

Postcolonial encounters between the west, the east, and Islam in Hanum Salsabiela's travel writing

Risma Nur Rahmawati ^{a, 1, *}, Faruk ^{a, 2}, Wening Udasmoro ^{a, 3}

^a Universitas Gajah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

¹ Risma.nur.r@mail.ugm.ac.id; ² Farukkhan@ugm.a.id; ³ Udasmoro@ugm.ac.id

* Correspondent author

Received: July 26, 2025

Revised: October 20, 2025

Accepted: October 28, 2025

KEYWORDS

East
Islam
Postcolonial
Travel Writing
West

ABSTRACT

Travel writing serves as a crucial medium through which narrators document and interpret their encounters with foreign cultures. This study examines Hanum Salsabiela's *Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika (BTLA)* to explore how the narrator reports on the United States, expresses her self-identity during her journey in the United States, and represents the people of the United States through the lens of postcolonial travel writing. This research is significant because the narrator not only depicts the United States as a geographical and cultural space but also highlights the presence of Islam within it. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, it is not surprising that many Indonesian travel writers are drawn to Islamic regions such as the Middle East. However, in recent years, some have begun to explore Western countries, which differ significantly in culture and religion. The data collection methods used in this research are textual observation and note-taking. In addition, the data analysis employs discourse analysis grounded in the *postcolonial travel writing paradigms* of Carl Thompson. In conclusion, the study indicates that the United States is portrayed as a metropolitan country, yet it continues to face overlapping social issues, including homelessness, Islamophobia, and discrimination. *BTLA* functions as self-reflective travel writing, using the United States as a space for the narrator to explore and reflect on her identity as a Muslim. Furthermore, in representing the Other, the narrator still exhibits traces of a neo-colonial attitude, even though she strives to present a cosmopolitan perspective.

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Universitas Ahmad Dahlan.

This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY-SA](#) license.



Introduction

Travel writing has long served as a vital medium for informing readers about foreign lands they have never visited. During the journey, the narrator often discovers new things that were previously unknown. In their work, the travel writer or narrator typically describes their experiences exploring foreign lands, the natural environment, and the various cultures they encounter (Nisa, 2024). Furthermore, Lisle argues that travel writing is valuable for understanding key international issues, including policy documents, government press releases, parliamentary debates, and media narratives. Additionally, due to its wide readership, travel writing provides insight into how power relations operate on a global scale (Lisle, 2006). During the colonial period, travel writing was predominantly Eurocentric, emphasizing European cultural dominance and superiority over the societies being explored. These narratives often focused on conquest, exploration, and the observation of the "exotic" qualities of colonized lands, establishing a clear distinction between the narrator as the subject and the local population as the object (Thompson, 2011).

By contrast, postcolonial travel writing adopts a more reflective and critical stance. It foregrounds, seeks a more equitable understanding of local cultures, and acknowledges the narrator's outsider status. Central themes in postcolonial travel narratives include identity, marginalization, and a heightened awareness of the complex power dynamics between former colonizers and the societies under exploration. The postcolonial approach to contemporary travel writing also seeks to examine the ongoing engagement between travel writing and cultural imperialism (Huggan, 2000). Hanum Salsabiela's *Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika* exemplifies this postcolonial approach. Faruk emphasizes that postcolonial societies often experience a mental dependence on Western standards, feel inferior, and lose confidence in developing their own identity and culture, which can also be reflected in travel writing where local cultures are portrayed through a Western lens, potentially reinforcing stereotypes or overlooking communities' authentic perspectives. Foulcher & Day explain that postcolonial studies are a strategy for reading literature that takes into account colonialism and its impacts within literary texts, as well as the position or voice of the observer in relation to these issues (Foulcher & Day, 2008). In Hanum Salsabiela's postcolonial travel literature, the West is no longer the object studied by the East, but instead becomes the subject of study for the West. The United States (the West) occupies the position of an object being observed by Indonesia (the East). As an Indonesian Muslim traveler in the United States, the narrator not only documents her observations of American society and social issues but also reflects on her own identity as a Muslim navigating a predominantly non-Muslim environment.

Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika (hereafter *BTLA*) is particularly important to study because the theme of the narrator's journey differs from that of other narrators. While much of Indonesian travel writing, such as *Ranah 3 Warna* (Fuadi, 2009), *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (El-Shirazy, 2004), and *Mekah Berkabut Merah* (El-Mishry, 2008), primarily focuses on journeys to the Middle East, *BTLA* foregrounds travel to the West, especially in the United States. In doing so, the narrator reflects not only on American society but also on Islam's position within it. Islam and America are inseparable in this context because the United States hosts one of the largest populations of Muslim migrants in the world (Migrationpolicy, 2025). Moreover, for the West (in this context, Americans), Islam is constructed as the "Near East" (Said, 1977). Western representations of inferiority do not stop at the East but extend to Islam itself. Islam, for the West, a formidable competitor in political, social, and even economic arenas. The West often views Islam as a persistent obstacle to its political, economic, and social progress (Said, 1997). Consequently, in travel writings, narrators usually associate America with Islam. Hanum Salsabiela, for instance, describes how discrimination experienced by Muslims in America stems from an unfounded fear of Islam, referred to as Islamophobia. This fear intensified significantly after the 9/11 WTC tragedy (Abbas, 2021; Bukar, 2020). Therefore, the researcher is interested in examining how Hanum Salsabiela, as an Eastern individual specifically an Indonesian - represents the West, particularly the United States (and of course, Islam in the United States).

