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ANXIETY AND DEFENSE MECHANISM BY THE MAIN CHARACTER IN LALA BOHANG'S WAKING UP FOR THE FIRST TIME (2021)

Usi Putri Lestari¹, Anita Sari²

^{1,2} Universitas Pamulang

Email: usiputri.lstr@gmail.com¹, dosen01170@unpam.ac.id²

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Abstract

Anxiety is one of the most pervasive psychological experiences in modern life and is frequently represented in literary works as a reflection of human emotional struggles. This study aims to examine how anxiety is portrayed and how defense mechanisms are employed by the main character in Lala Bohang's *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021). Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this qualitative descriptive study focuses on the main character as the participant of the research. The data consists of narrative passages and dialogues reflecting anxiety and defensive behavior. Data were collected through close and repeated reading of the literary work and analyzed using textual interpretation based on Freud's concepts of anxiety and defense mechanisms. The findings reveal that the main character experiences three forms of anxiety: neurotic, moral, and realistic anxiety. To cope with these psychological pressures, she employs repression, denial, projection, displacement, and sublimation. While the first four mechanisms provide temporary relief, sublimation enables the transformation of anxiety into constructive behavior and personal growth. The study concludes that anxiety plays a significant role in shaping the character's psychological development. These findings support the application of psychoanalytic theory in literary criticism and contribute to a deeper understanding of the representation of psychological experiences in literature.

Keywords: *anxiety, defense mechanisms, literary work, psychoanalysis, psychological literary criticism*

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Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most common emotional experiences in modern life. People feel it in different ways and for different reasons, sometimes because of genuine external pressures, and sometimes because of fears they cannot even name or explain. Freud (as cited in Andriana & Kasprabowo, 2020) described anxiety as a signal from the ego, an internal alarm that tells the mind something feels out of control or threatening, even when no clear external cause exists. In today's world, social isolation, despite digital connectivity, leaves many individuals feeling persistently alone (Mental Health Foundation, 2024). Financial uncertainty creates chronic psychological strain (Pfeffer et al., 2024), while constant exposure to negative news through social media intensifies the sense of threat (Azarian, 2016). Academic and professional competition puts enormous pressure on young people from an early age, and the effects on mental health are well-documented (Anderson, 2024). When all of these forces come together, they create the kind of emotional burden that people manage, often without realizing it, through unconscious psychological strategies known as defense mechanisms.

This study is grounded in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory as its grand theoretical framework. Freud (1923) proposed that the human mind is structured around three competing forces: the id, which contains raw instinctual drives; the ego, which acts as the rational negotiator between inner impulses and external reality; and the superego, which represents the internalized voice of moral standards and social expectations. When these forces conflict, the ego experiences anxiety, a signal that something inside is unresolved and threatening to break through (Freud, 1959). Freud (1959) classified anxiety into three distinct types: neurotic anxiety, arising from the ego's fear of losing control over unconscious impulses; moral anxiety, growing from guilt when a person feels they have violated their internalized moral code; and realistic anxiety, a proportionate response to genuine external danger. To protect itself, the ego develops defense mechanisms, unconscious strategies that reduce emotional pain and restore inner stability. These include repression, which pushes painful memories out of awareness; denial, which refuses to acknowledge a difficult truth; projection, which attributes one's own unacceptable feelings to others; displacement, which redirects emotion to a safer target; and sublimation, which transforms anxiety into constructive, socially acceptable activity (Freud, 1993). These two theoretical pillars, the typology of anxiety and the system of defense mechanisms, form the analytical foundation of this study.

Several prior studies have applied this framework to literary characters. Salsabyala (2022) analyzed Beverly Marsh in Stephen King's IT and identified repression and regression as dominant mechanisms. Kholidi (2013) examined George Milton in *Of Mice and Men* and found repression, rationalization, and fixation. Andriana and Kasprabowo (2020) analyzed the protagonist of Poe's *The Black Cat* and traced displacement, denial, and projection. These studies are valuable, but they share a significant limitation: they treat defense mechanisms as separate items to be listed in parallel, rather than examining how the mechanisms interact and evolve across the narrative arc. None examines sublimation, which Freud (1930) regarded as the most mature and constructive mechanism, in any sustained way. As a result, prior research offers a partial picture: it tells us which defenses a character uses but not how those defenses build on each other or what they reveal about the character's psychological growth.

