# The Analysis of Tragic Characters' Tragedy Origin in The Woman Warrior Based on Freudian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract: Maxine Hong Kingston is one of famous Chinese-American writers. Her prominent representative, The Woman Warrior, let her earn the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction in 1976. This great work surprised literary circle and attracted quiet a few researchers and scholars to appreciate and evaluate. This work is divided into five parts: "No Name Woman", "White Tigers", "Shaman", "At the Western Palace", "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Ripe", which mainly tell about five females' stories. With regard to this work, many studies have been conducted before. Here, this paper is designed to conduct the analysis of tragic characters' tragedy origin in The Woman Warrior based on Freudian psychoanalysis. This paper finds that there are three psychological factors to contribute to the two tragic characters' tragedy: the influence of the two tragic characters' and people's unconsciousness, the effect of tragic characters' death instinct, and the tragic characters' overuse of mental defense mechanisms which include displacement, depression, denial, and introjection.

Keywords: Freudian Psychoanalysis; The Woman Warrior; Tragic Characters; Tragedy Origin

#### 1. Introduction

The Woman Warrior takes China as its background, which displays the childhood of little girl and the real life of women around. It shows discrimination for Chinatown, depression, poverty of Chinese, China' ghosts and monsters, China's heroine who fights bravely. It touches upon many aspects that scholars and readers are interested in such as gap, feminism, the consciousness of finding root, the situation of immigrants (Cheung,1996) [1]. Accordingly, it is welcomed by worldwide readers. In terms of the studies of *The Woman Warrior*, most Chinese researchers and scholars attached importance to narratology (Jiang, 2012) [2], female narratology (Zhou, 2014) [3], ethical narratology (Wang, 2017) [4], deconstruction (Huang, 2014) [5],etc. While, to conduct the analysis on *The Woman Warrior* from the perspective of Freud Psychoanalysis is little. Besides, In this story, its tragic persons, No Name Woman and Moon Orchid, leave a great impression on readers. Therefore, this paper will try to do the analysis of tragic characters' tragedy origin in *The Woman Warrior* based on Freudian psychoanalysis.

Though this study, the author hopes that readers can try to probe deeply the two characters existing in this novel. Additionally, it will let readers and scholars learn about the psychological activity of characters, try to figure out why these characters suffer, understand that the great influence of psychology on characters. Finally, to some extent, it will let scholars know that they should take the psychological factors into consideration when analyzing characters or texts.

# 2. The Introduction of Two Tragic Characters in the Woman Warrior

The Woman Warrior is written by famous Chinese-American writer, and it consists of five parts. This paper just focuses on the first part and the fourth part. The first part is No Name Woman, it narrates "my" father's sister. She was married without love. After few days, her husband went aboard. She wanted to pursue true love. Nevertheless, unfortunately, she was pregnant. At that time, it is extremely shameful to have adultery for a married woman. Consequently, she was blamed and cursed by her families and villagers. She felt so painful. She had a birth at a pigsty. She couldn't bear the

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blame of families and villagers. Eventually, she ended up with her baby' life and her own life. The fourth part describes "my"mother' sister, Moon Orchid. Moon Orchid always resided in China. She was a traditional lady. Her husband worked in America, so she brought up her daughter alone. Her husband never came back to China and he just sent money back. It was hateful that he had an affair with another woman. However, Moon Orchid didn't denounce and hate her husband., because she reckoned that her husband had shouldered his responsibility. He was sending money back so that she could live a good life with her daughter. She even dared not confront her husband and took back her position. Unfortunately, when she faced with her husband, her husband blamed her and said that she shouldn't go there to disturb his beautiful life. Moon Orchid felt extremely painful. Ultimately, Moon Orchid became insane (Maxine,1989) <sup>[6]</sup>.

#### 3. Freudian Psychoanalysis

Freudian psychoanalysis was created by Freud, the famous Austrian psychiatrist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is a cornerstone of contemporary psychology. It exerts great influence on all kinds of areas. This paper will mention three relative theories of Freudian psychoanalytic (Berg, 2003: 246-252) [7].

