



Defense Mechanism as a Psychological Concept in Afro-American Novel

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Abstract— *The life of average black man offshore African soil is fraught with greater challenges. The study concentrates on defense mechanism as one of the many psychological devices or tools, used ignorantly by Black-Americans as a means of earning their manumission or emancipation from white overlords. Many of these challenges could be both mild and severe, traumatizing and excruciating; causing great mental or physical pain. The extreme of these challenges is that, it leads to early death if the victim or the situation is not rescued. Against this backdrop, the study adopted the concepts based on the psychoanalytic principles established by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) whose theory of the psyche is often today in Eagleton's Introduction to Literary theory (2005) referred to as classical psychoanalysis. This theory also combines with Lois Tyson (1999) African-American criticism to examine black families in black literatures from the psychological point of view. Cases of defense mechanism as a psychological concept are drawn out of four (4) Afro-American literary texts; Richard Wright's "Black Boy" and "Native son", August Wilson's "Fences" and Toni Morrison's Beloved. Major findings are the psychological errors committed by traumatized blacks from their daily challenges and how the errors defined their lives in ruins and their identity as blacks. Major attention was focused on how those blacks were able to defend themselves and possibly gained their emancipation from slavery. The study focused on how the sampled-blacks faced and accepted the confrontational harsh economy and unbreakable political structure created by the whites. The classist nature of the social structure were also considered and how this affects or defines the limitations of blacks as second-class citizens in diaspora.*



Keywords— *defense mechanism, psychological concept, Afro-American Novel*

I. INTRODUCTION

The psychological concepts in its totality are measure of mental reaction or neuron-responses that determines ones action or behaviour mechanically, perfunctorily or routinely in human sub consciousness. Omosule, (2013) in his examination of Lady Macbeth used Freud's psychoanalysis to reveal through the reflection of Lady Macbeth's statement; how desperate and determined she was to prosecute the assassination of Duncan. He stresses that Lady Macbeth's behaviour is a reflection of her innate trait (unconscious) for bestiality. The fundamental claims such as the infiltration of the realm of the *conscious* by the *preconscious* and the *unconscious* is pinned to

psychoanalysis. An overall assessment of what is going on in the sub consciousness of an average black living on American soil will be revealed through the defense mechanism employed by the characters picked from the four (4) texts chosen for this study. Meanwhile, the outcome of the findings will suggest the tendency or what a black man is capable of doing offshore African soil. Care is also taken not to generalise as the behavioural pattern of the chosen characters remain mere behavioural tendency.

Meanwhile, Afro-American literature is a body of literature written by authors of black origin or background but who lived all of their lives in America and writes about

their American experiences. African-American or Afro-American literature is also a balkanized version of American literature. African American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives before the climax of slave narratives. African literature as an Art was further glorified and made colourful and flowering with the Harlem Renaissance of 1950s.

The scope of this special Art include, the role of African Americans within the larger American society, blacks as fillers or substitutes to the whites' deficiencies, Afro-American culture, racism, slavery and social equality. The argument of this paper has grown out of an attempt to formulate what it means to be Black in the twentieth century. W.E.B. DuBois wrote in 1903 that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line'; that race and its variously linear parameters (borders, passages, journeys; traditions and origins; demarcations and discriminations) are still politically central at the end of the century serves as a reminder that the urgency of this message has in no sense diminished.

Situating the politics of race and racism as the problem that haunts and constructs the discourses of modernity, the subjectivities we inhabit and the times in which we live, makes dramatically apparent the ways in which 'race' has become the founding illusion of our identities. Dubois published *The Souls of Black Folk* on the threshold of the twentieth century, and his declaration on its future had its roots in the events, the dreams and the thoughts of the century that had just closed. What he meant by 'Negro' identity cannot be exactly mapped onto the ideologies, the debates and the times out of which Black identities are understood and enacted today. However, the differential and highly contextualised meanings of Blackness and of Whiteness are still closely and significantly bound to the histories inhabited and analysed by Dubois, and cannot be adequately interrogated without those histories.

