

**Research Paper**

# Freudian Analysis of “The Handmaid’s Tale”: Analyzing the Defense Mechanisms

**Sayed Razak Amin Shah and Muhammad Hassan Khoso**

Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

E-mail: khosomuhammadhassan@gmail.com

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**This study has attempted to critically analyze the psychological workings of the mind of the protagonist in the novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” (1985) by Margaret Atwood. For this purpose, Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and its particular aspects of Defense Mechanisms have been taken into consideration. However, “The Handmaid’s Tale” is a dystopian novel with deep psychological underpinnings, therefore it cannot be fully understood without analyzing it through the lens of psychoanalysis. This study has focused on the application of Freud’s ideas on the concerned novel’s protagonist. For this aim, relevant excerpts from the novel for textual analysis and opinions of other psychoanalytic critics have also been incorporated to further enhance the understanding.**

**Key Words:** anxiety, core issues, defense mechanisms, psychological underpinnings

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## INTRODUCTION

In psychology, psychoanalysis refers to a method of understanding the inner workings of the human mind i.e. its thought process and how and why it works in a particular way in every individual. For Milton, Polmear and Fabricius, psychoanalysis is based on the observation of emotions rather any other factor and it helps to alter the deep rooted structures of mind which have left a vivid impact on a person’s mind (9). In order to understand this, psychologists formulate some theories which provide an organized way or a lens through which they can analyze a particular psychological phenomenon. These theories form the basis of psychoanalysis in practical situations through clinical methods.

### Freud’s Theory

Psychoanalysis as a theoretical and practical method

was elaborated by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in the late nineteenth century, however many psychologists had existed before him too, but Freud’s fame lies in the fact that he refined the previous psychoanalytic theories and made them popular in an unprecedented way. Some of the influential psychoanalysts prior to Freud were Franz Anton Mesmer, Philippe Pinel, Jean-Martin Charcoat, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Schopenhauer, Karl Eduard von Hartmann, Eugen Bleuler, Alois Alzheimer and Joseph Breuer; Freud’s mentor.

The psychological process based on Freudian theory suggests that human experience is driven by three internal forces which also build our personalities. The first stage in our lives is of infancy which is the dependency on the parents for the satisfaction of instinctive needs such as food, clothing, shelter etc. At this stage, our nervous system works like “it” or and. This is known as the *pleasure principle*, i.e. immediate satisfaction of the

basic needs. Later, when we reach at early childhood this “it” changes into “I” or the Ego<sup>1</sup>. This is known as the *reality principle*, awareness of one’s self. Our ego tells us what is right and what is not, according to the social and cultural environment provided to us with all its values and restrictions. But along with the ego, our minds also develop a sense of *conscience* or the Superego or “above I” which reminds the ego to behave appropriately and remain within the set principles of morality of our society and culture. It thus, generates the feelings of shame, pride, guilt etc.

Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis manifests the importance of the unconscious over conscious. He proposes that a person’s apparent personality is not the reality of his true self, in fact whatever he hides reveals more about his true self; this is the working of the unconscious which h/she hides. He states in *Interpreting Dreams* that the ideas and psychological constructs of the nervous system are not situated in the organic parts, for they are to be found *between them* where resistances and desires correlate with one another (627). He explains that whatever a person is aware of is contained in his/her conscious and whatever they don’t seem to remember is stored up in their unconscious. This unconscious takes up the largest portion of our mind and is a collection of resentful past memories, repressed desires, traumatic experiences, conflicted thoughts and impressions of almost every undesirable event that had ever occurred in our lives. In fact, the unconscious becomes so assertive with time that it motivates and directs our every action and thought, unless it is not clinically cured. For example, if a young adult girl had had a troubled relationship with her uncaring and detached father, she would likely be attracted to emotionless and arrogant men in the hope of trying to make them love her the way she wanted from her father. But this wish is unconscious which means that she is not aware of her this repressed desire in a conscious manner. Hence, the point is that the girl herself is not able to understand the reason of her desiring such a rude man because does not know exactly what she wants.

