suicide but by its ethical implications. The open eyes—symbolizing accusation and unresolved witnessing—become a permanent fixture in Takashi's psyche. From a Freudian perspective, the gaze of the dead brother becomes the internalized moral authority that Takashi cannot appease, forming a punitive superego.

In this context, the superego does not foster self-reflection or reconciliation but instills guilt, shame, and self-punishment. Takashi does not mourn his brother as a loss to be processed; instead, he internalizes him as an enduring command to act—to rebel, to avenge, to continue a tragic legacy. His radical behavior is less a form of justice and more a ritual enactment of inherited suffering.

This process aligns with Abraham and Torok's (1994) concept of the "crypt"—a psychic tomb constructed to house traumatic family secrets that are never properly mourned. The crypt doesn't simply store memory; it shapes identity by embedding the unspoken within the self. Takashi's relationship to the past becomes parasitic: his identity forms around an unmourned death that fuels rage, despair, and moral confusion.

Further evidence of the superego's tormenting role is revealed when Mitsusaburo reflects: "He wants to suffer. That's the only way he can prove to himself he's not like [our brother]. But in trying so hard, he's becoming exactly like him." (Ōe, 1996, p. 112) Here, the destructive legacy of the family continues through unconscious repetition. Takashi's rebellion is not truly his own; it is the product of an inherited moral wound. Freud (1961/1923) noted that when the superego becomes severe, it can overwhelm the ego, leading to self-destructive behavior that masquerades as moral action. Takashi's trajectory confirms this: he seeks absolution through sacrifice, but in doing so, he reenacts the very trauma he wishes to transcend.

Takashi does not rebel merely against external oppression but against the crushing internal command to suffer, inherited through blood and silence. His superego, distorted by ungrieved trauma and family myth, becomes an inner tyrant—demanding not ethical responsibility but psychic submission.

4.5 The Silent Cry as a Symbol of Repression

The title of the novel—*The Silent Cry*—invokes one of Freud's most enduring psychoanalytic concepts: repression. According to Freud (1915/1957), repression is the process through which intolerable thoughts, desires, and emotions are pushed into the unconscious, rendered inaccessible to conscious awareness but not erased. These repressed affects often return in disguised or symbolic forms—through symptoms, dreams, or neurotic behaviors. In Ōe's narrative, Takashi's final psychological collapse represents the catastrophic failure of repression: what has been buried returns, but stripped of language and clarity.

The novel expresses this failure of articulation in stark imagery: "He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Only a twisted grimace, as though the scream had been buried in his body long before." (Ōe, 1996, p. 173) This haunting image serves as a metaphor for the condition of repressed trauma. Takashi's body attempts to vocalize what the psyche cannot process, resulting in a "twisted grimace" rather than intelligible language. The *silent cry* is thus both literal and symbolic—a sign of the unspeakable suffering passed down through family, culture, and memory.

Freud maintained that repression never fully eliminates an affect but displaces it. The energy of repressed content continues to influence behavior, surfacing as anxiety, hysteria, or compulsive repetition (Freud, 1957). Takashi's silent scream is not merely a psychological reaction to an immediate crisis; it is the culmination of an intergenerational burden that has been denied articulation. His silence does not represent absence but the saturation of affect—pain that exceeds the capacity for expression.

Earlier in the novel, this motif is anticipated in Mitsusaburo's reflection: "There's a cry we've inherited—not from our mouths, but from those who died before us. It's always there, even when no one is speaking." (Ōe, 1996, p. 92) This passage suggests that the cry belongs to a deeper historical and psychic register—a transgenerational trauma that cannot be directly confronted. The inability to vocalize this pain reflects the Freudian idea that repression can be so deeply rooted that the ego loses access even to the content being repressed. Takashi's breakdown, marked by mute

expression, reflects not just his own trauma but that of the familial and cultural unconscious.

Thus, the title *The Silent Cry* emerges as a precise encapsulation of repressed pain: a grief too immense to be spoken, too buried to be healed, and yet too powerful to be fully silenced. In Takashi's final moment of voiceless expression, Ōe stages the inevitable return of the repressed—not in clarity, but in rupture.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how Takashi's character in *The Silent Cry* serves as a profound literary exploration of psychological disintegration, trauma, and the failure of ego mediation. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis—specifically the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego—this analysis reveals that Takashi's revolutionary rhetoric and erratic behavior are not ideologically coherent, but rather manifestations of deep-seated psychic distress.

Takashi's identity is shown to be fractured by intergenerational trauma, unresolved grief, and a punitive superego inherited through familial and cultural legacies. His compulsion to act, to rebel, and ultimately to destroy reflects not liberation, but the collapse of internal structures designed to manage primal urges and moral demands. Defense mechanisms such as projection, sublimation, and denial temporarily shield him from unbearable truths but ultimately fail, culminating in symbolic breakdown.

The novel's title itself—*The Silent Cry*—encapsulates the paradox of trauma: it is both buried and omnipresent. Takashi's voiceless scream becomes a symbol of the unconscious forces that shape human behavior when trauma is left unprocessed and unspoken.

This psychoanalytic reading not only deepens our understanding of Ōe's narrative craft but also illustrates literature's role as a mirror of the unconscious, a space where hidden wounds, inherited memories, and psychic struggles are made legible. Through Takashi, Ōe critiques not only personal pathology but the broader failures of postwar society to reckon with its own historical and emotional inheritance.

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