

DEFENSE MECHANISMS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN *THE MAURITANIAN* (2021)

A GRADUATING PAPER

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement
for Gaining Bachelor's Degree in English Department



By:

Athallah Muhammad Satin

19101050029

STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
SUNAN KALIJAGA
YOGYAKARTA

**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
FACULTY OF ADAB AND CULTURAL SCIENCES
SUNAN KALIJAGA STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
YOGYAKARTA**

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**KEMENTERIAN AGAMA REPUBLIK INDONESIA
UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI SUNAN KALIJAGA
FAKULTAS ADAB DAN ILMU BUDAYA**

Jl. Marsda Adi Sucipto, Yogyakarta, 55281, Telp/Fax (0274) 513949
Web: <http://adab.uin-suka.ac.id> Email: adab@uin-suka.ac.id

NOTA DINAS

Hal : Skripsi
a.n. Athallah Muhammad Satin

Yth.
Dekan Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya
UIN Sunan Kalijaga
Di Yogyakarta

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Setelah memeriksa, meneliti, dan memberikan arahan untuk perbaikan atas skripsi saudara :


Nama : Athallah Muhammad Satin
NIM : 19101050029
Prodi : Sastra Inggris
Fakultas : Adab dan Ilmu Budaya
Judul : Defense Mechanism of The Main Character in The Mauritanian (2021)

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Yogyakarta, 31 October 2024
Pembimbing


Dr. Danial Hidayatullah, SS., M. Hum
NIP. 19760405 200901 1 016



KEMENTERIAN AGAMA
UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI SUNAN KALIJAGA
FAKULTAS ADAB DAN ILMU BUDAYA
Jl. Marsda Adisucipto Telp. (0274) 513949 Fax. (0274) 552883 Yogyakarta 55281

PENGESAHAN TUGAS AKHIR

Nomor : B-2433/Un.02/DA/PP.00.9/12/2024

Tugas Akhir dengan judul : Defense Mechanism of the main character in The Mauritanian (2021)

yang dipersiapkan dan disusun oleh:

Nama : ATHALLAH MUHAMAD SATIN
Nomor Induk Mahasiswa : 19101050029
Telah diujikan pada : Kamis, 07 November 2024
Nilai ujian Tugas Akhir : A/B

dinyatakan telah diterima oleh Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

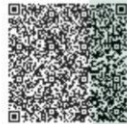
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Ketua Sidang

Dr. Danial Hidayatullah, SS., M.Hum
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Penguji I

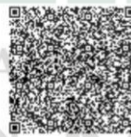
Dr. Witriani, S.S. M.Hum.
SIGNED



Valid ID: 6759aa9136db3

Penguji II

Febriyanti Dwiratna Lestari, SS., MA
SIGNED



Valid ID: 675bfee149465

Yogyakarta, 07 November 2024
UIN Sunan Kalijaga
Dekan Fakultas Adab dan Ilmu Budaya
Prof. Dr. Nurdin, S.Ag., S.S., M.A.
SIGNED

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The undersigned, I am :

Name : Athallah Muhammad Satin
Student Number : 19101050029
Department : English Literature
Faculty : Adab and Cultural Science

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Athallah Muhammad
NIM : 19101050029

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MOTTO

“Life is the courage to face question marks”

-Soe Hok Gie

“Be happy, Not because everything is good, But because you can see the good in everything.”

“So remember Me, I will remember You”

-Al-Baqarah : 152



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DEDICATION

This graduation paper is dedicated to me, my family, and my readers.



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Athallah Muhammad
19101050029

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Defense Mechanisms Of The Main Character In *The Mauritanian* (2021)

By : Athallah Muhammad

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the self-defense mechanisms used by the main character in the film *The Mauritanian* based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Self-defense mechanisms are an important concept for understanding how individuals deal with psychological distress and trauma, especially in extreme situations. The film, which is based on a true story, chronicles the experiences of Mohamedou Ould Slahi who was subjected to extrajudicial detention and torture at Guantanamo Bay, making it a relevant object of study to explore the psychological resilience of individuals under systemic stress. This study aims to identify and analyze the self-defense mechanisms such as repression, sublimation, projection, displacement, and aggression used by Mohamedou to survive mentally and emotionally. This study uses a qualitative approach with a close reading analysis method of related scenes in the film. The results show that self-defense mechanisms are not only Mohamedou's means of surviving trauma and injustice, but also reflect his psychological resilience in extreme situations. For example, sublimation is seen in her efforts to learn English and write a memoir as a way to cope with emotional distress, while aggression emerges as a form of verbal resistance to injustice. This research provides deep insights into the psychological impact of systemic injustice on individuals, the importance of self-defense mechanisms as adaptive strategies, and how films can be used to explore psychological concepts in social and cultural contexts.

