

Escaping Reality: 'Denial' as a Defense Mechanism in the World of 'Exit West

Ali Hamza,¹ Asma Ijaz Ahmed,² Amna Zahra³

¹ MPhil scholar, Department of English, Muslim Youth University Islamabad, Pakistan Email:

Chamza197@gmail.com

² MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Muslim Youth University Islamabad, Pakistan Email:

asmaijaz3294@gmail.com

³ MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Muslim Youth University Islamabad, Pakistan

Email:Amnazahra483@gamail.com

Abstact:

This research seeks to elucidate the essential principles of psychoanalysis, emphasizing the foundational ideas put forth by Sigmund Freud, in the novel written by Mohsin Hamid "Exit West". The theory of Denial, Defense Mechanism of psychoanalysis is clearly shown through the characters of Saeed and Nadia. Psychoanalytic theory places great emphasis on the concept of denial, which is a defense mechanism employed by humans to reject reality or truths. This idea has the potential to provide noteworthy revelations into the actions and experiences of the characters. This analysis attempts to deepen our knowledge of the psychological effects of relocation and the coping mechanisms used by individuals who are compelled to leave their homes by looking at how denial appears in Saeed and Nadia's journey. In "Exit West," denial is revealed as a complex coping technique that helps Saeed and Nadia deal with their quickly failing reality. These actions show the various ways in which denying can serve to safeguard the psyche, including withdrawing into a virtual world, avoiding unpleasant interactions, finding comfort in one another, or contesting the indefinite nature of their relocation.

Keywords: Exit West, defense mechanism, denial, psychoanalysis, character, consciousness,unconsciousness

Introduction

The migration crisis has become one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century, impacting global politics, economies, and societies. This phenomenon, driven by conflict, economic disparity, and climate change, has forced millions to seek refuge beyond their national borders. Amidst the growing body of literature exploring migration, displacement, and refugee experiences, Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* offers a poignant and timely narrative that delves into the personal and emotional aspects of this global issue.

“*Exit West*” the literary piece presents a dual portrayal: the evolution of an intimate connection between two youthful characters; Saeed, Nadia and the simultaneous deterioration of their urban milieu into a state of belligerence. As the conflict intensifies, they are compelled to escape via a series of mysterious portals that shuttle them to various global locations. The novel is not just a tale of physical journey, but also an exploration of the psychological and emotional challenges faced by individuals in the throes of migration.

While much has been written about the socio-political dimensions of *Exit West*, less attention has been given to its psychological underpinnings, particularly through the lens of psychoanalytic literary theory. Previous research has predominantly focused on the themes of migration, identity, and survival in the novel, but a significant gap remains in understanding the psychological defence mechanisms employed by the characters, specifically the mechanism of denial as theorised by Sigmund Freud and subsequently expanded by numerous scholars, including his daughter Anna Freud.

This study aims to address this gap by applying Freud's concept of denial to the characters in *Exit West*. Denial (believing that the problem doesn't exist or the unpleasant incident never happened), (Tyson, 2006, p.32), a defence mechanism where individuals refuse to accept reality or facts, is a crucial concept in psychoanalytic theory that can provide deeper insights into the characters' actions and experiences. By examining how denial manifests in Saeed and Nadia's journey, this analysis seeks to enrich our understanding of the psychological impact of displacement and the coping strategies employed by those who are forced to leave their homes. By doing so, this research adds to the current scholarly discourse by offering a

nuanced perspective on Exit West and highlighting the importance of psychological resilience in the context of migration.

Problem Statement

This study aims to explore the psychological dimensions within Mohsin Hamid's "Exit West" through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical literary theory, specifically focusing on the defence mechanism of 'denial.' By examining how denial manifests in the characters' behaviours and decisions, this analysis will offer a nuanced understanding of their coping mechanisms in response to the tumultuous events they face. Given the backdrop of a city teetering on the brink of war and the subsequent migration journey, the characters' use of denial becomes a critical factor in their survival and adaptation. This study will fill a gap in existing literature by providing a detailed psychoanalytical perspective on Hamid's portrayal of human resilience and psychological defence mechanisms.