# 3.1. Unconsciousness Theory

In 1859, Freud and Breuer cooperated and published *Studies On Hysteria*. The book first puts forward to the "iceberg theory" which explains the relation between consciousness and unconsciousness. Freud holds the view that humankind spirit can be divided into three parts: conscious, preconscious and unconscious. He compares human spirit to an iceberg. The corner of iceberg that floats on the water surface is the conscious. While the majority of iceberg below the surface is the unconscious, which determines, to some extent, the human beings' development and behaviors (Freud, 2005:78) [8]. Unconsciousness has quiet a few stimuli. Desire, friendship, love, hardship, as well as autosuggestion can contribute to forming unconsciousness. Its main sources mainly come from four aspects. Firstly, the repeated implication and explication will form unconsciousness. There is one more point that knowledge, belief, habit will also form unconsciousness. Thirdly, the influence of environment and an individual life will form unconsciousness. Last but not least, unconsciousness will come from the early stage of an individual, especially from his or her childhood (Ji, 2020: 227-228, 257) [9]

## 3.2 Death Instinct

Death instinct was put forward by Freud in his book *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* in 1920. Death instinct is inborn and it is a kind of impulse which will destroy order and go back to previous condition. When a person cannot get enough happiness or feels extremely painful due to the mental pressure, he will not have a strong desire for living. Hence, in this period, the death instinct will take up a great proportion. Therefore, when the impulse of death instinct is strong enough, corresponding things will happen in reality. Death instinct has two patterns of manifestation. The first one is outward projection, which shows destruction, aggression, invasion, quarrel as well as the defence against others people or things. While, the other one is inward projection, which manifests self-reproach, self-hatred, self-punishment, self-destruction, and suicide. The two patterns can be exchanged with each other. Death instinct tends to have outward projection. But when outward aggression is hampered, it will go back to ego and form the impulse or intention of suicide (Freud, 2005) [8].

# 3.3 Mental Defense Mechanisms

Mental defense mechanisms are raised by Freud. It has a function of self-defense. In daily life, there are conflicts among id, superego and reality. Therefore, people will feel painful and angry. At this moment, ego will adjust the relation of both sides of the conflict so that it makes superego's supervision acceptable and meets desire of id in some way. Due to this, anxiety is relieved and pain is released, this is so-called function of mental defense mechanisms which has diverse forms such as displacement, depression, introjection, denial. For displacement, when some powerful emotions and impulses that some things trigger cannot give vent to the object, these emotion and impulse will turn to another object. With regard to depression, it refers to some impulses and desires that cannot be tolerated by social morality, accepted by consciousness, and permitted by superego. These kinds of impulse and

desire are depressed into unconsciousness, which people cannot realize their existence. With regard to introjection, it is to absorb the exterior things into individuals' internal world and then form the part of personality. It will not only absorb the things individuals love, but also absorb something individuals hate and even fear. Denial is to refuse to admit those painful things which seem to never happen (Freud, 2018) [10].

## 4. The Two Tragic Characters' Tragedy Origin in the Woman Warrior

Here, this part will figure out what on earth contributes to the tragedies of tragic characters from the perspective of Freud Psychoanalysis. It is generally based on its unconscious theory, death instinct and mental defense mechanisms

# 4.1 The Influence of Tragic Characters' and People's Unconsciousness

Tragedies can be triggered by diverse factors which can be divided into internal and external factors. From the perspective of psychology, it can be found that the internal factors, characters' and people's unconsciousness in *The Woman Warrior* contribute to the tragedies.