Using Carl Thompson's postcolonial travel writing paradigm (2011), *BTLA* can be analyzed through three interconnected dimensions: reporting the United States world, revealing the self-narrator's identity, and representing the other (Americans). While travel writing and postcolonial studies have gained scholarly attention, few studies focus on Indonesian Muslim travelers in Western contexts, particularly the United States. Hanum Salsabiela can be classified as a postcolonial travel writer due to her social and cultural background, rooted in Indonesia, a nation colonized by Western powers for several centuries. As a member of the Eastern world with a deep colonial history, Hanum occupies a position that allows her to articulate perspectives distinct from those of Western authors in how she perceives and represents the world. In her literary work *BTLA*, She does not merely recount a physical journey to the Western, but also undertakes an intellectual and spiritual voyage that embodies her identity as an Indonesian Muslim navigating the dominance of Western culture. Thus, Hanum Salsabiela can be regarded as a postcolonial travel writer, as she writes from an Eastern standpoint that critically engages with the West, employing her travel experiences as a means of reflecting upon identity, Islamic values, and the cultural power dynamics between the East and the West.

Before presenting the results of the research problem analysis, the researcher will describe the previous study based on the material objects that will be classified based on the paradigm used. First, using the hermeneutic paradigm (Munir, 2017; Nanda, 2020; Khuzaemah et al., 2024), conclude that the work entitled *BTLA* contains positive values that can serve as a learning medium. Furthermore, using a psychological paradigm, Marlina (2017) shows that the Id, Ego, and Super-ego are reflected in the characters such as Hanum, Rangga, Julia Collins, Michael Jones, Phillipus Brown, and others (Marlina, 2017). In addition, a work titled *BTLA* was also researched using the deconstruction paradigm by Yusuf (2018). Yusuf points out that Hanum Salsabiela is trying to deconstruct the position of Islamic society in America. Islamic civilization is not limited to immigrants, it has played an important role in America's long history (Yusuf, 2018). Furthermore, by using the paradigm of literary sociology, Pebriana & Ardiansyah in 2017

showed that social and cultural elements in a work *BTLA* are illustrated through the stories of the characters including: Islamophobia, culture, American social customs, and historical facts of the existence of Islam in America (Pebriana & Ardiansyah, 2017).

In 2021, Tedian used the paradigm of literary sociology to research a work of *BTLA*. The conclusion of this study shows that in Hanum Salsabiela's work, two criticisms arise, social criticism and professional criticism (Tedian, 2021; Hasanah, 2022). In the same year, Riza et al., (2021) concluded that in the *BTLA*, there are four elements of tolerance, including: freedom and independence, recognition of individual rights, respect for the beliefs of others, and finally mutual tolerance (Riza et al., 2021). The researcher also found that there are four messages of *da'wah* in the work include: the message of faith, morality, sharia, and social (Wardani & Alawi, 2021). Lastly, Kartina's (2017) research using Carl Thompson's travel writing paradigm. The Study's results show that narrators tend to adopt a subjective stance when describing the American world. The ethical implications in Hanum Salsabiela's work can be seen in illustrations made by the narrator, which show parties that are considered high or inferior to others. When describing the East, the narrator depicts it as the orientalist does (Kartina, 2017). A review of previous studies shows that most research has focused on sociological, psychological, and deconstructive paradigms.

Although Kartina examined the same text using a similar theoretical framework, her study did not explore how the United States is depicted in relation to Islam's position within the country. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in positioning *Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika* as a form of "writing back" to the West, contributing to a more balanced and critical understanding of East-West relations and the role of Islam in global discourse. With this aim, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Indonesian Muslim travel writing negotiates identity, cultural encounters, religion, and power relations, while also enriching postcolonial literary studies and broader discussions of Islam in a transnational context.

Method

This research is qualitative, which aims to describe, explore, and understand the meanings individuals or communities attribute to social or humanitarian issues (Cresswell, 2009). The data—comprising words, sentences, and dialogues—relate to the reporting of the United States, the narrator's self-representation during her stay there, and depictions of Islam in the American context. Data were collected through observation and note-taking, focusing on identifying significant textual units that support the applied theoretical framework (Faruk, 2014). The researcher repeatedly read Hanum Salsabiela's *Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika* (*BTLA*), recorded key findings, and categorized them based on the postcolonial travel writing paradigm proposed by Carl Thompson (2011), which highlights three analytical aspects: *reporting the world* (description of foreign spaces and societies), *revealing the self* (narrator's reflections, identity, and personal experience), and *representing the Other* (portrayals of people and cultures, including power relations and colonial/neo-colonial traces). This framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how the narrative mediates cultural encounters, identity construction, and representational politics.

