



RESILIENCE AND FORTITUDE OF MIGRANTS IN
TWO MODERNIST WRITINGS:
JOHN STEINBECK'S THE GRAPES OF WRATH AND
ISABEL WILKERSON'S THE WARMTH OF
OTHER SUNS

BY

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ABSTRACT

The Great Migration in the United States at the turn of the century left a profound impact on America as a nation. It involved vast migration of poor share-croppers from Oklahoma to California to escape the economic and ecological disaster as well as the African-Americans from the rural Southern states to the cities in the North in order to break away from racial persecution. *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck and *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson chronicle the resilience and fortitude of the migrants in facing adversities in their quest for deliverance from hopelessness and despair to attain better lives for themselves and their communities. Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the struggles of the Joad family and other poor share-croppers in their migration. Wilkerson's writing, *The Warmth of Other Suns* depicts first-hand account of three African-Americans who personally went through the hardships of racial persecution and their epic migration. By weaving together historical accounts and the personal experiences of the characters using journalistic flair both writers gave their writings unique kaleidoscopes of the events that unfolded in the Great Migration. They managed to delve into the inner emotions of the migrants to portray their struggle to assert their identity as rightful citizens of the country and realise the American Dream. As modernist writings, the elements of modernism were apparent in the characterisation, plot and stylistics. The traits of modernism in the psyche of the characters are manifested in various forms in the works which reflect the new ways of understanding the complexities of the modern world.

ملخص البحث

تركت الهجرة العظمى في الولايات المتحدة في مطلع القرن أثراً عميقاً على أمريكا كأمة. وانطوت هجرة فقراء المزارعين المستأجرين من أوكلاهوما إلى كاليفورنيا على الهرب من الكارثة الإقتصادية والبيئية، وكذلك انطوت هجرة الأميركيين من ذوي الأصول الأفريقية من ولايات الجنوب الريفية إلى المدن في الشمال على الهروب من الاضطهاد العنصري. تسرد رواية "عناقيد الغضب" للكاتب جون ستاينبك ورواية "دفع شمس أخرى" للكاتبة إيزابيل ويلكرسون وقائع صمود وثبات المهاجرين في مواجهة المحن في سعيهم للخلاص من اليأس والقنوط لتحقيق حياة أفضل لأنفسهم ولمجتمعاتهم. تسرد رواية ستاينبك "عناقيد الغضب" نضالات الأسرة جود وغيرها من أسر فقراء المزارعين المستأجرين. كما تصور رواية ويلكرسون "دفع شمس أخرى" القصة الحقيقية لثلاثة من الأميركيين الأفارقة الذين عانوا بشكل شخصي من ويلات الاضطهاد العنصري، و تسرد وقائع هجرتهم الملحمية. ومن خلال نسج الوقائع التاريخية والتجارب الشخصية لأبطال الروايتين، وباستخدام الذوق الصحفي، أعطى كلا من العاملين الأدبيين مشهداً فريداً تتكشف من خلاله الأحداث. كما تمكن كلا الكاتبين من الخوض في المشاعر الداخلية للمهاجرين وتصوير صراعاتهم لتأكيد هويتهم كمواطنين شرعيين في البلاد ولتحقيق الحلم الأميركي. وكأي عمل أدبي آخر حديث ظهرت سمات الحداثة في التوصيف للشخصيات الروائية، والحبكة والأسلوب الأدبي. كما تجلت سمات الحداثة في السمات النفسية للشخصيات الروائية بصور متعددة في العمليين، والذي عكس بدوره الوسائل الجديدة لفهم تعقيدات العالم الحديث.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (English Literary Studies).

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other Institutions.

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To

My husband Wan Zamri Bin Wan Ismail, my son Wan Muhammad Aizuddin, my daughter-in-law Nur Idayu and my grand-daughter Wan Alisha Maryam – my bundle of joy.

