Trajectories of Youth Crises: An Appraisal of Mohamed Choukri's For Bread Alone

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Abstract

This article examines the trajectories and manifestations of youth crises in the lives of young people as explored in Mohamed Choukri's For Bread Alone. The psychoanalytic literary theory is applied in interrogating the motives for the actions of the young people entangled in crises. Findings reveal that these result from some underlying factors of dysfunctional family, poverty, and hunger. As discovered, youth crises manifest in drug and substance abuse, streetism, crime, and sexual perversion. These nonetheless serve as coping mechanisms for the young people to survive the difficulties. The study concludes that the absence of familial care, emptiness and disillusionment play crucial roles in disposing youths to certain crises.

Keywords: Coping mechanisms, youth crises, poverty, hunger, dysfunctional family

Introduction

Young people often experience certain crises that impact their lives. These can be within the family contexts and in society. Youth is defined as "a period of life in between childhood and adulthood" (Henze 5). The United Nations (UN) categorises youth as people aged 15 to 24. More so, a crisis is an unpredictable situation that pertains to an individual, family, organization, or society characterized by tension and insecurity (Nteka 64). Further, it refers to "acute and protracted events that are caused by conflict, climate-related hazards or other significant disruptors, which impact communities and make it more challenging for individuals to navigate daily life, and which often require humanitarian assistance" (Devonald et al., 1). Several factors give rise to youth crises, such as poverty, a dysfunctional family, emotional and mental health instability. Devonald et al. submit that crisis impacts on the mental health of young people (2). Accordingly, Mcgorry et al. aver an unprecedented increase in youth mental health issues, which encompass anxiety, psychological distress, and self-harm (08).

Mohamed Choukri's For Bread Alone explores copious instances of youth crises resulting in pain, despair, and struggle for survival among young people. The text was tagged as unwanted literature, a material about pornography and corrupt language, which is unfit for students (Nasalski 20). Further, Navarro and Parrilla acknowledge that sex is one of the building elements of Choukiri's work. Consequently, such stands are unconventional in Moroccan society and therefore censored (136). Kohstall avers that For Bread Alone is a counter-narrative that depicts contradictions and





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ambiguities domiciled in uniform narratives of national identity (99). Ait-El-Ouali corroborates that For Bread Alone is a counter-narrative; it deviates from the conventional Arabic autobiography, "breaking the alliance between the Arab Islamic body politic and the practice of traditional autobiography that prioritises and emphasizes intellectual and moral development which produces normative masculinity" (121). Similarly, El Younssi opines that Choukiri's works are remarkable for rebellion, counterculture and controversy despite the conservative nature of the Moroccan society (157). Notably, Kohstall argues that the universality of literature implies having also narratives on the subalterns, which For bread alone unequivocally fulfilled (99). Correspondingly, Navarro and Parrilla submit that Choukiri "is part of a generation of writers that turned the focus from the grand nationalist narratives to the daily life of the lower classes in colonial and postcolonial Morocco (130-131). Therefore, Ait-El-Ouali affirms that the author of the novel doubles as a character and a social critic, unveiling social inequalities in society and critiquing them from his relegated stance (121).

This paper bridges the gap in scholarship and examines the routes alongside the manifestations of youth crises in Mohamed Choukri's For Bread Alone.

The Socio-Political background of Choukri's Food Bread Alone

France's colonial activities with the Spanish government in Morocco greatly impacted the natives. Consequently, their lands became lost to France in 1926 following the surrender of Rif, Abd el-Karim to France (Brandabur 89). This incident led to a massive migration of the natives to the cities; likewise, the drought in 1952. The colonial oppression and tension experienced in Morocco materialized into abject poverty. The city of Taniger was an international zone controlled by Western powers, including the United States of America (El Younssi 158). Brandabur further notes that Tangier in the 1940s was filled with migrants following the harsh situation occasioned by the colonial oppression (91). Consequently, the migrants with bitterness looked at the foreigners and tourists who had occupied their lands and enjoyed meals in serene Tangier hotels, whereas the natives were overwhelmed by poverty. Ironically, the foreigners were viewed as providers of money, food, and sex. They also demonstrated ignorance of Moroccan history; hence, they oppressed the natives, whom they believed to be thieves and therefore should not be trusted. The colonial oppression was such that the police supported the foreigners in times of crisis against the natives. Notably, the natives were only useful as domestic servants. Further, the native Moroccans proved gullible to sexual abuse by foreigners due to poverty and hunger (Brandabur 87). Significantly, America refused assistance towards Morocco's independence instead they conspired with France.

