

The Quest of Identity of Kafka Tamura in Haruki Murakami's Kafka On the Shore

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ABSTRACT

In order to explore the issue of identity construction of an adolescent character in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, this research uses Nikolajeva's (2003) theory on implicit characterization and Trites's (2000) theory on identity construction in young adult literature. By employing a narrative approach in a qualitative method which focuses on the analysis of the main character, Kafka Tamura, and his quest of identity, the findings reveal three main points. First, through the implicit characterization depicted in his preferences, Kafka is portrayed as a teenager who distances himself from the society. Second, the most prominent issue in Kafka's quest of identity is triggered by father-centered conflicts. Third, sex and death in this novel are used as conflicts resolution. From the analysis, it can be concluded that the identity constructed by Kafka in the end of the novel is a compromised identity who learns to accept the norms and values of the society he intends to leave.

Keywords: *Adolescent, coming-of-age, identity construction, young adult literature*

INTRODUCTION

Young adult literature is a genre which is hard to define. However, some researchers and experts have proposed some definitions of young adult literature. For example, some researchers who analyze young adult literature like Nikolajeva (1995), Trites (2000), and Trupe (2006) have some similarities in defining the genre. They see young adult literature as a genre intended for adolescent readers who are individuals between the age of 10 and 19. However, the similarities do not make young adult literature easier to define, because the age range may also be a factor which makes the genre hard to define because books for 10-year-olds may be different with books for 19-year-olds. Trites (2000) also points out that young adult literature can also refer to books which consist of adolescent heroes and heroines or general books that attract adolescents. In addition, according to Nikolajeva (1995), the material culture embedded in young adult literature is also different in every country. This adds to the

difficulty in defining young adult literature.

In line with Nikolajeva's (1995) explanation above, it can be said that one of the ways of defining young adult literature is by seeing how the genre evolved historically. According to Trites (2000), young adult literature evolved from the term *Bildungsroman* which was introduced by a German scholar, Wilhelm Dilthey, in 1870. *Bildungsroman* refers to a type of novel which is related to the adolescents' educational process of maturing. In the young adult literature's development, this process remains as the major theme of young adult literature to this time. However, the way the story is told has changed. Brown and Stephens (1995) as cited by Trites (2000) state that the evolutionary change covers different things, for example: parental or adult figures, diversity issues, the use of point of view, and a more complex thematic development. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in 1967 is one of the landmarks in the evolution because it was written by an adolescent, and it also contains issues which was not common in the young adult literature

of that era (Trupe, 2006; Rosenberg, 2012).

Therefore, young adult literature shows the recurring theme of maturing into adulthood, or coming of age (Fox, 2010). Prior to Fox' theory, Trites (2000) has mentioned that in the coming of age novels, the characters are oftentimes faced with particular events that may trigger them to question the authorities, norms, and established orders. Nevertheless, the novels depict how adolescents disturb and are disturbed by the institutions which construct their universe (Trites, 2000). Trites adds that the interaction between the adolescents and the institutions helps them develop their identity either by questioning, accepting, or resisting it. In Fox' words, a child matures by constructing meaning of the things they experience.

The process of constructing meaning contains many issues related to the theme of coming of age which deals with the issue of identity (Fox, 2010). In the context of young adult literature, identity construction is always attached to the character development in the text (Janovsky,

n.d). Janovsky states that some characters develop throughout the story; they start in one way and end up differently so that the characters become more complex.

Hence, the complexity of identity construction in young adult literature is an issue worth analyzing because by doing so, we can see what values that young adult literature tries to implement by seeing how the young adult characters are depicted in the young adult novels. To explore the issue of identity in young adult literature, this study uses a novel entitled *Kafka on the Shore* which was first published in 2002 in Japanese and translated into English by Jay Rubin in 2005. It is written by Haruki Murakami who is considered as a well-known Japanese author. This novel has been categorized as one of the '10 Best Books of 2005' by *The New York Times* (Updike, 2005; "New York Times", 2005). *Kafka on the Shore* is chosen not only because the hero in this novel is a fifteen year old boy who is encountering an adolescent phase, but he also has a certain complexity that, in my opinion, reflects the difficulties of a

Japanese adolescent's coming of age phase in this time. In other words, it is assumed that *Kafka on the Shore* can provide data of how the hero in the novel represents Japanese male adolescents in constructing his identity by using the view point of young adult literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In analyzing the issue of identity construction in *Kafka on the Shore*, this study uses two theories proposed by Nikolajeva (2003) and Trites (2000). Based on Nikolajeva's (2003) theory on implicit characterization, determining the characterization of a particular character is one of the ways to explore more about the complexity of the characters in literary works. Besides direct characterization which can be seen in the author's description of a particular character, implicit or indirect characterization is widely used in general fiction (Nikolajeva, 2003). According to Nikolajeva (2003), adult characters' implicit characterization can be seen in their political views, religious beliefs, or what kind of beverages they prefer,

and so on. In children and young adult literature, however, the implicit characterization is limited because they are seldom free to explore their taste in their choices (Nikolajeva, 2003). Thus, Nikolajeva (2003) proposes several elements in children and young adult literature which can be used to determine the characters' characterization, which are: (1) proper names, (2) age, (3) setting, (4) attributes, and (5) preferences.

