



## REPRESENTING POST-TSUNAMI ACEHNESE IDENTITY IN TERE LIYE'S HAFALAN SHALAT DELISA: A STUART HALL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

This study examines the representation of Acehese cultural identity in Tere Liye's *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* through Stuart Hall's theory of representation within the context of post-tsunami Aceh. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the study combines textual analysis of the novel with interview and field observation data from Aceh. The findings show that the novel constructs Acehese identity primarily through religiosity, spiritual resilience, and social solidarity, positioning faith as the main source of cultural endurance after disaster. However, this representation is selective, privileging moral and religious unity while downplaying the social, ethnic, and cultural plurality of Acehese society. From a constructionist perspective, the study demonstrates that literary representation does not simply mirror reality but actively produces meaning through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Unlike previous studies that focus mainly on moral or educational aspects of the novel, this research highlights how post-disaster identity is discursively shaped, contributing to a more critical understanding of cultural representation in Indonesian literature.

### تجريد

#### Keywords:

Acehnese Identity  
Post-Tsunami  
Representation  
Stuart Hall  
Post-Disaster  
Narrative

تتناول هذه الدراسة تمثيل الهوية الثقافية الأتشية في رواية حفظ صلاة دليسا للكاتب تيري ليه من خلال نظرية التمثيل لستيوارت هول في سياق آتشييه بعد كارثة التسونامي. وباستخدام المنهج الوصفي-التحليلي النوعي، تجمع الدراسة بين تحليل النص الأدبي وبيانات المقابلات والملاحظات الميدانية التي أجريت في آتشييه. وتُظهر النتائج أن الرواية تبني الهوية الأتشية أساسًا من خلال الدين، والقدرة الروحية على الصمود، والتضامن الاجتماعي، حيث يُصوّر الإيمان بوصفه المصدر الرئيس لاستمرار الثقافة بعد الكارثة. ومع ذلك، فإن هذا التمثيل انتقائي، إذ يبرز الوحدة الأخلاقية والدينية على حساب التنوع الاجتماعي والإثني والثقافي في المجتمع الأتشي. ومن منظور بنائي، تبين الدراسة أن التمثيل الأدبي لا يعكس الواقع الاجتماعي فحسب، بل يشارك في إنتاج المعنى من خلال آليات الإدراج والإقصاء. وعلى خلاف الدراسات السابقة التي ركزت غالبًا على البعد الأخلاقي أو التربوي، تبرز هذه الدراسة كيفية تشكّل الهوية بعد الكارثة بشكل خطابي داخل النص الأدبي، مما يساهم في تعميق فهم تمثيل الثقافة في الأدب الإندونيسي.

## الكلمات المفتاحية :

هوية أتشيه  
ما بعد تسونامي  
تمثيل  
ستيوارت هول  
السرد ما بعد الكارثة

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi identitas budaya Aceh dalam novel *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* karya Tere Liye dengan menggunakan teori representasi Stuart Hall dalam konteks Aceh pascabencana tsunami. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis, penelitian ini menggabungkan analisis teks novel dengan data wawancara dan observasi lapangan di Aceh. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa novel tersebut membangun identitas Aceh terutama melalui religiositas, ketangguhan spiritual, dan solidaritas sosial, dengan menempatkan iman sebagai sumber utama ketahanan budaya setelah bencana. Namun, representasi ini bersifat selektif karena lebih menonjolkan kesatuan moral dan religius serta menyederhanakan keragaman sosial, etnis, dan budaya masyarakat Aceh. Dari perspektif konstruksionis, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa representasi sastra tidak sekadar mencerminkan realitas sosial, melainkan secara aktif membentuk makna melalui proses inklusi dan eksklusi. Berbeda dari penelitian sebelumnya yang umumnya menekankan aspek moral dan pendidikan, studi ini menyoroti bagaimana identitas pascabencana dikonstruksi secara diskursif dalam teks sastra, sehingga memperkaya kajian representasi budaya dalam sastra Indonesia.

## Kata kunci:

Identitas Aceh  
Pasca Tsunami  
Representasi  
Stuart Hall  
Narasi Pasca Bencana

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## A. Introduction

In the Indonesian context, culture is understood as the cumulative product of thought, behavior, and social interaction that evolves within dynamic social conditions. It is not merely a collection of symbolic traditions but a complex and dynamic system that continuously lives through the reproduction of meaning and social practices. Koentjaraningrat defines culture as the aggregation of human creativity, sense, and work (*cipta, rasa, dan karsa*) manifested in various social activities encompassing systems of knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, and customs that together shape the collective identity of society (Koentjaraningrat, 1990). Thus, culture should not be viewed as a static heritage but as a living process—a continuously reinterpreted way of life transmitted from generation to generation, emphasizing that cultural identity is perpetually in the making.

