

## UNRAVELLING THE UNCONSCIOUS: AN EXPLORATION OF EGO DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN *THE TALE*

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### **Abstract:**

*The unconscious realm of the human psyche is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that exist outside the conscious perception. The victims of psychological trauma repress and suppress the painful memories to the domain of the unconscious as a defense mechanism to survive the past experiences. The victims of abuse employ mechanisms of defense such as repression, denial, rationalization, and distortion to ward off the unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and a trigger brings back these long-forgotten distorted memories. These coping strategies erase the intolerable hard truths about the distressing past, occasionally resurfacing through dreams and flashbacks and even influencing and adversely affecting the present life. Based on the life of the award winning documentary filmmaker Jennifer Fox, *The Tale* (2018) is an unnerving tale of childhood trauma and its realization through the recollection of memories.*

**Keywords:** *Unconscious, defense mechanisms, repression, rationalization, distortion.*

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live. So, what's your story?” (*The Tale* 00:44:55-00:45:00)

Psychology has always sought to study the inner workings of the unconscious mind, the storehouse of all memories and past experiences, both those that have been repressed through trauma and those that have simply been consciously forgotten. And a trigger would bring back tormenting and torturing events that has befallen one's life that has been kept in the inaccessible unconscious.

Victims of childhood abuse learn, early on in life, coping strategies to defend against feelings of anxiety and unacceptable impulses, as a means of survival. These psychological strategies brought into play by the unconscious mind contribute not only to manipulate, deny, or distort reality, but also defend against thoughts and feelings to painful and frightening reminders and to maintain one's self-schema.

The term 'defense mechanism', first introduced by Sigmund Freud in his paper “The Neuro-Psychosis of Defense” (1894), was later conceptualized and enumerated by Anna Freud in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936). The ego employs a range of defense mechanisms like repression, regression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, denial, projection, displacement, rationalization, intellectualization, suppression, introjection, and distortion, which operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings and make things feel better for the individual.

*The Tale* (2018) is an exceptional American drama film written and directed by documentarian Jennifer Fox which renders the story of Fox's own childhood sexual abuse. The memoir depicts how Fox employed coping mechanisms to avoid the atrocities of sexual abuse experienced as a child and how she revisits her repressed memories under the light of adulthood distinguishing what's “true” and what's not and what's “imagined” and what's real and reckoning with the true nature of events.

The unreliable narrator of this memoir tells a powerful story of survival and self-discovery where she was forced to rewrite her memories as a defense mechanism. Jennifer is a middle-aged eminent

documentary filmmaker who captures complex life narratives through the lens of her camera. With the discovery of an essay she wrote in middle school, unearthed by her mother Nettie, Jennifer delves into her memory to deduct the events that happened over the summer camp when the 13-year old young Jennifer became acquainted with her horseback riding teacher, the enigmatic and charming Mrs G, and her professional running coach Bill Allens. Jennifer found companionship in “two very special people”, her riding teacher and running coach when her parents barely noticed her as they were immersed in looking after her younger siblings.

Jennifer was reluctant to relay her relationship with the 40-year old Bill fearful of her mother's reaction as she remembers it be something beautiful, having perceived a romanticized narrative opposed to the sexual grooming and rape her coach inflicted on her. Jennifer begins her investigation to find the truth by retrieving her fragmented memories and interrogating her fellow students from riding camp and even Mrs G. Through her fragmented memory and flashbacks, Jennifer finds her younger self when she was a 13-year old and she embarks on to narrate her story. But Jennifer comes across her photo album, she realizes that she had assumed herself to be much older and when she finds the picture when she was 13 years old, she was startled by the tiny little thing looking back at her. She begins her narration once again replacing the older Jenny with a younger one who almost looks like a little boy.

Jennifer developed various defense mechanisms to inhibit memories that would help her live with the experience of the psychological trauma in her adult life. Jennifer never experiences her memories as vivid and consistent and fills the gap with the help of her essay and what she gathers in her investigation. There is evidence of repression, denial, projection, displacement, rationalization, intellectualization, suppression, introjection, and distortion in the memoir employed by adult Jennifer to protect her ego against potential anxieties.

Karen A. Duncan, in her book *Healing from the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, explains how “the intense emotional, physical, and mental aspects of traumatic memories stored within the brain may be the source of flashbacks, nightmares, and somatic responses experienced by women” (193). The inability to recall or recollect in sequence memories of traumatic experiences is witnessed in cases of child abuse. When stresses occur that retrigger emotional responses or mental images of the trauma, these responses overstimulate the individual and intensify her response.