Theoretical Foundation

Psychoanalytic literary theory was developed from the works of Sigmund Freud an Austrian Neurologist alongside his colleague Jacques Lacan. His ideas were first documented in the book The Interpretation of Dreams (Hossain 2). It was established in the later part of the 19th and early





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20th centuries. The psychoanalytic literary theory can be applied "to the author of the work; to the work's contents; to informal construction; or to the reader" (Eagleton 155). Freud's theory of psychoanalysis significantly introduced a new method towards the treatment of 'abnormal adult behaviour' (Hossain 3). The theory states that humans have innate instincts; thus, there is desire to gratify human needs, which include food, shelter, as well as cordiality. Consequently, this satisfaction is categorized into the oral stage, the anal and the phallic stage. The oral stage has the child desirous of involving objects and is the initial phase of sexual life (Eagleton 133). At the anal stage, erotic pleasure is derived from the processes of removal and destruction. Finally, the phallic stage focuses on the sexual drive of the child; here, the sexual identity of the child is developed. The attachement of the male child with his mother's body leads to an unconscious desire for a sexual union with her, which Freud refers to as Oedipus complex. With the boy turning to his mother, the girl unconsciously redirects her libido to her father. The boy, however, abandons this desire because of his father's threat of castration, at such it is repressed into the unconscious (Eagleton 134). The oedipal complex projects the transition of a child from the pleasure principle to the reality principle and forms the foundation for morality, authority, and law (Eagleton 135-136).

Moreover, the human mind, according to Freud, is compartmentalized into three parts, which are the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. The conscious refers to the part that embodies human present thoughts and feelings. The preconscious denotes the part where thoughts, ideas, and feelings can be retrieved. The unconscious includes the feelings and desires that are outside the conscious mind. (Niaz 39). The unconscious refers to the part of the mind located in the porous boundaries of consciousness. The unconscious embodies laws of transformation that guide the process of repression as well as sublimation (Hossain 3).

The theory focuses on the fact that human actions are governed by the unconscious. Moreover, the human psyche is tripartite, which includes the id, the ego, and the superego; Niaz et al. aver that the three parts of the psyche are usually applied to the actions of the characters in literary analysis (38). The id is the primitive part of the psyche that exhibits lack of self-control; as such, it lacks moderation and the ability to delay gratification. It is the repository of human desires and drives, which include thirst and anger (Niaz 38). The id operates in accordance with the pleasure principle and seeks impulsive gratification without recourse to morality. The id serves as the base of every mental energy. The ego functions as the mediator between the id and the superego. It works in accordance with the reality principle. Hence, it balances both the id and the superego; it evaluates the desires of the id and the morality of the decisions presented by the superego. On the part of the superego, it works as the "International societal and parental standard" (Hossani 4). It is the moralistic part of the psyche that projects what is good, right, or bad, etc.

Moreover, Freud views dreams as the outflow of repressed desires hidden in the unconscious mind into consciousness (Gbenoba 110). Dreams are outlets of releasing repressed feelings that are unacceptable to the conventions of society. Psychoanalytic theory perceives literature as dreams;





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they are formed by the mind representing reality which they are not entirely when analysed (Hossain 40). Dreams further offer the main access to the unconscious (Eagleton 137). Therefore, this study examines the characters in Choukri's For Bread Alone in the light of psychoanalytic theory.

