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Reaction Formation Evaluated through Psychoanalytic and Sociocultural Lens

In the late nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud published his work on psychoanalytic theory, which most notably introduced the idea that humans possess a two-track mind where the conscious mind and unconscious mind run parallel to each other. One of the greatest curiosities that still perplexes scientists to this day is how much of one's thoughts and behaviors are controlled outside of the reach of the conscious mind. Interestingly enough, over 200 years later from Freud's controversial proposition that the unconscious mind plays a significant role in one's actions, researchers today have amassed considerable evidence to support this postulation as valid. One of the most prominent researchers currently studying the interaction between the conscious and unconscious mind, Ezequiel Morsella, developed the term "passive frame theory"—which proposes that the conscious mind is merely a servant for the much more expansive and complex unconscious processes that dictate human behavior (Morsella et al. 1-2).

Not only did Freud's early work as a psychoanalyst bring to focus the prominent role that the unconscious mind plays in one's behavior, but he also used this concept to form a basis for understanding how the unconscious mind handles anxiety and unpleasant stimuli, establishing a set of defense mechanisms that all rely on the basis of one repressing stressful emotions as a means of coping. Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story "I'd Love You to Want Me," features two Vietnamese immigrants: a husband, commonly referred to as "the professor," and his wife Sa Khanh, also known as Mrs. Khanh, who sees the professor's cognitive decline visibly worsening

as the story progresses (Nguyen 128). It is not long before the professor begins to call Sa by a different name, Yen, which catches Sa by surprise and leaves her mystified as to the true identity of Yen. The answer to this mystery is never revealed, such that I seek to explore the significance of this identity the professor continually refers to in place of Sa. I will form the basis for this argument off of the premise that Sa's role—as both caregiver and as the sole wage-earner of the two—leaves the professor feeling ashamed and discontent with his restricted autonomy because it conflicts with the gender norm present in Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, where the husband is expected to be the primary wage-earner and exist as the primary decision-maker in the family unit. I will then extend further into the professor's cultural ties in that the stigma towards mental illness and impairment that is also predominate in many Southeast Asian cultures like Vietnam increases the professor's shame and lack of self-worth he feels while grappling with continually worsening cognitive decline. Through identifying the internal shame and external resentment that the professor feels in the presence of his wife, Sa, I will argue that Yen serves as an example of the defense mechanism known as reaction formation. Reaction formation is the idea that a person's conscious behaviors overcompensate for unacceptable and anxiety-provoking thoughts. Using this lens derived from psychoanalytic theory, I seek to prove that the professor's unconscious mind creates an alternative version of his wife named Yen that shields himself from the jarring truth, shame, and anxiety that comes from bearing feelings of resentment for Sa as he fully realizes his cognitive decline and his dependency on his wife. To this end, I will show the plausibility for the professor's creation of Yen as a means to allow himself to direct his negative emotions towards Sa while feeling comfort and safety in the illusion of Yen's existence.

To prove my argument, I will supplement my close reading of “I’d Love You to Want Me” with Barbara Yee’s exploratory analysis of psychological distress that can accompany elderly men who are southeastern Asian refugees as they adjust to gender role differences from their homeland (Yee 26). I will use this article to support the idea that the clash of gender roles from the Southeast Asian territory of Vietnam to the United States contributes to the professor’s worsening feelings of embarrassment and anxiety that accompany losing touch with tradition. I will then further supplement my close reading with an article by Ezequiel Morsella that describes the nuances that exist in the interaction between the unconscious and conscious mind as it relates to the professor’s creation of Yen as a defense mechanism formed from vulnerability in his unconscious mind (Morsella et al. 1-2). In congruence with using these supplemental sources, I will focus my argument in a close reading of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s short story “I’d Love You to Want Me” for particular moments that support what leads the professor to employ the defense mechanism, reaction formation, and create Yen.

