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FIRE ON THE MOUNTAINS: A STUDY OF EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

Anna Freud developed upon the concepts of various defense mechanisms that her father Sigmund Freud had discussed in his theory of the psychoanalysis. Later psychologists like George Valliant gave it a more structured definition and delineated the defense mechanisms on a continuum that ranges from immature to pathological to neurotic to mature. Defense mechanism is the innate response of a mind to an unconscious id/ego conflict as translated into behaviors and perceptions Anita Desai's 1976 novel *Fire on the Mountains* set on the hills of Kasauli makes a psychological foray into the characters of the women that live or come to the lonely house of Carignano. The present paper makes a study of the use of defense mechanism by the three prominent characters of Nanda Kaul, Ila Das and Raka to see if their strategies were successful for them and how they shaped them as a character.

Keywords: Defense Mechanisms, id/ego, isolation, sublimation, psychology, denial, projection.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountains* (1976) is a psychological study of three females born and borne in different circumstance but threaded together by familial relations or friendship. The novel's action takes place mostly at the psychological level and thus can be read in the light of defense mechanisms as described by Anne Freud (1937) who worked upon Sigmund Freud's original ideas of the unconscious and the ego defenses as well as the systematic classification of defense mechanisms on a scale of mature to immature behaviors as listed by George E Valliant. (1994). In Sigmund Freud's concept of psychoanalysis, the unconscious is the most important part of the human psyche and is the main progenitor of human behavior. Dianna T Kenny provides a lucid description of the concept in her 2016 essay:

The Unconscious refers to the existence of thoughts and feelings of which we are not aware that motivate our strivings and behavior. It is the locus of dynamic psychic activity – the place where wishes, impulses and drives reside, a place not beholden to the realities of logic or time or the constraints of socially acceptable behavior. The contents of the Unconscious are usually experienced as painful and/or forbidden and have therefore been repressed, that is, excluded from consciousness, in order to reduce the associated anxiety, guilt or conflict. (3)

The human psyche employs certain 'defense mechanisms' that are "innate involuntary regulatory processes that allow individuals to reduce cognitive dissonance and to minimize sudden changes in internal and external environments by altering how these events are perceived." (Valliant, 44) These defense mechanisms are automated in the sense that they are not a conscious decision of the mind but they influence the perception of reality and the conscious mind significantly. "Defense mechanisms can alter our perception of any or all of the following: subject (self), object (other), idea, or feeling." (44) What is most interesting about this psychological phenomenon is that they are an innate way of resolving conflict of the mind and yet could be either healthy or disruptive for a person in the long term.

Anne Freud, daughter and disciple to Sigmund Freud has listed and researched on several defense mechanisms as practiced by the ego to resolve the id-superego conflict: repression, regression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, denial and sublimation or displacement (1937). Though these concepts have been challenged by recent researches (Baumeister, 2002), they still hold some relevance and have been taken up by researchers like Otto Kernberg (1976, 1984), Valliant (2002) who have expanded and elaborated the viability and usefulness of these concepts as basic to psychoanalysis. In a 1994 paper *Ego Mechanisms of Defense and Personality Psychopathology*, George Valliant classifies the defense mechanism into four broader categories that 'arranged in order of their empirical association with global assessments of mental health the Ego Defenses as defined in the DSM-III-R:

- a) Psychotic defenses: Denial (of external reality), Distortion (of external reality)
- b) Immature defenses: Passive aggression, Acting out, Dissociation, Projection, Autistic fantasy, Devaluation, Idealization, Splitting, Intellectualization
- c) Neurotic (intermediate) defenses: Isolation, Repression, Reaction formation, Displacement, Somatization Undoing, Rationalization
- d) Mature defenses: Suppression Altruism' Humor, Sublimation.

The novel as a study of the complexities of the human psyche invites an interpretation of the various perceptions and behaviors in terms of the success and failure or strength and weakness of the defense mechanism. The mechanism can be noticed to be actively in force with all three female characters with only Ila Das, who is perceived as a clown by Nanda, adapting mature defenses. While Nanda Kaul's action and reactions form a complex web of pathological, immature and neurotic mechanisms, Raka's has developed neurotic mechanisms like somatization, repression, devaluation, and isolation as major character traits even as a child.