The data were analyzed through several stages, beginning with categorizing relevant quotations and narrative passages into three patterns—*reporting the world*, *revealing the self*, and *representing the other*. Theme coding was conducted to identify recurring issues, including U.S. modernity, social problems, spiritual experiences, interactions with local communities, and representations of Islam. This was followed by postcolonial interpretation to examine how the narrator constructs relationships among herself, the United States, and Islam, and how colonial or neo-colonial discourse emerges within the narrative. This stage also enabled a critical reading of how the narrator's identity as a Muslim traveler shapes her perception of the U.S. socio-cultural landscape. The final synthesis produced several key conclusions: the United States is depicted as a developed nation still struggling with social issues; the narrator's journey serves as a self-revealing exploration of personal and religious identity; Americans are represented alongside underlying colonial or neo-colonial dynamics; and Islam is portrayed through both its presence and its challenges within a Western context.

Results and Discussion

The Representation of the United States, Its Challenges, and the Issue of Islamophobia

Travel writing is a medium through which readers can learn about places they have never visited (Nisa, 2024). In the contemporary era, travel writing is produced not only by pilgrims and explorers, but also by tourists and students who visit foreign countries. However, this genre is also produced by tourists and students visiting foreign territories. The content of travel writing will usually tell about foreign places

visited by travelers. More specifically, travel writing often explores cultural and lifestyle differences in the places it visits. It is not uncommon for travel writers or narrators to describe their personal interactions and experiences while abroad. Foreign territories are frequently portrayed as 'different worlds' in contrast to the writer's place of origin. In this subsection, the researcher aims to reveal how Hanum Salsabiela informs the readers about her representation of the United States, which is constructed through her personal experiences and perspectives.

Regarding the travel writing titled *BTLA*, the United States is depicted as a metropolitan region, as illustrated in the following excerpt: "The dew seemed to smirk slowly at our state of awe as we watched building after building of New York skyscrapers" (Salsabiela, 2014). As a country considered a global superpower, the narrator states that America possesses economic, military, and global influence around the world. "Buildings are simple in form, yet undeniably, it is here that many world decisions are made. International policies, wars, embargoes, the ostracism of nations, annexation of countries, formation of alliances, and countless thrones in these buildings here, the President of the United States acts as the world's chief policeman (Salsabiela, 2014). Hanum Salsabiela also describes the buildings and street scenes in New York, including the Malcolm X Memorial, the streets of Downtown, the Columbus statue, the Jamaica Queens neighborhood, and Central Park. Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the narrator depicts the Jefferson Memorial, Baird Auditorium, and Christian Cemetery complexes. In *BTLA*, the narrator states that on September 9, 2009, she had already set foot in the United States. The first area she narrates is Harlem, which features the Malcolm X Memorial, a symbol of equality between Black and White people. In Harlem, the narrator not only encounters the Malcolm X Memorial but also discovers a Christian church designated for African - Americans. She further depicts the church's active atmosphere and the passing cars in the area.

During her journey in New York, the narrator depicts the city as a metropolitan area of towering skyscrapers, yet with pockets of greenery. Central Park, for instance, serves as the "lungs" of the city, providing space for people to pursue their individual activities. Covering approximately 3.4 square kilometers, the park resembles more of a city forest than a traditional park. The narrator observes:

"Its area is roughly 3.4 square kilometers. Central Park looks more like a city forest whose face has been remodeled, rather than a city park. It is not only the lungs of the city but its actual heart. It was built with foresight for the future influx of millions of people into a city. The surrounding skyscrapers act like vital organs, functioning efficiently. Inside Central Park, there is a life of its own. People run morning and evening, trees shed their leaves, birds perch and chirp like fresh blood carrying oxygen from the atrium and heart chambers, then spreading it throughout the body" (Salsabiela, 2014).

Gedung pencakar langit yang mengelilingi seperti organ-organ tubuh yang kemudian tumbuh karena organ utama berkembang dan berfungsi baik. Di dalam Central park terdapat kehidupan tersendiri. Orang-orang berlari pagi dan sore, pohon-pohon meranggas dengan cantiknya, dan burung-burung bertengger berkicauan bagaikan darah segar pembawa oksigen yang berjalan dari serambi dan bilik jantung, lalu menyebarkanannya ke seluruh organ tubuh (Salsabiela, 2014).

Through this depiction, the narrator emphasizes both the scale and vitality of New York while illustrating the coexistence of urban development and natural space. The United States also struggles with social issues, including homelessness and vagrancy. Hanum perceives that the reality of the American world differs from her prior expectations, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

During my time in America, I could not help but notice the social realities that contradicted my own idealized assumptions of this "unconquerable nation." Walking along the metro platforms in New York, I saw homeless people wandering, their faces tired, their hands extended for coins stamped with the Statue of Liberty or bills bearing the faces of American presidents. I paused to reflect: perhaps I had imagined America as flawless, a land of endless opportunity, yet here were lives drifting without purpose, struggling for a day's survival. The city's gleaming skyscrapers loomed above, symbols of wealth and power, while beneath them human fragility persisted unnoticed (Salsabiela, 2014).