Thank you for making my quest for knowledge enduring and meaningful.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

Throughout history man has undertaken the arduous and perilous task of migrating either individually or collectively in search of a better life, which could include survival, security, religious freedom, political determination and economic empowerment. Manning (2013:1) highlights that migration portrays a human habit as a thread running throughout human history. With increased means of mobility, the propensity for both internal and external migrations has increased as well. A wide definition of migration is provided by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2012:2) as...

A process of moving, either across an international border, or within a state. Encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes refugees, displaced persons, uprooted people, and economic migrants.

In view of the serious impact of migration in societies, social scientists and researchers such as Fong (2004:122), Boehm (2010:19) and Schmidt (2012:42) have attributed that the foremost defining criteria for those who have undertaken these migrations are their resilience and fortitude in facing the adversities that include perilous journeys and realities of the safe-haven of the migrants' dreams. Not all migrants meet with success, many perish and yet the flow continues. It is akin to taking a gamble where the winner takes all and the loser loses everything, including their lives. Surely, this task requires strong emotional, physical and spiritual capacity that only people with resilience and fortitude possess. Here definitions for resilience

and fortitude are needed in order to provide a better examination of the migrants' psyche. Reich et al. (2012:4) defines resilience as...

An outcome of a successful adaptation to adversity. People who are resilient display greater capacity to regain equilibrium physiologically, psychologically and in social relations following stressful events, and the capacity to move forward.

The concept of resilience is viewed by Walsh (1998:1) as the ability to heal and take charge of one's life after a traumatic experience. Zolli and Healy (2012:6) further explain the concept of resilience in different branches of the sciences such as: in the field of engineering, it refers to the degree to which structure like a bridge or building can return to a baseline state after being disturbed; in ecology, where it refers to an eco-system's ability to recover from degradation; in business, where it signifies having sufficient back-ups to prevent disruption to operation; and in psychology, where it is related to the ability of a person to deal with trauma.

On the other hand, fortitude as described by Green (2008:89) is the "strength of mind that enables a person to meet danger or bear pain or adversity with courage". However, fortitude as a virtue is dependent on the socio-cultural context. For example, Green highlights that the fortitude of a Quaker pacifist¹ is to be distinguished from that of the Taliban who seek martyrdom for fighting against American soldiers (McInerny, 2014:75; Johnston, 1963:61).

Numerous research have been undertaken to understand the reason, the impetus, the pull and push factors, the state of the minds, the emotional and spiritual aspects of migrants in undertaking their journeys and what makes them resilient in their quest (Codrington, 2005:452; Gold & Nawyn, 2013:100; Taylor, 1969:99). This study shall examine the resilience and fortitude of specific groups of migrants, amidst

¹ Refers to an unconditional rejection of all forms of warfare and violence (Brock and Socknat, 1999: ix).

the insurmountable challenges, trials and tribulations that they have to face in two modernist writings in their struggles to achieve their dreams for a better life.

With regards to the above, the plots of the writings, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), took place in the 1920s to 1930s in the United States and these depict the internal migration of share-croppers from Oklahoma to California as well as that of African-Americans who were former slaves, from the rural South to the Northern and Western states of the United States in order to seek a better life. Both writings portray the resilience of the characters in facing the emotional and physical trauma in their epic migration, which changed the United States landscape forever.

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a story of the migration of the share-croppers from the Southern states to the North of the United States. Essentially, these share-croppers (also known as tenant farmers), who do not own land on which they worked, comprised of poor whites, freed African-Americans slaves and Latinos. These farmers endured discrimination due to the lack of resources and the debt peonage by the landlords (Greenburg, et al., 2008:265).