Research Questions

1. How does the defence mechanism of denial shape the emotional and psychological responses of Saeed and Nadia to the socio-political upheavals depicted in "Exit West"?
2. In what ways does denial impact the characters' interpersonal relationships and decision-making processes throughout their journey in "Exit West"?

Literature Review

Freud's framework suggests that memories, desires, and unconscious thoughts determine behaviour. He identifies three parts of the psyche: the id, the ego, and the superego. The ego operates in the realm of consciousness, while the id resides completely in the unconscious. The superego functions both consciously and unconsciously.

Freud's theory delineates the human mind into two essential components: the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious mind consists of all the thoughts and perceptions we can bring into our awareness.

Alternatively, the unconscious mind contains all that is beyond our conscious recognition, such as unacknowledged wishes, desires, hopes, drives, and memories. Freudian psychology compares the mind to an iceberg, where the small visible section above water is the conscious mind, and the large hidden expanse beneath the surface symbolises the extensive unconscious mind.

Freud's Theory of Defense Mechanisms

When someone seems unwilling to accept a difficult reality, they might be labelled as "in denial," and attempting to find reasons for inappropriate behaviour is often referred to as "rationalising." The ego employs various defence mechanisms to shield oneself from anxiety, such as rationalisation and denial. Some of the most recognized defence mechanisms include regression, repression, and denial.

Defence mechanisms serve to shield individuals from emotions such as shame or anxiety that arise when they perceive threats or experience heightened demands from the id or superego. Functioning primarily at the unconscious level, these mechanisms aim to mitigate negative emotions such as worry and enhance positive emotions. Defence mechanisms are inherent and normal functions of the ego. However, when excessively utilised—frequently employed—they can contribute to the onset of disorders such as panic attacks, phobias, fixations, or hysteria.

Within his notion of defence mechanisms, that are the psychological tactics people use to deal with life and preserve their sense of self, Freud included the idea of denial. This is a synopsis concerning the denial mechanism: Sigmund Freud described denial as a defensive tactic in which a person rejects reality or the facts. It entails preventing awareness of outside events. When something becomes too much for them to bear, they just decide not to go through it.

The main goal of denial aims to shield the person from unpleasant or distressing feelings. It serves as a momentary distraction from reality, giving the brain space to take in and comprehend challenging information. Denial is refusing to accept that a fact or the truth exists is known as simple denial. For instance, a person who is diagnosed with a terminal illness may reject the information or acknowledge the truth while negating its importance. Or Imputing to other people one's own undesirable emotions.

Freud thought that children are more likely to engage in denial. People tend to use more complex defence mechanisms as they get older. Adults, however, are still capable of denial, especially in situations involving severe stress or trauma. When someone tries to cope with a painful circumstance, denial is frequently their first line of defence, followed by suppression, projection, and rationalisation.

Hamid (2017) is a well-known novelist from Pakistan. He has received numerous international honours for his moving writing. His artistic portrayals of identity problems, the war system, shifting behaviour, isolation, militants, terrorism, and male-female relationships offer fresh perspectives on how people can adapt to their conventional roles. In his writing, Hamid (2017) portrays an autonomous female character who is fighting for her own survival. She has been stubborn since she was young. She doesn't feel very attached to her family. She is making decisions based only on her own satisfaction, free from other influences. She desires to be in charge. Her mental environment during her upbringing and the issues she encountered following her relationship with Saeed are the causes of this kind of disorder.

Pakistani literature is supported by an abundance of instances of this kind. Hamid (2017) uses the role of Nadia and Saeed to embody these ideologies in his novel *Exit West*. As they go from one nation to another through mystical portals, characters such as Saeed and Nadia in this work "*Exit West*" go through a great deal of psychological distress. The unconscious mind's voyage across trauma and moving might be compared to their trip, which mirrors Freud's views regarding the influence of external pressures on the internal psyche.

Analysis:

The psychoanalytic idea of denial can be used to explain the passages within Mohsin Hamid's "*Exit West*". This is how denial could be operating in different circumstances:

- 1. "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her. For many days." (Hamid, 2017, p.7).**

Explanation: This quote illustrates collective denial. The characters are probably experiencing tension and anxiety as a result of the tense and imminent conflict represented by the

scene, however they are sitting normally denying the circumstances that are going to take place later, for instance: war. Despite the influx of refugees indicating a crisis, the city maintains a facade of peace. Saeed and Nadia's focus on their classroom interaction rather than the broader context shows their individual denial of the changing circumstances.