Freud explains that when people are not willing to give in to their conscious wishes, which can be the result of their superego, their unconscious stores up all those desires. This can also be the result of refusal for changing their harmful personality traits because their personalities have been formed and shaped that way. In order to avoid confrontation or exposure of their weaknesses, their minds tend to form some *Defense Mechanisms* to avoid pain and trouble. He holds the view in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* that the ego usually gets stuck between the craving of the id and the resistance of the superego. While juggling both

extremes if the ego somehow breaks down or accepts its failure, then it causes moral and neurotic anxiety(78). This state of *Anxiety* or guilt eventually helps to reveal the *Core Issues* behind them. Below, these aspects are discussed in detail:

### Defense Mechanisms

Whenever we try to suppress our undesired or unacceptable thoughts or memories, we project one of the many forms of defense mechanisms. These mechanisms work on the unconscious level in order to protect us from facing painful or disappointing situations. When these mechanisms start working more assertively or uncontrollably they may cause obsessions, phobias, or even symptoms of hysteria. According to Cramer, defense mechanisms are a kind of mental shortcuts which we use for the protection of our self-esteem (4). She gives an everyday example for this; consider an adolescent who tries to look, talk and behave according to certain demands of his/her peer group in order to “fit in” and not to be left behind. His/ her efforts are the unconscious results of avoiding social ostracization by his defensive conformity (6). These mechanisms can be explained as following:

1. **Denial:** Rejection of the reality or any painful or traumatic event.
2. **Displacement:** Transference of aggressive feelings towards someone harmless due to incapability of confronting the real target.
3. **Projection:** Portrayal of inner insecurities through the act of accusing others for one’s own guilt and lacking.
4. **Repression:** Forgetting something bad or important.
5. **Regression:** reverting back to childlike emotional state by hiding oneself from the world. This can also be a way of getting involved in self-destructive activities in order to avoid adult confrontation and responsibilities.
6. **Selective Perception:** Hearing, seeing and focusing on the things that are unlikely to cause trouble or which can be tackled easily.
7. **Selective Memory:** Deliberately subtracting the traumatic or undesirable events from one’s memory.
8. **Avoidance:** Maintaining distance from the people or situations which may be capable of reviving our repressed memories.
9. **Rationalization:** Covering up of the insecurities or guilt over something that one did unintentionally, by asserting that others provoked you.

<sup>1</sup> Detailed account can be obtained from Freud’s *The Ego and the Id*.

- 10. **Intellectualization:** Considering all the pros and cons of something that may be done as a compensation of avoiding an embarrassing situation.
- 11. **Sublimation:** Transformation of conflicted emotions or guilt into something positive as compensation.

**Anxiety and Core Issues**

With continuous fight with the defenses, one tends to break down occasionally, and this vulnerability to the issues creates a state of anxiety. This state then provides an insight to the actual reasons or the core issues underlying that anxiety, since anxiety usually bring out the repressed thoughts to the surface. Here is the brief description of the relationship of core issues with anxiety: (Table 1)

Table 1

Core Issue	State of Anxiety
Fear of intimacy	Overwhelming feeling that the one we are attached to will hurt us, thus putting constant effort to remain emotionally "safe".
Fear of abandonment	Maintaining an emotional distance from people out of fear of being abandoned or rejected.
Fear of betrayal	Having trust issues with the people whom we love, assuming that they may be cheating on us behind our back.
Low self-esteem	Believing that we are not worthy of love or a high position in life and letting ourselves to accept all forms of punishments.
Unstable sense of self	Experiencing identity crisis and a constant sense of vulnerability which provokes indecisiveness and restless attitude for everything.
Oedipal fixation/complex	A dysfunctional bond with parents of opposite sex which does not let us develop mature relationships with our partners.

**Psychoanalytic Criticism in Literature**

Many psychoanalytic theories have emerged after Freud's, but his theory is an archetype for all those, therefore it is usually referred to as *classical psychoanalysis*. When literary theorists started analyzing the characters' psyche through the lens of psychoanalytic theories, they were criticized on the ground that since characters are not real and alive, they do not qualify for psychoanalysis. However, in response to this, proponents of psychoanalytic criticism asserted that by obtaining an insight to the characters' minds, one can more effectively understand the human mind and behavior in general.

