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Defense Mechanisms in Sekar Ayu Asmara's Novel Perempuan di dalam Piano: A Freudian Psychoanalytic Study

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the forms of defense mechanisms and their underlying factors in the novels Perempuan di dalam Piano (2020) by Sekar Ayu Asmara and Doa Ibu. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method utilizing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Data were collected through reading and note-taking techniques, and analyzed using the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that the novel Perempuan di dalam Piano contains ten forms of defense mechanisms, whereas the novel Doa Ibu contains seven forms. The factors underlying their emergence include anxiety, conflict, and personality structure. The similarity between the two novels lies in the emergence of several similar defense mechanisms, while the differences are observed in the variation of mechanisms and the conflict factors affecting the characters.

Keywords: ***Sekar Ayu Asmara, defense mechanism, psycholinguistics, Sigmund Freud***

INTRODUCTION

PODES data indicates a 21.73% increase in suicide victims and attempts in 2024 compared to 2021, aligning with rising Google search trends. Although depression is not the sole cause of suicide (Turecki & Brent, 2016), it remains a primary contributing factor, highlighting the urgency of maintaining mental health. This phenomenon demonstrates that unmanaged psychological pressure can lead to fatal consequences, making the understanding of defense mechanisms highly relevant. Defense mechanisms are essentially the ego's efforts to protect individuals from anxiety

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arising from inner conflicts or external pressures (Freud, 1926). When functioning adaptively, they allow individuals to withstand psychological pressure without resorting to self-destructive paths; however, when they fail or operate maladaptively, they can lead to mental disorders that exacerbate anxiety (Hall & Lindzey, 1995).

Since inner experiences and unconscious coping mechanisms are not easily observable in real life (Jung, 1916), literature offers a unique entry point. Literature emerges from human inner experience, while psychology seeks to explain it scientifically (Minderop, 2010), creating an interdisciplinary approach known as the psychology of literature (Freud, 1920). Through fictional characters, authors reflect human psychological dynamics and coping strategies (Ogden, 2013), making literary analysis a means to comprehend real-world psychological patterns. The relationship between literature and psychology is mutually revealing (Freud, 1960); literature reveals psychological truths, while psychology provides conceptual tools to understand literature's impact on the psyche (Milner, 1992). Given that no one is entirely psychologically healthy (Jung, 1916) and human psychic life is driven by unconscious conflicts between instinctual drives and social norms, unacceptable thoughts are repressed into the unconscious (Freud, 1913). When this repression exceeds psychological tolerance, the ego automatically activates defense mechanisms to maintain psychological balance and continuity (Jung, 1916; Freud, 1920).

Defense mechanisms and conflict are integral to psychoanalytic personality psychology, inseparable from the structural understanding of the id, ego, and superego (Minderop, 2010). The tension among these three components is the primary source of anxiety, with defense mechanisms emerging as the ego's response to this pressure (Minderop, 2010). Understanding these mechanisms is increasingly crucial for comprehending everyday psychological phenomena, from trauma responses and interpersonal dynamics to the processing of difficult emotions through creative expression (Freud, 1926). Within Freud's structural framework, humans are constantly in a state of tension between the id's instinctual demands, the superego's moral requirements, and the external reality managed by the ego (Freud, 1920). Therefore, a comprehensive and systematic study of defense mechanisms in literary characters is highly relevant, as it not only deepens character analysis but also provides profound insights into the universal psychological struggles and mental pressures reflected in contemporary society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method. This research is conducted through the analysis and interpretation of texts with the aim of uncovering meaning (Sugiyono, 2022). The

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approach utilized in this study is the psychology of literature, employing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, with a specific focus on the defense mechanisms of the characters in the novels. This research utilizes literary psychology analysis to highlight psychological issues associated with fictional characters in literary works (Minderop, 2010). The researcher serves as the key instrument in this study. The data collection techniques employed are reading and note-taking. According to Arikunto (2010), the reading technique is an in-depth information collection method that emphasizes the object of study; it involves reading available materials and information in detail, filtering data that is strictly relevant to the analytical needs, and selecting materials pertinent to the research problem. The note-taking technique is an information collection method focused on identifying elements that contain defense mechanisms (Mahsun, 2005). The data validity technique employed is semantic validity. The data reliability testing used in this study is intra-rater reliability. Data analysis involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification. The drawing of conclusions utilizes Freud's perspective on defense mechanisms.