Keywords: self-defence mechanisms, psychoanalysis, *The Mauritanian*, Sigmund Freud.

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis mekanisme pertahanan diri yang digunakan oleh karakter utama dalam film *The Mauritanian* berdasarkan teori psikoanalisis Sigmund Freud. Mekanisme pertahanan diri merupakan konsep yang penting untuk memahami bagaimana individu menghadapi tekanan psikologis dan trauma, terutama dalam situasi ekstrem. Film ini, yang didasarkan pada kisah nyata, mengisahkan pengalaman Mohamedou Ould Slahi yang mengalami penahanan tanpa proses hukum dan penyiksaan di Guantanamo Bay, sehingga menjadi objek studi yang relevan untuk mengeksplorasi ketahanan psikologis individu di bawah tekanan sistemik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis mekanisme pertahanan diri seperti represi, sublimasi, proyeksi, displacement, dan agresi yang digunakan oleh Mohamedou untuk bertahan secara mental dan emosional. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode analisis close reading terhadap adegan-adegan terkait dalam film. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mekanisme pertahanan diri tidak hanya menjadi alat bertahan Mohamedou dari trauma dan ketidakadilan, tetapi juga mencerminkan ketahanan psikologisnya dalam situasi ekstrem. Contohnya, sublimasi terlihat dalam upayanya mempelajari bahasa Inggris dan menulis memoir sebagai cara untuk mengatasi tekanan emosional, sedangkan agresi muncul sebagai bentuk perlawanan verbal terhadap ketidakadilan. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan mendalam tentang dampak psikologis dari ketidakadilan sistemik terhadap individu, pentingnya mekanisme pertahanan diri sebagai strategi adaptif, dan bagaimana film dapat digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi konsep psikologi dalam konteks sosial dan budaya.

Kata Kunci: mekanisme pertahanan diri, psikoanalisis, *The Mauritanian*, Sigmund Freud.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Studying the character's psychology in film combines two important disciplines: literature and cinema. Both provide a useful framework for analysing the psychological complexity of characters in a visual narrative context. In both literature and film, complex characters are often the main focus. They face conflict and change and have psychological backgrounds that form the basis for the story's development.

In the 21st century, the psychological complexity of characters in visual artworks such as films has been the subject of in-depth analysis. One such approach is psychoanalysis, which provides insight into the defence mechanisms of fictional characters. Self-defence mechanisms are one of the important concepts in psychoanalysis introduced by Sigmund Freud. It refers to the unconscious ways that individuals use to protect themselves from anxiety, internal conflict, and unpleasant realities. The psychoanalytic framework, specifically the concept of self-defense mechanisms, can be used to understand how characters in films can deal with psychological distress under adverse conditions. One of them is in *The Mauritanian*, the main character in this film faces psychological distress due to the accusations and unfair treatment he experiences.

The film *Mauritanian* is directed by Kevin Macdonald and set in 2021. The movie is based on a true story in 2015 about the unilateral detention of the United States after the attack on the WTC on September 11, 2001. Mohamedou Ould Slahi

from Mauritania, Southwest Africa, was accused of involvement in the attacks on September 11, 2001. The accusation was directed at Slahi without any apparent basis. This movie tells how Slahi struggles to get justice for the one-side allegations made by the United States. Assisted by a lawyer who also saw irregularities in the case, he was eager to reveal the truth hidden by the US government. Not only that, the US government also committed acts of violence against Slahi so that he would admit to the accusations. The elements of violence and oppression are unknown even though the allegations are not through a legal trial, so Slahi's whereabouts are completely unknown by his family and the community there.