The migration of the share-croppers was mainly due to the economic and ecological turmoil in the Southern states of the United States. In relation to this, Gregory (1987) observes that the economic and ecological turmoil of the 1900s in the United States, as described in the novel, caused an unprecedented economic and social migration where between 1.3 million people left the Southwest and more than a quarter of them resettled in California. The persistent drought altered the farming landscape of Oklahoma and other Southwest states and turned them into a "Dust Bowl". This shattered the lives of the farmers due to the destruction of their farmland as well as livestock. Gregory (1991:19) recorded the conversation that the former

Vice-President Henry Wallace had with a migrant worker in which he asked what the latter was doing in California. The latter answered, “well mister, I was farmin’ back in Oklihomy and it jist kep a gittin’ droughthier and droughthier and droughthier so, here I be”. Steinbeck’s view on the plight of the migrant workers, which shaped the novel, is highlighted by Haslam (2014:4) who describes how the abject condition of the workers and migrants had shattered Steinbeck’s view of his country as the beacon of democracy and justice as envisaged by the country’s Founding Fathers. Steinbeck laments on this deplorable situation through the voice of the narrator of his novel who says...

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is s a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. And children are dying of pellagra.

However, he believes, through the voice of the same narrator, that despite the dire circumstances, the poor and dispossessed workers have the inner strength and resilience needed to ensure their survival.

Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* focuses on another major factor for migration and connects this to the persecution of African-Americans under the “Jim Crow” laws. Brown and Stentiford (2008:95) traced the Jim Crow Laws to “The Eugenics Project² – the idea that white race is endowed with positive hereditary qualities while the non-white race is naturally bestowed with negative human attributes”. It refers to a set of discriminatory laws against African-Americans in the Southern states of United States at the end of 1877. The name Jim Crow originally refers to the character of a simple-minded country slave in minstrel shows before the Civil War. It later morphed into laws that placed severe restrictions on the rights of the

² A comprehensive discourse on the history and nature of eugenics can be viewed in Bashford and Levine (2010) in the *Oxford Handbook on the History of Eugenics*.

blacks in general (Brown and Stentiford, 2008: xvii). These laws effectively created a totalitarian and racist society in eleven states where African-Americans suffered humiliation and trauma. Many innocent lives were lost to “neck-tie” parties - mob lynching by whites to persecute African-Americans by hanging (Tischauer, 2012). One black elderly African-American aptly describes her life in the “Jim Crow” America as, “The white man had everything. We had nothing” (Litwack, 1998: 271).

In this respect, the central theme of both writings in this research is about the experiences of the characters that embark on epic migration and the effects that their migration had on the American demographic landscape. In essence, both writings revolve around three critical phases that depict the circumstances and the socio-economic environment which culminated in the migration.

The first phase highlights the need to escape from the economic turmoil and social persecution of the poor share-croppers and African-Americans in the South. The second phase shows the perils and challenges that the migrants had to face during their long journey through the vast American wilderness from the South to the North and the West of the United States. The third phase involves the stark realities of the migrants’ new homes in terms of realizing their dreams of a better life. At each stage of the migration, the state of mind, as well as the emotional and spiritual aspect of the migrants shall be examined in this study to determine their level of resilience and fortitude despite having to face the odds.

The Great Migration spurred a massive increase in the African-American communities in the cities in the North. In the decade between 1910 and 1920, New York's black population rose by 66 percent, Chicago's by 148 percent, Philadelphia's by 500 percent. Detroit experienced an amazing growth rate of 611 percent (The New York Public Library, 2005).

This research shall also examine the reasons for the migrations in both writings. This approach is crucial in order to demarcate the push and pull factors between the two migrations in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which is primarily for economic reasons, and in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which was due to racial oppression. This will provide the research with a more holistic overview of the narration of the Great Migration in America in the twentieth century as described in the two works.

Steinbeck and Wilkerson are among notable writers in the United States who have presented the voice of this era through their writings. The setting of both their works is the 1900s, a period beset by social incarceration and economic exploitation of the share-croppers and African-Americans as well as unparalleled economic and ecological disasters that have colored the historical narrative of the United States. These events have culminated in the mass migration of those afflicted from the farms and cotton fields of the South to the cities of the North and the West of the country.