RESULT

Forms of Defense Mechanisms in Perempuan di dalam Piano by Sekar Ayu Asmara

The results indicate that the novel Perempuan di dalam Piano (NPP) by Sekar Ayu Asmara contains psychoanalytic defense mechanisms according to Sigmund Freud. The types of defense mechanisms identified include repression, sublimation, projection, displacement, rationalization, reaction formation, regression, aggression, apathy, fantasy, and stereotype.

a. Repression

This mechanism emerges when the ego suppresses unacceptable desires back into the unconscious mind (Freud, 1920). The signs of the repression defense mechanism observed in the character Indraswari can be seen in the following novel excerpt.

NPP1R:

She was grateful that her belly was beginning to grow. She found a way to nurture love for her unborn child. She imagined herself carrying the child of her beloved composer. The child in her womb was the fruit of her love with Rachmaninoff. (Asmara, 2020: 84).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of repression. From

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the excerpt, it can be observed that Indraswari attempts to suppress the unpleasant memory and the reality that the one who impregnated her was a market laborer, replacing it with a favorable memory. She believes that the baby in her womb is the child of Rachmaninoff. Indraswari's behavior represents a process in which an individual disregards or places into an unconscious state a desire that cannot be fulfilled due to demands of reality or morality (Thurschwell, 2000).

NPP2R:

Indraswari was convinced that her baby was the reincarnation of the legendary pianist. The baby in her womb would not react whenever she played a work by Mozart, Beethoven, or Puccini. It was different when she played a work by Rachmaninoff. Her baby seemed to move restlessly. And occasionally gave a small kick. A kick of praise.

The above excerpt falls under the repression defense mechanism, which means suppressing thoughts or feelings that cause anxiety, so they do not surface into consciousness (Blackman, 2004). In the excerpt, Indraswari may harbor anxiety about her pregnancy, the future of her baby, or fear of the great responsibility of being a mother. Rather than acknowledging that anxiety directly, she suppresses it and replaces it with the belief that her baby is the "reincarnation of a legendary pianist." The baby's reaction to Rachmaninoff's music is interpreted as a "kick of praise," rather than merely a natural fetal movement. This is a form of repression: the anxious feelings are suppressed and replaced with a more positive and comforting fantasy (Westerink, 2021). Thus, the excerpt reflects how a person suppresses uncomfortable feelings and channels them into beliefs or fantasies that make them feel safe.

b. Sublimation

Sublimation occurs through actions that replace uncomfortable feelings or take the form of redirection. For instance, an individual may possess a high sexual drive (Freud, 1977).

NPP2S:

She harbored a personal grudge. This grudge fueled her great ambition. She wanted to succeed and become famous. She wanted the mother who had abandoned her to feel regret. Regret because that unfortunate baby had turned out well. Whoever she was, Miss Mimi would never forgive her. (Asmara, 2020: 104).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of sublimation. Miss

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Mimi's real name is Darminah. Having grown up in an orphanage, she harbored resentment toward her biological parents. She wanted to make them regret and prove that the baby they had abandoned had turned out well. She proved this by becoming a successful singer. The grudge she carried was redirected into an aspiration that had a positive impact on her life. An individual experiencing emotional conflict, whether stress originating from within or without, expresses rather than suppresses feelings or impulses that may cause problems, transforming them into actions acceptable to society (Giuseppe & Perry, 2021). Therefore, the above excerpt constitutes an ego defense in the form of sublimation or redirection.

c. Projection

NPP1P:

Mother exploited the tragedy. Deliberately blaming the prostitute. The deck woman who caused the disaster. A broken soul weakened her child. Self-confidence vanished. Even her backbone seemed unable to support her anymore. Broken at the very moment of feeding, returning love to the path of truth. (Asmara, 2020: 222).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of projection. The excerpt shows Indraswari attempting to shift blame onto Kinasih for what had happened. This defense mechanism functions as an effort to make the individual appear better in the eyes of others. This is a defense mechanism known as projection, which can be described as attributing to others feelings or tendencies that are unacceptable but actually exist within one's own unconscious mind (Feist et al., 2018).

NPP2P:

"There were a dozen, Mother."

"Where did the difference go?"

"I don't know. Mother… maybe it fell… maybe the flower seller was at fault." Bromo's lie rolled off his tongue effortlessly. It sounded too hurried and unconvincing. (Asmara, 2020: 60).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of projection. The flowers that should have been a dozen were reduced because Bromo had actually given some flowers to a woman he had met at the market that afternoon. However, fearing his mother's anger, he ultimately shifted the blame onto the flower seller. When internal impulses trigger excessive anxiety, the ego can reduce that anxiety by transferring responsibility for the unwanted impulse to an external factor, generally to another individual (Feist et al., 2018).

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d. Displacement

An individual facing emotional conflict or internal or external stress generalizes or redirects feelings about or responses to one object onto another object that is typically less threatening (Minderop, 2010).

NPP1D:

Jati threw a pillow while shouting. He could no longer bear it. The world was mocking him. Denmas was mocking him. He rose and ran out of the room. (Asmara, 2020: 119).