Aceh, as one of Indonesia's provinces, possesses a distinctive and deeply rooted cultural identity. This uniqueness emerges from the harmonious synthesis of Islamic values, respected local traditions, and a strong sense of social solidarity (Khairani & Ibrahim, 2025). Acehnese culture functions as a moral and social foundation that governs both everyday interactions and efforts to preserve tradition amid modernization (Dewi et al., 2025). Various

cultural expressions — such as the Saman Dance, *kenduri* rituals, *pengajian* gatherings, and the practice of *pemulia jamee* (honoring guests) — demonstrate how the Acehese actively maintain and revitalize ancestral values while simultaneously engaging with contemporary realities (Heniwaty & Yusnizar, 2015). Through these practices, Acehese identity continues to evolve as a living dialogue between faith, tradition, and social transformation.

Within the broader Indonesian and Southeast Asian historical context, Aceh has long occupied a distinctive cultural and political position shaped by the intertwining of Islamic authority, regional consciousness, and historical encounters with colonial and state power. Reid argues that regional identities in Southeast Asia are not formed as fixed cultural essences but emerge through long historical processes in which religion, political imagination, and struggles over authority play a central role (Reid, 2005). This historical positioning helps explain why Aceh is repeatedly represented in national cultural narratives as a region marked by moral resilience, strong religiosity, and symbolic distinctiveness (Muhammad, 2013).

The study of cultural identity occupies a central position in the humanities because it reflects the ways in which societies define themselves, their histories, and their realities. In contemporary cultural theory, identity is no longer conceived as an essential or fixed entity, but as a socially constructed concept shaped by language, symbolism, and collective experience. Hall asserts that identity is not something that one simply possesses; it is produced within representation, continually negotiated through discourse and social practice. Identity, therefore, is relational—it emerges through difference, contestation, and the interplay of meanings within particular historical and cultural contexts (Hall, 1997).

Within Indonesia, Aceh holds a unique position in the discourse of cultural identity. Its distinctiveness is not only rooted in the dominance of Islamic religiosity but also in its dynamic negotiation between local wisdom and modernity. Restela and Narawati describe Acehese identity as a synthesis of local wisdom, Islamic orthodoxy, and social resilience (Restela, 2017). However, this identity is far from monolithic; rather, it remains fluid, continuously redefined in response to changing socio-historical conditions. The massive earthquake and tsunami that struck Aceh on December 26, 2004, became a turning point that dramatically transformed the region's social and cultural landscape. Beyond the physical devastation, the disaster triggered a deep process of cultural and moral reflection, compelling the community to reconstruct not only its material life but also its collective identity. In the aftermath, Acehese society engaged in a process of recontextualizing self-meaning,

renegotiating cultural values, and rebuilding solidarity in the midst of shared trauma (Sakdiah, N. & Mauliza, 2023).

In this context, literature plays a vital role as both a record and a re-creator of cultural reality. It functions as a symbolic space where human experience is interpreted and mediated through narrative and language (Wardany et al., 2024). Among the literary works that vividly capture post-tsunami Aceh, Tere Liye's *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* (2009) stands out as a poignant narrative that intertwines loss, faith, and resilience. Through the character of Delisa, a young survivor, the novel articulates the spiritual endurance of the Acehnese people, portraying their religiosity, submission to divine will (*tawakal*), and social cohesion as the core of their identity. Beyond its emotional narrative, the novel constructs a specific cultural image of Aceh—one that emphasizes moral and spiritual strength as the essence of its collective character (Nilawijaya, 2021).

Nevertheless, cultural representation in literary texts is inherently selective and never entirely neutral. Every representation carries interpretive choices that may privilege certain meanings while silencing others. The image of Acehnese identity presented in *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* must therefore be critically examined in relation to the broader and more complex socio-cultural realities of post-disaster Aceh. As Hall emphasizes, representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process of constructing meaning within discourse (Hall, 1997). Hence, the analysis of representation becomes essential in revealing how cultural identities are produced, negotiated, and ideologically framed through narrative strategies.

Previous studies of *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* have primarily focused on moral and religious values, particularly in relation to character education and spirituality. However, critical examinations that interrogate the novel from the perspective of identity construction and representation remain limited. Considering the novel's popularity and wide readership, its portrayal of Aceh has significant implications for shaping public perceptions of the region. This research, therefore, seeks to analyze how Acehnese identity is represented and negotiated in *Hafalan Shalat Delisa*, and to what extent this representation reflects or, conversely, restricts the multidimensional reality of Acehnese culture.

