

The Lingering Impacts of Defense Mechanisms on the Human Psyche in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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Abstract

Memory serves as the bridge linking the past, present, and future, weaving a continuous thread through time. Remarkably, the past holds undeniable significance for humans. Various experiences, encompassing both trauma and negative encounters, resulted from the past and frequently molded human behavior. Trauma can leave lasting emotional scars, influencing how people perceive and interact with the world around them. As a result, individuals often experience insecurities and anxieties, leading to potential changes in their behavior. This aspect is represented in Jesmyn Ward's 'Sing, Unburied, Sing'. This paper aims to reveal the cause of Leonie's trauma and how it affects her personality. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the impact of unpleasant experiences due to racial discrimination and the loss of a loved one because of systemic violence on an individual's behavior. It further sheds light on the uses of coping mechanisms such as denial and displacement by the character Leonie through the lens of psychoanalytical theory. It also intends to examine the impact of Leonie's defense mechanisms on her personality and explore the adverse effects they have on her surroundings.

Keywords: Defense Mechanism, Trauma, Behaviour, Denial, Displacement, Personality

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Sing, Unburied, Sing by Jesmyn Ward strongly depicts marginalization and oppression of the black people living in Mississippi, such as the killing of Given, the imprisonment of Richie and Pop, and the lynching of Blue, and the profound impact of racism on the characters' lives. The novel is a flashback to the past, haunting the black community in the present as they feel glimpses of racism are alive in the present. These events serve as poignant examples of the systemic violence and injustice that the characters face due to racial discrimination, shaping Leonie's life and the narrative of the novel.

While existing scholarship has addressed various themes like Death, Love, Slavery, Subaltern, Trauma, within *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, there remains a notable gap in the focused exploration of coping mechanisms as a psychological element. The present study delves in to examine and comprehend the nuanced ways through which Leonie uses her coping mechanisms in the novel.

Jesmyn Ward's award-winning novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, illustrates the impacts of historical racism in the aftermath of slavery in America and also highlights the transmission of intergenerational trauma. There are three different narrators in the novel. The novel tells the story of Jojo, a thirteen-year-old boy. His sister is Kayla, called as Michaela. They both live with their grandparents. His grandmother, Mama, is dying of cancer. His grandfather, Pop, who takes care of them and tells stories about his past in the Parchman, His mother, Leonie, who is a drug addict and most of the time absents herself from her duty as a mother, His father, Michael, is a white man, while Leonie is black and a drug addict, is imprisoned in the opening of the novel. Leonie takes a road trip with her children to pick up Michael from prison. It can be interpreted as a trip to the past.

Each character in the novel has different kinds of memories from their past. Leonie is one of the characters who grapples with her past, and it affects her in different ways. The incident that affects her most is the death of his innocent brother, Given at a young age due to systemic violence. Michael's cousin fatally shot him during a wood drinking session after he won. Michael's family concealed the murder by claiming it was a hunting accident because of their supremacy. It has a profound impact on her. Leonie grapples with the delayed impact of Given's death, manifesting in nightmares and hallucinations. In addition to that, at the age of fifteen, Pop faced an unjust arrest and was sent to Parchman Prison. Even though slavery was abolished, the conditions at Parchman resembled those of a slave plantation. The connection between slavery and Parchman highlights the enduring impact of systemic violence and justice on the characters' lives. At the beginning of the novel, Michael, too, is in the same prison, serving a three-year sentence. Richie's imprisonment and death, and the lynching of Blue, are some of the other incidents that affect her. These incidents from her past affect her psychological balance in the present and her personality, as memory acts as the connective thread that binds the past, present, and future.

Defense mechanisms are an important ingredient in psychoanalytic theory which refers to the unconscious psychological strategies that an individual employ to handle anxiety and protect themselves from troubling thoughts or emotions. Mark Elwood Nolder defines:

Defense mechanisms are unconsciously self-deceptive means of anxiety reduction which are unrelated to intelligence. They are unconsciously self-deceptive as well as being a means of reducing anxiety. . . Defense mechanisms are supposedly unrelated to intelligence; therefore, it should demonstrate discriminant validity via a lack of correlation with a reliable and valid measure of intelligence. (4)

Accordingly, defense mechanisms assist in shielding the ego from harm and function at different awareness levels. Defense mechanisms help to preserve psychological balance. It is a more effective way to delve into the life of a person whose unconscious mind conceals underlying concerns. People utilize it to protect their sense of self, maintain emotional equilibrium, and avoid painful truths. It functions in the unconscious, protecting against unpleasant feelings.