This defense strategy is an effort to transfer negative emotions from one object to another that is not the source of frustration but is safer as a target (Minderop, 2010). The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of displacement. Jati, feeling frustrated and disturbed by what Denmas was singing as if the song were offending Jati and even mocking him ultimately did something that could make him feel relieved after transferring his anger toward Denmas, namely by injecting a sedative to silence Denmas.

NPP2D:

That woman had changed her child's perspective. That woman had cast a net of sin as a trap; Bromo had to end his relationship with that woman. (Asmara, 2020: 151).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of displacement. The event in which Indraswari shifts the blame for Bromo's disobedience his refusal to obey her anymore. She blames Kinasih and accuses her of having a negative impact on her child. A person can direct unacceptable impulses toward various people or objects so that the original impulse is disguised or concealed (Feist et al., 2018).

e. **Rationalization**

Rationalization has two objectives: the first is to reduce disappointment when one fails to achieve a target, and the second is to provide an acceptable justification for one's actions (Freud, 1966).

NPP1RA:

In the field of psychiatry, Jati understood that his behavior was an abnormality. Having obsessive traits was a symptom beyond the normal range. He was indeed obsessed with love. Toward his late mother. He also had the same obsession toward Kinasih. He judged this attitude as still

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reasonable. He was a doctor who had studied psychiatry. He understood when obsession could turn dangerous. So far, his obsession was still under control. (Asmara, 2020: 73).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of rationalization. Jati actually understands that he has obsessive traits toward his fiancée, Kinasih. However, he judges his behavior as reasonable and still within normal limits. He employs the defense mechanism of rationalization by providing a logically acceptable justification that it is natural for him to have obsessive traits toward Kinasih.

NPP2RA:

Deep inside, Indraswari felt a moment of gratitude. Grateful that her stomach rebelled every time she ate. She had one hope. That the fetus could not consume good nourishment from its mother and would therefore not survive. She kept this hope tightly in silence. She hoped that the fetus in her womb would not get the chance to be born into the world. And that she would be freed from all the sins that bound her. (Asmara, 2020: 83).

The above passage contains an ego defense mechanism in the form of rationalization. In the deepest part of Indraswari's heart, she hoped that the baby in her womb would miscarry. She rationalized this through her persistent stomach turmoil that kept rejecting food, reasoning that she could miscarry if the fetus received no nourishment or nutrition. Deep inside, she rejoiced because she felt this was a reason acceptable to her logic. The baby she did not want would die before being born into the world due to starvation, and she would not bear the sin of the loss of life within her womb. An individual facing emotional conflict or internal or external stress creates reassuring or self-serving but false explanations for others (Giuseppe & Perry, 2021).

f. Reaction Formation

An action that attempts to divert or hide feelings of anxiety by acting politely or friendly in a way acceptable to others (Minderop, 2010).

NPP1Rf:

"If I did not pretend to believe, Mother would be disappointed. I cannot bear to hurt Mother. I even promise to always love the woman inside my piano. Because that is my mother’s request. And that makes her happy." Bromo attaches the kite string. (Asmara 2020:137).

Reaction formation is an action that explains by replacing feelings that trigger anxiety with feelings opposite or contradictory to consciousness (Minderop 2018). In the excerpt above,

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Bromo's attitude changes to obedient and tries to believe what his mother says so that she will not be disappointed. He deliberately acts obediently in front of his mother to protect her feelings.

g. Regression

Regression consists of two types: (1) backward behavior, which is an action resembling a little child who is fussy and very dependent to gain comfort and attention from others; (2) backward primitivization, which is a very risky behavior because it can cause actions that are unwanted or harmful to others and oneself (Minderop, 2010).

NPP2Rf:

He will raise the child. He will care for him lovingly. However, he needs to tie him by playing with guilt. Guilt for making his mother unable to walk again. With such a heavy burden, he believes Bromo will always obey his request. (Asmara 2020:88).

The above event contains an ego defense mechanism, namely regression. He raises Bromo with love but behind it hides a purpose to control Bromo as he wishes. Indraswari also often manipulates Bromo and even says Bromo is an illegitimate child who ruins her life. This is part of the behavioral regression defense mechanism. Regression translates our thoughts into primitive expressions (Freud, 1977).

h. Aggression

According to Freud, one of the ego defense mechanisms is aggression. Aggression is the expression of an individual's anger closely related to tension and anxiety experienced, which in turn can cause harm or attack to others or objects causing frustration (Minderop 2018). There are two types of aggression: (1) direct aggression, expressed directly at the object causing frustration, usually verbal but can become physical if emotional impulses are strong; (2) displaced aggression, a reaction from an individual feeling frustrated but unable to express it directly to the source due to inaccessibility or ambiguity (Halifah 2015).

