



MEKANISME PERTAHANAN MCGLUE MELALUI PENGALAMAN TRAUMATIS: SEBUAH STUDI PSIKOANALISIS FREUDIAN

MCGLUE'S DEFENSE MECHANISM ACTIVATED BY TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES: A FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS STUDY

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Received:
August, 2 2023
Revised:
June 17, 2024
Accepted:
June 18, 2024

ABSTRACT

The most important thing for parents to achieve is a safe environment for their children to grow up in. Children need to be guided properly to lead a good life in the future. Psychoanalysis, a theory by Sigmund Freud, generally discusses a person's experiences in their early stage of life. This article employs psychoanalysis as the grand theory, focuses on the relationship between childhood trauma and its impact on adulthood, and implements a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the main character of Ottessa Moshfegh's novel, McGlue. The story follows McGlue, a man who suffered childhood trauma after discovering he was unfairly treated by his mother and was continuously rejected by society. It aims to analyze the causes of his trauma and how it affected defense mechanisms that he did in his adulthood, in facing reality. The defenses he did were mostly performed when his best friend, Johnson, died. When confronted with Johnson's death, he used four defense mechanisms: selective memory, regression, projection, and denial. McGlue turned into an individual who chose violence to protect himself from hurting. This study finds that his traumatic experiences made him against the world, judging by how he consumed alcohol since he was young and continuously doing illegal and irresponsible things.

Keywords: Anxiety, childhood trauma, defense mechanisms.

ABSTRAK

Hal paling penting yang harus dicapai orang tua adalah lingkungan aman untuk anak-anak mereka tumbuh. Anak-anak perlu dibimbing secara tepat untuk dapat menjalani kehidupan yang baik di kemudian hari. Psikoanalisis, sebuah teori dari Sigmund Freud, umumnya membahas pengalaman seseorang pada tahap awal kehidupan mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan psikoanalisis sebagai teori utama, dengan berfokus pada hubungan trauma masa kecil dan dampaknya di masa dewasa, serta menerapkan metode deskriptif kualitatif untuk menganalisis karakter utama dari novel Ottessa Moshfegh, McGlue. Bercerita tentang McGlue, seorang pria yang menderita trauma masa kecil setelah menyadari bahwa ia diperlakukan tidak adil oleh ibunya dan terus menerus ditolak oleh masyarakat. Bertujuan untuk meneliti penyebab traumanya dan bagaimana itu berdampak kepada mekanisme pertahanan yang ia lakukan di masa dewasanya, dalam menghadapi kenyataan. Pertahanan banyak ia lakukan saat teman dekatnya, Johnson, meninggal. Ketika dihadapkan dengan kematian Johnson, ia menggunakan empat mekanisme pertahanan: memori selektif, regresi, proyeksi, dan penolakan. McGlue berubah menjadi seseorang yang menggunakan kekerasan untuk melindungi dirinya dari rasa sakit. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pengalaman traumatis membuatnya menentang dunia, dilihat dari bagaimana ia mengkonsumsi alkohol sejak masih kecil dan terus menerus melakukan hal ilegal dan tidak bertanggung jawab.

Kata kunci: Kecemasan, trauma masa kecil, mekanisme pertahanan.

INTRODUCTION

The human mind is reasonably understood to be an extremely complicated maze. When expressing, thinking, or behaving in a certain way, our psyche has the utmost power over our body and practically controls it. For that reason, our thoughts and actions can be considered a product of our psyche. Two persons in the same room are unlikely to think the same way in response to the same situation. In general, this study will look at someone's mind when confronted with unpleasant events and how they instantly react to them.

The process of developing a child's personality begins at a very young age, when the concepts of Id, Ego, and Superego are formed in his or her psyche. As a result, it is critical for children to grow up in a healthy environment where they are not subjected to abuse. According to UNICEF in the report "Early Childhood Development", early times for children are a time of great opportunity but also a significant risk because they are trained to learn from the environment in creating moments and perspectives on understanding things according to what they acknowledge. A major trauma that occurred in the patient's childhood can have long-term consequences for their improvement (Gaensbauer & Jordan 2009, 948).