Steinbeck, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, highlights the plight of the dispossessed share-croppers and their eventual migration from Oklahoma to California due to the “Dust Bowl” ecological crisis. In 1962, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for his realistic and imaginative writings that combined sympathetic humour and keen social perception. The Swedish Academy praised him as one of the “Masters of Modern American Literature” (Itzkoff, 2013). Steinbeck proclaimed that the writer’s duty was to declare and celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit (Schultz and Li, 2005: vii).

Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, California, a fertile agricultural valley, among the migrant workers. He enrolled at Stanford University as a student in literature and left without gaining a degree. Later he worked as a laborer and journalist in New York

City and moved to Pacific Grove where he began writing. Although middle-class by birth and education, Steinbeck felt a strong affinity to the plight of the working class. This experience had shaped his worldview on the plight of the migrants as reflected in his writings. He was a controversial writer for his time and the controversy surrounding his novel culminated in the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. His first two novels are *Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933). Over his career he wrote more than a dozen literary pieces and among the most notable were *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* (Shillinglaw, 2014; Parini, 1996; Benson, 1984).

Wilkerson, who also won a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for her writing *The Warmth of Other Suns*, depicts the “Jim Crow” era of persecution of African-Americans in the United States. Among other awards that she has received for her book are the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, the 2011 Anisfield-Wolf Award for Non-fiction, the 2011 Hillman Book Prize, the 2011 Lynton History Prize from Harvard and Columbia universities, the 2011 Heartland Prize for Non-fiction, the Stephen Ambrose Oral History Prize, the Independent Literary Award for Nonfiction, the Horace Mann Bond Book Award from Harvard University and the NAACP Image Award for best literary debut. She was also shortlisted for the 2011 Pen-Galbraith Literary Award for Nonfiction and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize (Wilkerson, 2010).

Wilkerson was born in 1961 in Washington DC to a family whose parents were themselves migrants. After graduating from Howard University, she underwent internships as a journalist with a number of influential newspapers, such as *Washington Post*. She landed a job at *Detroit Free Press* and later moved to *The New York Times*. In the late 1990s, she took leave of absence to teach at several

universities, such as Princeton and Harvard. As a daughter of the Great Migration, she felt that the stories of the migrants were not sufficiently told. To avoid euro-centric and biased interpretation of the migration, as well to ensure objectivity, she devoted 15 years of research on the subject and personally interviewed 1,200 survivors to get a first-hand information and true picture of the epic migration (Marcella, 2011; Taylor, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The Grapes of Wrath and *The Warmth of Other Suns* are modernist writings. However, unlike other modernist novels, such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by Scott Fitzgerald that have tragic endings and tones of hopelessness, both writings under review depict and highlight human virtues and give positive denouement to the stories of the characters. Yet these characteristics are not explored by critical responses to both works. Instead, the general idea is that all modernist novels will showcase elements of modernism that are characterized by nihilism, godlessness and alienation which fit the general tone of writings written during the early twentieth century. In this respect, Farshid (2009) cites Saul Bellow (1964) who argues that the mainstream characterisation of modernism in literature does not always hold water as the human spirit will always soar above such hopelessness and despair.

With regards to the above, both writings have refuted the norms of modernism that were characterized by the era such as hopelessness, loss of faith and despair. Both writings have proven that despite the odds, the oppressed, the dispossessed and disrespected were triumphant in their quest for a better life because they were empowered by their resilience and fortitude. This was further strengthened by a strong

sense of self-esteem and dignity as well as solidarity and altruism in the community (Sonn and Fisher, 1998; Sayer, 2011; McCorpin, 2011).