There are many modes of defense mechanisms or coping mechanisms that operate unconsciously in a person's life. Many psychologists have identified various forms of defense mechanisms, among those Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and The Id* (1962) and Anna Freud's *The Ego and Defense Mechanism* (1948) takes the spotlight. Anna Freud, the sixth and youngest child of Sigmund Freud identified ten defense mechanisms that had been explained by his father. They are Denial, Displacement, Projection, Rationalization, Intellectualization, Reaction Formation, Regression, Regression, Repression, Suppression and Sublimation (40). Cramer in his work "Understanding defense mechanisms. Psychodynamic psychiatry" says that these defense mechanisms can only provide temporary relief, and do not address the root causes of distress (920). Among the ten defense mechanisms, this paper takes on the first four: Denial, Displacement, Projection and Rationalization, and applies it in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, to comprehend the psychological elements in the character Leonie.

Leonie, a complex character in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, exhibits various defense mechanisms to escape from prior consciousness that contribute to her psychological makeup. Leonie's coping mechanisms are a microcosm of the human psyche, reflecting the intricate interplay between trauma, family dynamics, and societal pressures. Her struggle with grief over the death of her brother leaves her a drug addict. This study aims to dissect Leonie's coping mechanisms through a psychological lens and provide a deeper understanding of Leonie's psyche and her mental well-being. It aims to assess how Leonie's coping strategies influence her personality and investigate the negative effects they exert on her environment.

Denial is one of the significant defense mechanisms that is clearly evident in Leonie's behavior. Throughout the novel, Leonie denies the harsh reality of her

circumstances, particularly regarding her responsibilities as a mother. Despite the fact that her daughters Jojo and Kayla require her assistance and direction as a mother, she frequently resorted to drug consumption and denial, evading the challenges of parenthood. Meanwhile, Jojo takes on the role of the primary caregiver for his three-year-old sister, Kayla.

Leonie's denial creates frustration for her children. She escapes from being a mother by deliberately staying away from home. Jojo remembers a distressing incident when he accidentally stepped on a can lid while her mother had left him alone at home. This incident has caused him to lose trust and grow distant. Jojo recalls this hurtful occasion:

When Leonie came home that night, she didn't say nothing. I don't think she noticed my foot until Pop shouted at her, over and over again, Goddamnit, Leonie! I drowsed with pain medicine, itchy with antibiotics, my foot all wrapped in white, bound tight, and watched Pop slap the wall to punctuate: Leonie! She flinched, stepped away from him. (Ward 16)

Due to frustration, Jojo started to address his mother by her first name instead of calling her as mom. Jojo also hated her mother's behavior in his birthday.

Leonie's lack of responsibility is her another form of showcasing her denial. She is casual and never takes accountability and shows her obligation to do. One time, Kayla fell ill with a stomach bug and fever, while they were travelling in a car to pick up Michael from prison. In an attempt to alleviate Kayla's nausea, Leonie endeavours to create an herbal remedy but struggles to recall the specific instructions her mother has taught her. This shows her lack of responsibility towards her children as a mother. Leonie finds "wild blackberries" (Ward 105) to help Kayla. Fearing the potential harm of an incorrect remedy, Jojo takes swift action, prompting his sister to vomit. Jojo distrusts her and cries: "I don't want Leonie giving her that. I know that's what she thinks she need to do, but she ain't Mam. She ain't Pop. She ain't never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life and she don't know" (Ward 109).

Leonie, even, hasn't taken care of her dying mother. Mam's death has forced Leonie to step into the role of caretaker. She admits that "I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember. I can't see. I can't breathe" (Ward 274). Meanwhile, Jojo often feels that he is the parent of Kayla. While Leonie is out of her home for work or to do drugs, Jojo takes most of the domestic and emotional responsibilities of parenting. In these examples, the novelist underscores how families operate when they encounter crises.

Leonie showcases another aspect of the coping mechanism, the projection. Nancy McWilliams says that "Projection, the mental process by which people attribute to others what is in their own minds" (McWilliams). It involves individuals attributing to others the thoughts and feelings that exist within their own minds. Projection is like seeing one's own characteristics in other. It is similar to a combination of denial and displacement. It is similar to a combination of denial and

displacement.