This study addresses that gap by offering an integrated analysis of Lala Bohang's *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021), a collection of illustrated short stories centered on a young woman navigating anxiety, emptiness, and self-disconnection in modern urban life. Rather than cataloguing defense mechanisms in isolation, this study examines how they operate as a system, tracing the character's progression from avoidant defenses in the early narrative toward sublimation by its close. Particular attention is given to sublimation as a narrative turning point, a contribution that modifies how psychoanalytic theory is applied in psychological literary criticism. Two research questions guide the analysis. The first asks how anxiety is portrayed in *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021), what forms it takes, how it is expressed, and what psychological sources drive it. The second asks how the main character copes with her anxiety through defense mechanisms and what the cumulative trajectory of those mechanisms reveals about her psychological development. By answering these questions through careful textual interpretation grounded in Freudian theory, this study aims to deepen understanding of how literary works may reflect the emotional complexity of human psychological experience.

Research Methods

Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design. This approach is suitable for literary analysis because it focuses on understanding meaning and interpreting experiences rather than measuring or quantifying data (Moleong, 2010). Creswell (2014) explained that qualitative research allows the writer to explore a topic in depth and in context, which is important when analyzing the psychological experiences of a literary

character. In this study, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory serves as the main analytical framework, guiding the identification and interpretation of anxiety and defense mechanisms throughout the text.

Participants

The participant in this study is the main character of *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021) by Lala Bohang, a young woman whose psychological experiences form the central focus of the analysis. The literary work itself functions as the primary source, providing a narrative through which the character's inner world, emotional responses, and coping behaviors are expressed. This qualitative analysis does not involve human participants in the conventional sense; rather, it draws on literary analysis to interpret the character's psychological condition as depicted across the text.

Instrument

In qualitative literary research, the primary instrument is the researcher, who functions as the main tool for collecting, selecting, and interpreting data (Moleong, 2010). As Litosseliti (2010) noted in the context of qualitative research methodology, the human instrument plays a central role in shaping how data are identified, categorized, and analyzed, since the process depends on the researcher's sensitivity to the text and command of the theoretical framework. In this study, the researcher's analytical decisions are guided by Freud's psychoanalytic framework, specifically his theories of anxiety (Freud, 1959) and defense mechanisms (Freud, 1957) which provide the theoretical basis for interpreting the character's psychological experiences. The literary work *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021) by Lala Bohang functions as the data source from which narrative passages and dialogues are drawn as the primary material for analysis. This distinction between the researcher-as-instrument and the text-as-data-source is methodologically important: the former concerns how interpretation is conducted, the latter concerns what is being interpreted.

Data Collection

The writer used the following steps to collect the data. First, the writer read *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021) by Lala Bohang thoroughly and repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. Second, the writer identified narrative passages and dialogues that reflected the main character's anxiety and defensive behavior. Third, the writer marked the relevant data based on Freud's psychoanalytic theory of anxiety and defense mechanisms. Fourth, the writer classified all collected evidence corresponding to the three types of anxiety: neurotic, moral, and realistic.

The five defense mechanisms: repression, denial, projection, displacement, and sublimation, as outlined in the theoretical framework.

Data analysis

In the data analysis stage, the study examined narrative passages and dialogues from *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021). The analysis was guided by Freud's psychoanalytic theory, with each theoretical concept operationalised as a distinct analytical category. The analysis was conducted in the following steps. First, relevant narrative passages and dialogues were identified through close and repeated reading. Passages were selected when they contained explicit or implicit expressions of emotional distress, psychological conflict, or coping behavior by the main character.

Second, selected passages were coded according to Freud's (1959) three types of anxiety. Neurotic anxiety was identified when the character expressed fear arising from her own uncontrollable thoughts or unconscious impulses rather than from any external threat. Moral anxiety was identified when the character expressed guilt, shame, or self-blame linked to perceived failure to meet internalized moral or social standards. Realistic anxiety was identified when fear was triggered by a concrete, external, and identifiable danger in the physical world.