The Mauritanian tells the story of a traumatic experience that is not only personal, but also caused by an external factor. This sets the film apart from other trauma films that often focus on loss or violence in personal relationships. Therefore, the movie is particularly interesting because the psychological distress caused by an external factor is something that is out of control.

The pressures Mohamedou experience, including torture, isolation, and legal uncertainty, create complex psychological conditions. Psychoanalysis is a relevant approach to understanding Mohamedou's psychological experience in this film, as it is able to explore the emotional responses and unconscious mechanisms used to cope with trauma and suffering. In these situations, self-defense mechanisms such as repression and sublimation may have emerged as a response to maintain emotional balance. Understanding these mechanisms not only provides

insight into Mohamedou's personality, but also highlights the psychological impact of systemic injustice and violence on individuals.

In the context of Freud's psychoanalysis, these self-defence mechanisms protect the ego from the anxiety generated by the conflict between the id, ego, and superego and serve as survival strategies that allow Mohamedou to stay alive and maintain his identity and self-worth. Mohamedou's experience shows how self-defence mechanisms can be an adaptive response in extreme situations, although they can also hinder the resolution of deep trauma. This study aims to analyse the self-defense mechanisms used by the main character in the film *The Mauritanian* based on Sigmund Freud's theory.

Through a psychoanalytic framework, the analysis of the self-defense mechanisms used by Mohamedou in *The Mauritanian* can provide a deeper understanding of his mental and emotional struggles in the face of torture and injustice. This research can also provide an overview of the use of self-defense mechanisms as a form of defense and resistance to continue fighting to defend rights and freedoms.

1.2 Research Question

According to the background and the problems described above, the formulation of the problem in this study is

1. How is the defense mechanism portrayed by the main character in *The Mauritanian* film?

1.3 Objective of Study

Based on the background and research problem formulation that has been explained. The researcher sets the research objectives to be achieved in the research as follows.

1. Analyze the self-defence mechanisms used by Mohamedou in *The Mauritanian* based on Sigmund Freud's theory. By understanding how Mohamedou develops and uses these mechanisms, we can gain deeper insights into how individuals can maintain psychological balance in situations of stress and uncertainty.
2. The research also highlights how *The Mauritanian* offers a unique view of human resilience under tremendous pressure. Self-defense mechanisms serve as protection from trauma and as a tool of resistance against oppression, making the film an important case study in understanding psychological resilience and resistance.

1.4 Significance of Study

This research can be the basis for the use of film as a learning medium in understanding psychological concepts, especially those related to self-defence mechanisms and how individuals manage trauma in the context of external oppression. This research can also expand insights into human resilience in situations of oppression and trauma. By analysing how Mohamedou's characters use various self-defence mechanisms, this research can reveal how individuals survive mentally and emotionally under extremely harsh conditions.

1.5 Literature Review

The first study to be reviewed is "Masalah Psikologis Tokoh Utama Andreas Dalam *Erzählung Der Zug War Pünktlich* Karya Heinrich Böll: Analisis Psikologi Freud" by Trimurti Dhian Pratiwi published by State University of Yogyakarta in 2015. The author explains the psychological analysis of the main character, Andreas, in the story *Der Zug war pünktlich* by Heinrich Böll. The author describes in detail the psychological problems faced by Andreas, using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory approach. The analysis presented shows how Freudian concepts such as defence mechanisms, the influence of past trauma, and Andreas' inner conflict are described in depth. In analysing Andreas' character, psychoanalytic theory provides a deep insight into the character's psychological background and the complexity of his inner problems. The author successfully illustrates how Andreas' past trauma is reflected in his behaviour and decisions, as well as how psychological defence mechanisms play a role in his response to the situations he faces.