Theoretical Framework

Anxiety, fear of persecution and the fragmentation of the *self* are experiences peculiar to the era from Matthew Arnold to Paul de Man: they can be found throughout recorded history. What is perhaps significant is that in this period such experiences become constituted in a new way as a systematic field of knowledge. That field of knowledge is known as psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud in late nineteenth century Vienna; and it is Freud's doctrines that we now want briefly to summarise. 'The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one.' It was Freud, not Karl Marx, who made this statement, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.

What has dominated human history to date is the need to labour; and for Freud that harsh necessity means that we must repress some of our tendencies to pleasure and gratification. If we were not called upon to work in order to survive, we might simply lie around all day doing nothing. Every human being has to undergo this repression of what Freud named the 'pleasure principle' by the 'reality principle', but for some of us, and arguably for whole societies, the repression may become excessive and make us ill. Following the justification of Sigmund Freud theory, the paper unraveled the fear and anxiety of the black characters in the chosen texts for practical analyses.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

(i) Afro-American Literature

A body of writings and literary works detailing the movements and ordeals of blacks on American soil is what is today referred to as African American or Afro-American literature. Critics cite Wheatley's successful defense as the first recognition of African American literature. As a result of the skepticism surrounding her work, 'Poems on Various Subjects' offers its reader several introductory documents designed to authenticate Wheatley and her poetry and to substantiate her literary motives. Another early African-American author was Jupiter Hammon (1711–1806). Hammon, considered the first published Black writer in American, published his poem *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with penitential cries as broad side* in early 1761. In 1778 he wrote an ode to Phillis Wheatley, in which he discussed their shared humanity and common bonds. In 1786, Hammon gave his *Address to the Negroes of the state of New York*. Writing at the age of 76 after a life time of slavery, Hammon said and I quote : 'If we should ever get to heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black, or for being slaves'.

He also promoted the idea of a gradual emancipation as a way to end slavery. Hammon is thought to have been a slave until his death. In the 19th century, his speech was later reprinted by several abolitionist groups. William Wells Brown (1814-84) and t Victor Sejour (1817–74) produced the earliest works of fiction by African-American writers. We cannot talk about African American literature without mentioning the 13th Amendment passed by the late Abraham Lincoln which almost ended slave trade. When we move further in the history, we must examine the good efforts of the early Abolitionists like WEB Dubois, Fredrick Douglass, Boker Taliafero Washington, Henry Louis Gate, and so on.

Of importance also is their secret road networking and stoppages called 'The Underground railroad' which was the

homes of the individual Abolitionist following 'The Northern Star'. Of great reference also is the work and effort of Harriet Tubman who helped more than 500 blacks gained manumission. We can remind ourselves the nostalgic effect of slavery when we talk about the early counties system; cotton and sugarcane plantations where blacks work as indenture servants. When we move forward, we discuss at length about 'The great Migration' towards the Northern Carolina and Philadelphia down to the Renaissance period, then to the Age of Toni Morrison the 1980s winner of Pulitzer award.

(ii) Defense Mechanism as a Psychological Concept

Defense mechanism is a psychological tool or device unconsciously or perfunctorily used by a frustrated or traumatized being to escape from assailing threats either coming from other super-human being or from the vicinity or environment habited by the victim to remain or stay alive. Sigmund Freud was adjudged to be the first scholar to have discussed this tool or device as one of the psychological devices postulated in his early psychoanalysis theory dated 1939. Other tools are *fear*, *inferiority complex*, *anxiety*, *racial discrimination*, *death*, etc. Terry Eagleton and Louis Tyson also dwell on this theory in their *Literary Theory; An Introduction* (2005) and Tyson L. (1999). *Critical Theory Today* respectively.