It is possible to interpret the young man's silence toward the young woman as a sort of denial in which he is trying to avoid making an emotional connection. He might be avoiding his own emotions or the possible complexities that could result from developing a relationship in such a turbulent situation by being silent with her. The young man may be ignoring the seriousness of the situation because of the larger backdrop of the region being on the verge of war. Having conversation with the elderly woman might be interpreted as an acceptance of a normal and secure life, in stark contrast to the unpredictable and dangerous world surrounding them. He might be rejecting the difference between his need for regularity or the chaos outside by avoiding her.

It is possible to interpret the young man's refusal to engage as a defense mechanism against his uneasiness and anxiety of the unpredictability of his surroundings. It can feel dangerous or pointless to establish new connections in a city that might soon be involved in violence, so he might deny himself the chance to make new friends in order to safeguard his emotional health. Psychoanalysis interprets the young man's silence toward the woman as an example for the denial mechanism being in effect. He might be shielding himself from the tension and worry brought on by the unstable state of the city on the verge of war by avoiding emotional interaction and rejecting the possibility of normalcy and stability provided by the young woman. This denial gives him a brief break from having to face his own emotions as well as the harsh reality that surrounds him.

- 2. “Nadia did not hear of her cousin's death in time to attend the funeral, and she did not visit her relatives, not for lack of emotion but because she wanted to avoid being the cause of unpleasantness.”(Hamid, 2017, p.21).**

Explanation: The passages from "Exit West" by Mohsin Hamid offer yet another illustration for the denial mechanism in action. It is possible to see Nadia's decision to forgo seeing her family as a kind of denial in which she is trying to avoid facing her own loss and her

family's feelings. She is depriving herself of the entire grieving process and the social component of loss that these traditions offer by refusing to go to the burial or see her family. Nadia's avoidance of her family after her cousin's death is a form of denial. By not attending the funeral or visiting relatives, she's denying the reality of her loss and the changed family dynamics.

Nadia's justification that she didn't want to cause trouble points to a deeper rejection of her own significance in her family's grieving process. It's possible that she's negating the importance of being there and the solace it could offer her family. This suggests that she may have repressed her individual needs and feelings in favor of a projected situation in which she would cause discomfort rather than her true sentiments and her obligations to her family.

It is possible to read this behavior as a coping mechanism for the hurt of bereavement and even familial strife. By avoiding circumstances that might force her to face her cousin's death head-on, Nadia may be rejecting its truth. She is able to temporarily control the emotional effects of the loss because of this avoidance. Internal conflict results from her feeling the emotion but not acting on it by going to see her relatives, as is socially required.

She may alleviate the cognitive dissonance by using denial to defend her behavior as a means of avoiding unpleasant situations. Nadia's choice to stay away from her relatives even though she was upset at her cousin's passing might be seen as an example of the psychoanalytic denial mechanism in action. She is able to manage the complicated intricacies of her familial ties as well as the right away psychological consequences of the loss through the mechanism of denial.

3. According to Hamid (2017), Nadia and Saeed's phones opened up a digital world that transcended physical boundaries, offering them access to both real and imaginary places (p. 25).

Explanation: This describes how Saeed and Nadia use their phones as gateways to an interconnected virtual world, a stark contrast to their physically disrupted city. The phones symbolize their access to a broader reality beyond their immediate surroundings, suggesting a form of denial where they immerse themselves in the digital realm to escape the harsh realities of their war-torn environment.

The idea that phones might be used as a gateway to an "invisible world" raises the possibility that the two of them utilise technology to get away from their everyday lives. By losing themselves in the virtual world, people are escaping the harshness or challenges of their real situations, which can be seen as a type of denial.

It's possible that Nadia and Saeed are avoiding having to deal with their real-world issues, such the political unpredictability and personal difficulties they encounter, by spending so much time on their phones. They use this strategy to focus their attention on less demanding or more enjoyable virtual activities, which helps them manage their feelings of anxiety and stress.