Significance of this Research

This research shall provide an insight into the virtues of resilience and fortitude, two crucial elements in facing adversities in life. Both works selected for this study have attracted numerous reviews on various aspects of the themes and plots, such as economic, philosophical, political and social issues. However, the issues of resilience and fortitude in the writings have not been significantly highlighted. There are valuable lessons to be learned from both writings that will provide empathy and sympathy on the plight of the waves of migrants of our time. In times of adversity, of hope and of fear, men and women, whether individually or collectively, will return to the inherent spirit of humanity beyond the realms of material pursuits. This is manifested in many forms either through religion or other forms of spirituality, such as patience, determination, transcendentalism and altruism, which are narrated in numerous occasions in the writings analysed (Resnick et al., 2010:8).

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- (1) To examine the social, economic and political struggles of the characters in overcoming all forms of prejudices and injustices as depicted in the two works.
- (2) To explore characteristics, such as other contributing personality traits and historical contexts that are associated with the resilience and fortitude of the characters in both works.

- (3) To explore and chart developments in the contextualization of resilience and fortitude of African-American and migrant workers in American society in general.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the factors, such as social, economic and political, which caused the migration of the characters in both works and the adversities faced by them?
- (2) What is the nature of resilience and fortitude, for example other personality traits and historical contexts, which shape the lives of characters in both works and help them to prevail despite the odds?
- (3) How have the resilience and fortitude of African-American and migrant workers been described, contextualized and developed in American society in general?

Literature Review

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* had created a controversy when it was first published as the authorities accused him of exaggerating the conditions of the migrants and this eventually led to the banning of the book from public libraries and literature classes. A vociferous critique of the book was raised by the Associated Farmers of California who denounced the book as "Communist Propaganda" and this resulted in the censorship of the novel³ (Wartzman, 2009). Despite the controversy, the novel's circulation reached levels of inter-class readership and produced a wide spectrum of reviews and criticisms. Stokes (2011) highlights that despite the controversy, *The Grapes of Wrath's* position have catapulted from being associated

³ This has prompted the creation of the Library Bill of Rights in 1939, which guarantees the right of Americans to have access to information and the right to utilize that information (Preer, 2008; Wartzman, 2009).

with American pop culture into a respectable work in the cannon of twentieth-century American literature.

In this respect, the controversy between the dominant worldview of the establishment, as shaped by the capitalist system and the resilience of the migrant workers depicted in the novel, fits into the theoretical framework of this research. This is supported by Alexander (2004) who narrated the triumph of the “Okies” as gaining their own unique public identity.

In his novel, Steinbeck highlights the issues of alienation and oppression, both being the concerns of modernism (Toth, 2010). This is supported by Leoffelholz (2012) and Perkins et al. (2012) who agreed that Steinbeck is a major writer of the modernist era. Toth (2010), Leoffelholz (2012) and Perkins et al. (2012) have also argued that the elements of alienation (a characteristic of modernism) in the novel helped built the resilience and fortitude in the characters.

His literary style in the novel is a fusion of facts and fiction derived from his journalistic assignment (Whitt, 2008). Another aspect of his literary style is highlighted by Vlcek (2011) on the use of the literary devise of intercalary chapters to depict the settings, which shows the social and historical events in the story. The amalgamation between description of facts in a fictional characterization and his intercalary style gives a fresh dimension to historical events that are shaped by the resilience and fortitude of the characters in facing challenges.

As a classic, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* has attracted numerous reviews and discourses on various themes in the novel. For example, Murphy (2013) discusses the distortions of the American dream, such as America being the land of opportunity but with Americans who are laced by greed. Another theme was on gender relations by Fonseca (2005) who attributes leadership roles to female characters in epic

migrations while depicting the figure of the male provider collapsing in the chaotic economic depression. Mourão (2003) raised the issues of economics and the role of the government during the Great Depression. Jasim (2008) discusses biblical allusions in the novel by equating the characters to biblical personalities. Bengoetxea (2014) touches on the issue of the abuse by the judicial system and the police.

