



# “Is Happiness a Dream?”: A Psychological Reading on Jacqueline Wilson’s *The Suitcase Kid*

Muh. Arif Rokhman

Department of Inter-Cultural Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada

\*Corresponding author. Email: [arokhman@ugm.ac.id](mailto:arokhman@ugm.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

The research aimed at identifying the anxieties and defence mechanisms in the main character of a novel, *The Suitcase Kid* as it employed those psychological theories. The method of analysis is focussed on the analysis of the main character, Andrea who was a 10-year-old girl and whose parents are divorced. As the only child in the family, the divorce brings a very deep impact on her as her parents then get married. Her father married a woman, and her mother also married a man. As Andy has two new different families, she had to move from one to the other every week and experienced anxieties due to the divorce and attempted to overcome them by performing self defence mechanism. Having the fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, and unstable sense of self, she developed defence mechanism including denial, projection, displacement, regression, fixation, and avoidance. The result showed that the main character suffers from the disorder and attempts to overcome them. The message of the novel is that divorce will bring psychological negative impacts on the children. Yet, the teenager also attempts to handle her problems.

**Keywords:** *Suitcase kid, Family problem, Modern English family, Anxiety, Defence mechanism*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is very important for people in the world. The study is related to the United Kingdom as an island in 20<sup>th</sup> century which includes this mental health study. The focus of the study will be on the teenagers who are the future generation of the country. United Kingdom is a modern country in which the people’s health including their mental health is given priority in their lives. Studies on mental health in the country has been abundant, yet a study on the teenager’s mental health via literary works is rare. This study will see how a young woman suffered from anxieties and her attempts of overcoming them. The novel entitled *The Suitcase Kid* (1992) written by Jacqueline Wilson is chosen as the object of the research because the writer is a well-known children and teenager’s author from the UK. She has won many awards such as the Nestlé Smarties Book Prize in 1995 for her novel *Double Act* and the National Book Awards Children’s Book of the Year in 2000. *The Suitcase Kid* is interesting to be analysed looking from the title. It is a story from a point of view of Andrea West (or Andy), a 10 year-old girl and how her life is portrayed after her parents divorced and have new families.

Previous studies on the relationships between literary studies and psychology or psychoanalysis have been conducted by many scholars.

One of the studies is about human emotions in short fictions (Anish et al., 2022). The article aimed to analyse a novella and three short stories written by R. Chudamani and investigates fear found in those stories. *Yamini*, the novel, is the major focus of the article while three short stories, namely “A Knock at the Door”, “The Strands of the Void”, and “Drought” were the minor focus. *Yamini* is the story of a forced marriage experienced by the main character. “A Knock at the Door” is the story about two widows who protect their sister’s son from his father. “The Strands of the Void” discusses the dowry system in Indian society. “Drought” is the story of a married woman who attempts to run away from the tortures of her husband.

One relevant research has been conducted on the application of defence mechanism in literary work (Ali et al., 2023) in which Adiga’s novel was analyzed using Defense Mechanism discussed in Lois Tyson’s Theory of Psychoanalysis focusing on psychological disorders or dysfunctions and employs the Freudian term Defense Mechanism for human efforts, mostly unconscious, to cope with suppressed desires. The protagonist of “The White Tiger” showed, in an implicit and nuanced manner, childhood psychic experiences that result in repression, fear, and regression. This article

investigated Balram’s character in the light of Tyson’s Defense Mechanism theory including selective memory, selective perception, regression, displacement, denial, avoidance, and projection.

The novel has been studied before by Rusdi (Rusdi, 2016) who analyzed the plot structures of the novel using narratology by focusing on the plot of the story. The findings of this research reveal that the plot of the story is structured like a tree. The plot is developed by a major plot which provides ways for five interrelated plots and forms a story with branching plots. The finding indicates that there are two significant meaning which is attributed by the structure of the plot. Firstly, the story with branching plots elevates the level of suspense to the reader. Secondly, the set of events in the novel indicates that *The Suitcase Kid* can be considered as a Bildungsroman novel.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study is to identify the anxieties experienced by the main character. Besides, the study will also look into the defence mechanism she employed. This is to discover how the main character as a child has made attempts to handle the anxieties she had meaning that, while life around her is hard, naturally she was able to develop methods of surviving in the society. Hopefully this study will be useful to understand the micro situation of young people of England in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

