

## *'I'm Not A Fucking Muslim' An Attempt to Deserve a Place Called Home Through Denial*

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### Abstract:

Denial is a way for a person to build up expectations of themselves that do not align with reality. This research aims to find out how Character M uses the ego defense mechanism denial to eliminate the prejudice of the Islamic identity that he received. This research was conducted using the descriptive qualitative method based on data obtained from the *Native Believer* (2016) novel. Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, precisely the ego defense mechanism, is used to analyze types of denial that arise due to various prejudices received by Character M. As a result, the researchers found three types of denial in the novel that are used as self-defense from various prejudices received and what kinds of self-created identity that Character M would like to keep. Past events in the name of Islam are one of the factors that shaped people's prejudice in judging Character M personally in Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer* (2016) and become a complex issue in the novel that is interesting to be investigated further by the researchers.

**Keywords:** Denial; Prejudice; Self-Identity; Muslim

### Abstrak:

Penyangkalan merupakan cara seseorang untuk membangun ekspektasi terhadap dirinya sendiri yang tidak sejalan dengan realita. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana tokoh M menggunakan mekanisme pertahanan ego penyangkalan sebagai upaya untuk menghilangkan prasangka identitas keislaman yang diterimanya. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif berdasarkan data yang diperoleh dari novel *Native Believer* (2016). Teori psikoanalisis Sigmund Freud, tepatnya mekanisme pertahanan ego, digunakan untuk menganalisis jenis-jenis penyangkalan yang muncul akibat berbagai prasangka yang diterima oleh tokoh M. Hasilnya, peneliti menemukan tiga jenis penyangkalan dalam novel tersebut yang digunakan sebagai pertahanan diri dari berbagai prasangka yang diterima dan identitas diri seperti apa yang ingin dipertahankan oleh tokoh M. Peristiwa masa lalu yang mengatasnamakan Islam menjadi salah satu faktor yang membentuk prasangka masyarakat dalam menilai tokoh M secara personal dalam novel *Native Believer* (2016) karya Ali Eteraz dan menjadi isu yang kompleks dalam novel tersebut yang menarik untuk dikaji lebih lanjut oleh peneliti.

**Kata kunci:** Penyangkalan; Praduga; Identitas Diri; Muslim



## INTRODUCTION

A literary work is likely created based on real-world issues. One such issue is related to discrimination. The discrimination is based on the labeling that a character receives due to being part of a certain social group. The labeling that a character receives is not completely relevant to their personality and is simply based on stereotypes of baseless knowledge, either from the media or word of mouth. From this, the character will usually do whatever it takes to eliminate the label caused by the stereotype and prejudice. Prejudice is "an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Many novels are intended to convey a powerful message to the reader, inspire them, and provide awareness to dispel their deafness to the problems that exist in society. Muslim Literature has served as a platform to uphold the rights of the Muslim community that resulted from Islamophobic acts. Ejiofor (2023) explains that Islamophobia is a phenomenon of discrimination against the Muslim community. It is commonly found in developed countries with a minority of Muslim community. Islamophobia arises due to the influence of prejudice and stigma that non-Muslim communities have against Muslims themselves.

