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**The Psychological Impact of Apartheid on the Colored Identity
in Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and *October***

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Abstract

This research paper aims to shed light on the psychological impact of apartheid on Colored identity in Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) and *October* (2014). In fact, the word "psychological" is too wide, so this paper will focus on the defense mechanisms adopted by the characters in Wicomb's two novels to cope with their life as colored people. The paper aims to examine both novels by illuminating how the characters use defence mechanisms to cope with.

The paper aims to show that apartheid and racial thoughts can ruin the life of many colored families including their innocent children who do not even understand the complexities of apartheid and racial life and the result is distorted generations that suffer confusing perception of home and loss of identity, the thing which cause a constant pain in mind, heart and soul.

Key words: defense mechanisms, apartheid, colored, Wicomb, *October*, *Playing in the Light*

Zoë Wicomb was born in 1948 in Beeswater, a small settlement in the semi-arid area of Klein Namaqualand in the Western Cape province of South Africa. She is the daughter of a schoolteacher. She grew up in a family that spoke English in an Afrikaans-speaking Griqua community. Wicomb's knowledge of English allowed her to join a better school than her peers in the village. She was sent to Cape Town for high school. She attended the University of the Western Capewhicj which is a higher education institution that the apartheid government had designated for colored students. In 1970, she went to the United Kingdom for graduate studies at Reading University. She lived in England then she went back to South Africa and taught at the University of the Western Cape. Now, she resides in Scotland where she is a professor at the University of Strathclyde. She got the Honorary Degree from the Open University in 2010. She is a winner of the 2013 Windham–Campbell Literature Prize for Fiction literature at the University of Strathclyde (Nthunya, Manosa. "Zoë Wicomb: A lesson in reading").



She wrote many articles discussing issues of feminism and postcolonial literature. Her first book is *You Can't get Lost in Cape Town* and it is a collection of short stories. It was published in 1987 and it got great attention. Her second novel is *David's Story*. It was published in 2002 but its events occurred in 1991. *Playing in the Light* is her third novel. It was published in 2006. *The One That Got Away* in 2008 is her second collection of short stories. Her last novel is *October* and it was published in 2014. She wrote important essays such as "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Colored in South Africa" in 1970 which is about apartheid and democracy and "Setting Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial" in 2005. In 2013, she published her important essay "Nelson Mandela".

Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* presents the story of Marion and her family and how she discovers the past hidden secret of her family. The secret which makes her discover the real colored identity of her parents. This past shows a heavy burden on the part of her parents specially her mother Helen who commits an immoral behavior to get the affidavit which proves Helen and her family to be white. Apartheid is the major generator of the disordered behaviors of the characters in *Playing in the Light*. Apartheid represents big pressure. It obligates the characters' minds to resort to defense mechanisms to be able to move on with their life.

Wicomb's *October* narrates a different story about home, family, and nostalgia. Apartheid is not the main theme in this novel; however, the impact of apartheid is clear through the events of the story of the novel. Mercia, who is the main character in *October*, lives in Scotland and is dumped by her husband after a marriage of twenty-five years. Mercia has left South Africa for twenty-five years. She does not think about going back home. She receives a letter from her brother asking her to come back and take care of her nephew. So she decides to return to her original city which is in south Africa to regain her real identity in a journey of self-discovering. Mercia and her brother are raised under the oppression



of apartheid. This oppression leads to their unconscious behaviors of distorting their current and past reality to reach satisfaction.

Apartheid is “the name of the policy that governed relations between the white minority and the nonwhite majority of South Africa during the 20th century” (Britannica n.p). There is racial discrimination against nonwhite people in many aspects of their life such as the political affairs, economy, religion and even education. This provides white people a better life than that of colored people who are treated as a part of an inferior category. Being black is a source of shame. This psychological pressure motivates black people to try hard to act as white. The result is loss of identity, or a distorted identity which is referred to as colored identity.

According to Robinson, in his interview with Wicomb "A Writer of Rare Brilliance", Wicomb narrates many real situations which inspire her to write her books and essays especially those about apartheid and the colored identity (n.p). Describing her first situation about "playing white", Wicomb states that "There was a family living across the road from us, and one day they just disappeared. Our neighbors say, 'They've left. They've turned white. (...) This happened all the time" (n.p).

