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Tantri's Anxieties and Her Defense Mechanism in The Film *Sekala Niskala* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the anxieties and defense mechanisms in Tantri, the protagonist of Indonesian indie film *Sekala Niskala* (2018). This pivotal film of Kamila Andini tells the story of Tantri, a Balinese girl, dealing with her twin brother, Tantra's terminal illness. In this study, we are investigating Tantri's anxieties and her ego's defense mechanisms according to Sigmund Freud's anxiety theory and his and Anna Freud's defense mechanism theory. We found that Tantri displayed reality, neurotic, and moral anxiety. Her reality anxiety of Tantra's deteriorating health extended to her neurotic anxiety and moral anxiety. As a response, Tantri's ego applied the defense mechanisms of repression and sublimation. Tantri's repression was manifested in a pretense of reality and dreams that revealed the fears and desires; her sublimation was expressed through a dance. The results of this study show that anxiety and defense mechanisms are universal in different stages of life and all social backgrounds.

Keywords: anxiety, defense mechanisms, Indonesian film, psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

The drama genre in film is linked closely to independent filmmaking, resulting in the subgenre of indie-drama. The drama genre itself is often combined with other genres. Drama films are identified by their non-specified and serious approach to drama stories about human experience and the lack of comedic techniques (Williams, 2018). As one of the major genres that make up the Indonesian film market (Santika, 2023) where genre influences audiences watching behavior greatly (Rizky & Stellarosa, 2019), drama alone has some key differences compared to drama independent films. This can be traced back to its origins. In Indonesia itself, the movement of modern independent filmmaking was rooted in the *I Sinema* manifesto, where thirteen independent filmmakers pledge to find alternative ways to produce and distribute film to end stagnation in the film industry (Sasono, 2021). Through the years, there have been different meanings of what it means for a film to be independent in Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia: independent of government regulation/censorship, big mainstream studios, or traditional methods of filmmaking (Baumgärtel, 2012). Because independent films are made with relatively low production costs, funded by non-commercial organizations or donors, and screened in alternative settings such as film festivals and roadshows (Putri, 2013), they are not made with a wide national audience in mind. Independent filmmaker Kamila Andini even admits that she is unsure if her film has room for appreciation in Indonesia (Wirastama, 2018).

Kamila Andini who produced, wrote, and directed the film *Sekala Niskala* (2018) is one Indonesian indie filmmaker who is now much appreciated. Andini's works mostly revolve around the indie film scene and have the subjects of traditions and feminism. Throughout her career, the awards she has received include 27 wins and 55 nominations, both nationally and internationally (IMDb, n.d.). To Kamila Andini, film is the perfect medium for her to tell stories, one that she is constantly exploring (Sikuska, 2018). We choose to discuss her work in my study because analyzing her earlier work which is *Sekala Niskala* (2018) is insightful in learning

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about her rich artistic journey, as her works center on relevant societal issues, are nuanced, and have objective artistic values that are internationally and nationally acknowledged.

In 2018, Kamila Andini released her second feature film *Sekala Niskala* (*The Seen and Unseen*) at the Toronto International Film Festival World Premiere (TorinoFilmLab, n.d.). *Sekala Niskala* (2018) remains one of the modern classic Indonesian cinemas, as it has represented Indonesian cinema on the international stage (Administrator, 2018; Soelistijono, 2018) and is widely appreciated. A review from The Hollywood Reporter calls the film "A quietly powerful portrait of childhood grief" (Kerr, 2017), and *The Jakarta Post* review calls it "a languid exploration of grief through the lens of a child" (Widianto, 2018). Its unique cultural backdrop appeals as an exotic aspect, but the personal topic of childhood grief remains important whenever the film is discussed. This is where the film's intrigue comes from, namely *Sekala Niskala* (2018) combines its wider objective of representation and personal theme of grief into a harmonious narrative film. The topic of anxiety is interesting because anxiety is an emotion that is familiar to everyone. In *Sekala Niskala* (2018), anxiety is explored through a unique perspective.

Sekala Niskala (2018) tells the story of Tantri and Tantra, a Balinese ten-year-old girl and boy twin siblings going through a shift in their life. Tantra is ill with a tumor in his head. Tantri must process the state of her brother that is slipping away to his illness. In her inability to accept Tantra's illness, Tantri copes with it through different means: play, pretense, and dreams. To deal with her anxieties, Tantri applies some defense mechanisms, which are natural to humans that reveal so much about their mental states. The film ends with Tantri being able to accept the fact that she is about to lose her brother. In this study, we are going to investigate Tantri's anxieties and how she copes with them.