*Native Believer* is a novel by Ali Eteraz that raises the struggle of refugees of Islamic descent in America to eliminate the prejudice of Islam against them. This novel portrays the condition of the Islamic community post-9/11 incident, which indirectly drives the level of Islamophobia in America. The main character in this novel is described as a Middle Eastern-looking man with a strong Islamic background and name, M. The character M claims to be a non-believer person. He has never followed any Islamic teachings despite his Islamic background. However, the other characters in the novel do not believe that claim and still consider M as a person who adheres to the 'terrorist' religion. This prejudice makes M begin to question his identity. At this point, he is in a dilemma whether this prejudice is a form of racism against him or not, because he continues to convince himself that he is not a Muslim. In this study, the researchers show how the three types of denial are used in dealing with various unpleasant actions and analyze the causes of the denial.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research related to the novel *Native Believer* has been conducted by Qizi & Qizi (2022) related to Islamic motifs as well as other intrinsic elements in the novel *Native Believer*, such as character, language style, and issues in the novel, such as racism. In addition, in previous research, there was research that raised discussions related to Islamophobia in 2021. Mehdi et al. (2021) conducted research related to Islamophobia that occurs by categorizing forms of Islamophobic acts or blaming human rights for Muslims using the theory of Islamophobia. Ego defense mechanisms are within the scope of Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Freud & Hall (1916) explains that psychoanalysis is a method used to treat someone who has mental problems. However, the development of this science is so extensive that it has penetrated the world of literature. The theory of psychoanalysis is commonly used to 'possess' characters in literary works to find out how their psychological state. The ego defense mechanisms introduced by Sigmund Freud were later developed by Anna Freud (Sigmund Freud's daughter), who was also interested in this field of study. One form of ego defense mechanism developed by Anna is denial. A. Freud (1966) has discussed denial more, namely denial in fantasy and denial in word and act. Denial in word and act refers to how we deny the existing reality to avoid anxiety in ourselves. In this study, the researcher wants to examine the self-create identity formed from denial due to prejudice experienced by him.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method on M's dialog and narration in the novel *Native Believer* by Ali Eteraz. Descriptive qualitative analysis is a method used to analyze data, such as text and audio, unrelated to specific numbers. (Bhandari, 2020). This research was carried out using procedures: 1) read the novel *Native Believer* by Ali Eteraz, 2) find points related to the prejudice that the character M faces in the novel, 3) analyze the types of denial that exist in the novel, 4) what identity M intends to form from his various denial actions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Denial is an ego defense mechanism when someone wants to deny an unexpected reality. In *Native Believer*, the anxiety experienced by character M causes various forms of denial. One of the causes of character M's denial is the prejudice he receives from the

people around him. This prejudice then fosters hatred and forms Islamophobia. Chambers & Hussain (2023) argue that Islamophobia is considered more tolerable than other forms of racism, such as color and ethnicity in this century. With this condition, the fate of an immigrant from a Muslim country who has no other place to belong to but the destination country will not be able to get through their day easily. To convince other characters to believe that M does not belong to a particular religious group, he attempts a denial act to make his identity accepted by his surroundings. There is a form of stereotypical action and religious prejudice in the novel by the character George Gabriel, “that without thinking, you put the collected works of Muhammad above the collected works of Nietzsche. ... I’m just asking if that was an expression of some residual supremacism on behalf of the Koran.” (p.20).

The act of placing the Koran on top of Nietzsche's book is not something to bother about for M. It would be different if someone who is a non-Muslim believer meets a figure who has a strong stereotype of a religion like M. Of course, this action leads to inner turmoil in the character. This sort of assumptive opinion is highly inappropriate for someone to raise. Judging someone as a residual supremacist based on the Koran placement on the bookshelf can be considered as an insult to M. Stereotypical statements are also voiced by those closest to M, including Marie-Anne, his wife, “The one you hear on the news. The prejudice that Muslims can’t be trusted. That a Muslim is sheisty, shifty, shady; undemocratic; hard to fit into the culture; a pariah.” (P.49).

The vulnerable opinion expressed by Marie-Anne has also triggered anxious feelings that lead to the formation of M's denial. Marie-Anne as the closest figure to her, should be able to always be on her side, especially considering Marie-Anne has more chances to know M personally.

Denial is the “refusal to admit the truth or reality of something (such as a statement or charge)” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). Based on the data that researchers have found, 3 types of denial appear as an ego defense mechanism for M's character.

### **Simple Denial**

Simple Denial is an act of outright refusal to believe something perceived as an unpleasant action or event. A major event in one's life sometimes leads one to boldly declare words that contradict the truth to form a self-protection of their identity. Kut (2019) denies the significant role of the 9/11 tragedy in the novel. However, for this research, the

researchers discovered that the tragedy played an important role in the beginning of M's denial. In *Native Believer*, there is a quote that shows M's explicit declaration of denying his identity:

I had been forced to confront the question of Islam. But not for very long. When the towers fell I simply attested to myself that I wasn't a Muslim— There's no known god, nor is there an unknown god, and if there must be a god, then all are god— (p. 54).

