



An Indian Approach to Anna Freud’s Psychological Defense Mechanism through the Bollywood Film *English Vinglish*

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Abstract

*Psychodynamics, largely a part of psychological and psychoanalytic criticism, initially set its foot in the nineteenth century. In the 1920s, this psychological literary criticism developed as psychoanalytic criticism with the remarkable contribution of Sigmund Freud. Freud is often referred to as the father of psychoanalysis because of his indelible and path-breaking contribution to the field of psychoanalytic criticism. His significant theories, such as the personality theory of id, ego and superego, unconscious mind, Freudian slip, psychosexual development and the mechanisms of defense have unfolded mechanisms of the conscious and unconscious mind of an individual. Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund Freud, added another brick to the psychoanalytic theories through her significant contribution to the arena of child psychology. Besides child psychoanalysis, she is also known for her theories on defense mechanisms in her well-known work, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936). In it, she has deliberated on denial, repression, displacement, sublimation, suppression, rationalization, projection, reaction formation and introjections as some of the defense mechanisms of the conscious and unconscious mind. The present research article would look at some of these defense mechanisms from an Indian standpoint by its application to a Bollywood film, *English Vinglish* (2012). It would also attempt to understand the positive and negative implications, if any, of the defense mechanisms on the respective individual, i.e., Shashi Godbole, the central character of the film.*

Keywords: Defense Mechanism, Denial, Rationalization, Regression and Sublimation.

Introduction

Psychodynamics, largely a part of psychological and psychoanalytic criticism, initially set foot in the nineteenth century. Psychological criticism in the literature primarily dealt with the workings of the mind and personality of the respective authors. In the 1920s, this psychological literary criticism developed as psychoanalytic criticism with the remarkable contribution of Sigmund Freud. He expanded the term ‘psychology’ to ‘psychoanalysis’ which initially started as the “analysis and therapy of neurosis” but soon developed and adapted to understand the “history of civilization” (Abrams 257). Freud is often referred to as the father of psychoanalysis because of his indelible and path-breaking contribution to the field of psychoanalytic criticism. His significant theories, such as the personality theory of id, ego and superego, unconscious mind, Freudian slip, psychosexual



development and the mechanisms of defense have unfolded mechanisms of the conscious and unconscious mind with works, like, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), and many others.

Anna Freud, daughter of Sigmund Freud, added another brick to the psychoanalytic theories through her significant contribution to the arena of child psychology. She has propounded theoretical as well as practical perspectives in consideration of psychoanalysis in the different stages of the development of a child. Besides child psychoanalysis, she is also known for her theories on defense mechanisms in her well-known work, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936). In it, she has deliberated on denial, repression, displacement, sublimation, suppression, rationalization, projection, reaction formation and introjections as some of the defense mechanisms of the conscious and unconscious mind. The present research article would look at some of these defense mechanisms, i.e., denial, rationalization, regression and sublimation, from an Indian standpoint by its application to a Bollywood film, *English Vinglish* (2012). It would also attempt to understand the positive and negative implications, if any, of the defense mechanisms on the respective individual, i.e., Shashi Godbole, the central character of the film.

Shashi Godbole in *English Vinglish*: A cursory Glance

The Bollywood film, *English Vinglish* (2012), features Sridevi as the central character, named Shashi Godbole. The Indian movie traces the journey of a married woman who aspires to learn the English language so that her husband and daughter admire and acknowledge her identity in their English-spoken circles. It is scripted and directed by Gauri Shinde and produced by Sunil Lulla, R. Balki, Rakesh Jhunjhunwala and R. K. Damani. *English Vinglish* is a feminist film that centres on a married middle-class woman, Shashi Godbole. Shashi, besides being a homemaker, is a small entrepreneur who is locally known for her *laddoos* (traditional Indian sweet that is round in shape). She runs her business from her home only which seems one of the reasons that her husband, Satish Godbole, does not acknowledge her identity as an entrepreneur. Shashi has two kids, a daughter and a son, Sagar and Sapna, respectively. In the film, a typical Indian family is presented where the husband is in the dominant position. Satish's attitude is quite casual towards Shashi's business of making *laddoos*. Shashi, like a traditional wife, expects acknowledgement and appreciative words from her husband for her efforts in sharing the expenses of the household and earning an economically independent identity. But her husband looks at her only as a housewife and because of this he sometimes laughs over her small running business of making *laddoos*.

Contrarily, her mother-in-law is presented as supportive quite unlike the traditional portrayal of a mother-in-law in typical Indian families. Shashi's mother-in-law is compassionate and considerate towards her and, most importantly, acknowledges her efforts and understands her. There are a few instances in the film where her mother-in-law understands her unsaid emotions when she is jeered by her husband or her daughter. Like her mother-in-law, Shashi's son, Sagar, loves her dearly and both share a sound and vivacious mother-son duo bond. Contrastingly, her daughter, Sapna, jeers and ridicules her mother for



not being able to speak English. There are frequent instances in the film where her daughter is seen disparaging and ridiculing her and making her feel inferior and lower because of not knowing English.

Understanding Psychological Defense Mechanism through Shashi Godbole: An Application

In *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, Anna Freud defines defense mechanism as the psychological process of the unconscious mind in which it endeavours to defend an individual from being psychologically and emotionally hurt. As mentioned earlier, Anna Freud has discussed varied sub-processes in the psychological defense mechanism. The present research paper has comprehensively looked at the denial defense mechanism, rationalization defense mechanism, regression defense mechanism and sublimation defense mechanism by its application to an Indian female character, i.e., Shashi.