Life for Nanda Kaul had been arduous and toiling because Nanda as a wife to the Vice Chancellor and as a mother lead a double life. She always projected herself (another of Anne's immature defense mechanism) as a perfect home-maker and a caring mother while stifling under the nuisance of child-rearing and a failed marriage. This brings up the common defense mechanism of denial. Nanda Kaul stayed in a voluntary state of denial as long as her husband was alive. She did not accept the fact that the infidelity of the husband along with his uncaring attitude meant a ruined marriage and demanded some courageous action on her part to either reinforce the marriage or to break free from it. Nanda's repression of her actual feelings of anger, frustration and rejection and indulging, on the contrary, in the 'reaction formation' of being the regal queen that runs the show perfectly leads to her regression in the later life. Her inability to deal with a small girl, her extreme anxiety at Raka's presence, her story-telling about her father to Raka are all aspects of her personality that border on schizoid personality disorder. The novels begins with a note of negativity using the verb 'paused' and goes on to describe the 'cicadas fiddling invisibly under the mesh of pine needles.' (1) Nanda Kaul, regal at her 'home on the ridge' (4) Carignano, wanted to be left alone to those cicadas and the pine trees. No human interaction was welcome to her—letters meant demands, queries, requests, and promises that were exhausting and repulsive. She wanted to stay there as rooted and as naturally as the fauna there—the pines, the hoopoe, the irises, the apricot tress, the occasional eagle, the clean air and the barren mountain. Her desire to stay with the fauna and as the fauna reveals her regression as an adult.

The character of Nanda Kaul is drawn by Anita Desai from a post colonial, post-modern, as perhaps a post-feminist vantage point to depict a woman who has given too much already—like the earth, the land, the nature, she has exhausted her resources of love and warmth, her generosity, her humaneness and has been rendered emotionally barren and hence dysfunctional. Nanda Kaul is at a fag end of her life where she has given up on human company. Nothing and no one in human form is welcome to her as she has already spent all her energies dealing with them. In her reveries about the past, the novelist reveals to the readers how tortured a soul Nanda was. She was kept at bay by her husband who was having an affair with one of the teachers Ms. David and she in turn kept her children away from herself. There was no close relationship with her children. She tells fantastical stories to Raka regarding her home and her father travelling to places, bringing in gifts and having a sort of zoo at home but being simultaneously disgusted with her own self for lying to the child. Nanda Kaul's whole life before coming to Carignano has been a complex interweave of repression and reaction formation. Her overtly dutiful behavior as a mother and as a housewife at her previous house in Punjab shows her obsession on being able to prove herself as a good mother. However, when the women who came as guests to her house whispered about her success as a home-maker, she reacted sharply giving them a glance that would cut them through and shut them up. (19)

The marked features of Nanda Kaul's character are emotional distress and anxiety. She wants to avoid human company and contact at all cost—no phones are welcome, no letters or messages, no friends from the past nor even her own great-grandchildren. She is startled to hear the cacophonous ringing of the telephone, detests the sight of the postman, is most unwelcoming to Raka and is dismayed at the prospect of Ila Das' visit. The desire of being loved and cherished by her husband remains an unfulfilled desire and begets many complexities in her character. She develops the reaction formation of being the most dutiful wife while detesting her life from within.

She thought of the veranda of their house in the small university town in Punjab, the Vice-Chancellor's house over which she had presided with such an air as to strike awe into visitors who came to call and leave them slightly gaping. (19)

She avoids confrontation with her husband and chooses to project herself as the regal 'queen' adept at running the show at the home-front. When she chooses isolation in her later life, living at the huge house on the ridge of Kasauli, she becomes extremely anxious about the arrival of Raka and the brief visit of her long lost friend, Ila Das. Her twitching at the handwriting of her daughter, Asha speaks of the distorted and distanced relationship with her children. She could never openly talk to her daughter about her faulty parenting style probably because she herself had done the same. Nanda Kaul essentially remains in denial of her pain as an un-cherished wife. She does not know how to deal with the trauma of an infidel husband and a failed marriage. Denial in a subject emerges when the reality is too brutal or upsetting for the subject to accept it and modify his behavior accordingly. The subject sometimes chooses to overlook the changed reality totally and continue to behave in the old manner. Had Nanda Kaul accepted her harsh reality of an unloving, uncaring husband, she might have taken a different trajectory in life and may not have had to deal with so many anxieties and dilemmas in old age.

The other tragic woman in the novel is Ila Das, who also displays an active defense of the unconscious-id/ego mechanism. Although depicted as physically clumsy, extremely shrill-voiced, garrulous, and a nosy nuisance, Ila Das has some virtues that makes her win over Nanda Kaul, at least psychologically speaking. Ila Das' life, like that of Nanda, has had its share of tragedies. She in fact, is in a worse condition than Nanda Kaul who is at least economically better off and has the luxury of a huge house and a devoted servant and the choice to shut people from her life. Ila Das being financially destitute had to struggle till the last days of her life fending for herself and her sick sister. Ila, however scores over Nanda in what Valliant (2002) has termed as mature defense mechanism—sublimation. Divorced at a very young age, spurned by her irresponsible drunkard brothers, Ila took care of her old mother and sick sister, she displays great moral courage in leaving her job as a home science teacher that Nanda's husband as a Vice-Chancellor got for her when she was not duly promoted. She repeatedly serves as an example of moral fortitude when she earns a new degree in social work and comes down to a village to work against the evils of child marriage and poverty

