



Navigating Racial Identity: Denial, Repression, and Resilience in Novel *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna

Ammar Dani ¹, Diah Tyahaya Iman^{*2}

^{1,2}Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

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Correspondence :
diahtyahayaiman@hum.unand.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Racial Identity, Denial, Repression and Resilience in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*. This research identifies how the author depicts Birdie's racial identity development, defense mechanisms, and resilience in responding to social expectations. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, applying Sigmund Freud's "Model of Psyche" and defense mechanisms (Denial and Repression), as well as Emmy Werner's resilience theory, which encompasses three stages: trauma identification, adaptive analysis, and positive transformation. Data are collected from the novel and relevant literature. The results show that Birdie's racial identity develops through internal conflict, balancing id, ego, and superego. Trauma and social pressures affect her resilience development, which is rooted in the dissonance between her authentic self and societal expectations. The study demonstrates how Birdie employs defense mechanisms to cope with racial identity and social expectations. Her journey reflects the psychological struggle of biracial individuals seeking acceptance in racially divided societies.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is a crucial and dynamic component in every person's life, formed through diverse processes, including personality development, self-exploration, social interaction, and the influence of values and culture. Identity refers to the individual characteristics or traits that define a person, and it plays an essential role in shaping one's self-perception, habits, and life decisions, besides strengthening social relationships and community ties. In the context of literature, the exploration of identity including race, culture, class, and gender—has long served as an important reflection, acting as a mirror to society's evolving perceptions of the self and belonging. As stated by Hall (1996), identity is not a fixed entity but rather a fluid construct that is continuously shaped and reshaped through socio-cultural interactions (p. 24). One example of an author whose works discuss the theme of racial identity is Toni Morrison with her novel *Beloved* (1987), which tells the story of the legacy of slavery and prolonged psychological trauma. In addition, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is another author whose works discuss this theme, such as her novel "Americanah" (2013), the above authors reflect that literature plays a significant role in raising identity issues through the author's understanding and representation in their work, as well as

how these works can provide better insight and understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups. Literature illustrates how discrimination and stereotypes can hinder one's life, while also providing a better understanding of the experiences and struggles of marginalized groups in the face of diverse social contexts.

The connection between racial identity and character psychology has become increasingly central, especially when examined through the lens of resilience or mental fortitude. Resilience is defined by Werner (1982) as "the capacity to cope effectively with internal and external stresses," and within racial narratives, this concept serves as a crucial defense mechanism. Characters who experience racial discrimination and cultural alienation often demonstrate a remarkable ability to navigate adversity and shape their understanding of self and community. Issues such as subtle racism, cultural displacement, and societal pressure to conform trigger the essential need for resilience. Resilience here is an active process of maintaining cultural integrity, rather than merely the absence of suffering. Through complex storytelling methods, authors frequently depict how resilience allows characters to transform racial trauma into personal empowerment and collective strength. Resilience in literature functions as a symbol of resistance by characters and communities against racial and cultural erasure, where racial identity, which is a central force in stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, also becomes a source of inner strength.

The writer noticed that the theme of racial identity is being explored more frequently in contemporary literature. Many authors frequently examine the complex interactions of racial identity and resilience in their works. They explore themes like code-switching, colorism within racial groups, and how race intersects with other identity factors such as gender, class, and sexuality. The texts frequently illustrate how resilience manifests not only in individual resistance to racism but also in the preservation and celebration of cultural traditions, the formation of supportive community networks, and the reclamation of ancestral knowledge. Racial identity and resilience in literature show how authors utilize various textual techniques to portray the multifaceted nature of racial consciousness and survival. The characters' journeys often reflect broader societal struggles with racial justice, cultural preservation, and the ongoing process of building psychological fortitude in the face of systemic oppression.