Denial Defense Mechanism

The first is the denial defense mechanism. Anna Freud defines it as the psychological mechanism of the unconscious mind in which it tries to deny the existence of painful or hurtful actual situation or reality so that the individual would not feel hurt. A careful consideration of the initiation of the movie reflects the traditional Indian household where a woman is the one who wakes up early, cooks and prepares everything for her husband and children. The introduction of Shashi's daughter, Sapna, is carefully planned to trigger thirst in Shashi to learn English. In the initial scene, Sapna's jeering of Shashi regarding her wrong pronunciation of the word 'jazz' provides a hint of the execution of Shashi's psychological defense mechanism. When Sapna asked Shashi to again pronounce the word 'jazz', she refrained from saying it because she does not want to get mocked by her daughter. Implicitly, she tries to deny the situation in the fear of being mocked and laughed at. However, later, she repeatedly tried to pronounce the word, though alone. But when she could not do it, she renounced practising it considering it insignificant. Thus, by abandoning the practice of pronunciation, she has expressed her denial to seriously consider the sarcasm of her daughter towards her. The unconscious denial defense mechanism of Shashi's mind is again reflected when she tries to rationalize her jealousy. When Shashi's husband tries to give rationale regarding him hugging his female colleague, she agreed with his explanation that it's just a westernized gesture to say hello to someone. Noticeably, she was offended at first when she saw her husband hugging another female but after listening to his explanation, she abandoned her jealousy as if the incident had not happened in the first place.

Rationalization Defense Mechanism

Anna Freud defines the rationalization defense mechanism as a psychological process where the mind tries to find rational reasons for any inappropriate behaviour. As already discussed in the denial defense mechanism Shashi tries to provide herself with a rationale that her husband had hugged a female colleague in just a welcoming gesture, so, it also includes a rationalization defense mechanism. This rationalization defense mechanism is also reflected in Shashi's unconscious consolation to her mind that her daughter Sapna is highly influenced by western culture and that's why she often laughs at her inability to speak in English. A



similar instance is seen in the middle of the movie when Shashi goes to stay at her sister's place in Manhattan. There, when her niece Meera's fiancé came to meet her for dinner, she retired to her room on the pretext of feeling sleepy. It is because she could not relate to the English-spoken group of her sister, niece and her fiancé. By making her way to her room, she unconsciously tries to give herself the rationale that she does not belong to this group. That's why, in her room, she immediately rang her husband to share some words with him.

Regression Defense Mechanism

Anna Freud links the regression defense mechanism to an individual's earlier phase of development when he or she is a child or a teenager to mentally push away some stress or anxiety. In the movie, the regression defense mechanism is seen at the point when Shashi started to learn English in Manhattan. However, in the initial half as well, there is a small hint at the regression defense mechanism of Shashi's mind when she makes a dance move to release her stress because of her daughter's mockery of her. Though it was on the insistence of her son Sagar that she showed the dance move, it had somewhat released her stress. The regression defense mechanism is explicitly highlighted when Shashi joined the New York Language Academy in Manhattan to learn English. The first day at the academy infused her with great energy and excitement as if she is a damsel who has just joined college. On her first day, when she reached the academy by herself, she was relaxed and elated. It was an achievement for her that she accomplished without any help in a foreign land. There, the everyday excitement to learn something new thrilled her and made her more and more inquisitive about learning the language which she had earlier found insignificant. Learning English made her feel as if she is exploring an unbounded ocean. In the regression defense mechanism of Shashi, the role of Laurent is significant. In Laurent, Shashi found a genuine friend to whom she can divulge her dilemma and can also express her disappointment of not being acknowledged by her family. On the other hand, Laurent was fascinated by Shashi's personality and harboured feelings for her. In the movie, Laurent implicitly approached Shashi quite several times by inviting Shashi for coffee. Initially, Shashi denied accompanying him but later when she realized his respect towards her a satisfaction of acknowledgement enveloped her. Later, she accepted his invitation and also went on an outing with him which she enjoyed like a chilled-out college-going girl.

Sublimation Defense Mechanism

A sublimation defense mechanism is a constructive psychological mechanism. In it, an individual channelizes stress and anxiety in some constructive or productive work. In the movie, Shashi excels in making *laddoos*. She has a good small business making *laddoos* which she is running quite well evident from the number of customers she deals with regularly. Even, her husband appreciates her cooking and culinary skills. Though, it is shown in the movie that it is from earlier that she is fond of making *laddoos* and other eateries yet this fondness of her turns out to be a practice of stress release for her. When her husband and children reached Manhattan, at an instance during the conversation, her husband made fun of her. Shashi was offended and stressed because of such behaviour on her husband's part in front of everyone; she immediately stood up from there and started making *laddoos*. When



her sister tasted the *laddoo*, she was speechless by the amazing taste. Thus, sublimation is also an important phase of Shashi's defense mechanism in the movie *English Vinglish*.

Conclusion

Thus, Shashi's character in the movie, *English Vinglish*, exemplifies Anna Freud's psychological defense mechanism discussed in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. Particularly, four psychological defense mechanisms are reflected in the character of Shashi; they are the denial defense mechanism, rationalization defense mechanism, regression defense mechanism and sublimation defense mechanism. In the movie, Shashi's act of denying the scornful attitude of her daughter towards her reflects a denial defense mechanism while her act of giving herself a rationale that it is because of the influence of westernized culture illustrates the rationalization defense mechanism. Shashi's unfolding and exploration of herself as a free bird like a college-going girl hints at a regression defense mechanism while her fondness for cooking and making *laddoos* highlights the sublimation defense mechanism. Thus, all these four psychological defense mechanisms, i.e., denial, rationalization, regression and sublimation, are implicitly and explicitly reflected in the character of Shashi in the movie *English Vinglish*.

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