Mungkin aku telah dibodohi asumsiku sendiri bahwa sebuah negeri di Amerika Serikat haruslah sempurna dalam segala hal, dengan predikat negeri tak tertakhlukan yang disandangnya. Toh aku tak sepenuhnya benar. Tunawisma, gelandangan, dan manusia tanpa hidup dan tujuan berkeliaran sepanjang undakan dan peron metro. Tangan mereka menengadah, memohon koin-koin bergambar patung liberty atau uang kertas bercetak wajah para Presiden Amerika yang dapat mengamankan perut mereka untuk sehari (Salsabiela, 2014).

The narrator also observes American materialism, particularly in the use of urban spaces: "Business is business. Even if the building was originally a church in New York's main district, it turned into a gambling

house that preferred to make money rather than serve as a gathering place for singing and worship, which they considered out of tune" (Salsabiela, 2014). This illustrates how houses of worship in New York are vulnerable if they cannot afford rent, as financial priorities often outweigh religious or social considerations. In addition, Hanum observes that the United States experiences a social problem, specifically Islamophobia, which refers to an unjustified fear of Islam. Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (Kemenag, 2020; Mustaqim, 2024). Therefore, as a member of the Indonesian Muslim community, Hanum feels the need to engage in reporting that reveals how the United States continues to experience Islamophobia.

Muslim migrants, although naturalized citizens, still occupy lower socioeconomic positions. At the same time, the undercurrent of fear and suspicion against Muslim migrants revealed itself in subtle and structural ways. As a Muslim woman, Hanum felt these tensions keenly, though they were not always directed personally. Islamophobia in America, especially in the United States is pervasive, operating at personal, structural, and even transnational levels. On the streets, it might appear as a suspicious glance or a whispered remark; in government policies, it manifests as surveillance, profiling, or exclusion; across borders, it shapes narratives about Islam that influence perceptions globally (Beydoun, 2018). In her travel writing, the narrator reports that Islamophobia in the United States is not limited to verbal expressions but extends to physical acts. "I remember a couple dressed modestly this afternoon being harassed by three thugs. My memory still hasn't faded from witnessing Officer Mohammed getting struck with a wooden plank by a drunken man who had lost control of his emotions" (Salsabiela, 2014).

In the United States, Islamophobia also manifests in a structural dimension, represented by historical policies and state actions against Islam and Muslims. Today, this is most visible in legal frameworks and programs applied to Muslim police officers during the prolonged War on Terror. Structural Islamophobia includes laws and regulations that disadvantage Muslims. One example is restricting immigrants from Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. Hanum also illustrates how Muslim migrants are strictly regulated when entering American territory, as shown in the excerpt below:

"I've been here for ten years now. I'm 40. The first two years were the hardest for me. You know, after that attack, anyone with an Arab appearance was called in one by one by federal agents. Including me. Especially since I was still young and new, but time heals. Returning to Syria was clearly not an option. America has given me so much of a future." Souleyman spoke in a fluctuating tone. His shoulders rose and fell. At times, he was fiery, but just as quickly, he would weaken" (Salsabiela, 2014).

"Aku memang sudah sepuluh tahun di Sini. Umurku 40 tahun sekarang. Dua tahun Pertama adalah tahun terberat bagiku. Kau tahulah, setelah tragedi serangan itu, semua orang bermuka Arab dipanggil satu persatu oleh agen federal. Termasuk aku. Apalagi aku masih muda dan baru. But time heals, waktu menyembuhkan. Kembali ke Suriah jelas bukan pilihan. Amerika sudah memberiku banyak masa depan." Souleyman berbicara dengan nada naik turun. Bahunya juga naik turun. Ada kalanya dia berapi-api. Tapi secepatnya juga meluruh lemah" (Salsabiela, 2014).

The above excerpt depicts how the United States imposes strict regulations on Muslims seeking entry into the country. Besides that, Islamophobia in the United States is closely associated with the 9/11 WTC tragedy. The 9/11 WTC in New York was the event in which an American Airlines plane crashed into the WTC building in New York by an extremist group on September 11, 2001. This incident further intensified verbal and physical discrimination against Muslims, particularly in the United States. Hanum Salsabiela also noted the trauma experienced by American society as a result of the 9/11 attacks. This implies that Islamophobia continues to persist in the United States. Although Islamophobia did not originate with the 9/11 tragedy, many scholars agree that fear and suspicion toward Islam significantly increased in its aftermath (Boulahnane, 2018; Dauda, 2020; Dellarosa, 2022; GhaneaBassiri, 2013; Hakim, 2023; Istriyani & Yuliatun, 2016; Kistoro et al., 2020; Sa'adi, 2021; Syarif et al., 2020; Udasmoro, 2022). In the aftermath, negative stigma surrounding Islam increased. For instance, in *BTLA*, the narrator recounts a demonstration opposing the construction of Ground Zero in New York, during which a police officer became a victim of violence by protesters simply because his name was Muhammad. Additionally, Islamophobia is reflected in the following excerpt:

"You know, soon the world will commemorate the 9/11 tragedy. The editorial board asked me to write a review about it. If Islam did not exist, that tragedy probably would not have happened. You also know about the London bombings, the Bali bombings in Indonesia, and many more. All the perpetrators were Muslims claiming to be jihadis. The article deadline is probably a week after the 9/11 commemoration" (Salsabiela, 2014).