By giving people access to a world that is "all around them, and also nowhere," the phones underscore the paradoxical existence and absence of the virtual world. They may not feel as in control or predictable in their real surroundings as they do in this parallel reality. Psychoanalysis would have us believe that by creating and withdrawing into a more controlled virtual world, they are denying that they have any control over their actual lives.

It is possible to see their emotional involvement with the virtual setting as a way for them to transfer their feelings from the actual world to a safer, although fictional, location. By refocusing their attention in order to escape facing the emotional burden of their existing circumstance, they are engaging in a sort of denial known as displacement.

4. "Saeed and Nadia found themselves unsettled and craving each other's company, and so they decided to go ahead and meet after all."(Hamid, 2017, p.27).

Explanation: The fact that Saeed and Nadia chose to meet in spite of the dangers implies they are ignoring the serious dangers to their safety. They manage to concentrate on their emotional demands rather than the threats outside. They are choosing to find comfort and peace in each other's company in the face of calamity. When someone prioritise their emotional support needs over a logical assessment of the threats in their environment, it can be considered a type of denial.

They can temporarily escape the hard reality they endure when they meet one other. This is a denial tactic, according to psychoanalysis, where individuals isolate themselves from the chaos outside by creating an oasis of intimacy and stability. It is possible to see their decision to meet and their need for each other's companionship as coping mechanisms. They can keep their feeling of normality and control by downplaying how serious their situation is, which helps them regulate their worry and anxiety.

Psychoanalysis interprets Saeed and Nadia's decision to meet in spite of the risks around them as a prime instance showcasing denial mechanisms being in action. They neglect the current dangers to their safety in favour of each other's company in order to find solace and emotional support. This conduct demonstrates how denial can serve as a means of defence in trying circumstances, highlighting their need for regularity and connection in an atmosphere of upheaval.

5. Even amidst their challenging circumstances, Saeed and Nadia's approach to escape was not straightforward. Saeed had always harboured a desire to depart from his city, but he had imagined it as a temporary and intermittent departure, never as a permanent one (Hamid, 2017).

Explanation: Saeed's denial is evident in his reluctance to accept the permanent nature of their departure. He clings to the hope that leaving might be temporary, which prevents him from fully confronting the reality of their dire situation.

Saeed's conviction that their departure from the city will only be temporary reflects a denial of the possibility that it could have to be permanent. The concept of leaving becomes more psychologically tolerable because of this denial, which enables him to hold on to the prospect of returning.

Saeed is attempting to preserve continuity and regularity with his former life by imagining sporadic departures. He uses this denial as a coping mechanism for the nervousness and stress of having to start over from scratch and face an unknown future.

Saeed's unwillingness to think about departing "once and for all" is an indication that he doesn't believe their circumstances are over. It would be emotionally taxing to accept that they would never return, so he subtly minimises how permanent their departure is.

Psychoanalysis interprets Saeed's ambivalent attitude toward leaving their city as an example of the denial mechanism. He dismisses the idea that their absence might be permanent, believing it to be only transitory. The prospect of leaving is made more acceptable by this denial, which keeps him feeling hopeful and normal. Additionally, it spares him from having to deal with the emotional toll and finality of leaving his house and confronting an uncertain future. This conduct demonstrates how denial can act as a defence strategy, allowing people to control their emotions and preserve psychological equilibrium in the face of major disruption.

These quotes illustrate various instances of denial or attempts to maintain normalcy in the face of escalating conflict and personal loss, reflecting the psychological defence mechanisms employed by the characters.

Conclusion

To conclude, In Mohsin Hamid's "Exit West," the denial mechanism in psychoanalysis is demonstrated by a number of actions and attitudes taken by the characters Nadia and Saeed. These acts of denial are coping mechanisms that assist the characters in navigating the difficult and uncertain circumstances they find themselves in. It is an essential psychological tactic that helps the characters deal with the overwhelming challenges they encounter. Whether by retreating into an online world, avoiding emotional confrontation, seeking solace in the face of danger, or disputing the irreversibility of their departure, Nadia and Saeed use denial to safeguard their mental health and preserve a sense of control in an unpredictable and dangerous environment.

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