The writer has chosen the novel *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna as the object of this study on racial identity and resilience because the novel presents a unique theme, particularly in its storyline of racism faced by a biracial character. *Caucasia* are interesting to examine because it provide new perspectives on issues of racism and identity construction. This novel is also Danzy Senna's first work, and she is known in the literature for often exploring issues that raise important questions about the construction of identity, class, and race in America, which remain relevant today. Published in 1998, *Caucasia* has achieved some achievements. Danzy Senna's debut novel, *Caucasia*, delves into themes of identity, class, and race in America topics that continue to be highly relevant and widely discussed. These factors aim to investigate the *Caucasia* further. Additionally, Danzy Senna provides new perspectives on racism, identity construction, and linked resilience and identity, especially in the context of racial and cultural challenges.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical method to analyze the racial identity, defense mechanisms, and resilience issues of the main character in the novel *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna. The primary data are derived directly from the novel, supported by secondary data such as online articles, academic journals, and theories from books relevant to the discussed topics. The writer applies psychoanalytical literary approach as the grand theory used to support this study. To carry out this research, the writer uses intrinsic analysis to understand the story well. In addition, the writer applies Sigmund Freud's theory of the "Model of Psyche" (Id, Ego, Superego) and Defense Mechanisms (Denial and Repression) to identify the development of Birdie's racial identity and how she responds to internal conflict. Furthermore, the author also uses Emmy Werner's Resilience Theory, which discusses the three stages of resilience development trauma identification, adaptive analysis, and positive transformation to analyze how the character overcomes social expectations and the process of identity formation. This method allows the author to conduct indepth library research, which serves to provide a

strong interpretation of the primary source while simultaneously revealing the character's psychological struggles in navigating her complex racial identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Model of Psyche of Birdie's Racial Identity

The Expression of Birdie's "Id" on racial identity

The id refers to the unconscious part of the psyche that contains primitive instinctual impulses and operates according to the pleasure principle (Freud, 1923). It is argued that Birdie's id conflicts arise from her struggle with racial identity, which affects her relationships through her questioning behavior and rebellion against fake identities. From a young age, Birdie has existed between two worlds, born into a family where her father and sister, Cole, have dark skin, while her mother and she have lighter skin. These differences lead young Birdie to see herself as "a blank slate" (Senna, 1998, p. 119). Birdie's personal growth is accompanied by a struggle to identify with the black or white community. Senna skillfully portrays how Birdie's psyche deals with this identity crisis through the expression of her id. In *Caucasia*, Birdie is depicted as a young girl coming from Boston, a city that emphasizes race in classifying people in social life. This makes it more difficult for her to discover her true identity, along with the storyline.

Senna portrays Birdie's id, which shows the desire to have her identity recognized clearly. It is analyzed that Birdie's id here is a part of the development of her racial identity in facing internal struggles; she tries to be a little bit more shown to express her id, but sometimes she's worried about the risks of her biracial appearance. Senna also illustrated how Birdie's id grapples with the internal conflict of self that increases her resilience while facing reality. The fact that she was born a biracial girl triggered her id, which wants to be recognized in society, which forces her to develop her racial identity and resilience.

The Expression of Birdie's "Ego" on racial identity

The ego refers to the component of personality that mediates between the id and the demands of the environment (Freud, 1923, p. 30). Birdie's ego conflict is centered on her adaptation to a false identity and her inability to adapt her biracial identity to social pressures. Senna interestingly portrays the complexities of Birdie's ego and her experiences in Boston and New Hampshire, along with social expectations issues due to the sharp contrast setting, which navigates the conflicts between her id, ego, and superego, ultimately illustrating the challenges of forming a cohesive racial identity.