Integrating into a western culture, such as the United States, with new and conflicting gender norms can have a negative effect on male immigrants of Southeast Asian descent, as seen in the professor. The article “ELDERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE FAMILIES” illuminates this trend (Yee 24). In this article, Barbara W. K. Yee aptly notes:

It appears that at least for short-term adaptation, which includes the period soon after migration to as long as 15 years, middle-aged and elderly refugee women adapt to life in the new country in a more positive manner than do men of the same age (Yee 26)

The reason that this phenomenon occurs relates to the idea of how traditional gender roles began to change for Vietnamese refugees, as the female refugees took up work after immigrating while also performing household tasks and childcare, causing the men to no longer be the primary wage-earners of the family unit (Yee 26). This change further caused male Southeast Asian

immigrants to have a less clear sense of their functional roles in the family unit, losing some control over their lives—their autonomy—they once had previously (Yee 27).

While there is no explicit or detailed mention of the professor and Sa's experiences as newly integrating immigrants into American society, there is a strong indication that this shift in gender norms did affect the professor's confidence and identity. The professor feels weak and frail in the company of Sa, which is seen early on in the story and persists throughout the story because of Sa's control she exerts over and takes away from the professor as his caregiver. For instance, when the professor gets up to dance, "Mrs. Khanh seized the tail of his gray pinstripe jacket. 'Stop it!' she said, pulling hard. 'Sit down!' Giving her a wounded look, the professor obeyed" (Nguyen 129). When Sa "seized" the back of the professor's suit, "pulling hard," the professor's response is a "wounded look" akin to one of a disappointed and embarrassed child scolded by his mother in public (Nguyen 129). The professor is an adult well into his years, but he is being treated as if he is a disobedient child in this moment of the story. Sa's quick and forceful reprimanding of the professor's behavior also depicts Sa as a more authoritarian caregiver, leaving less freedom to the professor to act as he desires due to his cognitive decline. This approach that Sa takes as a caregiver to the professor restricts the professor's autonomy, which further worsens his already weakened identity from being dependent on Sa. During the drive home from this wedding banquet, the professor takes a "wrong turn taking them by the community college from where he'd retired last spring" (Nguyen 129). A psychoanalytic interpretation of this memory slip—parapraxis—is that the professor's immediate unconscious feelings of shame from after the wedding banquet drive his actions to seek a place of security and comfort: his old job. As someone who lost both his job and his ability to take care of himself, this moment in the story reveals the burden that the professor carries with himself in his

unconscious mind that relates to losing his control and power that he once had before his diagnosis and even more so before immigrating to the United States. Therefore, the phenomenon discussed regarding the worsened transition that elderly male refugees of Southeast Asian descent encounter holds true to increasing the viability with the professor (Yee 26).

While the professor is no longer working, his wife takes on the role as the caregiver and wage-earner for the couple after the professor's diagnosis. To combat his internal feelings of shame and external resentment for his wife, Sa, that come with him having a greater dependency on her and which are against gender norms he is used to, the professor has more reason to internalize his shame and undergo a defense mechanism—reaction formation. The result of the professor's reaction formation, as seen in the story, is the professor's replacement of his wife Sa with a less threatening version of her—Yen—that gives him joy, happiness, and comfort in his relationship rather than the feelings of insecurity, shame, and resentment the professor feels when imagining his wife as the figurehead of the family unit—the independent—and himself as the dependent.

The joy that comes with work and having a purpose can be made evident by comparing how Sa fastens herself to her job as a librarian, despite her son Vinh's insistent recommendations that she retire and stay at home to care for the professor. Sa's fulfillment in her job can be seen when the passage notes, "Answering those questions, Mrs. Khanh always felt the gratification that made her job worthwhile, the pleasure of being needed, if only for a brief amount of time" (Nguyen 132). When Sa finishes work, she packs up her things with a "sense of dread that shamed her" (Nguyen 132). Sa's feelings of gratification turn to feelings of "dread" and obligation as she returns home to care for the professor (Nguyen 132). This idea mirrors how the professor also feels about returning home. As noted previously, the professor's unconscious mind feels stronger ties and feelings of comfort to his

place of work than his home. One primary reason this occurs is because of the associated positive emotions and memories that the professor's place of work holds in his mind that remind him of a time when he was more independent and held less shame versus how his home holds more associated negative emotions related to being less than and inferior to his wife because of his cognitive decline related to his diagnosis.