Leonie exhibits elements of projection in her interactions with others. She projects her own insecurities, guilt, and unresolved issues onto those around her, especially Jojo. This defense mechanism helps her avoid her inner conflicts directly. Leonie's struggle between love for her children and resentment over lost happiness reflects projection. Leonie's frustration with Kayla's support mirrors her unresolved feelings about her lost brother, Given. Leonie's brother's ghost evokes an undisclosed trauma, "that one doesn't yet know" (Chang 125). So, Leonie projects her inner conflict onto her relationships, shaping the complex dynamics within the novel. She harbours resentment towards Kayla for still having a supportive brother, contrasting her own loss of a sibling over a decade ago. It is evident when Leonie says that "Michaela kicks my seat again, I turn around and slap her leg so hard my palm stings. Jealousy twins with anger. That girl: so lucky. She has all her brothers" (Ward 197). Thus, she displays twin emotions of jealousy and anger.

Due to Leonie's strong commitment to Michael and substance abuse, she is perceived as harsh, distant, and unpredictable in her interactions with Kayla and Jojo. Her resentment grows when Jojo displays a close bond with her sister Kayla, causing her to feel envious of their relationship. Leonie says, "I stand there, watching my children comfort each other. My hands itch, wanting to do something. I could reach out and touch them both, but I don't." (Ward 101). This shows her real intention. She doesn't want to be a mother to her children. Likewise, Mama believes she lacks 'maternal instinct'. Instead of loving them, she accuses them of having a good relationship.

Even from the beginning of the novel, though Jojo and Kayla have both parents, one is in jail while the other is a drug addict. So, Jojo and Kayla's grandparents take on parental roles. Simultaneously, over the course of the novel, Jojo becomes a fatherly figure to Kayla. Jojo says about Kayla as follows: "My spine, my ribs, my back: a wall" (Ward 223). This shows that Jojo comes to a crucial understanding about his relationship with his sister, realizing that she relies on him for both protection and affection, elements lacking in their mother's care. This pivotal insight significantly influences Jojo's choices throughout the remainder of the novel, marking a key moment in his journey towards responsible and compassionate maturity.

Displacement, a defense mechanism rooted in repression, is the act of redirecting unexpressed emotions, such as anger, towards unrelated people, animals, or objects. Kendra Cherry in her article "Common Defense Mechanisms People Use to Cope with Anxiety" says that "displacement involves taking out our frustrations, feelings, and impulses on people or objects that are less threatening" (Cherry). This involves transferring aggression to non-threatening targets, thereby avoiding potential consequences in the original situation.

Leonie displays elements of displacement in her actions. She redirects her frustrations and anger onto others, particularly her children, rather than confronting

the root causes of her struggles. This displacement contributes to the strained family dynamics portrayed in the novel. Michael and Leonie blame their children for their shortcomings. Once Leonie slaps Kayla for having a brother, it showcases her anger and frustration towards her. Another incident when she showcases displacement in her behaviour is when they drive to drop off Misty. Leonie places Kayla on her lap and offers her a peppermint. Suddenly, a wild hog dashes onto the road. Michael manoeuvres the car to avoid it, causing Kayla to be thrown. Leonie quickly lifts Kayla, noticing a large bruise on her forehead, leading to Kayla's distressed screams. Leonie narrates this incident as follows:

I clutch Michaela, but I can't hold her and she flies forward, hitting her head on the board. Michaela bounces and slides down on my feet, and she is quiet... I grab her under her armpits and drag her up, see a purple knot weeping red on her forehead. She's alive, because her eyes are open and she's hitching to cry, her breath stuttering in her throat. She wails. (Ward 201)

For this, she shouts at Jojo instead of accepting her carelessness.

After Michael is released from Parchman, they return to Al's (Michael's lawyer) house. Michael expresses gratitude for Al's support. Leonie, meanwhile, washes Kayla and Jojo's clothes in Al's washing machine and cleans Kayla in the bathtub, although she realizes she's being too forceful. "I dump Michaela, the wailing bundle, on the bed and begin toweling her off and she's still kicking and screaming and moaning and now saying 'Jojo', and I just want to give her one slap, or maybe two" (Ward 147). Thus, she expresses her anger towards Kayla. Despite the urge to slap Kayla, Leonie refrains, fearing that once she starts, she won't be able to stop, so she leaves the room, slamming the door behind her. Instead of taking care of her child, she wants to attack her because of her anger and frustration in life.