# 4.1.1 The Influence of Tragic Characters' Unconsciousness

That knowledge, belief, habit, environment influence, and individual life will form the unconsciousness is mentioned above. No Name Woman and Moon Orchid are both born in China. At that times, the principle of feudal moral conduct exerted great influence on Chines female. It involves three cardinal guides and five constant virtues. The so-called three cardinal guides is that "rulers guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife". While, "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity "compose five constant virtues. These are important parts of China Confucian ethical culture. Of course, it is conducive to enslave ordinary people for rulers. Dong Zhongshu reckons that in the ethnic relationship, there are unchangeable principal and subordinate relations between rulers and subjects, between fathers and sons, between husband and wife. Rulers are principal, subjects are subordinate, fathers are principal, sons are subordinate, and husbands are principal, wives are subordinate (Zhang, 2012) [11].

The two tragic characters both lived in China whose traditional cultures had a great influence on them. They bore these cultures and traditions in their mind. Gradually, the consciousness changed and permeated into their unconsciousness. They both even didn't realize the great influence of Chinese culture and tradition. For Chinese tradition in that times, two tragic characters owned different attitudes, different unconsciousness, and behaved differently. But the outcome was similar. Tragedies still happened to both of them

Herein, the unconsciousness of No Name Woman will be talked. As human beings, firstly, they will meet our own interests instinctively. They want these wishes to be achieved. They unconsciously find food, love and something else for their pleasure and happiness. They just fulfill the pleasure principle and can't control their will. They just operate with impulse, and want to make their instinctual desires satisfy immediately. For instance, in The Woman Warrior, No Name Woman got married without true love. After few days, her husband went to work abroad. Then she had no company and concern, so she desired to be loved unconsciously. It is why this unconsciousness leads her to having some affairs with other men. Due to the lack of love, she yearned for true love unconsciously in order to meet her own pleasure and happiness. So she fell in love with other man. Form the objective perspective, to have a true love and follow heart aren't erroneous. Everyone has the right to love and be loved. We shouldn't add some limitations on it. It is animals and human beings' instincts. Nonetheless, unfortunately, China, in that era, was traditional. It was shameful for married woman to love another man. It was adultery. They didn't ask reasons just blame you ironically. The pursuit of love freedom ran counter to China tradition and cultures at that times. It was also a big conflict between unconsciousness and China environment and social reality in that era. Therefore, this is why No Name Woman choose to die. This is why her tragedy occurs.

Then, it will turn to the unconsciousness of Moon Orchid. It is known that environment, culture and tradition are the factors to form unconsciousness. Environment shapes people. Environment and tradition are so powerful that they can be transformed into people's unconsciousness. Due to the influence of China traditions and ethnic, in that era, Chinese became traditional and polite. But some old tradition cultures are not rational such as three cardinal guides and five constant virtues. If people always keep on that and they do as requirement without realizing these principles' deleterious influence

on them, they will be ruined by these. While, Moon Orchid in *The Woman Warrior* is a typical example. Moon Orchid was a typical traditional Chinese woman. Her husband went to American to work and didn't go home quite of few years. She was told that her husband had a young lover in America and lived a happy life. While, Moon Orchid even didn't blame her husband. She counted that she could forgive him for the reason that her husband sent money back. That money was enough for her daughter and herself. Without that money, she couldn't live well with her daughter. Here, it is witnessed that in Moon Orchid thought, she reckoned her duty was just to bear child and obey her husband. She even can stood that her husband had affair with another woman. She deemed that she couldn't grumble him. These thoughts shapes her unconsciousness. From her unconsciousness, she was not cognizant of that she should fight for herself and live for herself. Therefore, when people told her about her husband's affair, she tried her best to protect her husband. She even didn't dare to meet he husband. On the road to meet her husband, she even tried to escape and come back home. She was afraid of that her husband would hit her. But when she faced her husband and faced reality, she couldn't bore this. But as a traditional Chinese woman, she chose to submit to humiliation and didn't denounce her husband. When coming back, she felt tortured in her hear of hearts and said no words. Eventually she became insane. It is her unconsciousness which China tradition and ethnic shapes that leads to her tragedy.