When Sa returns from work, she then takes on the role of the caregiver, as seen in when she “strategically composed a series of lists” to help the professor along his activities of daily living (Nguyen 132). The professor unconsciously acknowledges his restricted autonomy that he has gained with his cognitive decline in this exchange with Sa, where he later “hired a handyman to install iron bars on the windows...leaning his forehead against the bars” with “resignation” to the reality that he is losing his ability to have control over his thoughts (Nguyen 132). Compared to how his wife takes a more active role in helping the professor with daily tasks by “strategically” composing lists, the professor takes a much more passive role in helping himself through hiring a “handyman” to do work he needs for him (Nguyen 132). In this way, the “iron bars” that the professor installs on the windows show how the professor is slowly losing his trust of his conscious mind and becoming more aware of the idea that he could retreat into a less consciously regulated fashion of thinking and behaving that come with more influence from unconscious mind, which would warrant these “iron bars” to be placed on the windows (Nguyen 132).

This section of the story takes on a tone of despair and dread on a deeper level as well. The professor sinking his head into “iron bars” signifies that the professor not only feels trapped in his own house but also in his own mind (Nguyen 132). The image of the professor's “forehead” being the part of his head that touches the “iron bars” gives weight to the idea that his personality—primarily dictated by the frontal lobe that sits directly behind the forehead—is slowly becoming imprisoned, leading to a

less expressive and conscious self (Nguyen 132). As the professor speaks with “resignation,” this elicits a tone of hopelessness that the professor feels regarding any escape he could make from his mental prison (Nguyen 132). At this point in the story, the professor tells Sa, “You wouldn’t want me sneaking out at night” (Nguyen 132). Interestingly, the professor’s words here connect to how earlier in the story it is revealed that during Vinh’s teenage years, the professor nailed the windows shut in the house to prevent Vinh from sneaking out at night to see his girlfriend (Nguyen 131). Therefore, as opposed to how earlier on in the story Sa treats the professor like a child, now the professor is treating himself as such. This is significant because the professor’s thoughts and actions demonstrate an unsettled and disturbed unconscious mind—particularly in the presence of Sa, who continually reminds him of his cognitive decline—which would be reasonable grounds for the development of a defense mechanism like reaction formation to occur and result in his creation of Yen.

In accordance with the idea of an “integration consensus,” conscious processing in an individual involves a “wider and more diverse network of regions” than does unconscious processing (Morsella et al. 4). When an individual is suffering from cognitive decline, as seen in the professor, their conscious actions become “decoupled from consciousness,” allowing unconscious impulses to reign free (Morsella et al. 4). Furthermore, when one’s conscious mind feels threatened, defeated, or tired, this leads to their conscious mind becoming less selective, or restrictive, to the unconscious mind’s impulses (Morsella et al. 1-2). This logic provides further evidence towards how Yen can exist as a figment of the professor’s imagination, precipitated by the anxiety that plagues the professor’s mind due to his restricted autonomy.