Trauma has devastating effects on mental wellness that also contributes to the biological changes in the brain. Traumatic experiences in childhood have led to the current scenario in which people develop something to protect themselves and continue living with the agony they only understand. Unfortunate childhood events may impact the future since they may shape how someone acts like an adult. According to Tyson, trauma contains painful memories that can threaten an individual psychologically and may also lead them to anxieties (Tyson 2006, 21). As a result, it appears to be subjectively viewed because all pain and feelings are relative, implying that no one can compare their suffering to greater or less painful than another person.

The term "past events" is frequently used in psychoanalysis. According to Golding, there is a dynamic interaction between present and past time, with the past contained in the present and the present changing into the past (1982, 551). Because everything that happened in the past is responsible for what happens in the future, it is critical to learn what happened in someone's childhood when determining their current behavior. All these create a shield for someone to prevent any harm or something that may activate their fear, which is when one or more types of defense mechanisms are utilized.

When someone becomes anxious about something they do not find pleasant, they immediately engage in defense mechanisms to deal with the anxiety. When people become anxious about something, the Id, which represents repressed feelings, and the Ego, which represents defense, are brought into consciousness, as Anna Freud argued about defense (Freud 1937, 22). It causes difficulty to someone when an internal or external event invades how they think, so it allows the mind and body to create mechanisms that act as a shield against threatening life events (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998, 1082). The various types of defensive mechanisms are intended to ease the stress created by the fear of someone by carrying out specific actions to restore peace, for example, selective memory, denial, regression, projection, and so on. The purpose of these acts is to help people distance themselves from potential risks or negative feelings.

The portrayal of several forms of defense mechanisms driven by childhood trauma can be seen in this novel by Ottessa Moshfegh with the title *McGlue* published in 2014. It tells the story of McGlue, a man working as a sailor in the 1850s who lived his life carelessly. McGlue had a best friend who saved him from death and supported him with anything he needed. His name was Johnson. Both come from somewhat different families; Johnson came from a wealthy family with a reputation, while McGlue came from a lower-class community who often committed crimes and enjoyed drinking alcohol. Johnson had always been surrounded by all the good things until he met McGlue on one freezing night and almost died. He saw

McGlue as someone who needed his help, and he decided to stick by McGlue's side to learn more about the world.

Freudian Psychoanalysis is used as this study's grand theory because it explicitly involves the idea of anxiety, which comes from repressed feelings that motivate an individual to employ acts of defense mechanisms to conceal the painful trauma. It intends to analyze how the childhood trauma of McGlue is responsible for his current behavior. Because the treatment a person receives in his or her childhood memories determines their adulthood, it is prominent that a good environment or treatment is needed for children, especially when they are still young. The novel describes McGlue's messed-up childhood, in which he left his unloving mother and entered the world of alcohol at a young age. His choice shaped his reckless behavior and caused him to become the worst version of himself. The discussion will cover what made McGlue a traumatized person and how defense mechanisms he used shaped his behavior, as written in the formulated question: What traumatic experiences did McGlue have as a child that led him to use these four defense mechanisms, namely selective memory, regression, projection, and denial, especially when confronted with Johnson's death?

Theoretical Background

1. Freudian Psychoanalysis and Defense Mechanisms

Psychoanalysis is a method of learning about oneself that involves studying one's personality and the processes that occur in both the unconscious and conscious mind (Freud 1917, 15). It must include some past events that resulted in the person's trauma. Trauma is classified into three categories: physical, emotional, and sexual (Toof, Wong, and Devlin 2020). Childhood trauma can be considered the reason for mental and physical health problems. People with trauma would find a way to protect themselves from a threatening situation. The behavior of a person when dealing with their internal torment and immediate reactions is called a defense mechanism (Putnam et al. 2014). It might also be interpreted as a defensive reaction to protect ourselves. A more thorough definition from Anna Freud in her book defined defense mechanisms as acts of defense that are employed by the ego as a reaction to the occurrence of a resistance that comes from the Id (Freud 1917, 22). Anxiety can be caused by painful memories stored in the unconscious mind. The instant reaction toward anxiety is the defense mechanism. For instance, if a person has been traumatized by significant humiliation in the past, they may limit or even isolate themselves from socializing with new people. They do this to avoid putting themselves in the same situation as before.