Birdie's ego appears when she reunites with Cole. In this regard, it is evident how Birdie's ego is unable to get past the trauma of the separation when she meets Cole again. Birdie is still trapped in feelings of abandonment. When finally reunited, Birdie faces the difficult reality that their lives have moved in different directions, as depicted in the novel: "I didn't say anything. It wasn't that I didn't believe Cole. I did. I understood that it was a mixture of fear and lethargy that had kept her away. But the bottom line was that she hadn't tried to find me. She had gone on with her life. I hadn't been able to" (Senna, 1998, p. 347). This quotation illustrates the ego operating under continued superego pressure, causing Birdie's true feelings to remain buried beneath the conscious superego's conflicted state. In this reunion scene, Birdie's ego is under continuous superego pressure, so her true feelings are buried in internal conflict. During the reunion, Birdie's ego was unable to transcend the trauma of the breakup with Cole. Although she rationally understands Cole's reasons, emotionally, she is still fixated on the feeling of abandonment. The line "She had gone on with her life. I hadn't been able to" powerfully shows the inability of Birdie's ego to rise above the trauma and deal with the painful feelings of her separation from Cole.

Senna effectively illustrates how Birdie's ego struggles to balance her natural desires for authentic identity and the societal and familial expectations that force her to adopt a fake persona. This conflict ultimately shapes her development of resilience throughout the story and highlights the psychological cost of racial passing and identity erasure.

The Expression of Birdie's "Superego" on racial identity

The superego refers to the component of personality that represents internalized moral standards and ideals that are acquired from our parents and society (Freud, 1923, p. 62). It is firmly argued that Birdie's superego conflicts in the storyline are due to conflicting moral standards and racial expectations that do not align throughout her journey.

Birdie's superego appears in its function as a moral value while living under a fake identity. This section discusses how Birdie's superego functions as a moral value while living with a fake identity, creating an internal conflict between conformity and authenticity. When forced to assume the identity of Jesse Goldman, Birdie's superego begins to enforce conformity to this new racial performance while maintaining her true identity.. This internal conflict arises when Birdie reflects, "That way I would always know I was living a lie" (Senna, 1998, p. 235). This statement shows how her superego pushes her to follow social norms and shows how her morals aspect guides her to accept using a fake identity. This creates an internal conflict between Birdie's superego, id, and ego, creating a deep psychological burden for Birdie as she tries to navigate her racial identity.

In *Caucasia* Birdie's superego functions as a complex defense mechanism to remain gradual in the dynamics of racial identity, even though it sometimes causes internal conflict for Birdie. Senna fascinatingly portrays throughout the novel, with remarkable insight and nuance, how Birdie grapples with the contradictory messages about racial identity that are received from her father's black nationalist ideology, her mother's beliefs in racial fluidity, and the rigid racial classifications in American society, the expression of Superego of Birdie is representation on Denial and Repression as the coping strategy that Birdie used to overcome the trauma, social expectations and internal conflict in *Caucasia*.

Denial and Repression as Birdie's Coping Mechanism

Denial

Denial is the first form of defense mechanism that the writer find in Birdie's character. Denial is the ego blocks upsetting or overwhelming experiences from awareness, causing the individual to refuse to acknowledge or believe what is happening. In *Caucasia* Denial present many times along with Birdies behavior when dealing with racial identity and social expetations.

Birdie often denies her complex racial background, especially when she is trying to adjust to a new environment. Birdie's desire to fit in and feel accepted drives her to deny her racial identity. Her id pushes her to seek pleasure and avoid pain, so she denies her racial identity to avoid conflict with her new environment. Birdie's ego tries to balance her id's desires with the reality of her surroundings, but this can also exacerbate her internal conflict. Meanwhile, Birdie's superego has high moral standards regarding honesty and self-integrity, so she feels guilty and uncomfortable when she denies her racial identity.

Repression

Repression is the second form of defense mechanism that the writer find in Birdie's character while she dealing with racial identity in her internal conflict. According to Freud, repression occurs when the ego attempts to suppress or hide desires, thoughts, or memories that are unacceptable to the superego (which functions as morality and social norms). The id, which is the source of primitive desires and impulses, often has desires that conflict with social norms and morality.