In Coping with their coloured identities, black people may resort to several forms of defense mechanisms. Freud states that we as humans have three major psychological parts; which are the "id", "superego", and "ego" (qtd.in. Boeree 5). Our "id" is our biological desires while "super ego" is the social obligations that surround us. The conflict between "id" and "superego" represents the tension that occurs to the poor "ego" which is the referee between "id" and "superego". We can say that "ego" is our choices or who we are. The tension that happens to our "ego" makes us use some defenses which help us escape the truth that we are afraid to face because we may be overwhelmed and controlled by them.

In her *October* and *Playing in the Light*, Wicomb depicts how her characters adopt various forms of defense mechanisms to deal with the problems of being black. For Both novels elucidate the

effects of denial, avoidance, repression, and identification on their characters.

Defense Mechanisms

Repression

Freud, in his “Repression” (1915), states that, “The essence of repression simply lies in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the consciousness” (147). Then, in his work “Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety” (1926), Freud illustrates an example of a person who may not want to know about sexuality as this may lead to a painful memory that he/she represses when he/she is young. (Freud, Anna. 59)

Identification

Freud, in his work “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” (1915), says it is “turning round upon the subject's own self” (126). He uses this term as a way to convey conflicted feelings of aggression felt toward another person to feelings towards own self. Clark gives a counseling example saying:

a client employs identification with the victim with her husband, who abuses alcohol. Although the client experiences hostility toward her spouse, she redirects her aggression inward and blames or censures herself for her husband's abuse of alcohol despite the multiple and complex cultural forces involved in his drinking pattern. (70)

Reaction formation

“Reaction formation” is another defense. In “Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial”, Baumeister and others argue that:

The concept of reaction formation involves converting a socially unacceptable impulse into its opposite. To apply this notion to esteem protection, one may propose the following: People respond to the implication that they have some unacceptable trait by behaving in a way that would show them to have the opposite trait. Insinuations of hostility or intolerance might, for example, be

countered with exaggerated efforts to prove oneself a peace-loving or tolerant person. (1085)

Projection

“Projection” is also another defense. According to Baumeister and others in their “Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial”, projection "refers to seeing one’s own traits in other people. A more rigorous understanding involves perceiving others as having traits that one inaccurately believes oneself not to have" (p.1090). For example, the man, who cheats on his wife, can think that his wife does the same thing, so he becomes jealous and can accuse her of cheating.

Denial

“Denial” is the " subconscious or conscious process of blinding yourself to negative self-concepts that you believe exist in you, but that you do not want to deal with or face. It is “closing your eyes” to your negative self-concepts about people, places, or things that you find too severe to deal with" (“Sigmund Freud: 12 Ego Defense Mechanisms”). Freud is the first one to talk about denial in one of his early writings that he describes a woman who invents a lie that the man, who comes to her place to visit her roommate, is in love with her and that he always comes to see her but the fact is that after the relationship stops between that man and her roommate, he stops coming, the thing which means that he never falls for her but to convince herself that her lie is true, she hallucinates that man comes and stays with her(qtd.in Clark, 24) to be able to deny the truth as she cannot handle the truth that that man does not love her at the first place.

Rationalization

The Welsh neurologist and psychoanalyst Ernest Jones writes, in a paper titled “Rationalisation in every-day life” (1908), that “[e]veryone feels that as a rational creature he must be able to give a connected, logical and continuous account of himself, his conduct

and opinions, and all his mental processes are unconsciously manipulated and revised to that end” (qtd. in Cherenkov et al. 775).

Avoidance

“Avoidance” is "Maintaining distance from the people or situations which may be capable of reviving our repressed memories” (Shah and Khoso 118). For example, a lady avoids talking about her husband’s cheating on her to avoid the pain that accompanies this fact.

Regression

Freud notes, in his “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality”, the pathogenic influence of regression. He argues that “All the factors that impair sexual development show their effects by bringing about a regression, a return to an earlier phase of development” (240). Its quality is shown in the words of a person who tries to avoid a painful conflict and pressure by returning to a mode of relaxed mind and inner peace he felt in an earlier time (qtd. in Clark,161).

Displacement

“Displacement” is another defense. According to Baumeister and others in their work “Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial Displacement”, they identify displacement as "altering the target of an impulse"(1093). They also give an example in the same page saying "an unacceptable violent impulse toward one’s father might be transformed into a hostile attitude toward policemen or other authority figures"(p.1093).