2. Childhood Trauma Impacts on Change of Personality

People who have experienced childhood trauma are more likely to experience personality changes than they used to be. Traumatic events experienced in childhood result in being unable to have a social and adaptable personality as adults, mainly for two distinct spheres: active participation in social life and the ability to lead a positive interaction with others (Telaku, 2018). Traumatic events such as child abuse can result in the development of destructive behavior, according to a study by Hikmah, Arafah, and Abbas (2022). When they are abused, they develop hatred and become violent when confronted with problems. Children can also be traumatized as a result of parental neglect and lack of guidance. As included in the study by Ivana and Laksono (2022) and Cesar (2018), The child may struggle to mature normally and may even lack the ability to behave properly. They may choose to be aggressive because they do not trust others. Negative experiences, such as the death of a loved one, are also considered traumatic events that have a substantial influence on a person's life. A study by Wisnumurti and Pandin (2022) described the personality change of the main character after losing her baby.

The related studies mentioned here show that traumatic events in childhood have significant impacts on the change of personality.

3. Defense Mechanisms Effects on an Individual

As introduced by Freud in his theory, defense mechanisms can be used to help ease anxiety. It lessens fear and anxiety because tension is reduced, thus becoming reinforced and learned as ways of reducing anxiety (Hilgard 1949). Although defense mechanisms are employed to relieve bad feelings, it has a long-term impact on the individual. The study done by Guo (2018) explained that struggle in a person's life will hold his or her life from gaining self-awareness and possibly hide his or her true feelings. The main character chose to use selective memory, denial, and projection to shield himself from the unbearable expectations of others, which made him appear untrustworthy to others. A study by Maghira and Pandin (2022) showed that the main character chose avoidance to avoid herself from other people and it affected her personality in the end. Defense mechanisms can assist someone in escaping the confusion they are experiencing, such as when they are unsure how to react to undesirable thinking. To help them stop the overwhelming feelings and stay calm, the main character in Ulfa and Wulandari's (2019) study used repression, intellectualization, displacement, regression, reaction-formation, and introjection.

Generally, this present study discusses the fundamental defense mechanisms and how the character performed them to defend themselves from getting hurt. Defense mechanisms also influence the main character's behavior. The process of McGlue becoming the current version of him showed in him utilizing some defense mechanisms such as selective memory, regression, projection, and denial.

METHOD

The study applied qualitative and descriptive research methods to implement a psychoanalytic perspective into the literary discussion. Freudian Psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory explained the behavior of McGlue as the main character of Ottessa Moshfegh's *McGlue*, who experienced childhood trauma and was later responsible for his behavior. This article used primary data from the novel *McGlue*. The secondary data were collected from books, journal articles, theses, and reputable websites. Close reading was used to collect data and arguments for the analysis to obtain an in-depth explanation. Another reason was the novel's complicated structure, which needed to be considered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

McGlue's Misery

Traumatic experience has the ability to increase the strength of a particular stimulus to the point where it can no longer be influenced by normal means in a very short amount of time. (Freud 1917, 242). A child who is exposed to traumatic events may experience changes from how they used to be. The main character of *McGlue* fits the description of an adult with severe childhood memories that are responsible for all of his trauma. Despite being one of his mother's children, he was frequently forgotten, ignored, and underestimated. When his brother returned home with bruised and bloody eyes, his mother took *McGlue* to see the mother of the boy who had fought with his older son. Little *McGlue* learned to be violent and merciless from his mother.