"Kau tahu, sebentar lagi dunia akan memperingati tragedy 9/11. Dewan redaksi memintaku membuat ulasan tentang itu. Seandainya Islam tak ada, tragedi itu pasti juga tidak pernah terjadi. Kau tahu juga kan bom di London, bom Bali di negerinya, dan banyak lagi. Semua pelakunya Muslim yang mengaku jihadis. Tenggat artikelnya mungkin seminggu setelah peringatan 9/11" (Salsabiela, 2014).

Hanum's superior remarked that had Islam not existed, the 9/11 attacks would not have happened, implying that Islamophobia remains prevalent in the United States. The discriminatory treatment occurring in the United States is overlapping because it is not experienced solely by Muslims. However, differences in race and class discrimination a complicated issue on the continents. Racial discrimination is categorizing people by physical characteristics, while class refers to grouping people by economic status. For example, class discrimination is depicted through a Muslim convert named Julia Collins, who is not accepted as part of the upper class because she married Abdullah Husein, a man from the Middle East. The West often regards some regions in the Middle East by the West as "underdeveloped" civilizations. This perception is also influenced by other factors, such as politics, culture, and even history. In the United States, citizenship status is determined by the principle of *jus soli*, or place of birth. Although born and raised in America, Julia Collins is still considered "different" because she descends from the Melungeon people (displaced Americans) and has physical features such as a prominent nose, blonde hair, and light brown skin that resemble those of Arabs.

Now everything is clear. I could not guess Julia's racial and ethnic origins at first. Her nose was prominent like that of an Arab, yet her skin was light brown, her hair reddish, and her eyes green. It turns out she descended from these displaced Americans. No wonder her knowledge about Columbus, the Moriscos, and Islamic ancestors in America was so extensive (Salsabiela, 2014).

Kini semua jelas. Aku tidak dapat menebak dari ras dan etnis mana sebenarnya Julia berasal sejak awal. Hidungnya mancung seperti hidung orang Arab, namun kulitnya terang kecoklatan, rambutnya oirang kemerahan dan bolamatanya hijau. Ternyata dia keturunan orang-orang terusir dari Amerika ini. Pantas saja pengetahuannya tentang Colombus, Morisco, dan leluhur Islam di Amerika luas (Salsabiela, 2014).

Discriminatory treatment in the United States overlapped across various dimensions, affecting not only Muslims. Differences in race and class discriminated a complicated issue on both continents. Racial discrimination is the categorization of people based on physical characteristics, while class refers to grouping people according to their economic position. The West often perceives some regions in the Middle East as "backward civilizations," influenced by politics, culture, and even history. In the United States, citizenship status is determined by the principle of *ius soli* or place of birth. Despite being born and raised in America, Julia Collins was still considered "different" because she descended from the Melungeon people (displaced Americans) and had physical traits such as a high nose, blonde hair, and light brown skin. In addition, class discrimination is also illustrated by an immigrant named Hassan. As an immigrant, he worked as a clerk in a pork store and struggled to find employment in major sectors such as corporate companies. Immigrants arriving in America were often positioned as second-class citizens with limited access to opportunities and third-class citizens facing even greater barriers.

BTLA as a Self-reflective Travel Narrative

In terms of *revealing the self*, *Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika* can be classified as reflective travel writing. The narrator not only describes external experiences and observations in United States but also engages in introspection, exploring her own identity, beliefs, and responses as a Muslim traveler navigating a Western context. This reflective dimension allows the travel narrative to go beyond mere reporting, positioning the journey as a means of self-discovery and personal engagement with cultural and religious encounters.

Firstly, Hanum's process of self-reflection during her stay in the United States is demonstrated through her gratitude for being born into a Muslim family. She compares her experience as a Muslim with that of Julia Collins, who had to conceal her Islamic identity to be socially accepted in American society. For Hanum, Julia Collins embodies the limitations experienced by Muslims in the United States. During her time in Europe, Hanum had the freedom to explore her travel experiences without work-related obligations. In contrast, in the United States, she was required to fulfill her responsibilities as a journalist, addressing the question, *"Would the World be Better Without Islam?"* Annual commemorations of the 9/11 WTC tragedy by victims' families at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum inevitably evoke feelings of trauma. The author observes that American stereotypes about Islam restrict Muslims' agency, prompting her to clarify misconceptions based on her perspective.

Her visit to the United States thus becomes an exercise in self-reflection, with the country serving as a mirror through which Hanum revisits her identity, beliefs, and position as a Muslim in a pluralistic society. For instance, in Chapter 19 of *BTLA*, she recounts her experience being caught in a protest against the construction of a mosque near Ground Zero, the monument dedicated to the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks. During this event, Hanum experiences a moral dilemma, torn between supporting the mosque's construction and empathizing with the victims' families.

I wonder, which side would I take when a mosque is built on a site always associated with terrorism, not only linked to plane hijackings but also to Islam? For me, those terrorists did not just hijack planes—they also hijacked the name of Islam, turning an inhumane act into a vile slander against the faith (Salsabiela, 2014).

Aku berandai-andai, berpihak ke manakah aku, ketika ada masjid didirikan di situs yang selalu diasosiasikan dengan terorisme, yang bukan hanya selalu dikaitkan dengan pembajakan pesawat, tapi juga Islam? Bagiku, para teoritis itu tak hanya membajak pesawat, tapi juga membajak nama Islam, menjadikan fitnah keji aksi yang tak berperikemanusiaan (Salsabiela, 2014).