Rationalization is also been exhibited by Leonie as her defense mechanism. Unlike Denial, where individuals refuse to accept a troubling thought, rationalization involves justifying or excusing such thoughts or actions by convincing oneself of a logical explanation. It provides an opportunity for individuals to acquire new experiences.

Prior to his incarceration, Michael had been employed on an oil rig that experienced a catastrophic explosion. The incident resulted in the tragic deaths of eleven colleagues. Leonie explains the pathetic situation of Michael, as he couldn't find a job anywhere, by stating that:

When he started getting skinny, I thought it was because of his nightmares. When his cheekbones started standing out on his face like rocks under water, I thought it was because he was stressed out over money. When his spine rose under his skin, a line of knuckles punching up his back, I thought it was because of his grief and the fact that he couldn't find another welding job anywhere in Mississippi, or Alabama or Florida or Louisiana or the Gulf of Mexico. (Ward 93)

This experience traumatizes Michael and leads him into the world of meth production and drug addiction. Ultimately, he ends up in Parchman. Thus, Leonie justifies Michael's addiction.

Along with him, Leonie too proudly ate meth and consumed it. Leonie's addiction primarily stems from the grief she feels due to the death of her brother, Given. When Leonie hallucinates, she is able to feel Given's presence and receive his advice, as she says, "And that's when Given came back. [H]e smiled at me, this Given-not-Given, this Given that's been dead fifteen years now, this Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill" (Ward 34). Leonie's substance dependence also stems from her challenging economic circumstances, with past indiscretions hindering her chances of securing employment. Leonie's drug addiction can be seen as a result of transgenerational trauma.

We are all sinking, and there are manta rays gliding beneath us and sharks jostling us. I am trying to keep everyone above water, even as I struggle to stay afloat. I sink below the waves and push Jojo upward so he can stay above the waves and breathe, but then Michaela sinks and I push her up, and Michael sinks so I shove him to the air as I sink and struggle, but they won't stay up: they want to sink like stones. I thrust them up toward the surface, to the fractured sky so they can live, but they keep slipping from my hands. It is so real that I can feel their sodden clothes against my palms. I am failing them. We are all drowning" (Ward 195). Though she tries to do her duty as a mother, daughter, and even wife, she can't due to her trauma. Through this, Leonie expresses her trauma. Thus, Leonie justifies her addiction.

Though Leonie uses rationalization, it can result in emotional distance and a breakdown in communication within the family. Due to this, Jojo and Kayla experience feelings of neglect, confusion, and frustration as their mother's coping mechanism takes precedence over their needs. However, the employment of rationalization as a coping mechanism in the form of drugs ultimately leads to the destruction of herself and those who are around her. The conclusion of the novel demonstrates that Leonie repeats the same thing. She absented herself from the home with Michael and continued it.

Characters unconsciously exhibit different kinds of coping strategies to escape from their wounded memories and trauma. Likewise, Leonie's behaviour, as revealed by the study, demonstrates four coping mechanisms: Denial, Displacement, Projection and Rationalization. However, these coping strategies pose challenges for those around her, particularly her children, causing frustration as she remains absent when they seek support. In Leonie's absence, Jojo takes on most of the domestic and emotional responsibilities of parenting because of her denial of the harsh reality of circumstances, particularly her role as a mother to her children. She projects her own insecurities, guilt, and unresolved issues onto those around her, especially Jojo. She displays twin emotions of jealousy and anger towards her children. Instead of showing love towards her children, she wants to attack her

because of her anger and frustration in life. She couldn't even help her mother, Mama, who needs her help as she is dying from cancer. Rather than being an emotional support to her father, who has a wounded past, she keeps herself away from all her responsibilities. She loves her husband, Michael very much, and they always keep themselves away from home, which affects their children badly. Thus, her coping strategies have adverse effects on her surroundings, and she too suffers from them. It leads to her behavioural change to the core. It is evident that Leonie's utilization of these coping mechanisms offers only temporary relief, highlighting her inability to completely evade reality. The study revealed that adverse experiences and the loss of a loved one can significantly influence an individual's behaviour.

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