# 4.1.2 The Influence of People's Unconsciousness

The tragedy can not only be triggered by these tragic persons themselves, but also can be triggered by others people around the tragic persons. The unconsciousness of these people influenced them and thereafter leaded them to do some acts to influence the tragic persons and others. Therefore, when people try to figure out why the tragedy happens, the unconsciousness of people around the tragic persons should be taken into consideration.

Here, the influence of villagers' and "my" families' unconsciousness on No Name Woman will be discussed. The unconsciousness of people around them will propel these tragic persons do some acts. Maybe these people around tragic people don't realize that they exercise a great impact on these tragic individuals. But, truly, they are one of reasons of tragedies. To name only a few, in *The Woman Warrior*, No Name Woman looked for true love, had an adultery with another man, then she was pregnant. She was suffering. But unfortunately, her families felt humiliated and they even didn't mention her name and chose to forget her. Besides, her villagers thought that she was a bitch and an evil. They even held the view that she brought bad fortune to the village.

Due to this, No Name Woman couldn't bear this malediction. People didn't care for her. She was tortured and chose to have a birth on a pigsty quietly. Due to great pressure, she chose to die. From here, it can be witnessed that families and villagers greatly act on her. They live in China environment in that era, and people were traditional and stubborn. The Chinese ethic influences them deeply and conducts their actions in their daily life. Gradually, these ethics form their unconsciousness. Consequently, when they blamed No Name Woman ironically, they even didn't realize that it was their unconsciousness that lead them to do so. But these kinds of blame and malediction were so powerful and unbearable, which was beyond No Name Woman's endurance. She couldn't see hope and love any more. Therefore, the tragedy happened. Hence, what cannot be ignored is villagers' and "my" families' unconsciousness influence to No Name Woman.

Additionally, "My" families' unconsciousness also influences on Moon Orchid. Diverse culture background will incur humor, but sometimes, it will trigger tragedy. Various culture environments shape different cultural consciousness. As time goes by, it will form unconsciousness. A person might have conflicts in some aspects with another person who has a different cultural background. The cultural gap is so big that it will sometimes bring about tragedy. For instance, in The Woman Warrior, Moon Orchid is a typical traditional woman in China. She has lived in China for a long time. When hearing that her husband had another wife in America, in that era, she chose keep silence, didn't blame her husband and even spared no efforts to protect her husband. While, for "My" families such as "my" mother and "me", they always lived in America. They pursued freedom, human right, justice, and fought against gender discrimination and protected rights of female. When "My" families knew this bad thing done by Moon Orchid's husband. They forced Moon Orchid to fight for herself and encouraged her to take her position. But Moon Orchid didn't want to face this and what she wanted is to live quietly in China. She chose to forgive this. As a traditional woman, she even dared not to be confronted with her husband and she feared that her husband would hit her. But under the persuasion of narrator' family, she was propelled to face her husband. While their meeting was not good but a huge blow for Moon Orchid. Ultimately, she became insane. Here, conflict of two different unconsciousness are witnessed. For Moon Orchid, due to the influence of China ethnic and tradition in that times, she became comply with China ethnic and tradition, and submitted to humiliation unconsciously. While, for

narrator' families, American culture influenced them greatly. They asserted they should fight for themselves and fight for justice, and women and men were equal. As time went by, these thoughts moulded their unconsciousness. They did these things unconsciously. For Moon Orchid's husband, they claimed she should fight against him, argue with him and lawsuit him. That is why they propelled Moon Orchid to meet her husband. They did it unconsciously. However, Moon Orchid did as they required. Nonetheless, the ending is painful. What is more, it leaded to the tragedy. Therefore, the effect of "My" families' unconsciousness on Moon Orchid cannot be overlooked.

## 4.2 The Death Instinct of Tragic Characters

People are born with death instinct and life instinct. They are always controlled by the two instinct. When people don't feel happy and even feel suffering, they will have no desire to live. At this time, the death instinct will occupy a person' life. So it is not difficult to find that death instinct exerts great effect on the tragic characters. It is also one of reasons why tragedies takes place. There are two patterns of manifestation of death instinct which have been mention before. It includes introjection and extrojection. For introjection, it shows self-reproach, self-hatred, self-punishment, self-destruction, suicide. In *The Woman Warrior*, it can be found that there are death instinct existing in No Name Woman and Moon Orchid.