III. APPLICATION/ ANALYSIS

i. Comparing Bigger Thomas and Paris

If it was not a case of inferiority complex, one of the numerous psychological concepts developed by Sigmund Freud, Bigger Thomas a character in Richard Wright's 'Native son' would not have had to defend himself by preventing Mary Dalton with a pillow case which suffocated her to death when the latter tried to answer the call of her blind mother while Bigger laid her on bed in her room. Bigger having watched nude films and had seen the beauty of white ladies in the movie savored and immediately became hungry of having sexual intercourse with any of them. Mary Dalton who of course a victim of the established circumstances was naive of this psychological disorder of his glorified driver, got herself drunk and was left in the mercy of a black man who could not control his sexual urge and feelings; was almost raped and unfortunately died through psychological error committed by Bigger. Had Bigger Thomas a white young man, the best he could have done was to contest with Jan Earlon Mary's boyfriend and struggle to have Mary to himself the way Paris did to Menelaus to have Helen all to himself in Homer's Troy even though it will result to an all-out war and bloodshed just as the war between The

Greeks and The Trojans which lasted for 10 years with a continuation of another 20 years in Odyssey.

ii. Defense Mechanism in Black Boy

Of significance is the fight that ensued between Richard and some boys in the novel because his victory over those boys gave him a lot of relief thereafter. Richard fought some boys who waylaid him on his way to the grocery store when he turned six years old. Because the boys are many and are apparently more powerful than he is, they beat him mercilessly and make away with the money his mother has given him to buy, items at the store. This incident happens thrice.

On each occasion, his mother sends him back and gives him money again. On the fourth occasion, his mother gives him a whip in addition to the money and warns him not to come back home without what he is sent to buy. Richard is torn between running away from the boys, and being beaten by his mother and squaring up to the boys. If he is beaten by the boys, he can retaliate, but if he runs home and he is beaten by his mother, he cannot retaliate. He finally chooses to fight with the boys. He succeeds in beating the hell out of them.

The boys flee to their parents. Their parents come to look for Richard and threaten to beat him. He vows to deal with them the way he has dealt with their children. The boys and their parents go back home, surprised about the kind of a boy Richard is. Since then, nobody waylays him again. His mother has done this to instill in him the need to fight back when oppressed. He would not probably have known his potentials if his mother had not handled him in a tough way. We see in Richard's mother a good motivator, someone who does everything in her capacity to bring out the best in a child. This particular incident influences Richard's later actions. At almost each new school he attends, he has to fight with some boys to assert his prowess. Some parents encourage thuggery. The parents of the boys who waylay Richard exemplify such. They do not bother to ask their children what they have done to Richard. They want to defend their children. If Richard does not threaten to beat them, they would have joined their children to beat Richard and may have probably killed him in the process. These parents behave as if they are the only ones who have children. If Richard's parents most especially his mother had come but to defend him, those children's parents would not have found it palatable.

Richard's stubbornness is his own defense mechanism. His stubbornness at childhood knows no bounds; he holds on tightly to whatever he believes is right. When called upon to be the valedictorian, he rejects the principal's address. This action of his is the first of its kind in the history of the

school. His argument was that though the address of the principal is better than his, it does not say what he as a black boy would like to say. He was threatened by the principal, who claims he has the power to fail anyone, even if he has passed. The principal also lures him with a teaching appointment.

Richard, however, remains undaunted. He damns the consequences and goes ahead to read the address he has prepared himself. Some people applaud him after the address but he is not moved by people's reaction. Through this event, Richard portrays himself as an iconoclast; somebody who believes in himself and feels things should be done the proper way, one who is undeterred by the beauty of any office. With this he has succeeded in doing something new. People can use anything to suppress anybody who wants to change the status quo. The principal knows that Richard is right; this is why he wants to use all possible means to make him change his mind. He does not want Richard to attack the issue of class differentiation and colour bar prevalent in his society then.