As the professor’s condition gets worse later on in the story, Sa embracing Yen as her identity to the professor proves to be effective at fitting the professor’s distorted version reality for his wife. After puzzling over a sentence for five minutes, the professor cries to Sa, “I’m losing my mind, aren’t

I?” (Nguyen 136). Afterwards, he relinquishes another aspect of his autonomy to Sa, in which she read to him from then on. Ultimately, this leads to the professor’s confused state as he “raised his hand as if to ward off a blow” when face to face with Sa in the professor’s library (Nguyen 139). This moment reveals that the professor shows hostility towards Sa only when he regards her as such in his mind. Once Sa establishes herself as Yen to the professor, however, this leads to the “lowering of his hand” and he sits in a chair with a “hooded gaze” (Nguyen 139). In this critical moment, the professor immediately becomes tranquil after confirming Sa under the false identity of Yen that bears less hostility and danger towards his feelings of insecurity and dependence that lurk in his unconscious mind in relation to Sa. The professor’s “hooded gaze” is used to represent how his eyes are fixed at Sa, still contemplating and uneasy of her presence (Nguyen 139). This image also takes on a deeper meaning: the conscious and unconscious minds are both fighting for power at this moment in the professor, yet the professor’s eyes are half-closed to signify his vision of reality is becoming dimmer.

One of the main counterarguments that could be made towards my psychoanalytic and sociocultural interpretation of what precipitates the professor’s manifestation of Yen is that Yen is not a defense mechanism but rather a simple delusion caused by the professor’s cognitive decline. While this may be so, I believe there is more at play. While Sa recalls her days out at sea with her children and the professor, she remembers how, instead of praying, the professor “had stood at the ship’s bow as if he were at his lectern...and told [the children] lies. ‘You can’t see it even in daylight...but the current we’re traveling on is going straight to the Philippines...’” (Nguyen 135). The manner in which the professor stands at the bow “as if he were at his lectern” is a reference Sa makes to the professor’s occupation as a professor back in Vietnam, where he had expertise in thermodynamics and oceanography (Nguyen 135). The professor on this boat was most likely not suffering from cognitive decline, as he is later on in the story, because this memory of their fleeing after the fall of Saigon in

Vietnam would have occurred decades in the past. Therefore, the professor unknowingly lies to his children about the expected course they would take on the boat despite being an expert on this related topic. Sa later remembers, “[The professor] repeated his story so often even she allowed herself to believe it...his embarrassment only deepened once they reached land, which the locals informed them was the north shore of eastern Malaysia” (Nguyen 135). In this memory of Sa’s, the professor shows early signs of a belief perseverance phenomenon—when an individual actively rejects other information to support their own viewpoint—as seen in how the professor “repeated his story so often even she allowed herself to believe it” (Nguyen 135). This moment in the story connects to the time at which the story takes place, where the professor follows a belief perseverance phenomenon that Yen is real while actively rejecting Sa’s insistent and repeated comments to him that he is delusional. The professor’s “embarrassment” when he learns his theory was incorrect further supports the idea that the professor possesses an insecurity with being wrong. In this sense, even before encountering noticeable cognitive impairment, the professor valued being right and in the know. With Sa repeatedly mentioning to the professor that he is unwell, this heightens his anxieties with him losing his cognitive abilities he once previously had. Therefore, by establishing the professor’s insecurity with being right and discomfort with being wrong or mentally unwell, this creates a plausible opportunity for which my argument stands on: his employment of a defense mechanism known as reaction formation—Yen—to guard himself against his unruly thoughts and impulses that would cause him discomfort.

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s short story “I’d Love You to Want Me” illustrates that love is indeed a tale of struggle and sacrifice. Sa’s newfound autonomy and identity in her occupation and role as caregiver becomes the bane of the professor’s existence as he loses his confidence in his greater purpose and role in society, as it conflicts to gender norms he is more familiar and comfortable with from his country of origin—Vietnam. It is therefore a woeful irony that Sa’s

strong identity and autonomy that she exudes throughout the story and her insistence on trying to help the professor maintain his grip on reality becomes the main catalyst to which the professor descends into his delusions while battling his worsening cognitive decline after his diagnosis. It is with this idea that the professor's unconscious mind directs his discomfort with his mental impairment and his resentment of Sa that results from it into a delusion—Yen—who brings him the opposite feelings of joy, comfort, and safety.

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