# 4.2.1 The Death Instinct of No Name Woman

There is no doubt that death instinct can trigger the occurrence of tragedy. There are quiet a few factors to incur the appearance of death instinct and let the death instinct occupy the leading status. However, the more death instincts are, the more tragedies will happen. In *The Woman Warrior*, there are many factors to induce death instinct. For No Name Woman, on the one hand, from the perspective of herself, she had no love in her marriage, so she wanted to look forward to true love. But it was painful that there was no true love for her, and even worse, she was pregnant. She was withstanding. On the other hand, from the exterior aspect, for her families, they should give love and concern to her, and try their best to help her get away from the dilemma. On the contrary, they even didn't want to mention her name. They just reckoned that she would humiliate their family' fame. Additionally, her villagers even thought that she was an evil and let her go away. All of these discouraged and hurt No Name Woman badly. She suffered a lot and had no impulse to live. Therefore, death instinct occupied the foremost position. She chose to die. Therefore, death instinct functions greatly.

# 4.2.2 The Death Instinct of Moon Orchid

Death instinct always exists in people's daily life, The more death instincts are, the more dangerous life is. In The Woman Warrior, Moon Orchid also suffered a lot. After her marriage, she shouldered the responsibility to bear her daughter. Her life seemed usual and happy. But it was said that her husband had a lover in America. As a traditional Chinese woman, she tried to protect reputation and ignore that fact. She burdened and bore all. But under the persuasion of narrator's families, she took the courage to meet her husband. While, her husband didn't love her any more and even had started his new life. This fact was so painful for Moon Orchid. From here, there are many factors to incur Moon Orchid' death instinct. Firstly, she was in China environment. When a woman knew that her husband had an affair with another woman, in most instances, she will bear this for children and whole family. So did Moon Orchid. The tradition influenced her. But she couldn't stand this in her heart. There is one more point, narrator's families contribute to the tragedy. They let Moon Orchid face her husband and let her realize that she should fight for herself. Thoughts and cultural conflict influenced her. Thirdly, it was her husband. He ignored the hardness of his wife and didn't undertake the responsibility to bear children and wife. He just sent some money back. Besides, he had a lover. He was so merciless and crude. All of these hurt and ruined Moon Orchid. Therefore, her death instinct appeared, she could not pour out the hardness and pain. Eventually, she became insane. Therefore, death instinct is one of reason for Moon Orchid's tragedy.

# 4.3 The Overuse of Mental Defense Mechanisms

For mental defense mechanisms, they are some ways to deal with some conflicts in order to escape some dangers, anxiety and unhappiness. Therefore, people always apply mental defense mechanisms into daily life. While, if mental defense mechanisms are overused, it will give rise to psychological illness and even ruin the life of persons. Eventually, the tragedy will occur.

## 4.3.1 The No Name Woman's Overuse of Mental Defense Mechanisms

There are many ways of mental defense such as displacement, depression. Provided that people use it correctly, it is conducive to people' mental health. On the contrary, it will ruin people. In The Woman Warrior, No Name Woman overused mental defense mechanisms. Firstly, it is displacement. No Name Woman desired to be loved, wanted to find true attachment and couldn't bear the marriage without love. She did makeup beautifully, and wore beautifully. She had date with another man and then had a baby. What No Name Woman did was opposite to China society of that era. Families and villagers asked reasons, just disgusted and cursed her. She could not bear this coldness and mercilessness any more. But she could not fight against these people. So she displaced all pain, hatred, sufferings into her baby and herself. Of course, she had no choice. But she overused displacement. She used this way violently. Eventually, she killed her baby and then she chose suicide. Secondly, she overused depression. In that era, the freedom of love was not permitted. And as a wife, she should be loyal to her husband and wear like married woman. But what No Name Woman did didn't meet the requirement of society in that times. She wanted to love without limitation, yearned for a true love. So she dressed beautifully. She didn't dress up like married woman. These all were not allowed by social ethnics in that era. So her thoughts was depressed into her unconsciousness. She tolerated all of these. She was tortured by society. She was depressed by society. So she chose to depress herself. In the end, she felt so depressed that she broke down. The tendency to have freedom and the desire to have true love appeared. But all of these thought were not permitted. So she felt no hope, then she gave up everything and ended her own life. If she didn't depress herself extremely, she always kept on her thoughts and ignored curses, this tragedy would not happen. Here, the effect of overuse of displacement and depression are noticed.