The second thesis to be reviewed is a work entitled "Mekanisme Pertahanan Ego Tokoh Utama Dalam Novel *Iwo Jima Kara No Tegami* Karya Yamashita Aiiri: Sebuah Kajian Psikoanalisis Sastra" by Eka Safitri Sujito published by Diponegoro University in 2018. The author discusses in detail the defence mechanisms used by the main character in the novel *Iwo Jima Kara no Tegami* by Yamashita Aiiri through the lens of literary psychoanalysis. The author analyses the protagonist's character in the work, highlighting how the ego's defence mechanisms play a role in the character's response to the conflict, trauma, or experience they are going

through. The author clearly illustrates how the character uses certain mechanisms, such as repression, projection, or denial, to cope with inner conflict. The analysis provides a deep insight into the psychological complexity of the main character in the novel. The author successfully connects psychoanalytic theories with character interpretation, providing a deeper understanding of how the main character uses ego defence mechanisms to cope with psychological discomfort.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

1.6.1 Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis Theory

The theory of psychoanalysis was first developed by Sigmund Freud in 1886. Freud was of Jewish descent, born in Austria on May 6, 1856, and died in London on September 23, 1939. In 1873, Freud studied medicine in Vienna and graduated in 1881 with honours. As a neurologist, he often helped his patients with problems such as irrational fears, obsessions, and anxiety. In helping to cure mental problems, Freud used an innovative procedure called psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis requires prolonged verbal interaction with the patient to explore their deeper personality.

The unconscious mind influences the human mind more than the conscious mind. Eagleton suggests that Freud described the human mind as an iceberg. He said a person's life is filled with various pressures and conflicts. To relieve these pressures and conflicts, humans tightly store them in the subconscious. Therefore, according to Freud, the unconscious is the key to understanding a person's behaviour. (Minderop, 2011, p. 13).

Coined by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis is a psychological theory and method to cure mental illness patients using psychoanalytic tools, focusing on the

unconscious state, and is called depth psychology. (Baumeister, Sommer, & Dale, 2002, p. 1). With his colleagues, Freud found that many forms of mental illness, such as anxiety and hysteria, resulted from past events being accepted in the unconscious. Freud's work suggests that the unconscious mind greatly influences conscious action. All of Freud's work depends upon the notion of the unconscious, which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness that nevertheless strongly influences our actions. (Barry, 2002).

Psychoanalytic theory, pioneered by Sigmund Freud, states that three main systems make up the personality psychoanalytic theory: id, ego, and superego. The three systems have their functions, properties, components, working principles, dynamism, and mechanisms, but they interact closely with each other (Lindzey, 1993). Freud explained that the id is unconscious and has no contact with reality that works using the pleasure principle, which always seeks pleasure and avoids pain. Like the id, the superego has the same nature but is responsible for building a moral system in the personality. As for the ego, it is partly conscious and works based on the reality principle, where it seeks to harmonise enjoyment for individuals with values in society (Halonen, 1996). Freud explained, if there is a conflict between id and superego that the ego cannot overcome, the ego will use unrealistic ways called self-defense mechanisms (Lindzey, 1993). This self-defence mechanism is said to be unrealistic because the ego will deny, falsify, or distort/destroy reality (Lindzey, 1993).

1.6.1.1 Defense Mechanisms

Defence mechanisms are characteristics that tend to be strong in a person. (Minderop, 2011, p. 31). These mechanisms cannot reflect personality in general but can influence personality development. Freud revealed that the source of the conflict that causes anxiety is the conflict between the id, ego, and superego. Some neurotic experts agree that defense mechanisms can protect a person from anxiety by not accepting reality.

An individual's defense mechanism is used to protect the individual's Ego from the id's urges and criticism from the Superego. If the individual's Superego and Id are in a state of balance or harmony with the Ego, then an individual is said to have a healthy personality, (Muis, 2009, p. 6). According to Freud, quoted from Alwisol, "Ego defence mechanisms are strategies used by individuals to defend against the expression of Id's impetus and challenge Superego pressure." (Alwisol, 2014).

According to Freud's view, conflicting desires with the personality structure will produce anxiety. Anxiety will be felt from within when the ego resists the desire to achieve pleasure from the id. Anxiety (anxiety) alerts the ego to overcome the conflict through ego defence mechanisms, protecting the ego to reduce anxiety (anxiety) produced by the conflict (Minderop, 2011, p. 32).

The defence mechanism occurs because of an urge or feeling of switching to look for a substitute object and a replacement object. (Minderop, 2011, p. 29). For example, aggressive impulses aimed at other parties are considered safe to attack. Freud, his daughter Anna Freud, and his students discovered some of these mechanisms. (Minderop, 2011, p. 30). Some ego defence mechanisms are:

1. Repression

Repression is the inability to recall fearful situations, people or events.