Triggers of Youth Crises

Several factors serve as triggers for youth crises in Choukri's For Bread Alone and are examined under the various themes:

Dysfunctional Family

The crises experienced by Mohamed are highly motivated by his dysfunctional family, which fails to provide him with the suitable haven required for his physical, emotional, and mental growth. Mcgorry et al. aver that family environment also accounts for a massive rise of mental health issues such as "anxiety, psychological distress, and depression (13). Hence, Mohammed lacks food, a conducive shelter, and clothing. Scarcity of food pervades his home; while the available shelter he lives in with his parents is barely comfortable, he is disturbed by his parents during their conjugal performances. Such experience impacts on Mohamed's wellbeing as a teenager as he is introduced to sex at a young age. Furthermore, Mohamed's father symbolizes a failed father; he savors being unemployed, whereas his wife labours to provide for the family through menial jobs at the detriment of her health. Therefore, her health suffers even during pregnancy, which her husband cares less about. He spends his time in discussion with wounded veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Mohamed says of his father: "Mother went back to selling vegetables in the street. This suited my father, who liked nothing better than to sit in the garden of the feddane, deep in conversations with the wounded veterans of the Spanish Civil War (29). The foregoing illustrates a disjointed and dysfunctional family. Whereas the norm should be the father working to provide for his family, the opposite becomes the reality. This impacts negatively on the young Mohamed. Hence, Jummah confirms the dysfunctional nature of Mohamed's family (e284).

Moreover, another vivid portrayal of this family as dysfunctional is his father's awkward action. He waits and collects Mohamed's meagre salary at the end of the month. It is disheartening that a strong and healthy father depends on the miserable salary of his teenage son. His father's irresponsible attitude predisposes him to child labour working in difficult conditions. Shamefully, he rebukes Mohamed for quitting the hard job of pushing a wheelbarrow that leaves him with blisters. He says to him: "Food costs money in this house unless you work, you've got no food or bed here" (40). Further, on the return of Mohamed from Oran, he finds that his father remains unemployed. He says of it: "My father was still happily unemployed. He spent the greater part of his day in the Feddane talking to madmen and friends who had been wounded in the Spanish Civil war" (69). This is a father with the responsibility to provide for his family including his son Mohamed. With such negligent attitude, Mohamed opts for crime to keep body and soul fit.





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Accordingly, his father physically abuses and manhandles his wife as well as his children. He inflicts physical blows and pains on them whenever he is annoyed, without regard to their emotional and mental health. Mohamed says of it:

> The neighbors had to break the bolt on our front door in order to deliver me and my mother from his military belt. My body was covered with bleeding welts, and one of her eyes was swollen shut. It was many nights before I could find a comfortable position to sleep in. I longed to be able to sleep in the air. My wounds hurt, my bones ache, and I can feel the fever burning in my head (36).

Furthermore, Mohamed's father is controlled by the id and acts on impulse; however, sometimes he comes to his senses and weeps for his actions. After strangling Abdelquader his son to death, he weeps throughout the night. This is captured thus: "He was in the room taking snuff and sobbing. I was astonished. He kills Abdelquader and then he cries about it. They sat up all night, weeping silently" (13). This incident depicts the manifestation of the ego, which works with the reality principle. However, Mohamed compares his family to that of his boss at the café, but sees that, though his boss hits his wife and children, he still shows them affection. This conflicts with his father's behaviour. He says: "I saw that the man beat his wife and children the same way as my father did. Even so, he was less bestial. Several times I saw him kiss his sons and he held long, calm conversations with his wife. My father could speak only in shouts slaps" (31). Whereas parents owe the responsibility to play the indispensable role in raising mentally and emotionally balanced children (McAdams et al. 9). This situation impacts the mental and emotional well-being of Mohamed. Therefore, he stays away from home. He says: "Sometimes I did not go home to see my parents for more than a week. This way I escaped from the discord and wrangling" (31). Mohamed's parents fail to provide a suitable environment for his mental and emotional health. Moreover, due to the negligent attitude of Mohamed's father, Mohamed is not enlightened about puberty and the expectations that come with it. He battles with changes of puberty as he says: "I began to have pains in my chest, and mentioned them. They told me: You're growing up, that's all. I have a disturbing sensation in my nipples and in my sex, and when I squeeze the milk out of my sex, I feel as if I were being torn to pieces inside my body (32). Obviously, sex education is the core responsibility of parents, sadly Mohamed's parents fail in this regard. Consequently, he dabbles into the experimentation of sex with prostitutes in brothels (44). These reflect the dysfunctional and disjointed nature of his family.

