

Defence Mechanism in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

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Abstract

This study aims to explain defence of Meena, the main character in When I Hit You novel. Meena undergoes lack of emotional needs that becomes one of the reasons that leads her to anxiety. Meena starts to perform defence mechanisms in order to preserve her emotional stability, therefore, the study focuses on how the main character overcomes her anxiety in the novel. Using descriptive and dramatic research methods, the writer conducts a deep observation about the character's defence mechanism type: sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy, through which the character's defence mechanism is understandable. The writer finds that Meena experiences five types of defence mechanism which are sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy. Further, the types of defence mechanism experienced by Meena can be seen in Meena's love of writing, Meena's acting contrary from her true feeling, Meena's isolating her emotion, Meena's overly idealizing her husband, and Meena's fantasizing her married life. Finally, the types of defence mechanism are worth studying very deeply as such knowledge is very necessary to make people able to overcome anxiety.

Keywords: *sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, fantasy*

INTRODUCTION

In life, people always want their life to go according to their expectations. However, not everything can go as how it should. There are many things that do not go as planned, and some of these things can make some people trapped in feelings of discontent, worry, anger, and these negative emotions can lead people into anxiety. Ong and Twohig (2022) state that anxiety is a feeling that arises when someone has an excessive concern about what-ifs and the worst-case scenario of a situation that does not

even occur yet. Anxiety can be felt by someone either consciously or unconsciously. According to Ma and Miller (2021), a person who has anxiety feels unable to control their feelings or emotions. This happens because a person feels overwhelmed by excessive feelings of fear and worry caused by the non-fulfilment of their ego needs or desires. Some people find this quite distressing and uncomfortable for their emotional stability. When someone encounters a threat or danger, the adrenaline system will increase and will automatically send signals to the brain about the danger (Himanshu et al., 2020). As the result, someone receives the signal as a warning to prepare and secure themselves from danger.

Freud (2014) asserts that anxiety has three general types that are realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety. Realistic anxiety is a feeling that arises caused by possible threats and is easily identified. Different from realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety appears when someone does not feel in control of themselves. Lastly, the emergence of moral anxiety happens when someone fears violating their own norms and rules. Anxiety is helpful because it can be an action of personal reminder for people with low self-esteem to prepare themselves for dealing with a threat (Jonas et al., 2014). Therefore, anxiety can lead people to have a defence mechanism. Anxiety helps people to prepare and perform self-defence systems adaptively to the threats occurred in their life.

According to a recent report, the Covid-19 pandemic leads to a 25% increment in anxiety and depression caused by numerous reasons (World Health Organization, 2022). Long research has been conducted on the achievement of emotional well-being as the outcome of the performance of defence mechanisms (National Library of Medicine, 2021). Defence mechanisms will always be consciously or unconsciously done by people to achieve emotional stability. The defence mechanism is a method applied by an individual to deal with negative feelings that arise within themselves caused by the un-fulfilment of their ego needs. So, defence mechanism plays an important role in human life as they can give protection from some threat and or danger.

The defence mechanism appears to obscure the negative circumstances which can give a bad influence on the human mind. While anxiety purposes to deliver the signal of threat and danger, defence mechanisms are the ones responsible for protecting individuals by reducing the feeling of pain or stress caused by anxiety. A defence mechanism is a psychological strategy performed by a person, a group of people, or even in bigger

communities to face the reality and preserve emotional stability (Semium, 2006). As the main character in the human mind, the ego exerts every effort to maintain the stability relation between reality, the id, and the superego. However, when anxiety takes control of the human mind, the ego has to find a way to stand up for oneself. Waqas et al., (2018) assert that the ego will perform the defence mechanism by unconsciously blocking the impulses or changing them to a different object which will be easier to obtain and not to endanger. Freud classifies the defence mechanisms into eight different terms, which are denial, projection, repression, suppression, sublimation, displacement, rationalization, and isolation (Schultz, 2017, p. 49). Furthermore, there are also some advance defence mechanisms that are idealization and compensation. However, not all the mentioned defence mechanisms are worth an application in this article since the main character does not undergo all.