NPP1Ag:

"Mother?" Fear suddenly struck Bromo. "The light of a disobedient child will always dim. You will never shine like a diamond." Indraswari said without turning around. (Asmara 2020: 59).

This excerpt shows aggression, seen from Indraswari's angry reaction directly expressed to Bromo. Indraswari vents her emotions on the object of her frustration by verbally expressing

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her anger directly at Bromo, the source of frustration. Character impulses showing destructive, attacking, or aggressive desires are considered manifestations of the id's death instinct according to Minderop (2010).

NPP2Ag:

"You grew inside me for eight months and made my womb stretch. I am a mother who fought death with bleeding to give birth to you. I sacrificed being unable to walk for you. Now you want to share your mother with a slut you met at the flower shop?" (Asmara 2020: 61).

This is also aggression, seen from Indraswari's direct angry reaction to Bromo. Aggression can be expressed through behaviors involving intent to harm others (Gazzaniga et al., 2011). Indraswari vents her emotions verbally on Bromo.

i. Apathy

Apathy is another form of reaction to frustration, which is withdrawing and acting as if resigned (Minderop, 2011: 38).

NPP1Ap:

Bromo's defense finally gave in. He resigned to the presence of the woman inside the piano. The resigned attitude was not harmful. In fact, the woman in the piano brought many benefits. He would never be lonely. Though unseen, the woman had powers. Making him better. Making him a virtuoso like his mother. (Asmara 2020:176).

This excerpt is an ego defense mechanism in the form of apathy. His mother's insistence to make Bromo believe in the woman inside the piano helps him become a great pianist. The woman also accompanies Bromo so he is not lonely. Faced with his mother's insistence, Bromo eventually resigned and chose to obey, believing the woman in the piano truly helps him and will not let him be lonely. This defense blocks awareness of unacceptable ideas, feelings, or actions to protect oneself from feeling threatened (Giuseppe & Perry, 2021).

NPP2Ap:

The plan now became futile. Kinasih chose a different destiny. The dream worth achieving had faded. The tomorrow to be conquered had vanished. There was no longer love worth fighting for. (Asmara 2020:210).

This excerpt is also apathy defense. Kinasih chooses to give up and resign to her father's

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plan that secretly agrees she will marry Jati in a week. She cannot refuse because she is already engaged to Jati. She ends her love story with Bromo. This apathetic attitude involves withdrawal and resignation to reality (Minderop, 2010).

j. Fantasy

Fantasy arises when faced with many problems, one may seek solutions by entering a world of imagination, basing solutions on fantasy rather than reality (Minderop, 2010). Those showing fantasy continue life even when sexual life is disrupted, like a hungry person imagining delicious food by combining pieces of various dishes (Minderop, 2011).

NPP1F:

He peeled one photo of Kinasih from the wall. His hand lit a match, burning the photo. Kinasih burned into charcoal. He took the charcoal remains and put them in his mouth. Swallowing Kinasih relieved his soul. "You and I are one, forever..." (Asmara 2020:202).

This is a fantasy defense mechanism. Jati places photos of Kinasih beside his deceased mother's photo who hanged herself. He burns Kinasih's photo hoping to possess her completely, like burning and eating the ashes of the photo. Jati creates a pleasant fantasy hiding his real feelings of anxiety and anger (Singer, 1975, 1984).

NPP2F:

The reality that day stuck and eroded continuously. Kinasih was stunned watching the reality. She peeked through the window into the living room. Bromo knelt on the floor, imagining talking to his mother. In reality, Bromo was talking alone. The wheelchair was empty. Mother had died. Bromo brought his mother's figure to life only in his mind. (Asmara 2020:260).

This is also a fantasy defense. Kinasih watches Bromo talking to an empty wheelchair while calling his mother's name. In Bromo's fantasy, his deceased mother is still present before him. In this calm fantasy world, where thoughts swim in a warm and safe sensory sea, the emptiness Bromo feels disappears. His pain fades. His weakness is gone. Replaced by strength, confidence, and ecstasy (Santrock, 1988).

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion outlined regarding the forms of defense mechanisms, all ten types are identified, namely repression, sublimation, projection, displacement, rationalization, reaction

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formation, regression, aggression, apathy, and fantasy, comprising a total of 40 data points, with displacement being the most dominant form. Conversely, the novel Doa Ibu exhibits only seven of these ten mechanisms, namely repression, sublimation, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, regression, and apathy, comprising a total of 23 data points, with rationalization being the most dominant form. This indicates that the characters in the novel Perempuan di dalam Piano face more complex and diverse psychological pressures.

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