Some of the areas of human behavior where psychoanalytic critics pay more attention are those which tend to provide us with a deeper understanding of society and the authors' psyche as well. For example, psychoanalytic critics may try to find the working of different defense mechanisms used by characters and what do they indicate, what are the core issues of a particular character, what could be the possible interpretation of the symbols depicted in dreams, sexual behaviors or fear or curiosity of death etc., what does the work tell us about the author's state of mind etc.

**The Handmaid's Tale**

Written in 1985 by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel with some aspects of science fiction and covers up many themes such as identity, love, helplessness, femininity and freedom, but most prominently, it highlights the issues of subjugation of women; of their minds and bodies. The novel revolves around the unknown narrator's gruesome account of the protagonist Offred, who is captured as a Handmaid in Gilead, working for the dominant male masters. The story is set in far future where most women have ceased to conceive except for a few which are now kept in control of the Commanders; Offred is one of them. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Atwood explains that her novel is a critique of power structures; how they work and how they manipulate people's minds in a tragic way.

Offred's suffering is more psychological than physical. Her story can be relatable to the accounts of the restrictions of medieval times, particularly the bigotry in the name of religious rites and rituals, subjugation of women in the name of fidelity. As LeBihan points out that the multi-layering and overlapping text gives a sense of unified, singular authority which is only tolerant towards those who bow down to its singular reality, identity and history (qtd. in Howells 106). This certainly sounds more like the Middle Ages. Since Atwood herself belongs to a Puritan background, thus it can be fairly said that her background may have psychologically provided the idea for this novel.

This study traces out the psychological underpinnings portrayed by the protagonist in order to get a deep understanding of how Freud's ideas can be applied to it for psychoanalytic criticism and interpretation of the novel

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Defense mechanisms function only when a person wants to hide or suppress some undesirable or tormenting thoughts. They are merely a way of avoiding painful confrontations or situations, or in Holland's words; it is a means of "coping" with the outside world through the resolution of emotions in the inner self (153) and are triggered by the contact with unpleasant things (158). According to Anna Freud, the dangers to the ego from the id are the result of the defense against the anxiety (63) and when the superego prohibits the fulfillment of the desires of the id, the situation becomes troublesome (58). However, Fenichel moves further and distinguishes the defenses into two categories; "successful" and "unsuccessful". For him, the relationship between these two categories is independent of their relationship to the external world; there is a continuous relationship between these defenses and the impulses that are being suppressed (143).

When it comes to literature, the psychoanalytic process and examination not only explores the characters' world of actions and thoughts, but also reveals the range of language used in literary texts. Skura thinks that the psychoanalytic analysis shapes the psychological pattern of characters' minds more than just being applied as a general theory. She believes that the minute changes that continuously occur in characters' consciousness are a way of exploring more possibilities of language and narrative; as opposed to its application as a general theory which tends to provide only fixed patterns of analysis (5). In case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the thoughts of the protagonist are a revelation of her psychological state of despair whose idea is constructed in the reader's mind through its particular use of the language. This language provides us with a sense of "self" regarding the protagonist, which in Hartman's words; is a tool for distinguishing the subject from the outside world (6). Thus, Atwood tries to keep the protagonist's identity and individuality intact by using the defense mechanisms of avoidance, denial, selective memory etc., through the deliberate use of language with deep psychological patterns. Fernando asserts that when these defenses, particularly of denial, are broken down then the memories of the traumatic experience take over and invades the primary functioning of the ego (131). This is what happens to the mind of the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale* which reveals her constant psychological effort of keeping her defenses safe and unaffected.