Sublimation is one of the defence mechanisms that have positive value when it is being performed as it transforms objectionable impulses into something that is perceived to be acceptable by the human mind (Pressley & McCormick, 2007, p. 140). Sublimation as a defence mechanism functions to alter undesirable impulses through art, music, and literature as the creative cultures (Feist, 2008, p. 44).

Isolation is a process in which an individual tries to unconsciously block the unpleasant feelings by remembering the real events while not receiving any personal feeling or emotion that comes from the event. This type of defence mechanism is performed by avoiding the idea of a person or situation that is distressing (Bailey & Pico, 2020).

Idealization is a process of self-defence purposes to attribute the best qualities to another person or object. Idealization mainly works to protect someone from internal or external conflict in a relationship by dominating the mind into thinking of the perfect traits of the other person (Cummings et.al., 2020). To illustrate, someone who idolizes a K-Pop idol will exaggeratedly attribute the positive qualities of their idol, imagining their idol to be kind-hearted, respectful, and funny then ignoring the fact that their idol is also rude and arrogant.

Reaction formation is a defence mechanism used by people to transforms an unacceptable feeling or emotion by acting opposite to what they really feel (Zulfaisya and

Hasra, 2020). For example, someone treating their co-worker that they strongly dislike in an excessively friendly manner so that they can hide their true feelings.

Fantasy is a defence mechanism used to avoid the reality by fabricating a safe place that stand in one's mind. Fantasy function to help people achieve temporary satisfaction through their imagination from their real-life conflicts or undesirable life (Miller, 2019).

Further, defence mechanisms can be not only seen in real-life events but also in literary works. One of the many literary works that deliver the topic of defence mechanism is a novel titled *When I Hit You* written by Meena Kandasamy. *When I Hit You* is a story following the journey of Meena as a young writer who married a university professor. The young Meena, who is still naive and not very familiar with the world, is then immersed into married life along with a man who considers marital relationships and roles as husbands to be the same as ownership of Meena's entire life. Meena's husband takes the advantage of it to treat her as property and tries to take away Meena's life as an individual. Their married lives were filled with domestic violence, and torture executed by Meena's husband as verbally, physically, and sexually. The young Meena then began to realize the reality she has been living is not the same as her expectation and needs then recognize the situation as a threat. The un-fulfilment of Meena's emotional needs becomes one of the reasons that leads her to anxiety. Therefore, Meena starts to perform defence mechanisms in order to preserve her emotional stability. Thus, how the main character overcomes her anxiety is discussed in this article.

Studies on *When I Hit You* have been extensively observed in numerous researchers. Therefore, the writer suggests several related studies using the same novel to find the gap for this study; the first study conducted by Kashyap (2018) analyse the feminist view found in *When I Hit You* novel. The researcher delves into the hidden life of Indian women who grew up to only be reminded that women are nothing and that they do not have the right to speak up and protect themselves from domestic abuse, marital rape, or contravention of their personal life.

The second study conducted by Mandal (2021) analyses the patriarchal practice found in the *When I Hit You* novel encountered by the main character the novel. In this study, she focuses on how women are trapped in a patriarchal society and suffer from domestic violence which occurs both physically and psychologically. She also

highlighted the real condition of marriage life in which there is found a great deal of oppression of women. The final result of this study shows the critical thinking of Meena Kandasamy as the writer and her assessment of women in modern society living in a patriarchal marriage.

The last study conducted by Majhi (2018) analyses the domestic violence found in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* novel and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. In her study, she investigated how patriarchy affected the behaviour of intimate relationship between partners when one person tries to control another. The final result of her study shows how men will use domestic violence when they find their partner to be obedient to keep them under their domination.

Drawing from all the research above, although the three researchers use the same novel entitled *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy discussing the feminist view and patriarchal practice in the novel. To the best of the writer's knowledge, there is no other researcher that has conducted the study using psychoanalysis approach on the topic of defence mechanisms in the novel entitled *When I Hit You* written by Meena Kandasamy

METHOD

Research Design

The writer uses descriptive and dramatic research method in analyzing the issue in the novel through presenting the characters mainly through description and discussion as well as through reporting the character's speech and action in that the writer quotes the description and the discussion of the main character as well as her speech and action that have things to do with defence mechanism. Thus, from describing, discussing as well as reporting the character's speech and action, the writer comes to the conclusion that the main character undergoes five types of defence mechanism: sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy. Thus, to get clear data to analyze, the writer uses defence mechanism to be the only method to analyze defence mechanism in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*.