Third, passages were analyzed for defense mechanisms. Repression was identified when the character dismissed or showed no emotional reaction to ordinarily distressing events, suggesting unconscious suppression. Denial was identified when the character refused to attribute her emotional struggles to internal conflict. Projection was identified when the character attributed her own fears or insecurities to other people. Displacement was identified when emotional energy toward one source was redirected toward a different, less threatening target. Sublimation was identified when anxious energy was redirected into productive, socially acceptable, and personally meaningful activity. Fourth, coded data were interpreted to answer the two research questions, with findings presented in relation to Freud's theoretical concepts and supported by direct quotations from the literary text.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are divided into two parts. The first examines how anxiety is portrayed in *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021) based on Freud's (1959) typology. The second discusses how the main character copes with anxiety through five defense mechanisms.

Results

The portrayal of anxiety in Waking Up for the First Time (2021)

The main character experiences anxiety in several different forms throughout the narrative, arising from her uncontrollable inner thoughts, the guilt she carries from childhood and family pressure, and her response to real physical danger in her daily life. The first passage shows neurotic anxiety when the character reflects on thoughts she feels are beyond her control. *“My thoughts swallowed me every time, almost entirely, without warning. They’re patiently waiting in the dark corner, pretending to be a ghost, where no one can see them. Watching, waiting for me to be unconsciously present for a second, floating inside on my own body. When the door is open, just for an eye to peek, they will shamelessly rush inside.”* (Bohang, 2021, p. 27)

The image of thoughts *“waiting in the dark corner”* represents repressed emotions that return without warning. Freud (1959) explained that neurotic anxiety occurs when the ego fears that unconscious impulses will break through its control. The character does not fear anything outside of herself; she fears what is happening within her own mind, which is the defining feature of this type of anxiety. Snowden (2006) also noted that neurotic anxiety is closely linked to the ego’s inability to manage the tension between conscious and unconscious mental processes.

The second passage shows neurotic anxiety through physical exhaustion and mental confusion that the character cannot escape. *“I’m so tired, but I choose not to sleep for days. My body aches so badly. I lay on my bed trying to sleep, but my mind starts to wander to all places, scents, and memories that are neither fiction nor reality; it’s just continuous visual chaos inside my head. I can’t tell where my mental state exactly sits right now.”* (Bohang, 2021, p. 95)

She describes her thoughts as *“continuous visual chaos”*, a mix of memories, imagination, and anxiety she cannot organize or control. The statement *“I can’t tell where my mental state exactly sits right now”* reflects a loss of psychological stability that Freud (1959) associated with neurotic anxiety. Mostowik (2018) notes that this confusion is a key symptom of neurotic anxiety, where the individual can no longer clearly separate reality from the products of an anxious mind.

The third passage shows moral anxiety through a painful childhood memory of punishment. *“Imagine living in pain as a result of your own choices; you can’t blame anything else but yourself. When I was a child, I was hit by my parents several times as a result of my stupidity in math. That’s probably where*

I started to hate numbers. I wish I tried harder back then." (Bohang, 2021, p. 70)

Being punished for poor academic performance taught the character that failure is a moral issue, not just a practical one. Freud (1959) explained that moral anxiety develops when the superego, formed through early experiences with parental authority and social expectations, produces guilt and self-blame in the ego. Feist and Feist (2009) similarly noted that the superego's influence tends to produce ongoing feelings of shame and unworthiness when its standards are not met.

The fourth passage shows moral anxiety persisting into adult life during family gatherings. *"Most of the time, the dinner would usually make her feel bad about herself, because it always turns into an interrogation and judgmental discussion on her education, financial, and personal life conditions. Her decision is always being questioned, never once accepting it with open-minded gestures."* (Bohang, 2021, p. 127)

Family dinners become situations where the character feels judged and inadequate. Freud (1959) explained that moral anxiety does not require actual wrongdoing; it only requires the perception that one has failed to meet an internalized standard. The pattern of self-blame that began in childhood is continuously reinforced through adult social relationships.

The fifth passage shows realistic anxiety when a dangerous physical event leaves a lasting emotional effect. *"One day in the rainy season, I was working in the living room, and the kitchen ceiling started to fall apart until the whole kitchen was covered with the broken ceiling. I was startled, I used to love the rainy season but now it's all the bad memories that stuck with me."* (Bohang, 2021, p. 37)

The character's startled reaction reflects a natural response to real physical danger, which Freud (1959) described as realistic anxiety. What is particularly significant is the lasting emotional consequence: the rainy season, previously enjoyed, becomes permanently associated with bad memories. Hall (1954) noted that anxiety learned through direct experience can generalize to related stimuli over time, explaining why a single frightening event reshapes the character's entire emotional response to a season.