## 3. THEORETICAL REVIEW -

Two theories will be employed here, viz. theory of anxiety and the defence mechanism. The discussion will be about anxiety that is shown by the main character in the novel. Tyson mentioned that anxiety is the disturbing, often overwhelming, feeling that something is wrong or that we are in danger (Tyson, 2015, p. 16). Furthermore, he explains that anxiety is an important matter since it is what leads a person to reveal their personality. He explained that core issues are deeply rooted, psychological problems that are the source of our self-destructive behaviour (Tyson, 2015, p. 16) which consists of six most common core issues which are fear of intimacy, fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, low self-esteem, insecure or unstable sense of self, and Oedipus complex. In this paper, there are three theories to focus on namely, fear of abandonment which is a belief that other people (usually friends and loved ones) will eventually desert us (physical abandonment) or do not care about us (emotional abandonment). Then, fear of betrayal is a feeling that other people (usually friends and loved ones) cannot be trusted. As an example, to laugh behind our backs, to cheat on us, to lie to us. The last one is insecure or unstable sense of self which is an inability to know ourselves or sustain a feeling of identity. These theories are relevant in analysing the character in the novel so that we can see how anxiety appears in Andy after the divorce and how it affects her. Tyson (Tyson, 2015, p. 16) defines fear of abandonment as the unwavering conviction that the people closest to us will leave us (physical abandonment) or do not really care about us (emotional abandonment). According to Tyson (Tyson, 2015, p. 16), a fear of betrayal happens when a person feels that other people, such as our friends and families, cannot be trusted

On the defence mechanism, In Cramer’s *Protecting the Self: Defense Mechanisms in Action*, defence mechanisms is defined as a type of neutralizer against the emergence of urges and desires (Cramer, 2006, p. 7). The defence mechanism is used to protect a person from being overwhelmed by anxiety. According to Berger (Berger, 2004, p. 89-90), there are eleven self defence mechanisms. In this paper, however, discussions will be only on the four of the eleven self defence mechanisms namely denial, projection, regression, and displacement. First, denial (Tyson, 2015, p. 15) occurs when someone does not believe the reality or fact or believe that “problem does not exist or the unpleasant incident never happened” (Tyson, 2015 p. 15). The person will block out any danger and assume that there is no danger. It is easier for children to ‘deny’ reality. Second, projection arises when “ascribing our fear, problem or guilty desire to someone else and then condemning him or her for it, in order to deny that we have it ourselves” (Tyson, 2015 p. 15). For instance, a person may dislike their neighbour so much that they mistakenly think they are the ones who are hated. Projection is a mechanism in which the unconscious protects a person from a situation that they do not desire or accept with their reasoning by. Third, regression occurs when someone is faced with stress and then moves back to a past psychological state. According to Tyson regression is “the temporary return to a former psychological state, which is not just imagined but relived.” (Tyson, 2015, p. 15). Fourth, displacement happens when someone satisfies themselves by taking it out on a person or object less threatening (Tyson, 2015, p. 15)

## 4. METHODS -

The method used in this research is psychological analysis on the main character of the novel. The analysis of the unconscious will be based on the actions performed by the character. Then the physical actions will be interpreted based

on the characteristics of anxiety and defence mechanism. Data are in the form of dialogues quoted from the novel. The data will be used to support to produce points in the discussion.

## 5. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION -

The following are the types of anxiety and defence mechanism that can be found the novel.

In the novel, Andy has a fear of abandonment of losing her dad. This starts with the fact that the divorce of parents causes loss of parental figure in a child's life. A parental figure is an older person who you treat like a mother or father, especially by asking for his advice, help, or support. In Andy's case, she feels like she loses a father figure to his new wife. This is shown by the sentences, "I say heaps of mean things to Carrie but she has never mean back. She always acts like she's pleased to see me but I'm sure she's not. She does not want me around half the time. She wants my dad to herself. I bet that's why she made the Japanese bed-bag. She can fold it up and stow it away in the cupboard. I bet she'd like to fold me up and stuff me out of sight too (Wilson, 1992, p. 37)". In her attempt of dealing with this fear, Andy developed a defence mechanism, namely denial. Denial occurs when the memory does not let stressful thoughts emerge. Being in the latency stage makes Andy young, thus it is hard for her to accept the fact that her parents are no longer together. Because of this, Andy chooses not to acknowledge this fact. She refuses to recognise the divorce of her parents and is still hung up on the idea of a perfect life in her old house, Mulberry Cottage: 'Oh Dad, please. I'm not starting anything. I just want to see Mulberry Cottage again, that's all.' 'Why? There's no point. We're not ever going to be living in Mulberry Cottage again. There's another family living there now.' 'I know. I just want to see it, that's all. Because I like it. And the mulberries should be out soon and we could maybe pick some and we could get Mum to make one of her pies and—'(Wilson, 1992, p. 33). The excerpt above shows a conversation between Andy and her dad. It is a form of denial for it shows that Andy is denying the fact that her dad will no longer be able to get back together with her mum as she insists on going back to their old house. A part of her is sure that her mum and dad will get back together and her family would be whole again. She tries to push the thought of their divorce from her conscious to her unconscious part of her mind to protect her.