This study aims to explain Tantri's reality, neurotic, and moral anxieties as well as her defense mechanisms in dealing with her anxieties, which are repression and sublimation. In reading this study, anxiety is understood as a matter that is universal and important to represent in the media. As anxiety is an issue that many people face, it may be helpful to also discuss defense mechanisms, how individuals cope with their anxiety. However different it is in everyone, anxiety and the ego's defenses against it plays a big role in influencing actions and behaviors. Also, in the context of the narrative film, the framework of defense mechanisms can be an interesting approach to identify, build, or analyze character development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In analyzing the film to achieve the purpose of the study, the main theories that will be used are Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory about anxiety and his and Anna Freud's defense mechanism theory. To explain these two main theories, we will explain first the categorization of personality as proposed by Freud. To begin, the three elements of Freud's organization of personality are composed of the id, the ego, and the superego. First, id is a reflex apparatus that fulfills the pleasure principle. Its aim is to avoid pain and find pleasure instead. Id is about fulfilling desire that is rooted in the unconscious, making it an inaccessible and obscure part of the personality (Hall, 1956). Second, the ego, ruled by reality principle, acts as a system that checks between an individual's desires and the real world that exists in society and decides the final action, balancing the id and superego (Hall, 1956, p. 48). Third, the superego is an individual's moral code that dwells on what is ideal. The two subsystems that make up the superego are ego-ideal and the conscience. The ego-ideal relates to what a child's parents consider morally good as signaled by rewards, whereas the conscience relates to what a child's parents consider morally bad as established by punishments (Hall, 1956, p. 23). As a person

grows in society, his morality develops. Because morality depends on society's ideals, the ego must check it with the superego before an action is made. Ultimately, the ego and superego control and regulate the impulses of the id (Hall, 1956).

The first main theory is the anxiety theory. Freud (as cited in Hall, 1956) defines anxiety as a painful emotional experience synonymous with the emotion of fear. Anxiety can be useful in signaling danger to the ego, making it necessary. Based on their source of fear, anxiety can be identified into three main types according to Freud: reality or objective anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety (Hall, 1956). As the names suggest, reality anxiety originates from a danger that exists in the external world and is considered objective; neurotic anxiety originates from a threat in an instinctual object-choice of the id; and moral anxiety comes from a threat in the conscience of the superego.

In dealing with anxiety, an individual may turn to just attempt to alleviate anxiety (Hall, 1956, p. 85). Freud proposed the concept of defense mechanism, stating it as the unconscious processes individuals implement as a response to anxiety and later was expanded by Anna Freud. Anna Freud (1966) emphasizes defense mechanisms as motor automatisms of the ego based upon how one is raised. Among all the defense mechanisms, for the purpose of the study, only two types will be used: repression and sublimation. First, repression occurs when an individual, when faced with reality anxiety, blocks her impulse from conscious expression. Thus, before a cathexis (the energy that refers to impulses or reactions) may even produce anxiety, it is blocked from consciousness. Second, sublimation, known to be the most productive and healthy, involves diverting unacceptable thoughts or impulses into socially and morally responsible outlets (Kelland, 2023). The displacement of negative impulses into positive ones is determined by whether the action is respected and valued by others, such as pursuits that are valued for their intellectual, humanitarian, artistic, and cultural merits (Hall, 1956, p. 82).

ANALYSIS

Tantri's Anxieties

In *Sekala Niskala* (2018), Tantri experiences stressful situations that trigger anxiety. First, Tantri's reality anxiety mainly comes from the fear of what Tantra's illness could imply. Second, her neurotic anxiety is developed when she fears the implications of brother's illness in her life onwards as she continues to witness the changes in her life day by day as the consequences of Tantra's illness. Third, her moral anxiety stems from her desire to still treat her brother as if he were healthy no matter its consequences and from the guilty feeling for not suffering like him.

The film presents Tantri as first and foremost possessing reality anxiety by the nature of her situation of having a terminally ill twin brother Tantra, the main source of her anxiety. Generally, an illness is identified as a threat to life. Additionally, the deep relationship between twin siblings (Burlingham, 1947) could intensify Tantri's responses. The anxiety mainly lies in what the illness might imply, such as death and consequently major permanent changes in the family's life. Thus, when Tantri's ego perceives the illness that befalls her twin brother, it appropriately processes it as a danger as it can lead to major life changes as far as leading loss. To illustrate, Tantri shows this in the way her ego refuses to perceive the real danger because the unfamiliarity of the situation is alarming her. Her ego understands the objects associated with the reality of her brother's illness, which is the hospital room, with danger. Reality anxiety is also said to be traumatic, as it places the bearer of anxiety in a state of helplessness under overwhelming anxiety (Hall, 1956). Especially because Tantri is a child, around eleven years

old, her ego is not yet developed maturely, further increasing her excessive amount of stimulation of helplessness. As Tantri feels helpless in the situation, she feels as though she must act in a way that is within her own control. In this case, she is only presented with the choices of facing reality, for which she is not ready, or to completely avoid facing it.