In contrast, Richard's stubbornness could be compared to that of Kunta Kunte; son of Omoro and Binta Kunte from Uganda in Alex Haley's *Root*. The saga of a slave boy in defense of his black identity who refuses to accept Toby as a new name given to him by his slave master; the Toubab, a white man. He knew that a change of name is a total loss of his African identity.

iii. Defense Mechanism in Wilson's Fences

Rose mentions that Cory has been recruited by a college football team. Troy wants Cory to give up on football because the white man will never let him get anywhere with it. He believes that Cory should keep the job he has at the A & P and "get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living". Bono comments that if Cory is as good at football as Troy was at baseball then the boy will do alright. Troy says that despite his skills at baseball he's still poor. His wife tells him that times have changed since he played baseball – now black people are allowed to play in the major leagues. Bono says that Troy just came along too early. "There ought never have been no time called too early!" says Troy. He talks about how his batting average was way higher than Selkirk's, a guy who played right field for the Yankees back then.

Rose comments that people just had to wait for Jackie Robinson to come along. Her husband says, "Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody" and that he "knows teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make!" Troy complains that it should never have mattered what colour you were. If you were good at baseball, they should have let you play. He

believes that minorities will never receive the same deference given to white players.

Troy thinks that this son ought to be learning a trade instead of focusing on sports. He has no faith in organized sports; he was a great ball player as a younger man, but never had a chance to play in the major leagues. He is still haunted by the denial he suffered in the hands of whites who never gave him opportunity to play in major leagues despite his distinguished talent in playing baseball.

Rose and Bono tried to convince Troy that things have changed. The significance here is not to use the past to judge the present; what obtained at one time might change within the future. Troy played baseball in his youth, but it was before the days of Jackie Robinson and baseball's integration. Troy couldn't advance to the big leagues because of his race. Baseball, Troy says, never got him anywhere. "Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" because of the sport. It is part of the dynamics of life that what has less value yesterday may assume higher value today. Troy with all his baseball talent never got to play in the major leagues because the "colour" of the player was a factor then. But that discriminatory consideration no longer exists today.

Troy is still very unhappy about the colour discrimination he suffered at the expense of his talent. He fears the same fate may befall his son in football and doesn't want a repeat experience. He is concerned that his children should do better in life than himself. Cory's dream is attainable, yet Troy will not recognise that. He is blind to the changes that are taking place in society. On the other hand, Troy is far from being passive about the discrimination that touches him personally. He despises the racist practices at his job and attempts to change them. But when it comes to his son, he has a blind spot; he can't see the point of striving for higher attainment.

This conflict deepens as the play progresses. This unpleasant memory is what he wanted to repress reason for not allowing his son Cory to venture into sports because he believes white man will deny him the same way he was denied. This is where defense mechanism comes in.

iv. Defense Mechanism in Wright's Native Son

By the time Mary arrives home from the outing with Jan, she is thoroughly drunk and so drunk that she could not walk unaided. Bigger thinks of helping her to her room but is initially paralyzed by the fear of what her father, mother or any person, would think if he is seen in a position considered as a compromised one with a white girl.

Realizing that her situation is hopeless, he decides to help her to her room. In fact, at a point, he had to lift her bodily.

While assisting, Mary, Bigger experiences mixed feelings of admiration and hate. At a point he feels that she does not hate him the way other white people do. Anyhow, he manages to carry her to her room. While he holds her in his arms, sensuous feelings are awakened in him and he kisses her. He lays her on the bed. He wants to leave but is apparently held back by uncertain feelings. He grips her breasts and kisses her again, “feeling her move toward him” (p. 116). Suddenly, the door behind creaks and he stiffens. As he turns back to behold Mrs Dalton, he is overwhelmed by terror.

Bigger’s initial reaction to the appearance of Mrs Dalton is to knock her out of his way and make a run for his life. At that instance, the old woman calls Mary’s name. Not wanting Mary to speak and to frustrate her from getting up, which may attract Mrs Dalton to the side of the bed and lead to his discovery, Bigger covers her mouth. However, Mary mumbles and tries to get up again, but Bigger frantically grabs a corner of the pillow and covers her mouth with it.