Procedure

First of all, the writer collects the data in five tables in a note; the first part of the data is with sublimation, the second part are with reaction formation, the third part are with isolation, the fourth part are with idealization, and the last part are with fantasy.

Second of all, the writer elaborates the main character's defence mechanism types: sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy. Third of all, the writer quotes the quotation related to sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy. Last of all, the writer analysis the quotation and relates the quotations to the concepts of sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy in order that the writer confirms that the quotations are worth quoting.

Data Analysis

The data analysis is taken from Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* where the writer quotes the words that have things to do with sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, idealization, and fantasy. Thus, not all items in the stories are worth quoting here.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Defence Mechanism

Before coming to defence mechanism, the writer gives a little bit of the main character's anxiety. Meena is a young woman who comes from a small town in India. As a writer, Meena always feels like she already learns many things. She perceives herself to be smart but not until she meets someone. Her life starts to change when she encounters a man who works as a lecturer and also a politician. "I met the man who was going to be my husband. I was enchanted." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 28). As Meena starts to have romantic feelings for the man, she feels like he is the only one that she wants to spend her life with. Meena regards him as someone who is very smart, and intelligent, but funny at the same time. "This man is the real deal, I thought. He was going to make me look at everything differently." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 31). However, Meena is too naive to fathom that all the good qualities she perceived from the man are not completely portrayed in the way she thinks highly of him. After finally marrying the man, Meena starts to uncover the true cast of her husband. The personality, character, and how her husband handles his anger, all aspects found inside him are far from what Meena expects. Her dream to live with the love of her life and start a happy family suddenly fall apart as she starts to feel anxiety. The un-fulfilment of Meena's expectations in her relationship causes the emergence of anxiety, as she comprehends that her husband is abusive and manipulative.

Meena's Love of Writing

Meena's love of writing signs that she performs sublimation as a defence mechanism. Meena performs sublimation as her defence mechanism by altering her anxiety into her love to write. Meena has always been dreaming of becoming a writer. So, when she feels like the feeling of anxiety has already dominated her life, she starts to write to reduce the unpleasant feelings.

“...I was writing, I say. More often, I stick to the more modest version: I was trying to write. In the brief pauses between household chores, I would hunt for inspiration on empty pages, on the blank screen of my laptop. That's not work in his dictionary. That is someone doing nothing.”
(Kandasamy, 2020, p. 75)

The quotation shows that Meena writes because she really loves to. Even after a long work of household chores, she would still open her laptop to search for inspiration. Even after her husband tells her that writing is the same as doing nothing. “There is a semblance of respect that comes my way when I'm asked to write for a magazine, ...” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 75). Meena does not care of other people's opinions about her being a writer, what she really thinks is the feeling of pride and glory when someone acknowledges her writing. As a result, Meena always alters her anxiety into writing, even if it means that she has to do it secretly and in a very limited time.

Meena Acting Contrary from Her True Feelings

Meena acting contrary from her true feelings signs that she performs reaction formation as a defence mechanism. In her life, Meena uses reaction formation to reduce her anxiety caused by her husband. “As distressed as I am, there's a part of me wanting to laugh.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 51). The reaction formation as a defence mechanism is showed when Meena feels distressful, the trigger inside her does not lead her to cry or be angry but to laugh. She acts contrary to her true feelings because she chooses to laugh over the unpleasant situation in her life. “When something is too obvious, I think the best course of action is to pretend not to notice it at all.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 91). Meena deliberately avoids the negative circumstances by consciously pretending that nothing had happened. Thus, Meena can prevent the feeling of anxiety so that it does not extremely affect her life. Moreover, she also applied the reaction formation when she is dealing with her husband.

Further, Meena applies reaction formation when she acts to be a good housewife for her husband. "...But I know that aired in this manner, I am all set to play the part of the good housewife. Nothing loud. Nothing eye-catching." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 16). She consciously and continuously acts contrary to what she really feels. In reality, she feels exhausted from bearing with his behaviour. Being abused and manipulated by her husband make Meena wants to end her marriage, but she does not have the courage to make it into reality. Thus, one of the defence mechanisms she can do to deal with her anxiety is by acting contrary to what she really feels.