Although the threat of Tantra's death is said to be objective, Tantri also shows the signs of neurotic anxiety rooted in it. According to Hall (1956), neurotic anxiety happens when the ego is threatened by the id which results in actions that go against the human's natural instincts. Tantri's neurotic anxiety is seen in her avoidance of a non-dangerous object and sleeping issues. First, Tantri's avoidance of Tantra's room in the hospital is neurotic because it is not inherently dangerous. Early on, when Tantra is just getting wheeled into the room, Tantri refuses to enter despite being told to (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.01.07–00.03.14). Because the unfamiliarity of the situation causes Tantri to be in shock, Tantri gets traumatized, associating the hospital room with danger. Since then, Tantri has avoided the hospital room. In later scenes that take place throughout the following weeks up to a month, every time Tantri is given a choice to come into the room during the day when there are other people in the room, she would not enter. Here, her reality principle gets disturbed, and her actions reflect more of her id working than her ego. Second, Tantri's neurotic anxiety results in sleeping issues. The human body needs sleep to survive, so if an individual's body somehow refuses to sleep, it is a sign that her mind is in an unhealthy state. For Tantri, she goes through numerous episodes of waking up late at night. This restlessness in her sleep is attributed to her reality anxiety and her dreams.

The consequence of Tantri's previous forms of anxiety (reality and neurotic) also comes in the form of moral anxiety as reflected in the way she punishes herself through guilty feelings and pain-inflicting actions. Her reality anxiety of losing her brother as well as her neurotic anxiety of constant worry of Tantra make her feel guilty. Her guilt is caused by her persistence to keep playing with Tantra who needs rest and for not being subjected to the suffering Tantra experiences. First, Tantri feels guilty because of her id's desire of playing with her brother as it reflects her selfishness. The moral thing to want is to wish for her brother to rest and be taken care of. Instead, her id gets a hold of her actions. Second, her reason for guilt is in her ego-ideal of living fairly with her twin whom she shares a deep connection to. When Tantri first discovers Tantra is losing his senses, in particular his fingers (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.36.35–00.37.43), she feels guilty because she is not subjected to the same suffering. With her ego-ideal not fulfilled, the guilty conscience of the superego burdens the ego, quickly resulting in self-hate (Hall, 1956, p. 34). This self-hate originates from the mind and can also manifest physically. In this case, it manifests in Tantri's physical self-harm, as afterwards, she prickles her own finger.

Tantri's Defense Mechanisms in Dealing with Her Anxieties

Defense mechanism is the way an individual unconsciously deals with anxiety. As anxiety is treated as a disturbance of the psyche, this energy of danger or anxiety must be expressed or let out. How this energy is transferred among the psyche and manifested involves defense mechanisms the ego applies to protect itself. In the case of Tantri, in dealing with the anxieties of adapting to her brother's illness, her fear of losing him, and her guilt in being healthy, Tantri's ego employs the defense mechanisms of repression and sublimation.

In the early stage of dealing with her brother's illness, Tantri deals with her anxiety through the defense mechanism of repression, identified by the blocking of one's impulse from consciousness. The first effect of Tantri's repression is disruptions in her normal bodily functions. In the situation of her brother getting wheeled to the hospital room, Tantri's ego registers the image as a danger. Rather than acting rationally, her ego registers this threat by setting up a barrier against the threatening idea to enter her consciousness. This repression

results in physical disturbances in the form of paralysis (Hall, 1956, p. 87). In the state, Tantri's body freezes as an effect of the ego's attempt at protecting itself.

Later, Tantri's repression makes her create a pretense of reality. Although at this stage, Tantri has become brave enough to witness Tantra being in the hospital room, Tantri still does not accept the fact that Tantra is terminally ill. Tantri has heard it by eavesdropping the conversation between her parents detailing Tantra's conditions, informing that he has lost his senses, sight, and hearing (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.20.47–00.22.35). Despite this, Tantri's ego creates a pretending situation that Tantra is still well and healthy, being able to still see, hear, and talk (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.31.35–00.32.23; 00.35.05–00.35.18). In these instances, to protect the ego, Tantri's ego distorts information and creates a pretense of reality.