I remember my brother came home bleeding from the eye once. My mother put him to bed with whiskey and took me with her to the mother of the boy who did it to him. I was left to sit on a mudded stump of tree while my mother yelled at the doorway how her son could go

blind, could die and leave her alone and meaningless. I was small and so often shoved off to cuddle into the nearest corner in this way, my back against some wall of other. (106)

At the time, little McGlue discovered that a mother's love is entirely subjective. This is evident in how his brother was more protected than him although they both were his mother's children. McGlue had been feeling rejected since he was a child. McGlue eventually developed a hatred for not only his mother but also people in this world, especially women, as a result of his mother's lack of love and care.

McGlue's Response to Johnson's Tragic Death

The role of Johnson to McGlue was almost like his guardian. When McGlue learned that Johnson had been declared dead, he could not do anything. It shocked him to the extent that he wanted to end his life as well.

The bed shakes with just my own breathing. No Johnson. I've got it now. He is dead, just like they've been saying. I think of a drink and cry more. No kind I can think of would take the stink out of this one, though. Johnson dead. That's what they've been saying, why they've been asking. I only just heard it now. I lay my own head down and pray to die. (113)

The narrative above describes how devastated McGlue was when people questioned this matter to him. He came to a realization that Johnson was no longer around him. The shocking news made him want to drink alcohol and drown himself in the sensation of intoxication. McGlue had always used alcohol to escape reality, and in this case, he seemed to want to end everything because Johnson was no longer beside him. Johnson almost became someone that McGlue needed in his life. In the narrative below, Johnson once told McGlue something that may help him sleep without drinking alcohol. McGlue replied to him by repeating Johnson's name. The only thing or person McGlue needed in his life was Johnson.

"If you can't sleep, think of things you like to eat, things you see walking down a road, girls' names. Say them in your head, again and again, until you're done." (26)

McGlue's Defense Mechanisms

Johnson was once a gentleman coming from a higher social class. Since McGlue met Johnson, the entire life of both changed because of each other's presences. McGlue felt bad for keeping him by his side because it had transformed Johnson into a completely different person than he had been before. Everything happened because Johnson saw McGlue as someone he admired, and he was willing to accept anything McGlue did.

And he bore the brunt of all my misdeeds. He felt what I couldn't. If he were here I'd throw an arm around him, pat his head and thank him. Whatever he'd had wrong, my wrongs were ten times the size. It was why he liked me. I think he liked to feel terrible. But he wasn't at all that way. By my side, I put him in a class of dirty animals, true, since I was one. Before me he was a gentlemen, a person we'd despise. Once he met me, Johnson said, his heart beat a little louder. He became like a man who knew something. It helped him to have to pull me up and bring me places. And he studied my ways, tried out what it felt like to grab what was his and not apologize. Though inside, I knew, he was still so nice. (107)

McGlue was consumed by guilt, but he was also lonely after Johnson left. As a result, he decided to protect himself from the never-ending guilt by recalling the happy memories he had with Johnson while he was still alive.

In other narratives, McGlue was reminded of Johnson's remarkable actions that had an impact on his life. As far as he could recall, they almost never argued. Perhaps because he

recognized that Johnson had saved his life and brought him to a place where he could be completely himself when he was around Johnson, without being afraid of being judged.

We'd always been good friends, remember. He saved my life. I was freezing to death somewhere, nearly a stone statue with icicles hanging from my nose. On a horse he came up promising me what, I forget now, again. (142)

I'm no averse to calling him the chickenshit he is, but no so soon. I think he's earned a little bit of this show. And I do take it as a show. The real Johnson wouldn't be so nancy. But I would not kill Johnson. He liked to be jostled, though. If he were here I'd punch his face till he laughed. He got jolly, punch-drunk. I was good at cheering him when I got tight the right way, which wasn't often. (122)

These two narratives show that McGlue used regression to recall his most important memories. He wanted everyone to understand that these memories back up his claim that he was not the murderer. He would not dare to do such a horrible thing moreover if it was for his one and only best friend. Given how frequently he praised Johnson's presence, the writer interprets McGlue's actions as one of his defenses to escape reality and ease the pain. However, as Tyson argued, regression is not all about happy memories. It may also involve traumatic or bad memories of someone to recall. As previously stated, Johnson was caught several times declaring that he wanted to die, but no reason was given for McGlue or the readers to comprehend. In the following narrative, McGlue noticed the strange behavior of Johnson. The writer assumes McGlue took advantage of this opportunity to revisit this memory and recall one particularly unpleasant memory of Johnson in order to better understand him. This specific act of regression was not intended to hide from the accusation, but rather to allow McGlue to discover the possible reason for Johnson's death wish.