## DATA ANALYSIS

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a story of a woman Offred who has been stuck in a miserable fate but she is not alone in this, almost every woman is facing same cruelty in the dystopian Republic of Gilead, which was once called United States. Gilead has a totalitarian government where the state rules over everything, even people's thoughts. There has been a dire dearth of children possibly due to constant wars; ". . . there are no children . . . doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors . . . such freedom now seems almost weightless" (33). The government now wants all the women to be hired as Handmaids in the officials' houses just for the purpose of procreation of children and Offred is one of them. No one is spared from the indoctrination of government's orders and Offred comes to know this while being prepared at Red Center for would-be Handmaids; "the republic of Gilead knows no bounds. . . Gilead is within you" (33). The place where Offred is sent to live i.e. the Commander's house, like all others, is more like a prison where the only thing that is not controllable is Offred's mind. Her surroundings are set in such a way that they keep on reminding her psychologically that she is nothing but a womb; ". . . everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us" (18). The physical and psychological confinement is enough to create severe anxiety in Offred and since she is not even allowed to express that, she uses certain defense mechanisms in order to preserve her outer posture and inner integrity; her identity. In Offred's case, *denial*, *selective memory*, *selective perception* and *avoidance* provide the basis for survival in a world of few options.

Offred's denial is visible in the dreams of her past; her happy life, before the world turned into a dystopia. Instead of admitting that that life is no more possible since she has lost her husband Luke and her daughter whose name is not mentioned, she keeps denying that her present misery is real; "I feel drugged. I consider this: maybe they're drugging me. Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion" (119). But by denying her miseries, she thinks that she is the only one who is keeping her sanity intact; "Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough when the time comes" (119). Offred's denial of harsh reality is also visible when she consoles herself by this reminder that "all of it is a reconstruction. It is a reconstruction now in my head . . . let's stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever" (144). She further imagines getting out of that place and forgiving all her aggressors; "But remember that forgiveness too is a power . . . maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom . . . maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it" (144-5). Offred keeps fighting back the unpleasant truth of her life so that

her mind and identity could not be lost; “what I need is perspective. The illusion of depth . . . perspective is necessary . . . otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be” (153). Offred’s piercing denial of the present and hope of the future is vividly seen when she says; “Every night when I go to bed I think, In the morning I will wake up in my own house and things will be back the way they were” (209).

Offred’s unconscious often leads her back to the pleasant memories of her past which are very few but recurrent. She recalls all the happy times and joyous moments spent with Luke, her daughter and her mother which still give her a hope for the future. Her unconscious uses the mechanism of selective memory to avoid the unpleasant events of her past. She recalls the happy instances spent with Luke because this gives her hope of finding him one day; “I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is no light” (115). Offred also recalls the time when she lived with her mother as a child. Whenever she closes her eyes, she either sees Luke, her daughter or her mother; “I’m dreaming that I’m awake . . . and my mother comes in with a tray and asks me if I’m feeling better. When I was sick, as a child, she had to stay home from work” (119). Offred also recollects about her mother’s personality and their relationship with one another. Though some of its parts are not pleasant but they are a reminder of Offred’s independent nature and a strong sense of individuality. Thus, those instances portray her urge for freedom which generates positivity and strength in her and that is why she recalls;

“I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy . . . I didn’t want to live my life on her terms. I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that . . . I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was” (132).

Offred often portrays the unconscious working of selective perception which makes her hear and see only those things which she can handle and avoid the rest. While watching Serena Joy (the Commander’s Wife) knitting small scarves for the Angels (soldiers of the army), Offred thinks that “it’s good to have small goals that can be easily attained” (23). Moreover, Offred also uses the mechanism of avoidance to avoid those situations which remind her of her past. While looking back to time when the new government started to take over her family’s life, she tells that “my name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden . . . I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden . . . I think of this name as buried” (94). Though she wants her identity back but she avoids revealing her real name only out fear of being caught.

Offred is a character which uses the defense mechanisms to avoid or to survive the unavoidable reality of her life. Thus, the psychological underpinnings in her character serve as the example for understanding the human mind in such situations.

## CONCLUSION

The novel revolves around the concepts of Freudian theory of defense mechanism as the protagonist Offred is entrapped in the web of dilemmas which she tries to avoid with defense mechanism in her mind by ignoring unavoidable reality of her life. However, this novel can be said an epitome of Freud’s theory of defense mechanisms which form the whole character of the protagonist who fits fairly into the model provided by Freud regarding defense mechanisms.

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