Repression is a mechanism used by the ego to overcome anxiety by suppressing the urges that cause anxiety in the unconscious. The cause of stress is the unconscious.

2. Sublimation

Sublimation is a form of diversion that will occur when socially beneficial actions replace uncomfortable feelings. Self-defence mechanism Freud's sublimation can be by releasing negative emotions into positive things. (Minderop, 2011, p. 34) Suggests that sublimation can occur. For example, an individual who has a high sexual drive then diverts these uncomfortable feelings into socially acceptable actions by becoming a nude model body painter artist.

3. Projection

Projection occurs when individuals shift the blame to others. Individuals often face situations or things that are undesirable and unacceptable by delegating them to others for other reasons. (Minderop, 2011, p. 34). This self-defence mechanism comes from feelings, thoughts, or emotions that are difficult for individuals to accept; individuals will project these feelings onto others.

4. Displacement

Displacement is a defence mechanism that divertes an unpleasant feeling towards an object to another, more likely object. (Minderop, 2011, p. 35)

Suggests that displacement can occur because of aggressive impulses that can be replaced as a scapegoat against people (or other objects) where these objects are not a source of frustration but are safer to target.

5. Rationalization

Rationalization is the creation of falsehoods (reasons) but can make sense as an effort to justify unacceptable behaviour. (Minderop, 2011, p. 35). Rationalization is done to reduce disappointment when individuals fail to achieve a goal and provide an acceptable reason for a behaviour.

6. Reaction Formation

Reaction formation is the repression of anxious impulses followed by tendencies contrary to the suppressed tendencies that are repressed. For example, a mother hates her child, but because hatred of the child is an attitude that makes her experience anxiety, then she shows the opposite, which is to love her child excessively. (Minderop, 2011, pp. 36-37).

7. Regression

Regression has two meanings. The first is retrogressive behaviour, which is a person's behaviour, such as acting like a child who cries and is very spoiled to get security and attention from others. The second is called primitivation, in which an adult behaves as if uncultured and loses control to commit acts of violence in solving a problem. (Minderop, 2011, p. 38).

8. Aggression

Aggression is a feeling of anger that is closely related to tension and anxiety that can lead to destruction and assault. Aggression can take the form of direct and diversion.

9. Apathy

Apathy is another form of reaction to frustration (inhibition of desire), namely apathy by withdrawing and acting as if resigned (Minderop, 2011, p. 38).

10. Fantasy

When a person faces such a heap of problems, sometimes they seek solutions by entering the world of the world, solutions based on fantasy rather than reality. (Minderop, 2011, p. 38).

11. Stereotype

Stereotypes are another consequence of frustration, where stereotypical behaviour shows continuous repetitive behaviour. Individuals always repeat actions that are not useful and seem strange, for example, someone who fantasizes. (Minderop, 2011, pp. 38-39).

1.6.2 Film Theory

As psychoanalysis theory will be used as the main theory for this research, film theory will be used as the supporting theory because this research uses a movie as the research object. Film theory can assist Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis in this research because film theory can be used to analyse and give more context to support the defence mechanisms in a particular scene.

Mise-en-scène is a French word that means the theatrical staging process, and it is one of the basics of film studies. In film study, it retains the theatrical overtones, meaning to “put into the scene” and designating all that the frame encompasses. The frame is the bounded axes of the image. It is a part of cinematography. (Villarejo, 2006).

Camera distance and angle are important parts of the mise-en-scene to give more context. For example, a medium shot of the character for the camera distance makes the character appear from above the waist and almost covers the whole screen. It gives context to the closeness of certain characters in the scene. While the camera angle, such as the master shot, is an angle that captures a wide scene, like at the dining table, it portrays the togetherness of many characters who gather at that dining table. (Sikov, 2010).