Projecting is the act of pointing out our own fear, problem, or guilt to another person and then blaming them for it in order to avoid admitting that we, too, have it. (Tyson 2006, 15). When someone is worried about their bad personality, they project it onto someone else. They accomplish this by criticizing and blaming someone else who appears to fit the description. They are pressed by an internal impulse that leads them to want to avoid their fear by accusing others. In this novel, the writer presumes that McGlue exhibits this behavior, as evidenced in the following narratives:

They said I've done something wrong? Johnson must be angry and won't come down to make it right. Not yet. And they've just left me down here to starve. Haven't had a drop in days more so. They'll see this inanition and be so damned they'll fall to my feet and pass up hot cross buns slathered in fresh butter and beg I forgive them. All of them: Johnson, Pratt, captain, Saunders, the fagger, the entire world one by one. Like a good priest I'll pat their heads and nod. I'll dunk my skull into a barrel of gin. (12)

This where the people come and this is where the money is and this is where I want to make it because up there there's nothing but old ties, and I'm done with old ties. And you're a good kid, and a drunk, but you just do what I say and you'll make it with me, right?" "Right," I said, but it didn't feel very right. I didn't want to make it. I wanted to lie down with it and strangle it and kill it and save it and nurse it and kill it again and I wanted to go and forget where I was going and I wanted to change my name and forget my face and I wanted to drink and get my head ruined but I certainly hadn't thought about making it. (38)

The sentence “They said I’ve done something wrong?” is addressed by McGlue to the people who despised him. He could not accept the indictment for the incident. McGlue was well aware that people did not consider him as a proper human being. McGlue had always been blamed for anything bad that happened to him throughout his life. It was inevitable for him to the point where he must be blamed for things he would never have done to respect his family or society. The defense appeared when he stated that Johnson would not meet him because he was still angry. Furthermore, he pretended to be a saint, ready to accept apologies from anyone. The writer suspects if this trait fits McGlue's characteristics, but it is understandable given that it is one of the defenses used to relieve his pain.

McGlue demonstrated the characteristics of someone who had recently lost an important person. He claimed to be under the influence of alcohol and that it was impossible for him to remember, especially if it was too shocking for him. Foster, as a lawyer, kept pressuring McGlue to recall any details from that night's incident that could aid the investigation. McGlue, on the other hand, was torn because he kept denying the allegation while imagining why it happened to Johnson rather than him. On certain occasions, according to Guo’s analysis, denial can make the individual act strangely (2018, 12). It can be seen in how McGlue acted as if he was familiar with darkness, and perhaps he deserved to die rather than Johnson. Hence, he agreed that someone who did it was wrong for everything.

“If anything even happened on whatever night you mean, I was too drunk to give it any attention,” I say. “Nothing goes unremembered. You were there. We have every reason to believe you are the one who killed him.” That is when my heart feels tight. I picture walking next to Johnson, shadow of death on his side, and mine side full of briny sunshine. Doesn’t he know I prefer the dark, which my eyes are used? There is no reason to it. The one who killed him had it all wrong. (93)

CONCLUSION

Childhood experiences are important for every child. They learn to behave by adopting what they are taught by their surroundings, thus it is very crucial to create a good and healthy environment. McGlue was depicted as a child with insufficient treatment from his mother and society, which led him to have anxiety. The anxiety activated several defense mechanisms for him to avoid difficulties in interacting with others and survive the reality. The defenses kept him safe for a while, but they gradually transformed him into a different person. He was a bright child who desired love and care, but as a result of his mistreatment, he developed a rude, reckless personality and a strong dependence on alcohol to escape the harsh reality.

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