Undoing

“Undoing” is another defense and it is "the process of trying to undo negative self-concept ratings of yourself by performing rituals or behaviors designed to offset the behaviors that the negative ratings of you were based on"(“Sigmund Freud: 12 Ego Defense Mechanisms”). Freud makes a study about the undoing process. He

explains how a patient, who is known as the “Rat Man”, feels the desire to move a stone in the road of his friend which can overturn the carriage on his friend's horse but after a few minutes, the Rat Man, feels strange about how he thinks, so he decides to return the rock to its original place on the road (qtd. in clark, 196).

Repression

In Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), “repression” is the main defense the heroine Marion uses. It appears in all her behaviors without real awareness of what her mind performs to keep her in the safe area away from the truth. The fact that Helen and John perform all the time that they are white makes them do their best to keep the truth away from their daughter but the truth appears in front of Marion in many situations. These situations happen during Marion's childhood. For example, John takes his little daughter Marion with him to visit his family who are, of course, black and live as black people without any performing. In this visit, Marion is shocked by what is totally different from her life style that the furniture is not luxurious like her house, flower boxes are not tended and the windows are neglected and not closed like that in her house that " [t]he lace curtain at his bedroom window is bunched up into the right corner, so she is able to look in" (10). This is shocking for Marion that her parents are so stern about that thing that "[h]er parents were always meticulous, neurotic really, about curtains" (10). Marion can investigate these surprising changes but she chooses to repress these facts and believe the performance of her parents.

Regarding *October* (2014), the effect of repression appears in the characters’ way of thinking as well as their choices and their attitude towards themselves and the characters around them. To understand to what extend repression devours the characters’ souls, it is important to illustrate the childhood of Mercia and her brother regarding their father’s way of thinking. Nicolas is the name of their father. Wicomb describes him saying that he is “a decent colored man” (9). This description is not only the main key to understand his character but also the source of all the complications he makes. The

two words may appear to be simple and clear but the fact is that his deeds show that he is decent and lewd, colored and acting as if he is white at the same time. He represses all the facts of his original roots that he rejects claiming that he is proud of what he is and that his home can be anywhere. “Nicholas did not tire of telling his young children the story of how he had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. That he was one of a large family, of a father who was illiterate, was neither here nor there. The important thing was that that father was visibly of European stock” (139). Nicolas represses what he cannot accept about his real identity.

Identification

In Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* (2006), “Identification” is used by Helen and John who do their best to imitate the perfect image of the white people. Helen is the one who struggles eagerly to do so. She is a character to be considered in this area. She is ready to do anything even if it is defiled and dirty just to reach her goal and live as a white woman who belongs to a white family. She tries to be White in everything thing. Therefore, she drinks, eats, dresses, talks, and if possible breathes as "White". For example, Helen wants to live in a white house, so she furnishes it with white furniture from magazines to feel that she really belongs to the white strata. Moreover, Marion inherits the attitude that she learns how to make her house a copy of what is inhibited in white magazines. Her apartment is “the fulfillment of an adolescent dream” (2).

Unlike *Playing in the Light*, identification in *October* is not artificial. It comes in a natural way. The characters do not feel that they are imitating white people. For example, Mercia distastes Sylvie’s cooking which represents the food of home and her roots’ culture, she shows, unconsciously, how she becomes when she identifies the way they eat to the extent that she is not able to accept her food culture anymore. The author comments:

Is Mercia growing fastidious about meat, about the killing of animals? She doesn't know. This is home; everything is topsy-turvy here. She would like to think that it is only the head, the face that is

after all so like a human's, that is repellent. She re- members, as a child at Sunday school, the picture card of John the Baptist's served head on a plate, which made her stomach turn. (*October*168-169)
What Sylvie cooks represents the original culture of Mercia which is rejected by her as a result of repeated imitation of the food style of the white people.

Reaction Formation

Since reaction formation is to behave in an exaggerated way to hide the opposite feeling to that behavior, Helen adopts that defense mechanism in her behavior to show that she is a native white and not colored at all. This can be illustrated in many situations especially with her daughter. For example, when Marion is a child, she imagines herself a mermaid, so she takes off her cloth from the upper part of her body to be like the mermaid. She runs as a mermaid in the garden. Helen snorts in horror and "spoke quietly, hissing with rage and disgust. What kind of child was she" (60)? The situation does not deserve Helen's tough words as Marion is a child, like any other child. She has her childish imagination. Any white child can do the same thing without this exaggerated tough reaction.