Poverty and Hunger

Mohamed's family is ravaged by poverty, which manifests in his walking barefoot; the bruises on his feet attest to this. This is captured thus: "... I followed at the back, lame and barefoot... On the way back home the old man noticed the blood coming up between my toes, and spoke to me in Riffian. What's that? He stepped on some glass, said my father. He doesn't even know how to walk. He's an idiot" (13). Surprisingly, he is able to own a footwear which he buys for fifteen





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pesetas from a maricon. Poverty prevents Mohamed from accessing formal education; thus, he is unable to read or write in any language (58). Furthermore, Mohamed steals from a small orchard near his parents' house because of hunger. He is caught but shown mercy by his captors due to the poverty-driven condition of his family. He is offered bread dipped with honey, which he gladly accepts (22). Mohamed wishes that the house and the orchard of his captors belonged to his family. Poverty affects Mohamed such that he could not afford one peset to buy bean soup; he is saddened and laments: Only one peseta, and I could have a bowl. But where to find the peseta? My life is not worth even one peseta now" (92). Consequently, he feels intense hunger with sharp pains in his stomach. To relieve himself, he picks rotten fish from the pavement and chews it. Despite being rotten, he peels off the skin and manages to chew it, but spews it because of the rottenness. Obviously, Mohammed suffers the worst embarrassments in search of bread/food (Navarro and Parrilla 133). In a bid to surmount hunger, Mohamed tries to engage in a strenuous menial job but without success. Disappointedly, he laments: "When I was seven or eight years old I dreamt of bread. And here I am at sixteen still dreaming about it. Am I going to dream about bread for ever?" (96).

Besides, poverty and hunger drive Mohamed to engage in homosexual relations with an old man, a maricon. Navarro and Parrilla submit that sex turns out to be a source of income for Mohamed to earn money for food (137). Significantly, being controlled and propelled by the id, he succumbs to homosexuality. The id is the barbaric and untamed part of the psyche, laden with the desire for the satisfaction of the basic needs and urges, pleasures without adherence to decorum and conventions. He engages in the perverse act for some minutes, with a reward of fifty pesetas. Mohamed, weakened by the hard life and hunger, lacks the power to resist the inordinate advance of the old maricon. Undoubtedly, poverty and hunger are precursors to his being lured into the illicit affair. Apparently, the id equally controls hunger such that reason and rationality are not considered. Additionally, the traumatic and emotional stress Mohamed suffers makes him vulnerable to the maricon. Howbeit, the ego, which operates in accordance with the reality principle and functions to satisfy the desires of the id according to conventions, manifests and controls Mohamed after the perverse act. He is brought to his right mind and the reality of his action nevertheless dawns on him. Suffice to say that the ego has an interface with the conscience. Mohamed loathes himself and says:

If I had been that old man I should have vomited. Does he get the same pleasure from sucking me that I get from sucking a woman's breast? Does he get excited while he does it? ...Suddenly I was struck by my conscience. What I had done was no different from what any whore does in the brothel (100).

Moreover, with the proceeds from the homosexual affair, Mohamed buys himself, after a long time, a meal of fried fish and half a loaf of bread from a restaurant in Zoco de Fuera (100).