Drawing upon Stuart Hall's Constructivist Representation Theory (1997), this study aims to critically examine the representation of Acehnese cultural identity in Tere Liye's *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* within the context of post-tsunami social transformation. It explores how the novel constructs meaning through narrative, character, and cultural symbols, and how these representations engage with broader ideological and social frameworks. The ultimate

goal of this research is to contribute to the theoretical discourse on Indonesian literary and cultural studies by demonstrating how literature functions not only as a reflection of cultural identity but also as a discursive space where identity is continuously constructed, contested, and reimagined in response to historical experience.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to examine how Acehese cultural identity is represented in Tere Liye's *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* using Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Specifically, this research seeks to analyze the narrative strategies and cultural symbols through which Acehese identity is constructed, as well as to explore the ideological implications of such representations within the post-tsunami socio-cultural context of Aceh. By addressing these objectives, the study positions itself as a critical intervention in Indonesian literary studies on cultural representation and identity.

## **B. Research Methods**

### **1. Research Type and Design**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the representation of Acehese identity in Tere Liye's *Hafalan Shalat Delisa*. This approach is selected because the research seeks an in-depth understanding of how Acehese cultural identity is constructed and represented within a literary text, while simultaneously relating it to the socio-cultural realities of Acehese society in the post-2004 tsunami context. The case study design is particularly appropriate, as the phenomenon under investigation is context-specific and closely tied to a particular historical and cultural setting.

In line with Creswell (2023), qualitative research positions the researcher as the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (J.W., 2023). Accordingly, this study involves the researcher's active engagement in interpreting both the literary text and the empirical data. Interview data were transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity of participants' voices and were subsequently examined through thematic coding. This process enables a nuanced reading of how Acehese identity operates discursively, both within the narrative structure of the novel and in lived social experiences.

### **2. Data Sources**

The data in this study consist of primary and secondary sources, designed to establish both intertextual and contextual understandings of cultural representation.

Primary data include: 1) The text of Tere Liye's novel *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* (2009); 2) In-depth interviews with Acehese tsunami survivors, community leaders, academics, artists, and representatives of the Acehese-Chinese ethnic group, involving multiple informants from each group; and 3) Field observations of socio-cultural life in Acehese communities, particularly those affected by the 2004 tsunami.

Secondary data comprise theoretical and scholarly sources relevant to the research focus, including literature on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, studies on Acehese cultural identity, and academic journals and books that support the analytical framework of the study.

### 3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three complementary techniques to ensure methodological triangulation and analytical depth. First, a close textual analysis of *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* was conducted to identify discourses of Acehese identity as expressed through narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, and setting. This analysis focuses on how the novel constructs and disseminates meanings related to Acehese culture, religiosity, and social values.

Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with selected informants from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, chosen based on their direct experience with post-tsunami Acehese social life and their involvement in local cultural or religious practices. These interviews explored participants' perspectives on Acehese cultural identity and their reflections on its representation in the novel. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim for analytical purposes.

Third, field observations were undertaken over a sustained period of field engagement to capture everyday socio-cultural practices within Acehese communities, particularly those related to religious activities, social interaction, and communal values. Data Processing and Analysis Techniques.

The collected data were analyzed through several interrelated stages. Interview data were first transcribed verbatim to preserve the nuances of participants' expressions. Subsequently, data reduction was carried out by selecting and organizing information relevant to the research focus on cultural identity representation. The data were then coded thematically to identify recurring patterns, including religiosity, adat traditions, collective trauma, social solidarity, and humanitarian values.

Drawing on Stuart Hall's (1997) constructivist theory of representation, the analysis examines how Acehnese identity is symbolically constructed within both literary and social contexts. This stage also considers how meaning is produced through selective representation and how ideological dimensions shape the portrayal of Acehnese culture. Finally, the analytical findings were interpreted critically to address the research questions and to situate the results within broader discussions of cultural representation and identity formation.

### C. Result and Discussion

#### 1. The Representation of Acehnese Cultural Identity in *Hafalan Shalat Delisa*

The analysis of *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* shows that Acehnese cultural identity is constructed through a selective interplay of religious symbolism, linguistic markers, local traditions, and social relations. These narrative elements collectively produce an image of Aceh as a religious, resilient, and morally grounded society. However, when the literary representation is examined alongside interview data and field observations, this identity appears idealized, privileging spiritual coherence while simplifying the social and cultural plurality of Acehnese life.