With her dad remarrying another woman, Andy feels as though he is taken away from her by his new wife, Carrie. This gets even worse when she finds out that Carrie is expecting a new baby because in her unconscious mind, there is a fear that the baby will "take over" her place and she will lose her father figure altogether. This thought haunts Andy to the point where it appears in her dream: 'Don't be so silly. You're not Andrea. My baby's my little girl and she's called Andrea,' Dad shouted from the house, struggling with the giant baby. 'I'm your little girl! I'm Andy!' I screamed as I dodged in and out of the traffic (Wilson, 1992, p. 61). The anxiety of losing her dad shows the core issue of Andy, which is fear of abandonment. She is terrified that he will leave or not care about her. She is also afraid her new step sister will replace her. In this situation, Andy uses another form of self defence mechanism which is projection. In the novel, Andy's anger and dislike towards Carrie causes her to accuse Carrie of not liking her instead: I say heaps of mean things to Carrie but she's never mean back. She always acts like she's pleased to see me but I'm sure she's not. She doesn't want me around half the time. She wants my dad to herself. I bet that's why she made the Japanese bed-bag. She can fold it up and stow it away in the cupboard. I bet she'd like to fold me up and stuff me out of sight too (Wilson, 1992, p. 38). Although she might not realize it, in her unconscious mind, Andy is angry towards Carrie for taking her dad away from her. In addition to that, Andy mentions that Carrie wants her dad to herself, when in fact it is actually Andy who wishes for that. She is not ready to share her dad with anyone else, let alone a new family.

Andy in the novel shows that she has this when she has to adapt to having not one, but five step siblings from being an only child. This can be seen from: For most of my life I was an only child. I didn't mind a bit. And then all of a sudden I get lumbered. I have five and a half stepbrothers and sisters (Wilson, 1992, p. 34). The fact that Andy said she felt "lumbered" shows that she feels like a furniture to be thrown away. She feels insecure of her existence in the two families that are "not hers". In her unconscious part of the mind, Andy has a fear that she is uncertain of whether she is accepted by her parents' families or not. She is afraid that she is unwelcomed by them or become a burden to them, as well as unwanted by them. To face this situation, she developed a regression. Regression happens when an individual moves backward in development in order to cope with stress. In *The Suitcase Kid*, Andy does this by reading "babyish" books that she used to read years ago: So now I choose really babyish books to read, stuff I read years ago, when I was six or seven or eight. I can remember reading the stories the first time round and sometimes I can kid myself I'm little again, and everything's all right (Wilson, 1992, p. 23). Reading those books for Andy comforts her. It brings her back to the stages before the latency stage, the time when she first read them, reminding her of the past where her family was still whole. It helps her block out the stress and frustration that she has been feeling. Another form of regression shown by Andy is the clinginess she has to both parents when she is ill. This is done so that Andy can get the attention that she needs yet lacks: I started to feel really sick then. I wanted to stay with Mum and have her making a big fuss of me – but I still wanted to go to Dad's too (Wilson, 1992, p. 54) 'My throat hurts. And my head. And my neck

and my arms and my legs. Everywhere hurts. Oh Dad, will you stay off work and look after me?' I begged (Wilson, 1992, p. 62). Her parents making a fuss of her reminds Andy of the past when they have not divorced yet. It helps her recall to when they were still together as a whole family. This memory is stored in her subconscious mind and by fussing when ill, Andy is able to reach out to those memories again.

Displacement is the act of directing anger and frustration towards something or someone that is less or not frightening. In Andy's case, her anger in her unconscious mind towards the divorce, her dad, and Carrie is displaced towards the new baby they are going to have: 'What shall we call your little sister, Andy?' she said. Dad brightened up. 'Yes, Andy. How about you choosing a name for her?' Carrie looked a bit worried, but she nodded. 'OK,' I said. 'I'll choose her name.' They're going to have to let me choose it now. They practically promised. And I'm going to pick the worst name ever (Wilson, 1992, p. 60). Based on this, we can see that Andy has already disliked the baby even before she was born. This is a form of displacement as the baby is innocent and not frightening at all to Andy. Another form of displacement is done by Andy towards her step-sister, Crystal. Since she cannot take out her frustration and anger towards her dad or Carrie, she does it to Crystal in the shape of unfriendliness. 'You can share my bunk-bed with me if you like, Andy,' said Crystal. 'No thanks. You wet the bed,' I said. 'Only sometimes,' said Crystal, blushing (Wilson, 1992, p. 37). Crystal has done nothing wrong to Andy and she knows this. Andy even mentions later in the novel "She's my second favourite sister" (Wilson, 1992, p. 154) when referring to Crystal. Yet, she could not help but be a little harsh towards her.

## 6. CONCLUSION –

All in all, *The Suitcase Kid* by Jacqueline Wilson portrays a cliché yet unique story with an interesting main character who can be analysed with the psychoanalytic criticism. The character Andy in the novel is a good portrayal of a child going through a parents' divorce as it includes feelings and thoughts of the child. It shows how hard a divorce is for a child, especially at her age. Andy is also faced with a problem of her parents divorcing which causes fears, anger, and anxiety to be present in her. Because of this, Andy is able to show her anxiety, which are fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, and insecure or unstable sense of self. Furthermore, to protect herself from these anxieties, she employs self defence mechanisms, which include denial, projection, displacement, regression, fixation. The employment of defence mechanism concepts is the novelty of the research. It can be concluded that while the character had a psychological problem, she was able to develop defence mechanism to handle the problem.

## 7. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that this article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the general data collection, analysis, editorial, and publication process.

## 8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms responsibilities for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation

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