Repression can also manifest in dreams. When Tantri's ego begins to experience reality anxiety, some parts of her cathexis seek to find a kind of fulfillment, and the ego fulfills this cathexis by releasing it through dreams (Hall, 1956, p. 88). Although in a sleeping state, repressed emotions can be reflected in dreams (De Timary, Heenen-Wolff, & Philippot, 2011) and can be as strong as emotions one would feel in an awakened state (Foulkes et al., 1988). In Tantri's case, the dreams she is having reflect her deepest fears and desires that reside in her unconscious. Firstly, her dreams reveal her fears of loss. In Tantri's dreams, the moon represents Tantra. In one dream, Tantra tells her, "I feel like I am the moon. So bright, but after a while, the brightness is fading away," to which Tantri replies, "I don't see you fading. You shine brightly just like the full moon" (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.36.09–00.36.31). This conversation can be interpreted as her conversation between her unconscious and conscious self. Deep down, her unconscious mind is aware that Tantra is severely ill, but Tantri wants to disagree, and her ego works to repress it. Tantri's fears in her dreams are also manifested in dreams she has about a group of children that are understood as her fear of the unknown. In the dreams, they always reflect Tantri's emotional states of fear and lacking emotional comfort (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.29.04–00.29.55; 00.10.13–00.11.10).

Not only fears, but Tantri's dreams also reflect her repressed desires. First, she dreams of playing with Tantra (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.23.50–00.27.10), revealing her ego's desire to be with him. In the same dream, Tantri dreams of sleeping together and then waking up with Tantra next to her, reflecting her desire for normalcy. Since she cannot do anything to achieve that desire, her ego releases tensions from the id through dreams. Second, Tantri's dreams of presenting a dance to the moon goddess as an offering (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.33.10–00.48.18) reveal her wishes for Tantra's health. It symbolizes Tantri's hope and desire in Tantra's recovery, as worshipping the moon goddess is believed to cure illness and chase away evil (Eiseman, 2009). Third, Tantri's dreams about her mother and Tantra practicing rebab reflects her desire to see them happy (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 01.02.23–01.02.44). Before the dream, Tantri has just witnessed her mother silently crying because of Tantra's worsening condition. As the desires cannot be fulfilled, they are then repressed to "find symbolic fulfillment in dreams (Hall, 1956, p. 88)," as dreams are also linked with wish-fulfillment, an image of objects or events that provides gratification and reduces tension (Hall, 1956, p. 25). Although repression is considered unhealthy, according to Hall (1956), it can be necessary in personality development as it serves as a protection for the ego that is still not mature enough to deal with danger productively from the id's attacks. In short, repression is necessary up to the point "the ego has acquired sufficient strength to cope with danger by more rational methods" (p. 89).

The last defense mechanism Tantri's ego applies is sublimation, which involves diverting negative emotions or impulses into acceptable or productive activities (Kelland, 2023). Whether for the purpose of intellect, humanity, culture, or artistry, sublimation relies on the social and moral acceptability of the activities (Hall, 1956, p. 82). Morality is believed to be

innate and at the same time a result of culture, its creation both using the emotional and rational process (Eden et al., 2015, pp. 8–9). As what is socially and morally acceptable are informed by the society a person lives in, Tantri's actions are a product of her environment, which includes her culture and traditions. Dance itself is a large aspect of Balinese culture and traditions, where its functions serve as a mandatory part of a ritualistic practice (*tari wali*), a part of a ritual to enliven the atmosphere but not mandatory (*tari bebali*), and as a performance art not for any ritual purposes (*tari balih-balihan*) (Duija, 2022; Armayani, 2021). Since dance is an integral part of life, Balinese children are exposed to dancing from an early age for the sake of cultural preservation and spiritual reasons, also called *ngayah* which means an offering to the gods (Sukarta, 2023). As a Balinese, she resorts to dance as a form of expression. Thus, the value of Tantri's sublimation is liberating (Arnold, 1995) and spiritual.