Religious imagery strongly structures the narrative. Recurrent references to *meunasah*, *shalat*, *doa*, and *pengajian* position religiosity as the organizing principle of everyday life. Early scenes of the *adzan subuh* and communal prayer establish religion as the primary rhythm of social existence, reinforcing Aceh's long-standing image as the "Veranda of Mecca." In the novel, *meunasah* functions not merely as a physical space but as a cultural symbol through which moral order and social harmony are defined.

The repeated invocation of *meunasah* functions not merely as a physical setting but as a cultural symbol that indexes Acehnese Islamic identity. Through narrative repetition, the novel constructs Aceh as a spiritual landscape in which moral order and social harmony are defined largely through religious practice. Representation here does not mirror social reality; rather, it organizes experience into a coherent moral narrative.

Empirical findings, however, complicate this portrayal. Interviews with tsunami survivors indicate that post-disaster religious life is intertwined with linguistic practices and communal adaptation. Qur'anic recitation and religious instruction are often conducted in the Acehnese language, reflecting a form of cultural continuity that is largely absent from the novel's Indonesian-dominated narration. This contrast reveals that

Acehnese identity in lived experience is negotiated through everyday linguistic and social practices rather than expressed solely through symbolic religiosity.

## 2. Religious and Social Symbolism as Discursive Identity Construction

In *Hafalan Shalat Delisa*, religion functions not only as a thematic element but also as a discursive mechanism that structures identity formation. Delisa's character embodies ideals of patience, faith, and *tawakal*, transforming personal loss into spiritual perseverance. Her commitment to memorizing prayers amid devastation operates as an allegory for Acehnese collective resilience. Similarly, scenes of communal rebuilding—such as villagers and marines reconstructing the *meunasah*—symbolize solidarity rooted in religious unity.

However, interview data indicate that this depiction only partially reflects lived social realities. Post-tsunami recovery involved a wide range of actors, including non-Muslim humanitarian workers, Chinese-Acehnese citizens, and international volunteers. These plural contributions are largely marginalized in the novel. The character of Koh Acan, for instance, appears primarily as a symbolic marker of tolerance rather than as an active participant in communal recovery.

This selective portrayal reflects what Hall conceptualizes as the politics of representation, where meaning is produced through processes of inclusion and exclusion. By foregrounding Islamic moral unity while minimizing inter-ethnic collaboration, the novel reproduces an idealized version of Acehnese identity—religiously cohesive yet socially homogenized (Hall, 1997). As Barker argues, such idealization is never politically neutral; it reinforces cultural narratives that privilege moral purity over social complexity (Barker, 2003).

Interview participants consistently emphasized values such as *gotong royong*, compassion, and perseverance as central to Acehnese identity, while also acknowledging tensions related to modernization, gender dynamics, and economic inequality. These social complexities, however, remain largely absent from the literary text. Consequently, while the novel effectively conveys emotional truth, it also narrows the interpretive space through which Acehnese identity is represented.

## 3. Language, Tradition, and Local Symbols in Cultural Representation

Language plays a crucial role in the cultural representation of *Hafalan Shalat Delisa*. Acehnese terms such as *meunasah*, *kenduri*, *Teuku*, *Cut*, and *hana mangat*, alongside references to *Tari Saman*, *martabak Aceh*, and *tikar pandan*, function as semiotic anchors that



signal local authenticity. These lexical choices transform language into a symbolic repository of memory and belonging.

Field data confirm that language remains a powerful marker of identity in Aceh. The Acehese language continues to be used in religious education, social rituals, and spatial naming practices, signifying cultural endurance across disaster and displacement. In the novel, however, linguistic markers operate symbolically rather than contextually. As Hall suggests, such representation “stands for” experience without fully “speaking from” it, producing an impression of authenticity that is culturally constructed rather than lived (Hall, 1996).

Similarly, traditions such as *kenduri* and *pemulia jamee* appear as episodic cultural signifiers within the narrative. Interview narratives reveal that these practices function as social and theological rituals that transform grief into collective resilience. While central to Acehese communal life, this depth of cultural practice is only briefly gestured toward in the novel.

#### 4. Textual Representation and Empirical Discrepancies

A critical dimension of this study lies in the comparison between fictional representation and empirical reality. Several discrepancies emerge between the novel and field data. Survivors locate the tsunami tragedy in Ulee Lheue, whereas the novel situates it in Lhok Nga. Architectural depictions of wooden stilt houses contrast with the concrete structures prevalent in affected areas. Most notably, the rescue narrative centers on an American volunteer, while survivor testimonies emphasize the role of local rescuers.