Jennifer wrenched her memories and feelings of childhood into the unconscious to prevent the disturbing mental processes from entering the consciousness. The repressed unconscious memories gradually returned when her mother Nettie discovers the essay Jennifer wrote for middle school and confronted her about the abuse. Jennifer remembers the events in a distorted manner, often confusing what she remembers and the representation of events. She imagines herself to be older, mature and sophisticated when she attended the summer camp, but in fact, she was a small in appearance and a shy and reserved kid. Jennifer never acknowledges her relationship with 40-year old Bill as abuse and considers him to be her first lover until her mother forces her to look back into the past. She discovers painfully that she threw up every time she was raped by Bill and even had anxiety attacks. Her mind and body equally resisted such intrusions and later ended the relationship.

Jennifer repressed the existence of Iris, who was a college student who ran Mrs G's barn that summer. Iris had also involved in a relationship with Bill and Jennifer totally repressed it and let her slip from the memory to make a logical and plausible explanation for her mind to reject the idea of the abuse she suffered. The indication of her repressed memories is revealed when Jennifer fails to remember whether she agreed to stay the night with Bill and converses with her younger self to confirm.

ADULT JENNIFER. What did I say?

MRS G. I have to go either way.

ADULT JENNIFER. I don't remember. I must have said something. I only remember them. Why can't I remember myself? Did I say yes? Why would you do that?

YOUNG JENNIFER. Well... It's my life. I can make my own decisions.

ADULT JENNIFER. Really? You think so? So, what did you say?

YOUNG JENNIFER. Well, I said yes, because I want to prove to Bill and Mrs G that I'm mature.

ADULT JENNIFER. But that's not what you wrote. You wrote that you don't want to be here. That you want to go back with Mrs G to her house. Look in your notebook. It's right there. (00:47:49-00:48:37)

Samuel Beckett writes in his book *The Expelled*, "Memories are killing. So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, for if you don't there is the danger of finding them, in your mind, little by little." The repressed memories of the past influence the present life of the victim creating unfavourable situations. Survivors of abuse have intense trust issues, anxiety attacks, flashbacks and fragmentation of memory. Jennifer has been engaged to her fiancé Martin for three years and she prolongs the marriage as she fails to acknowledge the ring Martin brought for her. Bill instilled the thought that a committed relationship is selling oneself out and Jennifer held on to the manipulation for these long years.

While repression is an unconscious mechanism, suppression is an entirely conscious coping strategy to delay the consideration of unwanted memories or circumstances. It is a deliberate act of seizing a particular thought from entering the mind. But it has a 'rebound effect' when it results in the increased occurrence of such memories and thoughts. Jennifer requests her mother not to dig up the past which she has rewritten so beautifully to wipe out the excesses of molestation and sexual grooming. She asks her mother, "Can you just let me sit with my own memories?" (00:10:51-55).

A victim of childhood abuse resorts to a wide array of psychological defenses through which the abuse is sidestepped from conscious awareness and memory, or minimized, rationalized, and distorted to such an extent that whatever did happen was not really abuse. Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* elucidates the tendencies the child has at her disposal to sheath her mind from further damage.

The child victim prefers to believe that the abuse did not occur. In the service of the wish, she tries to keep the abuse a secret from herself. The means she has at her disposal are frank denial, voluntary suppression of thoughts, and a legion of dissociative reactions. (102)

Jennifer's ego denies the abusive sexual relationship she had with Bill and distorts it to be a romantic relationship where she was consenting to the manipulation and deception of her aggressors. To diminish the infringement of her hurtful past, she uses inaccurate thoughts to reinforce her beliefs and minimize or deny the seriousness of the situation. When Martin approaches Jennifer on finding the essay and the letters exchanged between Jennifer, Bill and Mrs G, she justifies her abusers as important without realizing the depression they have erected in her mind.

ADULT JENNIFER. I'm not trying to justify it, okay? It was my childhood, and these things happened to me and it's just, you know, I'm just saying, it was complicated.

MARTIN. You talked about the relationship, but this is a grown man.

ADULT JENNIFER. He was my coach.

MARTIN. But what does that have to do with it? He was 40 years old. He was my age. Taking advantage of a child.

ADULT JENNIFER. Babe... this was important to me. And I'm trying to figure out why, okay? These people were important to me. (00:54:51-00:55:21)

Jennifer also defends her ego against undesirable thoughts, impulses, and motivations by denying their existence and attributing them to others. The psychological projection reduces anxiety in such a way that it finds the expression of the impulse without allowing the ego to recognize it. Jennifer projects her

own unacceptable thoughts and emotions in Mrs G when she argues with her mother over her own damaged self.

ADULT JENNIFER. Mom, you knew something. You told dad, and he talked you out of it.

NETTIE. That's true.

ADULT JENNIFER. You were following dad's rules, just like Mrs G followed Bill's rules.

NETTIE. Are you equating me with Mrs G and your father with that...