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Manifestations of Youth Crises

This section examines the various manifestations of youth crisis, which are categorized into specific themes:

Drug and Substance Abuse

Mohamed's gallivanting on the streets introduces him to smoking and drinking by some men at a café. His attitude of walking the streets without parental oversight, coupled with the need to fend for himself, predisposes him also to such a lifestyle. He recounts his first experience of substance use: "The first time I ate a piece of Majoun I fainted. Later I vomited what looked like moss...The men in the café encouraged me to smoke kif and majoun" (30). Smoking becomes an opium for Mohamed, especially from the turbulent atmosphere at home orchestrated by his oppressive father (36). According to Secim, substance abuse by young people stems from little care and rude treatment in families (2488). Similarly, unfulfilled expectations, unemployment and dysfunctional families contribute to involvement in substance use in young people (Osadolor 52). Further, Mohamed's life is characterised by smoking; despite being at the young age of twelve, he engages in it as a relief to his hostile society and as a route to weather the disillusionment over the lopsidedness that has bedeviled his society. Mohamed receives offers of butts and alcohol from people as kind gestures (96-97). After the escape from a police raid with another street youth, the latter offers him a cigarette, which he accepts. Mohamed perceives smoking as therapy for his ailments. He says of the youth who offers him cigarettes: "He handed me one of the butts. I sniffed at it. Virginia tobacco. He brought out a box of matches and lit it for me. I inhaled a deep breath of smoke and let it out. A delicious feeling of peace descended upon me" (91). The above statement captures the misconception about substance abuse and contradicts the reality. Notably, substance and drug abuse can lead to cognitive and behavioral issues, which have negative impacts on human health. Additionally, drug and substance abuse is associated with risky behaviors that lead to contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Sahu and Sahu 55-56).

Crime

Mohamed engages in stealing to retaliate against the oppression and exploitation he suffers at the hands of his father and his boss at the café. He feels incapacitated to physically confront his oppressors, but believes stealing from them is an avenue to inflict pain on them. According to the National Crime Council, involvement in crime is traced to several factors, such as socio-economic deprivation and family background/parenting (31). Consequently, stealing becomes motivated by the oppression Mohamed experiences. He says:

> My father uses my mother and me. The man who runs the café uses me too, since he makes me work longer than I should. But what can I do? I can steal from anybody who uses me. I began to think of stealing as way of regaining that which had been taken from me (29-30).

Furthermore, he participates in picking pockets and spends the proceeds on debauchery (72). Mohamed decides to pick pockets to survive. He says: "Will I manage to pick somebody's pocket





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the way Sebtaoui and Abdesalam do in Tetuan? Why not? I must try before what money I have left gives out" (102). His involvement in the act nearly lands him in trouble with arrest by two secret policemen, a Moroccan and a Spaniard. Consequently, he is accused of associating with two pickpockets, Abdesalam and Sebtaoui. However, Mohamed gains pardon through the influence of Señor Alvarez. The foregoing projects the aftermath of a youth crisis when it manifests in crime. Jummah contends that crime becomes the only resort when society neglects the needs of destitute young people, "for Mohamed, crime was not a choice, it was a desideratum" (282). Similarly, Ait-El-Ouali observes that Mohammed's involvement in crime serves as a survival strategy (101).

Streetism

Streetism is another manifestation of youth crises, where unfavorable circumstances and experiences of young people lead them to seek refuge on the streets, which offers them freedom and relief from their struggles. Asanbayev et al. state that "streetism is a social and an individual problem, it is very common in developing countries" (119). Mohamed's hostile home forces him to the streets; he sleeps in alleys "along with other vagabonds" (69). Wondimagegn and Dawit find that poverty, violence at home, and perceived freedom cause young people to turn to street life (5). According to Asanbayev et al., the first group of street children are forced by their parents to do menial jobs to earn money (119). The second group includes children and young people who run away from their homes due to conflicts with their parents; they sleep and live on the streets. Additionally, Mohamed and the boy he meets in Tangier belong to this second group. The boy shares his ordeal and reasons for coming to Tangier, recounting: "... my father was always beating me up. Sometimes he'd hang me upside down from the branch of a tree and beat me with his soldier's belt" (92). Like Mohamed, he is a victim of domestic violence. These findings align with Endris and Sitota's research on the causes of street life (94). Clearly, domestic violence and chaotic family environments are precursors to street life among young people. Mohamed's case fits this well; he prefers sleeping on the streets because of his father's abusive nature. Life on the streets offers Mohamed relief from the terrible atmosphere at home. At one point, he escapes his father's beating by tying a rope and jumping from the house onto the streets (85). Furthermore, Mohamed moves to Tangier and continues living on the streets, as shown here: "Already in Tangier, asleep again in a park. I had arrived that evening" (89). Additionally, other people—men, boys, and youths—also sleep on the streets with Mohamed. He explains: "There were also men from other cities who were passing through, and people who merely did not want to sleep at home, like me. Boys, youths and old men were sleeping all over the ground and on the benches like fish stranded on a beach" (86). He tells a young man about his street life: "When did you come to Tangier? Yesterday. And where do you sleep? In the streets" (97). This exchange highlights the experiences of youths leaving home in search of better opportunities and peace from chaotic family environments. The porter at the Tangier train station confirms the influx of people into the town and onto the streets, shouting at Mohamed: "This was a good town until you all landed here like a swarm of locusts" (95).