living in destitute conditions herself. Ila Das thus displays sublimation from her unconscious desires and her struggles. She could have easily slipped into greyer areas of neurotic ego-defenses like projection, distortion, schizoid fantasy or phobias and anxieties but she has a much mature response to her ill-fated circumstances diverting her energies into helping the cause of social welfare while Nanda Kaul regresses into isolation, loneliness and border-line schizoid personality disorder. Ila Das is a foil and an antagonist to Nanda who thinks of her as object of derision and later, as pitiable but Ila's self-reliance and congenial attitude would be termed as a successful personality trait by the psychologists.

There does seem to be a certain amount of denial in Ila Das when she when she fails to recognize Nanda Kaul's distance or irritation at her phone calls, her plan to visit her and while the conversation at her home. To Nanda, Ila is too self-obsessed to notice her discomfiture and act accordingly. But Ila is apparently a fighter and a person with a cheerful-talkative disposition.

The third prominent character in the novel is Nanda Kaul's great granddaughter Raka who has been sent by her grandmother Asha to stay with Nanda for the summer. Asha's daughter Tara was ailing and was also relocating to Geneva working on her failed marriage at the same time. Raka had been down with typhoid and was therefore sent to Nanda to both recuperate in the hills and to be taken care of in the absence of her mother. But Raka was a girl born in an alienated household with her sick and bed-ridden mother and her alcoholic and distant father. She thus learns from very early on that she could not rely on human company or affection and grows to be indifferent child finding refuge in nature only. "She had a gift of avoiding what she regarded as dispensable." (69) She is what Nanda Kaul would like to be—indifferent to her situation and close only to nature. Her character is portrayed using metaphors from animal and natural world hinting at her affinity with the nature and her projection as nature itself— 'one of those dark crickets' 'a mosquito' (43) 'lizard-like' (46) but the description are not those of beautiful birds or fearsome mammals, these are reptiles or flies that are only a nuisance. Later in the novel, she is compared to better animals— 'a soundless moth', a rabbit (51), 'little wild bird' (144) to reflect Nanda's acceptance of her.

Her entry to Carignano in Nanda Kaul's life was to bring out the 'fire'. Her final act of burning the forest is the writer's way of reducing the struggle of Nanda Kaul to a naught. The name Raka, as Nanda Kaul herself explains means 'moon' but is an "utter misnomer" for she is anything but 'calm and radiant' (43) like the moon. Unlike the moon that is swayed by the greater forces of the Sun and the Earth, Raka remains indifferent to Nanda Kaul. She only brings up the latent chaos on surface in Nanda's life causing a tide of emotional anxieties. The fire that she brings up to the Mountain is hardly cauterizing. It only incinerates, chars and devastates. Raka's choice of isolation may lead to a fresh set of problems in her later life. There are real issues of disassociation (indifference) and somatization like bedwetting (79) that should be addressed and treated. However, she also displays great altruism when it concerns nature; the episode with the hoopoes (72) reveal how much she felt herself a part of the natural surrounding and cared for them like their own. Nanda Kaul jealous of Raka's indifference to herself is forced to acknowledge her affinity of with nature:

Raka no more needed, or wanted, a house than a jackal did, or a cicada. She was a wild creature— wild, wild, wild, thought Nanda Kaul. (113)

Raka resembles Nanda in many aspects and the question of her fate remains hanging well until after the novel gets over.

The novel has a note of latent violence from the moment one picks up the book—'fire' on the mountain' evokes images of destruction and menace. While fire on a mountain is not an unknown phenomenon, it is nonetheless a rare one. Fire and mountain are a juxtaposition of ordinarily opposite images. Mountains symbolize height, stature, grandeur, flower and fauna, greenery and vegetation, an ecological abundance and a co-habitation of human and plant life. The 'fire' on the other hand, symbolizes destruction, ruin and also passion and purification. It is however the menacing nature of the characters' lives that has been depicted in the novel with significant stress on the ecological involvement. Francine E. Krishna in a review of the novel had mentioned the latent violence of the novel.

Indeed on a first reading, the sudden violent eruptions of the last two chapters almost seem inexplicable in the context of the work as a whole. In order to understand the meaning, one has to go back and read the novel through the images and make them work for us as one might a poem. It is only then that one begins to see the organic quality of the work. (164)

Psychologically, the interpretation of the title is suggestive of passions on peak, or alternatively ruins at its height which seems to be more in sync with the basic storyline of the book.

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