In *Caucasia*, the repression Birdie uses is an attempt to protect herself by suppressing or hiding memories, feelings, or desires related to her racial identity. Through repression as a defense mechanism, Birdie tries to protect herself from the pain and trauma associated with her racial identity. Her id wants to avoid pain by forgetting trauma and experiences of complex identity and family dynamics, her ego tries to protect her by living in reality, and her superego feels guilty for not facing the trauma.

Birdie's Resilience to Response to Societal Expectations and Racial Identity.

Stage of trauma identification.

This first stage of Emy Werner's Theory in *Caucasia* explores the trauma and obstacles that shape Birdie's identity through social expectations and internal conflicts in *Caucasia*. This part focuses on recognizing the specific difficulties that affect Birdie and her responses when faced with problems. Her mixed identity left Birdie confused and struggling to find her true self. Birdie's identity struggle shows the conflict between her id, ego, and superego. Her id drives her to seek a true self, while her ego manages the harsh realities of living between two races, often conflicting with what her id desires. On the other side, her superego, shaped by internalized social norms about race and identity, often adds another layer of complexity to this identity-seeking process.

Birdie's trauma in *Caucasia* due to her racial identity is the stereotypes and prejudices that Birdie faces, which also become a significant factor that identifies her trauma. Furthermore, they continue to be

her problems. It leads to her ego in fulfilling the demands of her id for authentic self-expression. Birdie's id inherently desires the freedom to express her identity honestly and without fear, but her ego must continuously face the reality of stereotypes attached to her complex racial identity. As depicted in the novel :

We live in disgrace. We slaughter our own, and we slaughter people overseas who don't think or look like us. This is a sick, sick country, baby girl. I know. Trust me. And the only way to get people's attention is to do something drastic. (Senna, 1998, p. 84).

The continuous stereotyping of society makes Birdie experience real discrimination, which significantly hinders her ego from fulfilling the desire of her id to be seen and accepted as a whole and normal individual. Birdie's superego has led her to experience a deep internal conflict because she has to respond to how she should act and behave in the face of dominant societal norms.

Birdie's experiences in facing the trauma caused by social pressure on her mixed identity, trying to balance her internal conflicts with external realities, present a complex and complicated experience in her search for identity. Birdie's journey through identity trauma stages shows how a biracial person struggles to find her identity in a society obsessed with racial categories. This includes the internal conflict within her between her id, ego, and superego as she faces racial discrimination while seeking acceptance from her environment.

This stage of trauma shows her psychological development, beginning with the imposition of a fake identity when she is forced to pretend to be white and separated from her sister. Birdie's trauma deepens as she adopts the persona of "Jesse" to survive, leading to internal conflict that reaches its peak when her true self rebels against the fake identity. Senna clearly portrays how this phase of identity trauma adds to Birdie's psychological burden and influences her growth as a biracial girl struggling with her racial identity amid societal demands and a complex environment. It certainly has a serious impact on the development of Birdie's self-resilience throughout the storyline .

Stage of Adaptation analysis

This second stage of Emy Werner's Theory in Caucasia examines how Birdie manages the complex interplay between her internal conflict, social pressure, and external forces in Caucasia. The focus of the analysis is on identifying and interpreting the specific ways Birdie manages trauma and social issues due to her mixed racial heritage. The analysis finds that Birdie creates several defense mechanism and ways to adapt to solve her complex racial identity and find a place in a society that does not easily accept her. Birdie uses adaptation as her defense mechanism, reflecting the ego's effort to balance her desires with reality and societal expectations. Her id seeks acceptance, while her ego struggles with racial identity, and her superego conforms to societal expectations. Her coping mechanisms also illustrate the ego's attempt to negotiate between the demands of the superego, reality constraints, and the needs of the id in this chapter.