In summary, the main character experiences all three forms of anxiety identified in Freud's (1959) psychoanalytic framework. Neurotic anxiety is the most pervasive, arising from her inability to control thoughts surfacing from her unconscious mind. Moral anxiety is deeply rooted in childhood punishment and continuously reinforced by adult family dynamics. Realistic anxiety, while grounded in a concrete external event, demonstrates how a

single frightening experience can reshape emotional responses to an entire range of associated stimuli. Together, these three forms reinforce one another, creating the layered psychological burden the character carries throughout the narrative.

The way the main character copes with her anxiety in Waking Up for the First Time (2021)

The main character uses five defense mechanisms across the narrative: repression, denial, projection, displacement, and sublimation. The first four help her avoid emotional pain in the short term but do not resolve the underlying anxiety. Sublimation, the final mechanism, allows her to transform anxiety into something productive and meaningful, representing the most mature and constructive form of coping in the story.

The first passage shows repression when the character responds to a disturbing childhood incident with complete emotional detachment. *“When the insect finally crawled out slowly from her ear and died a second after on her pillow, she smiled and went back to sleep as if it was nothing. She never thinks about the event, for her it’s just another day in her life.”* (Bohang, 2021, p. 12)

The phrase *“as if it was nothing”* does not mean the event was harmless; it means the character automatically suppressed its emotional significance before it could cause distress. Freud (1957) defined repression as an unconscious process in which the ego pushes threatening material out of conscious awareness. Schultz and Schultz (2009) explained that repressed material remains in the unconscious where it continues to influence behavior indirectly.

The second passage shows denial when the character attributes her emotional emptiness to an impersonal *“default setting”* rather than acknowledging it as her own. *“It’s not the empty personality that disturb your peace... It’s not that, it’s not you, it’s never you. It’s a default setting: the invisible baggage, the difficulties to express genuine emotions, the longing for everything abstract, the constant pursuit for a finish line with no clear direction.”* (Bohang, 2021, pp. 28–29)

Rather than acknowledging that her struggles stem from unresolved inner conflict, the character insists they are simply built into her. Freud (1924) described denial as a defense mechanism in which the individual refuses to accept a painful reality. Alwisol (2011) noted that denial works by creating a version of reality in which the threatening truth is treated as non-existent.

The third passage shows projection when the character expresses distrust toward others’ competence, attributing her own anxiety about

control to their supposed incompetence. *"I distrust other people's competency. I hate to delegate because it usually won't live up to my level of expectation."* (Bohang, 2021, p. 148)

According to Freud (1959), projection occurs when a person unconsciously transfers their own unacceptable feelings onto others. In this case, the real issue is the character's anxiety about losing control, a fear she does not acknowledge directly. Anna Freud (1993) explained that projection allows the ego to manage internal anxiety by perceiving it as an external problem. Wimala (2023) observed a similar pattern in literary characters, noting that projection consistently serves to protect the self-image by directing uncomfortable feelings toward external targets.

The fourth passage shows displacement when the character transfers fear and suspicion about her husband onto his car. *"Days passed by, her husband never looked happier than before, she was worried and cultivated hatred towards the car. It's absurd that nobody can touch the car, even his driver can't wash it. She thought there must be secrets in the car, she never saw the car key anywhere in the house."* (Bohang, 2021, p. 176)

According to Freud (1923), displacement occurs when emotional energy is redirected from its original, threatening source to a substitute that feels safer. The word *"cultivated"* indicates that this redirection built up gradually over time. Feist and Feist (2009) explained that displacement is particularly common when direct expression of emotion carries too high a psychological or social risk. Anna Freud (1993) noted that objects chosen as displacement targets are usually connected in some way to the original source of anxiety.