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Consequently, life on the streets exposes Mohamed to various forms of abuse, such as verbal, physical and emotional abuse from people on the streets. He narrates: "One of the porters yelled into my face: Get back! Out of here! Go on! This was a good town until you all landed here like a swarm of locusts! They swore at me, spat on me, and shoved me away. A muscular young man gave a hard kick and chopped me on the back of my neck" (95-96). Additionally, Mohamed becomes vulnerable to certain vices such as stealing, drugs, alcohol, homosexuality, and fornication. Specifically, he is introduced to sexual intercourse at a young age of twelve in a brothel and associates with prostitutes. Similarly, living on the streets impacts negatively on him; he is arrested and taken to Brigada criminal by two secret policemen for drinking and obviously living a suspicious life. Notably, the environment where he is arrested alongside his friends is remarkable for criminal activities. He says of life on the streets: "On the stairway, I ran into a drunk. He reached out to touch my face, saying: Aha, gazelle! Where are you off to, beautiful? I pushed his hand away violently, ran up two steps and glared at him. He guffawed. What are you so nervous about? Afraid of me? In his hand, he held an empty bottle. I'm going to fill up this bottle, he said. I'll be back (103). Significantly, living on the streets pulls Mohamed into engaging with thieves and in illegal business. His partner in the business informs him thus:

> We'll be using two cars, one to hold the stuff and the other for the men. I'll be bringing the stuff in from the ship in a rowboat. You'll be on the shore with the other three, and you'll need all your strength, because you've got to move fast the whole time. And you'll need your nerve. The customs men may be there on the shore somewhere, or stop us at the edge of town. If that happens, you're to do whatever either Qaabil or his partner tells you. You'll meet his partner. The secret police could come up while you're emptying the stuff out of the car, once you get to town. I like to tell you right out. The Job is dangerous. It's a job where anything can happen. They may shoot at us. You understand that? (140).

For Mohamed, life on the street with its vices proves therapeutic to him against the emotional trauma he suffers. He derives happiness and fulfillment from fornication with prostitutes. He affirms thus:

> My new pleasure kept me from being submerged by life at home... I was buried in my own melancholy, intent only upon my own body and the pleasure it could give me. Each day the world seemed to become a more complicated place. I slept in the street more often than I slept at home (50).

Conclusion

This paper has interrogated several routes of youth crises and their various manifestations. Certain crises that overrun young people originate from their homes and families. The family is the fulcrum for ensuring emotionally and mentally stable youths in society. Basically, young people need care





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and succor from the family, and when these are lacking, it is revealed that their emotional and mental health is at stake. Markedly, when the family fails to provide warmth and encouragement a child needs, such a child grows with negative/ wrong conceptions, which affects perspective and approach to life. The family has the primary responsibility to nurture children. Dysfunctional families often result in dysfunctional youths. It is discovered that youths get entangled in certain vices as survival strategies to their predicaments. The crises youths engage in have a tremendous impact on their identities, which lead to immediate or eventual severe consequences. The study concludes that the absence of familial care, emptiness and disillusionment play crucial roles in disposing youths to certain crises.

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