Birdie utilizes her family memories as a means to adapt, overcome trauma, and maintain her identity. This strategy is based on her memories with Cole, Deck, and her father. These memories give Birdie the strength to face her racial difficulties and demonstrate her ability to adapt well when faced with social pressure. Through strength, self-motivation, and her memories, Birdie is able to overcome feelings of isolation and increase her self-confidence amid social pressure. The memories she shares with Cole and Deck significantly influence Birdie's motivation. Birdie's family memories help her adapt and maintain her identity. This adaptation demonstrates Birdie's ability to develop effective coping strategies in facing complex challenges and maintaining her mental balance.

Birdie's adaptive strategies demonstrate her ego's efforts to find compromise solutions that can balance the needs of the id and superego. Birdie employs strategies to balance her needs and surroundings, such as relocating, adopting a new identity, and seeking support to alleviate her internal conflict. Birdie's adaptive approach is a key aspect of her resilience in the face of identity trauma, as her ego attempts to find a balance between the desire to express herself authentically and the harsh realities of her complex racial identity. Birdie's adaptive abilities, which enable her to cope with internal conflicts and external pressures, are the basis of her coping mechanisms. Senna clearly describes the process of adaptation through ego development, which involves the development of various coping mechanisms to manage conflicts between the id and superego, as illustrated in detail through the Birdie experiences in Caucasia.

Stage of Positive Transformation

This third stage of Emy Werner's Theory in *Caucasia* identifies Birdie's positive transformation in *Caucasia*. Positive transformation refers to the positive change that occurs in characters after they undergo the adaptation process. These changes often show as personal growth and transformation following adversity. These changes often show as personal growth and transformation following adversity.

Birdie's positive transformation in *Caucasia* can be seen in her reclamation of identity. The analysis finds that at the end of the novel, Birdie rejects the fake persona of Jesse Goldman and begins to accept her biracial identity. This marks a turning point in her journey toward self-acceptance. In this transformation, Birdie's ego develops a more complex understanding of her identity, enabling her to integrate aspects of herself that were previously in conflict. In contrast to Birdie's struggle to be accepted as white or black, depending on her social context, Birdie also faces a new reality in which she can come to terms with her complex racial heritage. Her ego develops this ability to integrate as she becomes ready, allowing her to transcend her previously characteristic, ambiguous defences

Senna clearly depicts Birdie's development of her racial identity and resilience through her experiences, which affect her understanding of the identity issues and social confrontation caused by these experiences in the storyline. This perception of Birdie presents both significant challenges and opportunities for positive transformation in her journey. The reader can witness the biracial character's resilience through engaging experiences that offer a storyline.

CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes that Danzy Senna's novel, *Caucasia*, presents racial identity, denial, repression, and resilience in an interesting manner. Senna presents fascinating images of Birdie Lee; a biracial girl caught between conflicting social expectations and her internal conflict due to her mixed-race status. Birdie's journey of identity is shaped by the struggle between her internal conflict and societal pressure, particularly the conflict between two different racial identities that she faces. Her story reflects the challenges faced by biracial characters in literary works, who often navigate multiple identities that raise more complicated issues. This complicated racial identity made Birdie feel isolated and depressed as she struggled to balance the social expectations with the reality of her mixed racial background

Senna effectively portrays Birdie's internal conflict as a biracial girl in *Caucasia*, showing that she employs the defense mechanisms of denial and repression to cope with social pressure stemming from feelings of alienation. This complex psychological conflict drives the development of Birdie's racial identity and resilience. Applying Freud's model of the psyche and Werner's resilience theory (trauma identification, adaptation analysis, and positive transformation), the novel illustrates how Birdie transforms traumatic experiences into a learning process to balance societal expectations and her internal struggles.

Caucasia explores the complexities of a unique racial identity and it highlights the importance of self-awareness, flexibility, and self-defense in dealing with biracial experiences. Senna carefully describes the psychological complexity through issues of identity, family, and society that Birdie faces. Her efforts to build resilience in various ways support her journey of self-discovery. The novel emphasizes how racial differences can influence an individual's psychology.

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