The fifth passage shows sublimation when, after a week of emotional withdrawal, the character transforms distress into vigorous physical activity and self-affirmation. *"After sleeping and not leaving bed for the whole week, I would be able to do HIIT workouts five days in a row. I would cook a healthy meal every day and take a bath twice a day. I'm at the peak of fearlessness and continue the out-of-this-world experience by shamelessly screaming to myself in the mirror, 'you're the bitch!'"* (Bohang, 2021, p. 30)

Freud (1930) defined sublimation as the process through which anxiety or instinctual energy is redirected into constructive and socially acceptable activity. Unlike the other four mechanisms, sublimation does not hide or relocate anxiety; it transforms it into something that actively supports the character's well-being and growth. Anna Freud (1993) regarded sublimation as the most mature of all defense mechanisms precisely because it converts psychological distress into positive and purposeful action.

In summary, the main character employs five defense mechanisms that do not operate in isolation. The first four repression, denial, projection, and displacement share a common function: they protect the character from conscious confrontation with her anxiety by concealing, externalizing, or redirecting it. While they offer temporary emotional relief, they do not resolve the underlying psychological conflict. Sublimation represents a qualitative shift: it is the only mechanism that transforms distress into something that actively supports the character's well-being and development. The character's shift from avoidant defense mechanisms to sublimation throughout the story shows a process of psychological growth. Rather than continuing to avoid her anxiety, she gradually learns to manage it in a more constructive way. This development is the central finding of the study.

Discussion

The findings from *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021) confirm that the main character experiences anxiety in three distinct forms, each with a different source and a different effect on her inner life. The neurotic anxiety is the most persistent, driven by intrusive unconscious thoughts that the character cannot quiet even in moments of physical rest. Freud (1959) explained that neurotic anxiety occurs when the ego fears the unconscious mind breaking through; this is precisely what the character experiences when she cannot sleep, cannot silence her mind, and cannot tell the difference between imagination and reality. Mostowik (2018) notes that this kind of confusion produces a chronic sense of instability, which the text depicts with precision.

Moral anxiety, rooted in childhood punishment and reinforced in adult family life, reflects Freud's (1959) argument that the superego does not simply disappear after childhood but continues to exert pressure on the ego throughout adulthood. The character does not need to have done anything wrong to experience guilt; she only needs to perceive that she has failed to meet a standard. Feist and Feist (2009) noted that this pattern of superego pressure produces enduring shame that shapes self-perception far beyond the original formative experiences. Realistic anxiety, grounded in the collapse of the kitchen ceiling, demonstrates how fear triggered by genuine external danger can generalize beyond its original context, a process that Hall (1954) described as the extension of conditioned anxiety to related stimuli.

Among the five defense mechanisms, sublimation occupies a uniquely important position. While repression, denial, projection, and displacement all function as forms of emotional management that conceal or redirect anxiety without resolving it, sublimation transforms it. Freud (1930) argued that

sublimation is the only mechanism that genuinely converts psychological distress into positive and productive behavior. The character's movement from a week of emotional paralysis to vigorous self-care and self-affirmation reflects this transformation clearly and marks the emotional turning point of the narrative. This progression from avoidant mechanisms toward sublimation is the central finding of the study and its primary contribution to the field.

Conclusion

This study examined how anxiety is portrayed and how the main character copes with it through defense mechanisms in Lala Bohang's *Waking Up for the First Time* (2021), guided by Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The main character experiences three forms of anxiety: neurotic anxiety, arising from uncontrollable intrusive thoughts; moral anxiety, rooted in childhood punishment and reinforced by adult family judgment; and realistic anxiety, triggered by a concrete external threat that conditions lasting negative emotional associations. To cope, the character employs five defense mechanisms: repression, denial, projection, and displacement, which provide temporary concealment of anxiety, and sublimation, which transforms distress into productive self-care and self-affirmation, enabling genuine psychological growth.

The findings of this study support Freud's (1959) psychoanalytic framework: all three types of anxiety and all five defense mechanisms operate in the literary text precisely as Freud described. At the same time, the study modifies the conventional application of Freud's theory in psychological literary criticism by demonstrating that defense mechanisms should not be read as discrete, parallel strategies but as an integrated developmental sequence. The character's progression from avoidant mechanisms toward sublimation represents a trajectory of psychological growth that the framework does not explicitly address in a literary context, and this integrated reading constitutes the study's primary contribution to the field. Future research is encouraged to apply this sequential framework to other literary works or to combine it with complementary approaches such as trauma theory or gender studies in order to further develop and test its explanatory potential.

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