The Warmth of Other Suns was written by Wilkerson who was appalled by the apparent under-reporting of the historical narrative of the plight of the African-Americans at the turn of the century. She took it upon herself to ensure that the painful emotions and experiences of the victims were recorded and shared. She felt that the story is another important step towards healing and attaining closer integration and equality in race-relations in the United States (Stauffer, 2010). Wilkerson combined journalism and literature in her narrative style to tell her story. For instance, from her extensive interviews, she discovered that the main cause of the migration was social and economic oppression, such as the “Jim Crow” laws. Her findings refute the mainstream view that the migration was primarily caused by economic reasons such as the locusts attacks known as “bollweevil” (Lepore, 2005). This refutation is supported by Giesen (2004:2) who describes the bollweevil as a historical myth that was used as a cover-up to the discriminatory practices against African-Americans.

Wilkerson’s writing showcases a new genre of writing in the United States known as “new journalism”: a new narrative style in examining real world or non-fiction. This is in line with the modernism theory that highlights experimentation in the writing of fiction (Dabscheck, 2011). In addition, Raison and Gordon (2012), highlight that Wilkerson gave voice to varying experiences, histories, ethnicities and perspectives, where new ideas and discussions surface - a characteristic of the modernism in her writing style. Unlike *The Grapes of Wrath*, which had intercalary

chapters to depict the historical setting, Wilkerson weaves together the multiple narratives of the victims which provide a distinct character and depth to her novel, and not merely present it as a historical narrative (Pitzer, 2011). In a review of the writing by *Kirkus Reviews* in its July 3rd, 2010 issue, the reviewer observes that the way she presents the victim's personal narratives by alternating them with short vignettes, created a powerful way of story-telling. The reviewer noted that Wilkerson...

Intersperses the stories of the interviewee's with short vignettes about other individuals which provides a bigger picture of the events without interrupting the flow of the narrative. Wilkerson's focus on the personal aspect lends her book a markedly different, more accessible tone, her powerful story-telling style, as well, gives decades spanning history a welcome novelistic flavor.

Another review, undertaken by Bobo (2010:253-255), raises the issue of humanity as a pertinent theme in her novel where the migrants are shown to be stereotyped, stigmatized and marginalized by other characters. The arguments presented above strengthen the fact that resilience and fortitude are powerful personality traits that are developed by the characters as they react to the events that happened in the historical context, which was during the Jim Crow era. It is also important to note that the period during which the events in Wilkerson's work happened coincided with the Dust-Bowl disaster depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Available literature on both works has covered a range of pertinent issues and themes with regards to the epic migration, trials and tribulations undergone by the characters and its socio-economic impact on society. However, none, to the knowledge of the researcher, has been written on the issue of resilience and fortitude of the migrants in the two works.

Theoretical Framework

Modernism as an ideology started as a result of the desire of the intelligentsia of the West to be free from the disillusionment of the feudal system and church of the Victorian era. Intellectuals and artists at the turn of the twentieth century believed that the cultural norms of the previous generations were simply old fashioned. They believed that the traditional forms of art, architecture, religion, social organizations and daily life were becoming outdated and, therefore, there was a need to break away from the past and its rigid conventions. Joetze (2011) citing Poplawski (2003:5) describes modernism as...

Probably the most important and influential artistic-cultural phenomenon of the twentieth century, whether it is considered primarily as a movement, a period, a genre, a style or an ideology.

This theory could be traced back to thinkers and philosophers such as Karl Marx (1818-1883) who in his *Das Kapital* (1867) postulates that reality is determined by materialist cultures and economics and called for a social revolution. Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in his Theory of Evolution gave modernism its scientific backing as he argues that survival of the fittest suggests that their survival was determined by their ability to adapt to their environment. The rejection of religion in all these theories was supported by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who declared that “God is dead”, as the values of traditional religion was considered outdated and illogical. With the declining confidence in religion as ordering the structure of the human mind, the Theory of Psychoanalysis pioneered by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) gained prominence as it highlights the dynamic unconscious state of the mind as a state where humans are unaware of their own thoughts (Childs, 2008; Lewis, 2007).