Similarly, in *October*, reaction formation appears first through the words of Craig and the place he chooses to live in with Mercia "for their old age" (*October* 66). and when Mercia says "Best not think of old age" (66), he answers laughing "Look, pal, it's nothing to be afraid of. Wrinkles are not big deal" (66). Craig says something when adopting the opposite thoughts. He does not actually intend to live with Mercia till they become old and this appears when he says that he does not want children and that they need to keep "doing as they pleased. Not kept indoors by children" (67).

Projection

Regarding *Playing in the Light*, projection is used by Helen most. For example, Helen's reactions to Mr. Boshoff's announcement of playing white that she decides that "the family deserved the scandal, the just deserts for unlawful behavior...(Mrs.

Boshoff) would have to move, she could surely not stay in that respectable area with her brood, who were, of course, strictly speaking, coloured, and strictly speaking should be taken away from her"(194). Helen does not think that she can be in her shoes as she is colored too. The only difference is that Helen and her family have not been discovered yet.

Projection is also used in *October* starting with Mercia that she acts in a way as if she is a victim when she is a victimizer. She says that her brother “is a monster, not the nice brother of the novel at all” (150), while she is the one who is not nice at all. She is the one who has left her brother who has no one but her and chooses to travel seeking good luxurious life away from her family. “Mercia had so little to give” (69). “Jake’s letter was no doubt written in the early hours, in a struggle with insomnia, with a hangover perhaps, when things get distorted” (69), and this means that he resorts to her hoping that she comes, rescues him and fixes his life but what happened is that she escapes “Jake’s letter. Emptied by grief” (69). She does not feel worried about him.

Denial

As illustrated earlier, denial is denying the truth consciously and unconsciously to blind a person’s eyes to what can cause anxiety to him/her. In Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, for example, Helen, Marion's mother, who blinds herself to the truth that she is not white and that she merely "plays white", uses denial. The impact of apartheid is clear in the way she thinks and reacts to situations that she keeps denying her truth all the time even in her bedroom that should be the most private and comfortable place in which a person can be himself. This proves that she denies the truth even to herself. Helen refuses the fact that she is black, she wants to live as a white woman.

In *October*, denial is also used as a defense by Mercia and her family. Regarding Mercia’s behaviors, denial can be taken as the major description for her character. She keeps denying the truth trying to convince herself with a substitute accepted truth with which she can deal. She denies the fact of her father as a racist

against his own race. She unconsciously chooses to ignore her father's lewdness that when she tries to write about her father, "Mercia types the sentence: Nicholas Theophilus Murray was a good man, a decent man. She stops" (213). She tries to educate herself the substitute fake fact about her father to be able to deny the awful truth about him.

Rationalization

"Rationalization" is trying to explain the reason of a person's behavior when there is no need to do so to hide sense of guilt or being ashamed. Helen and John use this kind of defense mechanism when they rationalize to themselves and to their daughter. Helen is a better rationalizer, so to speak, than John. This is because she keeps denying more than John does. She, for example, rationalizes her abjection and dirtiness in many rationalizing words that she says that it "could not be offensive to God who exalted the Poor" (145). Her justification is that she is poor because of the racial oppression towards colored people and that god knows everything about that and that what she cannot "be offensive to god"(145), so there is no problem to sacrifice making dirty deeds to get rid of the sequences of the racial oppression that suffocates any colored person. John is not involved in such dirtiness that he knows nothing about it. He also has a part of him that is still attached to his former black life. This enhances not being in full denial just like Helen.

Similarly, in *October*, rationalization is used by Mercia. Mercia uses this defense when she justifies for herself the reason of postponing reading her brother's letter. The normal behavior is to read it immediately as it is unusual to have letters from her family. She justifies her behavior that "she does not delete the morning's work as she promised herself" (13). She also justifies her behavior "as a caution against writing" (13). She wants to convince herself that reading the letter would affect her work which demands her peace of mind.

Avoidance

Regarding Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, Marion uses the avoidance defense mechanism to escape the suffocating artificial circumstances in her house. She has never felt safe or comfortable there. She wants to avoid the lack of love and domestic feelings she is eager to, so she avoids staying home. When Marion wants to feel comfortable, she goes to her office to the extent that "she likes being in her office when everyone has left" (15). Marion makes her office homey as she "knows how to make a place look homey"(35). Home makes Marion fragile as it suffocates her so she always tries to avoid being inside it by hardworking.