The excerpt reveals the narrator's ambiguous stance in responding to events that involve her as a Muslim, particularly when confronted with complex political and identity issues after the 9/11 WTC attacks. On one hand, as a Muslim woman and journalist, she feels a responsibility to defend Islam against American stereotypes. On the other hand, she cannot ignore the feelings of the victims' families. In this context, Hanum Salsabiela seeks to show that she is in the process of re-understanding the meaning of Islam, her personal identity, and human values in America. The following passage illustrates this confusing process of self-reflection during her time in the United States:

"This park has a spirit that brings together people who do not know each other. They possess a compound that immediately reacts positively when mingling. Strangers passing by nod, greet, or even act as if they have known us for years. This is the side of New York I never expected. A closeness within the alienation I am experiencing now" (Salsabiela, 2014).

"Taman ini memiliki ruh mendekatkan orang-orang yang tak kenal satu sama lain. Mereka memiliki senyawa yang langsung bereaksi positif ketika berbaur. Orang-orang yang melewati kamu duduk mengganggu kepala, menyapa, bahkan berlagak seperti sudah kenal kami beberapa tahun lalu. Inilah sisi New York yang tak pernah kuduga. Kedekatan dalam keterasingan yang kualami sekarang" (Salsabiela, 2014).

The excerpt above illustrates Hanum's interaction with Americans in a New York Park. Although the United States seems to reach out to her through friendliness, she still experiences a sense of alienation. This feeling of estrangement arises from her generalization of American society as hostile toward Islam, or at least holding negative prejudices against it, which leads her to maintain distance during her stay. While grounded in empirical experience, Hanum's perspective risks oversimplifying the reality of American society, which is socially, culturally, and ideologically diverse. On one hand, she is attracted to America's positive values, but on the other, she remains wary and suspicious whenever her Islamic identity is involved.

The narrator's process of self-reflection during her time in the United States reveals a sense of anxiety. As a Muslim woman present in a country that had experienced the 9/11 tragedy, Hanum encounters a social atmosphere that is tense and filled with suspicion. This is evident in her tone, which is more reactive, expressive, and focused on defending Islam. Her identity seems to be pressured by American public stereotypes and prejudices, prompting Hanum to feel the need to explain and even defend her faith before people she perceives as not understanding Islam correctly. While in Europe, (For reference, see Hanum's *99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa* and *Sangkala di Langit Andalusia*) Hanum reorganized her identity through the rediscovery of Islamic values and history in, America she attempts to reconstruct her identity through a process of clarification, defense, and resistance against the stigma attached to Muslims.

A Neo-Colonial Perspective Disguised Under the Guise of Cosmopolitanism

Travel writing helps readers understand the discursive nature of global politics by engaging with global realities such as colonial discourse and cosmopolitanism. Both colonial visions and cosmopolitan ideals address complex issues such as tolerance, equality, justice, and multiculturalism values that significantly shape global political dynamics. According to Lisle (2006), the narrator's engagement with global politics is reflected through the discourse of difference, notably by questioning the balance between power and harmony. For example, in *BTLA*, the narrator addresses global issues such as tolerance, equality,

and justice, particularly those concerning the position of Islam in the United States. In a postcolonial context, readers and researchers must carefully examine whether the narrator can celebrate cultural differences through a cosmopolitanism vision, or whether that vision still subtly reinforces colonial discourse.

Based on an in-depth reading of *BTLA*, the researcher concludes that the narrator tries to promote a vision of cosmopolitanism. This is represented through interfaith characters such as Lyla, a Middle Eastern Muslim woman adopted by non-Muslim Americans. Although she was adopted by a non-Muslim American man, Phillipus Brown, Lyla was not forced to abandon her Islamic faith. *"Are you a Muslim, Layla?" I asked highlighting this innocent conversation. Layla looked at me for a moment. Then I held out my hand. "Yes, I am a Muslim, although my father is not. But he also never asked me to be like him," Layla said* (Salsabiela, 2014). The excerpt above suggests that not all Americans exhibit Islamophobia. Through the character of Phillipus Brown, the narrator aims to demonstrate that some Americans display a tolerant attitude. The United States is also portrayed as a country capable of understanding religious and cultural differences to promote harmony among diverse communities.

The depiction of Lyla and her adoptive father suggests that the narrator adopts a principle of tolerance in portraying American society. The narrator also attempts to understand cultural differences between the United States and Indonesia. For instance, cohabitation between men and women is widely accepted in the United States. In contrast, Indonesia where Eastern values are still strongly upheld does not consider such practice acceptable. Nevertheless, while in America, the narrator shows an effort to appreciate and respect American culture. The narrator states, *"This is a lesson for me to appreciate what is considered normal in other people's countries, even if it seems inappropriate to me, a long process that shaped me into a persistent person who strives always to be tolerant"* (Salsabiela, 2014).