From Hall's perspective, these divergences illustrate that representation is a constructed discourse rather than a mirror of reality (Hall, 1997). The novel's emphasis on global humanitarianism symbolically repositions Aceh within an international moral gaze, transforming local agency into a universal narrative of compassion. This process aligns with Hall's notion of articulation, whereby cultural meaning is recontextualized through new ideological frameworks (Hall, 1996).

#### 5. Synthetic Summary of Findings

A synthesis of textual and empirical data reveals a patterned divergence between literary representation and lived experience in the construction of Acehese identity. In *Hafalan Shalat Delisa*, identity is articulated primarily through symbols of religiosity, moral integrity, and emotional resilience. Language functions as a cultural marker through selective Acehese terminology embedded within an Indonesian narrative, while religion

serves as the central axis through which morality and endurance are defined. Traditions appear as affirmations of communal warmth rather than as complex social practices.

In contrast, empirical findings portray Acehese identity as plural, dynamic, and negotiated. Linguistic practices are characterized by hybridity and bilingualism, religious faith operates alongside pragmatic social cooperation, and traditions function as adaptive mechanisms for post-disaster recovery. These contrasts highlight the ideological work of representation: the novel simplifies cultural plurality in favor of a morally cohesive narrative that resonates emotionally but limits the representation of social complexity.

## 6. Discussion: Representation as Cultural Negotiation

Integrating textual and empirical findings, this study demonstrates that *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* enacts a constructivist representation of Acehese identity. Rather than reproducing social reality, the novel signifies Aceh through emotional, moral, and symbolic codes, producing an affective reconstruction of post-tsunami identity. By foregrounding faith-based resilience, the text contributes to a national narrative that frames Aceh as both victim and moral exemplar.

At the same time, the simplification of cultural plurality reflects the ideological risks of essentializing identity. As Hall cautions, identity is always a matter of positioning rather than essence (Hall, 1996). Literature thus becomes a discursive space where competing versions of Aceh are imagined, stabilized, and contested. Through this process, *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* participates not only in representing Acehese culture but also in shaping how Aceh is remembered and understood within the broader Indonesian cultural imagination.

## D. Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of Acehese cultural identity in Tere Liye's *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* through Stuart Hall's theory of representation, demonstrating that literary identity is not a direct reflection of social reality but a constructed and selective process of meaning-making. The findings show that the novel foregrounds religiosity, moral integrity, and spiritual resilience as the core elements of Acehese identity, positioning faith as the primary source of endurance in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. Through religious symbols, linguistic markers, and selected cultural traditions, Aceh is represented as a morally cohesive and spiritually grounded society.

However, when read alongside interview data and field observations, this representation appears idealized. The lived realities of Acehese society reveal a more complex and plural identity, characterized by linguistic hybridity, inter-ethnic collaboration, and pragmatic forms of social resilience. While religion remains central, it operates in dialogue with social practices, collective labor, and adaptive traditions that are largely simplified or marginalized in the novel. This gap between textual representation and empirical reality highlights the ideological dimensions of literary representation, where inclusion and exclusion shape cultural meaning.

Drawing on Hall's constructionist perspective, this study affirms that cultural identity in literature is always provisional and positional—continuously produced rather than fixed. *Hafalan Shalat Delisa* thus functions as a discursive space in which post-tsunami Acehese identity is emotionally reconstructed and symbolically stabilized, contributing to a national moral narrative that frames Aceh as both a site of suffering and a source of spiritual exemplarity. While this narrative fosters empathy and moral reflection, it also risks narrowing the understanding of Acehese identity by privileging unity over diversity.

From a practical perspective, these findings are relevant for literary education, cultural studies, and the broader public understanding of Aceh. Given the novel's wide readership, its representation of Acehese identity has a significant influence on how post-disaster Aceh is imagined beyond the region itself. A more critical engagement with such representations can help educators, students, and readers avoid essentialized or overly moralized views of Acehese culture and instead appreciate its social and historical complexity.

This study contributes to Indonesian literary and cultural studies by offering a critical reading of post-disaster identity representation that integrates textual analysis with empirical perspectives. Future research may extend this approach by comparing representations of Aceh across different literary works, films, or media narratives, or by examining how Acehese readers interpret and negotiate these representations in their everyday lives. Such directions would deepen the understanding of how identity, memory, and power interact in post-disaster cultural narratives.

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