Tantri's first sublimation is in her dance imitating a cock fight. This dance is initiated after Tantri witnesses a cock fight in the streets (called *tajen* or *sabung ayam*) (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 00.43.45–00.48.18). Tantri and Tantra dance in swift and assertive movements, emulating the tension in the *tajen*. A *tajen* has a champion, as does the dance performed by Tantri and Tantra. To some Balinese, *tajen* is essential in the Hindu rituals for *yadna*, a step of rituals for Hindu Balinese that serves as an offering, sacrifice, worship, and respect to Ida Sang Hyang Wishi Wasa (Artaye, 2022; Mileh & Pidada, 2022). In witnessing the chickens fight, Tantri's ego identifies with the intense emotions from the *tajen*, guiding her to recreate those emotions. Tantri's *tajen* dance ends with her in defeat, paralleling being sacrificed, highlighting Tantri's feelings of helplessness as well as her ego's desire to experience the pain her brother is going through as informed by her superego saying it is not fair that she gets to be healthy while he suffers. Therefore, this defense mechanism is one way Tantri deals with her moral anxiety, fulfilling her superego's punishment through experiencing a concrete form of being in a state of defeat but in a productive outlet to let her emotions surface and gain release.

The next dance as a form of sublimation Tantri performs is a theatrical monkey dance. Tantri performs this dance after visiting the monkey temple to pray with her parents. The monkey temple's official name is *Pura Luhur Uluwatu*, one of the most important temples in Bali dedicated to Rudra, "the dissolver of life" (Eiseman, 2009, p. 265). The life that is being "dissolved" here is Tantra's. In the next scene, Tantri performs the dance dressed as a monkey (*Sekala Niskala*, 2018, 01.13.00–01.18.00) as an artistic expression for her to experience her grief. Every stage of the dance symbolizes Tantri's process in grief, including sorrow, desperation, rage, and finally acceptance. From the inputs from her reality which are intense emotional energy of defeat and loss, Tantri learns there is no hope for Tantra anymore. The anxiety that Tantri faces as the result of combination of her mother's outward sorrow, the temple visit, and witnessing Tantra immobile pushes her to an overwhelming emotional state of grief.

Previously, it has been stated that repression is necessary when the ego is still learning on how to deal with overwhelming situations. In Tantri's case, her ego is exhibiting healthy personality development through her shift from repression to sublimation. Tantri's ego has adjusted itself to find ways to cope, which it finds in the artistic expression of dance. Through both dances, Tantri gains spiritual and emotional fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

Sekala Niskala (2018) is one pivotal film for Indonesian indie filmmaker Kamila Andini with its cultural significance and intimate subject matter as highlights. In facing the stressful situation of her twin brother's terminal illness, its protagonist Tantri experiences anxiety and copes with it by applying defense mechanisms. The purpose of this study is to explain Tantri's anxieties and the defense mechanisms her ego employs to deal with them. To understand

Tantri's journey in dealing with her twin brother's illness, her anxieties and defense mechanisms are analyzed based on Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud's theories. Through them, Tantri's reality, neurotic, and moral anxieties, as well as her defense mechanisms in the forms of repression and sublimation are explored.

First, Tantri experiences three types of anxiety in *Sekala Niskala* (2018). Her reality anxiety is her fear of losing her twin brother, Tantra. Although still considered realistic, it becomes a neurotic anxiety when it interferes with her life instincts and daily life. Tantri's neurotic anxiety is displayed in her restraint from entering Tantra's hospital room and sleeping issues. Then, Tantri also faces moral anxiety in the form of guilt followed by self-harm. Second, Tantri's defense mechanisms are identified as repression and sublimation. In the early to middle stage of facing her reality and neurotic anxiety, Tantri applies repression. Tantri's repression comes in two categories: a pretense and dreams of her fears and desires. Then, in her later stages, she employs sublimation. Tantri's sublimation comes in the form of the productive and artistic outlet of dance. Both culturally significant and personally liberating, dance allows Tantri to express her emotional journey.

Through the psychoanalysis of Tantri in *Sekala Niskala* (2018), several findings are made. First, anxiety is a universal experience not limited to adults. Its representation in children, especially within unique cultural perspectives like that of the protagonist of *Sekala Niskala* (2018) holds its own intrigue. Additionally, to make discussions around anxiety more productive, discussing the ways it is dealt with is beneficial. For instance, with analysis of anxiety and defense mechanisms done together, character development, which also reflects real-life individuals, can be identified and used as learning tools. This study also highlights the importance of any defense mechanisms and the myth of the unproductive mechanism. Many defense mechanisms are regarded to be unhealthy except for sublimation, yet this study shows that even a categorically unhealthy mechanism still serves a purpose if it is not employed for the long term. Lastly, this study highlights cultural background, social norms and beliefs, religious practices and ideologies, and individual personality as contributing factors to psychoanalytical subjects like anxiety and defense mechanisms. Through analyzing Tantri from *Sekala Niskala* (2018), it can be concluded that anxiety as well as its responses in the form of defense mechanisms are universal to different stages of life and all social and cultural backgrounds.

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