Apparently impelled by intuition, Mrs Dalton who had earlier thought that Mary “must be asleep” (p. 116) moves towards the bed. As Bigger realises that he is going to be discovered, he is frightened, quickly picks the pillow and firmly covers Mary’s entire face with it. With Mary’s hands and fingernails being used to resist the covering on the face and the likely threat of exposure increasing, Bigger applies pressure with all of his strength in pressing the pillow down. After some moments, he no longer feels the resistance. By the time he takes his hands off the pillow, he hears “a long slow sigh go up from the bed” (p. 117). Mary is dead.

Mrs. Dalton, who is still in the room, but unaware of her daughter’s death wonders whether she was sick. As she moves closer toward the bed, Bigger moves stealthily away. In defense of his crime, Bigger carries Mary’s corpse, puts it in the trunk she had planned to take to Detroit later in the morning. He takes it down to the basement. Here, he tries to put the corpse in the furnace but the size of the furnace appears incapable of taking in the entire length of the corpse. Having put in the feet first, further pushing-in stops at the shoulder. He eventually gets a hatchet, severs the head off and throws it also into the furnace. After taking all he considers the necessary precautions, he pushes the level of the furnace back, pushes the trunk into a corner and goes out through the back door.

The murder of Mary is clearly not premeditated. Bigger is driven into the act by fear of what the white folks would

think if caught alone with a white girl in a room in the night. Consequently, this episode is significant in that it shows how fear can drive people into criminality. It also shows the consequence of the culture of fear, which the white oppression in the United States imposed on the black folks of Wright’s society.

v. Defense Mechanism in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Though the name of Sethe’s third child murdered, her throat having been cut with a handsaw by the deceased mother is not known, but the reason for Sethe’s “rough choice, her infanticide has left much to be desired and food for thought to the critics. *Beloved* explores the all-encompassing destruction wrought by slavery, which affects the characters freedom. The plot of *Beloved* follows two different stories. The first story takes place in present time, which is the year 1873, in Cincinnati, Ohio. The second story unfolds through flashbacks that tell of events that transpired in the past years. The Novel begins with Paul D appearing on Sethe’s porch one day. They have not seen each other in eighteen good years, when they both ran away from Sweet Home, the plantation in Kentucky where they lived as slaves.

Though both escaped captivity, they endured traumatic experiences in the process. Paul D ended up at a prison camp in Georgia, where he worked on a chain gang until a flood created conditions for an escape. For her part, Sethe was nine months pregnant when she fled from Sweet Home, and she had to give birth en route to freedom. Help from a young white woman saved her life and enabled Sethe and her newborn, Denver, to make it to Ohio. There Sethe reunited with the three older children she had sent ahead of her. When school teacher tracked her down, twenty-eight days later, Sethe responded by trying to kill her children to spare them from enslavement or being recaptured, and though three survived Sethe succeeded in killing her eldest daughter.

The memories stirred by *Beloved*’s presence build toward the novel’s twin climaxes. The first climax occurs in chapter 16, which narrates the scene where school teacher arrives at house 124 and Sethe tries to kill her children in the shed to save them from a life of slavery. She wounds her two sons, slits her eldest daughter’s throat, and attempts to bash Denver’s head against a wall. This horrific event changed Sethe’s life, poisoning her reputation in the community and was later haunted by the ghost of her daughter 'Beloved' whom she inadvertently killed because of the defense mechanism she adopted.

IV. CONCLUSION

The resonant idea deduced from the type of defense mechanism adopted by the characters chosen for this research work is that one which is not in their favour. Bigger Thomas' idea of silencing Mary Dalton with a pillow to prevent the latter from talking so that his presence in Mary's room will not be noticed boomeranged, Richard's chosen stubbornness only ended him as a bully even though he uses that defense method to save himself whenever trouble looms, Troy Maxson's conservative, adamant and impenetrable opposition of Cory's ambition to become a footballer contributed in what almost shattered the latter's big dreams or his chosen future career. Sethe's attempted murder of her sons and daughters and the eventful killing of her eldest daughter makes her become a savage and consequently a gothic character. Memories of past bitter experiences could be too dangerous to repress most especially the type of traumatic slavery experiences discussed in many slave narratives in the whole body of Black Literature.

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