ADULT JENNIFER. No, no. Mom, listen. I'm saying it's complicated. I'm saying she was deeply insecure, she was probably sexually abused herself as a kid. Probably.  
(01:07:12-01:07:35)

Jennifer's ego also found a "particular combination of introjection and projection" (Freud 85) termed as "identification with the aggressor." Jennifer classifies Mrs G as an incredible woman and Bill as her lover when, in fact, she was taken advantage by older people. She believed them to be two very special people whom she loved dearly and shared a special connection and bond she seemed to lack with her family. She considered herself to be a part of both of them. She was showered with attention, affection, and appreciation as she was often neglected. Obsessed with changing herself, she chose a change in the course of her life and pretended to be mature taking control of her life.

Mrs G was also an accomplice and even could be considered the brainchild of his whole charade. The married Mrs G and the divorced Bill shared the secret of being lovers to Jennifer, considering her to be an equal. Jennifer began to internalize the ideas and thoughts of her abuser, thus showing the evidence of introjection. She identified with attributes behaviours and principles of her aggressor to such an extent that she refused to be joined into matrimony. Jennifer, at last, ascertains of being exploited when she realizes through her enquiry that they had planned to have a threesome which was interrupted by her anxiety attack which resulted in putting a halt to the abuse. Jennifer's body resisted what her mind refused to accept.

Jennifer's ego employs the defense mechanism displacement unconsciously that shifts her aggressive impulses to a less threatening target to prevent the unwanted emotions from penetrating to the surface. She directs her anger and hostility at Martin, her fiancé, when he read the essay she wrote and suggested getting help from a therapist. Jennifer displaces her anger and frustrations of being identified as a "victim" at Martin. Jennifer has never classified herself as a victim of abuse as she resists the term altogether and finds the other possibilities threatening to her stable mind. As a result, Jennifer experiences shame, guilt, and disgust when her mother asked her to nail her memories in order to bring the suppressed memory to the consciousness. Being called a victim makes her angry and antagonistic, exploding suddenly at Martin, making him leave the apartment.

ADULT JENNIFER. Okay, I am not a victim. I don't need you or anybody to call me a victim, okay? Because you don't have a fucking clue about my life. So we need to stop this now. Let me just figure this out for myself.

MARTIN. Jennifer, I don't know your life. After six years? Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?

ADULT JENNIFER. If you knew me, you'd know I ain't going to see a therapist. I'm gonna figure this out myself. (00:55:43-00:56:12)

Jennifer uses both rationalization and intellectualization to block confrontation with unconscious conflicts. At times, Jennifer distances herself from her emotional self and analyses the stressful event by concentrating on the intellectual constituents of the circumstances. She goes through the investigation of her past as a detective, making her invisible, thereby, removing one's self from the pain, anger, and an onslaught of other emotions. She tries to piece together the forgotten days by visiting her fellow riding students and Mrs G, and holds on to her belief that Bill had been her first lover even though he was a

pedophile preying upon a 13-year old.

But on several occasions, Jennifer justifies the irrational behaviours and explains them logically. It is a reasoning given to block the guilt or shame mostly to the unconscious. Jennifer felt abandoned at her home as she was not even allowed to accompany a boy to the fair. She perceived to be free in the company of Bill and Mrs G and taking the situations at home unfortunate, she decides to take control of her life. And it has led to Jennifer being a pawn in the hands of her abusers. She confronts her mother and asks her of knowing about her relationship with Bill. Jennifer's grandmother had seen Bill kissing Jenny outside her home. Jennifer rationalizes this incident and contemplated that her mother knew of their relationship and turned a blind eye.

ADULT JENNIFER. Grandma knew, right? So you knew something.

NETTIE. What are you talking about? No.

ADULT JENNIFER. Well, I mean she saw Bill and I, out front, kiss, and she said she was gonna tell you.

NETTIE. My mother saw you?

ADULT JENNIFER. She didn't tell you something about seeing us kiss? She said she was gonna tell.

NETTIE. No, absolutely not. I've killed him. (01:06:22-01:06:42)

*The Tale* is a testament to the strength a victim of child abuse found to conquer her own memories. When she commenced her narration, she said, "The story you are about to see is true. As far I know" (00:01:00-00:01:06). But at the end, after retrieving all her repressed memories, she comes face to face with the perpetrator. Jennifer employed each of the coping strategies when confronted with a particular instinctual demand. The mechanisms Jennifer made use of could neither obstruct her ego from an eternal state of uneasy tension and alertness nor relieve from the sensation of severe and terrible torment from which she suffered. The personal self-reconciliation and self-reconstruction and the acceptance of her reality will alleviate her of her long-time suffering and live the rest of her life in tranquillity.

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