Hanum Salsabiela's tolerant attitude indeed reflects a cosmopolitanism vision by embracing cultural differences. However, upon closer examination, the narrator's portrayal of cosmopolitanism still appears to be entangled in neo-colonial discourse. Neo-colonialism is a form of new domination that emerged after the end of formal colonialism. While classical colonialism was characterized by direct occupation and control over territories, neo-colonialism arises when writers depict cultures, societies, and other places while still maintaining power hierarchies more subtly, namely through a cosmopolitan attitude. The narrator appears to celebrate cultural differences, yet in reality continues to marginalize the Other, much like colonizers did to the colonized (Thompson, 2011). Indeed, in her book *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Debbie Lisle urges readers and researchers to be more critical and cautious in interpreting cosmopolitan narratives. This is because, according to Lisle, the vision of cosmopolitanism may still carry traces of colonialism, albeit presented in more subtle and nuanced ways (Lisle, 2006). Although Hanum states at the end of the sentence that she tries to be tolerant, the beginning of the sentence, *"I can't criticize in the slightest"* reveals a sense of inferiority and the pressure to accept what she disagrees with. The notions of superiority and inferiority represent a binary opposition closely tied to neo-colonial discourse. The West often positions itself as the superior power with the authority to define and govern the Eastern world. On the other hand, inferiority has usually been attributed by the West to Third World territories and former colonies. As a narrator who becomes a migrant in America, she still positions herself as 'the weak one' *vis-à-vis* the American state. Using the word *'unfortunately'* implies that the narrator does not fully embrace the cultural differences between America and their migrant identity. In postcolonial studies, these two visions of cosmopolitanism and colonial discourse can indeed intersect and compete with one another.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, the researcher provides a concise and comprehensive conclusion. First, the United States is depicted as a metropolitan country with numerous skyscrapers. However, the United States still faces overlapping social issues, such as homelessness, Islamophobia, and discrimination, which are not experienced solely by Muslims. Second, *Bulan Terbelah di Langit Amerika* represents a form of self-reflective travel writing. The narrator not only describes external experiences and observations in the United States but also engages in introspection, exploring personal identity and beliefs. The journey is presented as a means of self-discovery and personal engagement through encounters with culture and religion. In this context, the United States provides the narrator with a space to reconstruct identity through processes of clarification, defense, and resistance against the stigma attached to Muslims. Finally, in representing the Other, Hanum Salsabiela remains entangled in a neo-colonial attitude, subtly subordinating the Other, despite her efforts to promote a vision of cosmopolitanism. The researcher hopes that this article will contribute to the academic field, particularly in the realm of postcolonial travel writing. By showing that in the contemporary era, the East is also capable of positioning itself as a subject analyzing

the West, or as Said referred to the Occidentalists. In addition, the results of this analysis are expected to provide new perspectives for engaging with cultural differences through a cosmopolitan vision that goes beyond mere tolerance. The researcher also hopes that future scholars will emerge to explore the depiction of America further more broadly, thereby complementing this study, which focuses solely on the United States.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : Risma Nur Rahmawati was responsible for the entire research project. She also led the screenwriting for data collection and analysis. The second researcher, Prof. Dr. Faruk, S.U., and the third researcher Prof. Dr. Wening Udasmoro, DEA., who is promoter and co-promotor agreed to the final manuscript of this paper.
- Funding statement** : The researcher would like to thank LPDP (Education Fund Management Institute), Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, BPI (Indonesian Education Scholarship), PUSLAPDIK (Education Financing Service Center), Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. In addition, the researchers would like to express their gratitude to the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Department of Humanities, Universitas Gadjah Mada, for providing them with the opportunity to conduct this research, which has made the publication of this article possible.
- Conflict of interest** : Both researchers declare that they have no competing interests.
- Ethics Approval** : Information on Ethics Approval and informed consent statements are required for all articles published in BAHASTRA since 2025.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper.

References

- Abbas, T. (2021). Reflection: The “war on terror”, Islamophobia and radicalisation twenty years on. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14(4), 402–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.1980182>
- Beydoun, K. A. (2018). American Islamophobia: Understanding the roots and rise of fear. *University of California Press* (1st ed.). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520970007>
- Boulahnane, S. (2018). Ground zero mosque in the context of America’s post-9/11 religious pluralism: CDA of mainstream news media’s coverage of the discursive event. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 8(2), 253–280. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v8i2.253-279>
- Bukar, A. A. (2020). The political economy of hate industry: Islamophobia in the western public sphere. *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 5(2), 152–174. <https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.5.2.0152>
- Cresswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publication.
- Dauda, K. O. (2020). Islamophobia and religious intolerance: Threats to global peace and harmonious co-existence. *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)*, 8(2), 257–292. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v8i2.6811>
- Dellarosa, M. (2022). Conceptualizing muslim identity in the US, post-9/11. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 12(2), 369–392. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i2.369-392>
- El-Mishry, G. (2008). *Mekah berkabut merah*. Grafindo Khazanah Ilmu.
- El Shirazy, H. (2004). *Ayat-ayat cinta*. Republika.
- Faruk. (2014). *Metode penelitian sastra: Sebuah penjelajahan awal*. Pustaka Pelajar.
- Foulcher, K., & Day, T. (2008). *Clearing a space: Postcolonial readings of modern Indonesian literature*. KITLV Press.
- Fuadi, A. (2009). *Ranah 3 warna*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- GhaneaBassiri, K. (2013). Islamophobia and American history religious stereotyping and out-grouping of muslims in the United States. *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance* (1st ed.). Palgrave MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137290076>
- Hakim, S. A. (2023). Islamic literature in modern Indonesia: Political disputes among muslim writers, 1930s-1960s. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 13(1), 208–224. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v13i1.143-167>
- Hasanah, A. I. U. (2022). *Kritik sosial dalam novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela dan Rangga Almahendra*. Universitas Diponegoro.
- Huggan, G. (2000). *Counter-travel writing and post-coloniality*. Atlanta Amsterdam.