From the quote above, M is denying and manipulating himself. The perpetrators of 9/11 were terrorists who used the image of Islam. He was afraid of his 'Islamic' identity and what the American people would think of him. However, the American public showed apathy toward the fact that the perpetrators of the incident were just individuals acting in the name of religion. M, realizing that the 9/11 incident was souring the public's view, decided to declare that he was not part of Islam. As we know, He could have claimed to be an atheist long before the 9/11 incident. In fact, he did not care about his identity as a Muslim, at least until he was worried that he could be accused of being a terrorist by the Americans. After what he had said, he began to form his own identity as a non-Muslim and lived with his ego defenses. He also did not hesitate to get angry with his closest friends to keep the image of Islam away from him.

“I mean, the Koran thing is weird, but come on. That a Muslim has a Koran in his house is not entirely—” I slapped the hat in his hand. It landed upside down as if jesters were about to erupt. “Muslim? I'm not a fucking Muslim.” The children near me clapped.’ (p. 44)

When Richard tries to comfort M about how normal it is for a Muslim to have a Koran at home, M's emotions are unnaturally overwhelming. It is because M felt that Richard was disturbing the self-identity he had built and believed in all this time. This self-identity that M has is a self-defense for him in reducing anxiety about other people's prejudice against him. M believed what he wanted to believe, and even though Richard would not be judgmental towards him for having an Islamic background, he would still feel offended by Richard's good intentions towards him.

### **Minimization**

Minimization appears when a person is aware of a fact but still tries to take it as something that does not need to be taken seriously. Despite the fact that the discrimination that M experienced was very detrimental to his work career, M still prioritized maintaining his identity as a non-Muslim by considering the dismissal he received as something that

did not need his concern. Here is the quote: “No,” I snapped. “I’m not about to go around claiming anti-Muslim discrimination when I’m not a Muslim.” (P.44).

By claiming anti-Muslim discrimination, M could restore his reputation and career in the workplace. M has nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to, making America his current homeland. He is aware that most Americans have the same mindset as George Gabriel. M's priority in life is not to uphold justice and defend his family's religion but to be accepted as an equal American citizen. Therefore, he uses denial-type minimization as his ego defense to realize his desire to be accepted as part of American society.

### **Projection as a denial**

The third denial that M uses to deal with and avoid the stereotypes he receives is by using projection as a denial. Projection occurs when people associate their unacceptable thoughts, emotions, or motives with others. When M encounters actions and remarks that he is uncomfortable with, he does not deny them outright or dismiss them as trivial. By using projection, he responds by retaliating against his interlocutor's actions. M wanted to remove the image of Islam from himself at all costs. But still, we can find the denial that he still has an attachment to the religion passed down by his parents. When Marie-Anne, his wife, suggested M destroy the Koran to prove that M is not a Muslim, this disturbed M personally. There was an argument between them, and they argued about which was the most respectable: the bible owned by Christians or the Koran. M's concern for Islam can be seen from this quote:

“How would you respond if you had to tell your boss that you threw the Bible in the trash?” (p. 50)

“So the Koran is a horror film that makes men into lying villains, and the Bible is what? A romantic comedy? Disney? It makes princes out of men?” (p. 50)

The way he argues reveals how M uses projection as a denial by asking the same offensive question and using a Christian point of view since his interlocutor, Marie-Anne, comes from a Christian family. M is disturbed by Marie-Anne's words, which proves that M still cares about the chastity of the Koran.

In this *Native Believer* novel, we can find the reason why M is very reluctant to be associated with the image of Islam is because he wants to form a self-identity that is not based on the prejudice of others. Cárdenas et al. (2021) explain that a person will tend to be in denial if their identity does not match the group they expect. M, who is a descendant

of refugees who grew up in America and is unfamiliar with his parents' country of origin, feels unwelcome everywhere. From all the forms of denial found in *Native Believer*, it shows that M is fighting for her self-identity as Non-Muslim and American. Therefore, he desperately wanted to fit in with American society, even if it meant sacrificing his family's beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

This research finds out how the three types of denial, simple denial, minimization, and projection denial, are used by M as an ego defense mechanism in dealing with religious prejudice. Some could see that denial could function to maintain the self-identity that the character desires to be understood by others. In addition, the feeling of not being accepted in a community group is one of the reasons for a person's inner turmoil and the emergence of a denial attitude. This research is expected to be a source of learning for readers and can also be further developed to discover more forms of denial in the face of religious prejudice in various literary works.

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