In *October*, avoidance is the main essence of the personality of Mercia. Mercia uses the avoidance defense most of all. Mercia avoids facing her real problems both old and new ones. She avoids anything which can remind her of past painful memories. This appears when she avoids reading her brother's letter postponing to read it as much as she can, giving herself unreal reasons that she is busy so as not to read the letter. Mercia also avoids talking with her brother to avoid hearing from him what she cannot handle that "she knows that she too is in a sense hiding from him, that she too wants to put off talking, put off the unknown decisions that talking will bring" (127).

Regression

As illustrated before, "Regression" is returning to an earlier period or situations in your life when being relaxed and happy. John is the one who uses the regression defense. Helen longs to her brothers from time to time but she never tries to contact them. Unlike Helen, John is the one who really longs to his previous life being colored. He longs to his previous job, family, his father's farm where he has been grown up, and even his colored wife Helen. For example, John also waits to any chance to sneak to his sister to have Sunday lunch at her house "into the nest of the jolly hotnos" (150). He feels that he satisfies his eagerness to his family through his visits to Elsie's house. He really longs to his old colored family that represents his origin.

In *October*, Mercia is the one who uses the regression defense. She longs for her old memories in Africa and in Glasgow with Craig although those days bring her nothing but sadness and “melancholia” that “Now sitting in Sylvie's yard, she thinks of that dusk-bound sadness as a longing for the African night, for blackness that like a screen is swiftly, securely drawn across the sky, obliterating the day in a quick, decisive death- obliterating guilt” (75). Regression is about escaping sadness through Indulging in old memories but what happens here is that she remembers what can make her feel sadness.

Displacement

In *Playing in the Light*, “Displacement” always appears in Helen's behaviors. For example, Helen knows well that she is defiled as she uses her body to negotiate the official document that proves she is white. Helen wants to punish herself but she cannot because she wants to deny this fact at the first place. So she becomes unsafe person to express her anger to. The result is that Helen displaces her anger to the costume she wears when she is with Counselor Carter "cutting it up with a pair of sharp scissors before putting it in the dustbin" (145).

Regarding the displacement defense in *October*, Jake is the major character who uses this defense. This comes from his constant anger. The anger which has accompanied him since his miserable childhood. The cruel way of his father in raising him up is the main reason of Jake's usage of the displacement defense that

he said bitterly, how it encourages the old man to make up more and more rules: in bed by nine, up at five; nothing other than mealie porridge for break. fast, which made Jake gag; no sweets; no pocket money; no radio during the week; only study, study, study. (78)

The normal thing is talking about parents in a lovely way. But the case here is that Jake is still mad at his father even after his death.

Undoing

“Undoing” is to make a behavior and undo it to avoid the anxiety that accompanies this behavior. Regarding *Playing in the Light*, Helen and John do not use this defense. Helen does not need



to use it as she is the one who is really eager to the white life. She does many things that she should wish to undo but she does not. If the time goes backwards, she would do the same thing without any hesitation.

Back to *October*, Mercia uses the undoing defense. Mercia regrets calling Sylvie a “tart” as a reaction of seeing her photos that she is “embarrassed by her reaction to the girl, or rather to the pictures. Once upon a time one was able to say: I take back those words” (158). Mercia also feels embarrassed and wishes if she does not ask Sylvie to take her son to live with her depriving Sylvie of her son that “tears of shame stream down Mercia’s face. For a second she thinks of fudging, or rephrasing to cover up, but no, Sylvie deserves nothing but the truth” (238).

Conclusion

This study shows that apartheid has a deep psychological impact on coloured identity particularly in Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and *October* through shedding light on the defense mechanism adopted to cope with their life as colored people. In order to cope with this dilemma, Wicomb’s characters have to resort to several forms of defense mechanism such as denial, avoidance, reaction formation, repression, regression, displacement, undoing, rationalization, projection, and identification. By so doing, Wicomb’s novels imply that racism is destructive to human race. The psychological pressure has damaged the mind of many generations. People can die without living their life the way it should be lived. They live fake lives under the pressure of racism and apartheid. The message is also meant to stress the idea that the colored people should not harm themselves for being white as it is not about who your parents are, it is about who you are.

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