- Istriyani, R., & Yuliatun. (2016). Media: Causes and strategies to overcome Islamophobia (Psychological and sociological study). *QIJS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)*, 4(2), 201. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v4i2.1759>
- Kartina. (2017). *Bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela dan Rangga Almahendra: Analisis Sastra perjalanan Carl Thompson*. Universitas Gadjah Mada. <https://doi.org/10.31851/pembahsi.v7i2.1361>
- Kemenag. (2020). *Menjadi muslim, menjadi Indonesia (Kilas balik Indonesia menjadi bangsa muslim terbesar)*. Kementerian Agama RI. <https://kemenag.go.id/opini/menjadi-muslim-menjadi-indonesia-kilas-balik-indonesia-menjadi-bangsa-muslim-terbesar-03w0yt>
- Khuzaemah, E., Ristanti, I., & Astuti, R. P. (2024). Nilai pendidikan karakter pada novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika serta pemanfaatannya dalam pembelajaran teks ulasan. *Disastra: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, 4(2), 153. <https://doi.org/10.29300/disastra.v4i2.3186>
- Kistoro, H. C. A., Kartowagiran, B., Naim, N., Latipah, E., Putranta, H., & Minggele, D. (2020). Islamophobia in education: Perceptions on the wear of veil/ niqab in higher education. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 10(2), 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i2.227-246>
- Lisle, D. (2006). *The global politics of contemporary travel writing*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491535>
- Marlina, E. (2017). Psikologi sastra dalam novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela dan Rangga Almahendra. *Pembahsi*, 7(2), 41. <https://doi.org/10.31851/pembahsi.v7i2.1361>
- Migrationpolicy.org. (2025, March 12). *Frequently requested statistics on immigrants and immigration in the United States*. MPI. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>
- Munir, S. (2017). Nilai religius dalam novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela Rais dan Rangga Almahendra. *Literasi: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia serta Pembelajarannya*, 1(2), 73–81.
- Mustaqim, A. H. (2024). *Negara Muslim Terbesar di Dunia*. SindoNews. <https://international.sindonews.com/read/1359461/45/10-negara-populasi-muslim-terbesar-2024-1713171886>
- Nanda, S. (2020). Nilai religiulitas dalam novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela dan Rangga Almahendra Nanda. *Jurnal Metamorfosa*, 8(2), 294–305.
- Nisa, Z. (2024). *Fiersa, sastra perjalanan dalam novel tapak jejak karya Fiersa Besari*. Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang.
- Pebriana, R., & Ardiansyah, A. (2017). Unsur sosial dan budaya dalam novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika: Kajian sosiologi sastra. *Pembahsi*, 7(2), 93–103. <https://doi.org/10.31851/pembahsi.v7i2.1365>
- Riza, M. C., Teguh Widodo, S., & Anindyarini, A. (2021). The form of tolerance value in the novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika by Hanum Salsabiela and Rangga Almahendra. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 8(5), 12. <https://doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v8i5.2515>
- Sa'adi. (2021). Countering Islamophobia in Portugal: Experience of Indonesian muslim expatriates. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 11(1), 29–53. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v11i1.29-53>
- Said, E. W. (1977). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- _____. (1997). *Covering Islam* (1st ed.). Vintages Books.
- Salsabiela, H.. (2014). *Bulan terbelah di langit Amerika*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Syarif, Z., Mughni, S. A., & Hannan, A. (2020). Post-truth and Islamophobia in the contestation of contemporary Indonesian politics. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 10(2), 199–225. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i2.199-225>
- Tedian. (2021). *Tanggapan mahasiswa mengenai stigma terhadap Islam dalam novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela*. Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta.
- Thompson, C. (2011). *Travel writing* (Issue 1). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203816240>
- Udasmoro, W. (2022). Gender and Islam: On the politics of sexuality of muslim male authors In Indonesia and France. *Musāwa Jurnal Studi Gender dan Islam*, 21(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.14421/musawa.2022.211.1-11>
- Wardani, S. W., & Alawi, M. (2021). Analisis pesan dakwah dalam novel religius bulan terbelah di langit Amerika. *KOMUNIKE*, 13(2), 183–208. <https://doi.org/10.20414/jurkom.v13i2.4568>
- Yusuf, A. A. (2018). Dekonstruksi peradaban Islam di Amerika pada novel bulan terbelah di langit Amerika karya Hanum Salsabiela Rais dan Rangga Almahendra. *Lakon: Jurnal Kajian Sastra dan Budaya*, 7(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.20473/lakon.v7i1.19713>