# 4.3.2 The Moon Orchid's Overuse of Mental Defense Mechanisms

There are other mental defense mechanisms such as introjection, denial. If they are overused, they can also bring about some damages. In The Woman Warrior, Moon Orchid's tragedy are triggered by these factors. Firstly, it is the overuse of introjection. It is not exaggerated to say that Moon Orchid is the victim of that traditional society. She was greatly influenced by three cardinal guides and five constant virtues. She always complied with these. She even didn't realize their limitation. She internalized these guides and virtues. She internalized deeply so that she cannot be changed easily. She always subjected and obeyed without any grumble. Even when her husband had a lover, she chose to accept. But the fact was too painful to being digested by herself. But China old traditions let her bear this. She introjected these too much. Accordingly, the tragedy happened. Secondly, it was the overuse of denial. When she was told that her husband cheated on her, and her husband was bad man and wasn't a responsible husband and father, she insisted that her husband treated them well and argued that her husband sent some money back every year. In spite of saying this, in her heart, she just wanted to deny the fact that her husband is bad man. She cannot accepted this fact. She disguised well, tried to protect her husband fame and family, and firmly denied what people said. But when she met husband, all those were so painful. Her husband was so evil and behaved like a ghost. She realized what she denied were all true. Eventually, she broke down. If she accepted this before and didn't deny this fact, as time went by, she would digest this bad thing. But, she didn't. As the saying goes, "the more expectation, the more disappointment." Thirdly, she also overused this depression. Her husband did that disgusting thing. In spite of feeling painful, she still need to bear that and depress herself due to the influence of China ethnic's principles. These irrational principles and guides let her become her husband's subject. She pretended not to feel suffered and painful. These feelings were depressed by her consciousness, and then gradually, they converted into unconsciousness. She depressed her feelings extremely. When confronting the fact, she couldn't bear it any more, her true feelings and unconsciousness burst out. Finally, she broke down. At the beginning, if she didn't pressed her feelings too much, showed her anger, spoke out her pain, she would have no big emotional wave, and the tragedy would not happen. Therefore, it can be concluded that the overuse of introjection, denial and depression exerts detrimental effect on Moon Orchid.

# 5. Conclusion

Through the research, this paper finds that there are three factors leading to the tragic characters' tragedy. The first factor is that the tragic characters' and people's unconsciousness influence the two tragic characters. The second factor is that tragic characters' death instinct propels them into the tragedy. The third factor is that tragic characters overuse the mental defense mechanisms. No Name Woman overuses displacement and depression, while Moon Ochid overuses introjection, denial as well as depression.

This paper analyzes cultural text from the Freudian psychoanalysis, letting readers learn about the two characters in *The Woman Warrior*, and letting them know the reason of character's tragedy from the perspective of psychology. For scholars, when analyzing text, they can not only study from text itself, they can also conduct research from the angle of multidisciplinary fields such as psychology.

The Woman Warrior, as a great work, shows social reality and cultural clash between two countries in that era. It has also built a bridge for cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. Nowadays, with the reform and opening up, the Chinese society makes big progress and integrated with the world. People's minds are liberated and their lives are happier. For traditional culture, the essence should be assimilated, while the gross should be discarded in order to realize better development. Additionally, cultural confidence should be strengthened further.

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