Meena Isolating Her Emotion

Meena isolating her emotion means that she performs isolation as her defence mechanism. "...because every reference to the sad tale of my marriage will be indexed under the responsibility over my own life. I must write my own story." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 9). When Meena talks about her sad marriage life, she does not involve her emotions, instead, she thinks of the positive side as her chance to take over and take control of her life. Furthermore, dealing with her abusive husband, Meena frequently uses isolation as her defence.

"I do not feel any guilt. I do not think any of his beatings or belt lashings will cause me to feel any guilt. With me, at this moment, I feel only the relish of rebellion, the comfort of long-forgone words that now make me feel safe, feel loved." (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 97)

Meena does not feel any emotion when she is being abused by her husband. She does not involve her feelings in the situation. The phrase "I feel only the relish of rebellion, the comfort of long-forgotten words that now make me feel safe, feel loved," shows her way of perceiving the situation logically. She does not want to waste her energy on something that will cause her to fall deeply into the feeling of anxiety. So, the role of isolation as a defence mechanism has helped her in blocking negative or personal thoughts while still be able to face the occurrence, thus, it prevents the feeling of anxiety.

Meena Overly Idealizing Her Husband

Meena who overly idealizes her husband means that she performs idealization as a defence mechanism. The idealization function leads Meena into believing that there is more positive value in her husband. "He can be kind, I know he can, I've seen how tender he is with the homeless boys in town, but with me, I know that he will always choose to

be cruel.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 138). Meena certainly knows that her husband is abusive and manipulative. However, to prevent the rising of anxiety in her life, Meena tries to focus only on the good quality of him.

“I fell in love with the man I married because when he spoke about the revolution it seemed more intense than any poetry, more moving than any beauty. I’m no longer convinced. For every genuine revolutionary in the ranks, there is a careerist, a wife-beater, an opportunist, a manipulator, an infiltrator, a go-getter, an ass-licker, an alcoholic and a dopehead.”

(Kandasamy, 2020, p. 89 – 90)

In the quotation above, Meena is certainly aware of the negative qualities of her husband. Meena chooses to focus on his good quality, as she views him to be someone who is revolutionary and intense while at the same time, she knows that her husband is also someone who has the courage to beat and manipulate his own wife, someone who is an alcoholic and a dopehead. All Meena does is a belief that the good qualities of her husband will replace her feeling of anxiety.

Meena Fantasizing Her Marriage Life

Meena fantasizing about her marriage life signs that she performs fantasy as a defence mechanism. Meena’s life has never been easy for her. Suffering from an abusive relationship, having to deal with a manipulator, and being isolated into loneliness. It is understandable if Meena uses fantasy as her defence in reducing the feeling of anxiety.

“On Sundays, we wake up late and stay in bed. In my fantasies of marriage, it is a suspended morning of making love and stepping out to eat an endless, lazy brunch. In reality, my husband goes over the events of the past week to conclude, after an elaborate analysis, that I’ve done practically nothing at all, and suggests a host of jobs that I should try. He usually sets himself as the stellar example.” (Kandasamy, 2020, p. 78)

Meena performs fantasy as her defence to retreating from the life that she never wants. In the phrase “In my fantasies of marriage, it is a suspended morning of making love and stepping out to eat an endless, lazy brunch,” she imagines how could life will be for her, enjoying Sunday morning with her husband as they eat lazy brunch. However, it all can only be happening inside her mind, in her own fantasy. Meena will never be experiencing

the life she wants in reality. So, the role of fantasy as a defence mechanism in Meena's life is to keep her sane by allowing her to imagine the perfect life she always wanted.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, the main character makes a success to defend her marital life with a disappointing husband through such defence mechanisms as follows: sublimation through which the writer channels her anxiety to other positive things, in this case, the main character alters her anxiety into her love of writing, reaction formation through which the main character acts in contrary from her real feelings, isolation through which the writer blocks the undesirable feelings and emotions so that it does not interfere her life, idealization through which the main character deceives her anxiety by overlooking on the positive qualities of her husband and ignoring his negative side, and fantasy through which the main character fantasizes her marriage life to retreat her expectations that she cannot make into reality.

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