1.7 Method of Research

1.7.1 Type of Research

Qualitative research methods are used in this study. Qualitative research aims to holistically understand phenomena about the experiences of research subjects, such as behaviour, perception, motivation, etc. (Moleong, 2011, p. 6). According to L.R. Gay, Geoffrey E. Mills, and Peter Airasian, qualitative research is the comprehensive collection, analysis, and interpretation of narratives based on observational data to gain insight into certain interesting phenomena. (L.R Gay, 2012, p. 381). The qualitative method refers to things' meaning, concepts, and characteristics.

1.7.2 Data Sources

The data sources in this study are divided into two:

1. Primary data will be obtained from *The Mauritanian* film, which is selected from scenes related to the research.
2. Secondary data is the data that will be obtained through books, articles, and the internet that support primary data related to psychology and defense mechanisms.

1.7.3 Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique in this study is close reading. In this technique, the data taken comes from the movie *The Mauritanian* (2021). Data collection techniques are taken from qualitative methods using text and images as data to be analysed. In this method, the movie that is the object of research is watched repeatedly and carefully. Each time watching, researchers note important things that are relevant to the formulation of research problems. By doing close reading, the researcher can carefully and deeply analyse every aspect of the film and gain a richer understanding of its content and meaning. Recording and analysing helped the researcher identify patterns, relationships, and findings relevant to the research objectives. In addition, data collection techniques are also carried out by adding other sources as additional information, such as journals related to the discussion raised, to support and strengthen the arguments on the data taken.

1.7.4 Data Analyzing Technique

After collecting the relevant data, the next technique is to analyse the data. The data is analysed by providing arguments from subjective understanding and

theoretical references to strengthen and clarify the analysis to avoid ambiguity and vagueness. Analysing data is when a subjective understanding of defence mechanisms combined with Sigmund Freud's theory is developed through objective interpretation. For example, the depiction of Mohamedou's attitude using self-defence mechanisms to cover up the dark story during his imprisonment is explained in detail. Furthermore, the data is also elaborated in context to get a comprehensive understanding. In addition to using a theoretical framework, other sources are also needed to assist in analysis.

1.8 Paper Organization

This chapter consists of 4 parts. The first chapter is the introduction to this research. The introduction consists of a background of the study, research question, the objective of the study, the significance of the study, literature reviews, theoretical approach, method of research, and paper organisation. The second chapter discusses the intrinsic elements of *The Mauritanian* movie, which consists of plot, setting, character and characterisation, and theme. The third chapter is the core of this research, which is analyzing the data obtained based on the research questions. The fourth chapter is the conclusions and suggestions regarding the research conducted.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

4.1 Conclusion

The analysis of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's psychological defense mechanisms in *The Mauritanian* highlights the various strategies he used to survive the severe trauma of torture and detention without due process. Mechanisms such as repression, sublimation, projection, dislocation, rationalization, formation reaction, regression, aggression, apathy, and fantasy reflect Mohamedou's ability to maintain emotional balance amidst tremendous pressure. The analysis shows that Mohamedou's defense mechanisms are dynamic and reflect his emotional journey and psychological growth. He experienced a shift from more passive mechanisms, such as repression and apathy, to more active and constructive mechanisms, such as sublimation through learning English and writing memoirs. The relationships with Nancy Hollander and Teri Duncan also played a significant role in encouraging her to uncover the truth and overcome trauma, thus enabling a transition towards more positive mechanisms. In addition, fantasies about her family and hometown demonstrated the importance of cultural setting and beliefs in maintaining hope and emotional bonds. These mechanisms not only provided temporary protection, but also contributed to long-term recovery, where the writing of the *Guantánamo Diary* memoir became a means of personal expression and a symbol of resistance to injustice. This analysis reveals the universal experience of individuals in the face of severe trauma, showing how humans can adapt and find

ways to survive in the most inhumane conditions, while confirming the relevance of this issue in a global social context.

4.2 Suggestion

For further research, it is recommended to expand the analysis by comparing the use of defence mechanisms in this film with similar cases from real life or other films that address similar themes. This could provide deeper insights into how individuals cope with trauma and systemic injustice. In addition, interdisciplinary research combining psychology, law and film studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of extrajudicial detention on individuals' mental health so that this study can be used as a basis for developing better psychological support strategies for those experiencing similar situations, as well as for raising public awareness about the importance of human rights and fairness in the justice system.

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