Besides Nikolajeva's (2003) theory, the other theory used in this study is Trites's (2000) theory which focuses on the identity construction of an adolescent character in young adult literature. According to Trites (2000), young adult literature does not only depict an adolescent's transition to adulthood, because it also contains many subversive and didactical ideologies which can manipulate adolescent readers' ways of thinking. Trites adds that these ideologies relate to how adolescents learn about power. She emphasizes that "without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow" (p. x). It means that during the process of the

transition, adolescents must understand their position within the power that represses them, and also understand how to rebel against it in order to grow. Paradoxically, the power that represses them is in the form of institutions which try to shape them to be a better person, for example: school, government, family, and so on (Trites, 2000).

In her theory of power and repression in adolescent literature, Trites (2000) found the recurrent elements of adolescent literature that she has analyzed. According to her, books for adolescent contain a lot of sex scenes, antagonist parents, photographers, schools, and death. Therefore, she theorizes four fundamental elements that mostly occur in young adult literature. The four fundamental elements are: (1) institutional discourse, (2) authority figures, (3) sex and sexuality, and (4) death.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a narrative approach in a qualitative method which will be descriptive and explanatory. This study will involve a critical analysis

which seeks answer to the questions by examining various aspects of the novel (Sandelowski, 1991; Reisman, 1993). Sandelowski (1991) states that a narrative approach can give insight on how stories disclose a human being's experience in life. This is the reason that this approach is chosen because it is suitable for this study because it will help to discover and explore the identity issue in *Kafka on the Shore*.

In terms of data collection, there are two types of data that will be collected. They are characterization and conflicts. The first data are gathered by identifying Kafka Tamura's characterization at the beginning of the novel by adapting a model of characterization proposed by Nikolajeva (2003). The second data are the issues concerning young adult in the novel which are collected from the conflicts between Kafka and other characters, and also the conflicts between Kafka and himself (inner conflict). The data are collected and selected based on the issues of identity construction in young adult literature. After that, the selected conflicts will be identified as rites of

passage which are marked by some changes in Kafka's perspective. Then, the changes or development will be examined and framed by using identity formation concept proposed by Trites (2000).

The collected data on characterization and conflicts will be analyzed and interpreted by implementing Trites's (2000) theoretical perspective on identity formation in young adult literature. Furthermore, Trites's theoretical perspective can be used as a tool to analyze the construction of Kafka's identity in the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, it was found that Kafka's quest of identity is constructed in three ways, which are: (1) by constructing a character who distances himself from the society; (2) by establishing father-centered issues; and (3) by using sex and death as the resolution to the conflicts.

A CONSTRUCTION OF A DISTANT ADOLESCENT

In constructing an identity, a character cannot be separated from

his/her characterization since it is closely connected with his/her sense of self. Besides direct characterization which can be seen in the author's description of a particular character, implicit or indirect characterization can also be used to see how the character constructs his/her identity (Nikolajeva, 2003). In children and young adult literature, the implicit characterization is limited because they are still repressed by their parents in exploring their taste (Nikolajeva, 2003). Thus, based on Nikolajeva's (2003) theory, there are several elements in children and young adult literature which can be used to determine the characters' characterization, which are: (1) proper names, (2) age, (3) setting, (4) attributes, and (5) preferences. The elements may also be the factor of the character's coming of age process because according to Fox (2010), a child matures by constructing meaning of the things they experience. From the analysis, it is found that Kafka is depicted as an individual who is isolated from the dominant culture.

Kafka Tamura is portrayed as fifteen year-old teenager who lives in Nagano, Tokyo with his father, Koichi Tamura. On his fifteen birthday, he decides to run away from his home to elude his father's prophecy which tells him that he will murder his own father and violate his own mother and adopted sister who left him when he was four years old. Throughout the plot, Kafka makes some choices suggesting that he seems to distance himself from the dominant culture he lives in. One of the choices is the name "Kafka" that he chose to be his new identity.

Kafka's name is closely connected with identity construction. Kafka chooses the name himself to describe his new self. The name "Kafka" may sound unorthodox for Japanese people since it is not a traditional Japanese name. However, the meaning of the name "Kafka" is closely related to Japanese legend and culture. He explains that the name "Kafka" is derived from Czech which means "crows" (Murakami, p. 330). In Japanese culture, a crow is a symbol for many things. It can be considered as pest because crows'

population is overgrowing in Japan and they usually make chaos ("Crows in Japan: Menace or Guide of the Gods?", 2012). However, crows also symbolize divine intervention in Japanese legend due to the three legged crow legend (Yatagarasu) which tells about how crows help a hero by giving him suggestions to win a war (Japan National Tourism Organization, n.d). In addition, in several cultures, crows also symbolize a bad omen or prophetic insights.

There is an assumption that by choosing the name "Kafka", Kafka sees himself as a stray crow that lives on its own. Also, since a stray crow is considered as pest, Kafka sees himself as someone who does not fit into the society he lives in. The fact that his mother took his adopted sister with her and abandoned him may trigger Kafka's feeling of being insignificant and unwanted which leads him to isolating himself from the society. In addition, choosing the name that is not Japanese can be presumed as Kafka's symbolic gesture meaning that he intends to leave his own identity as a Japanese.

Kafka's isolation from the dominant culture is also found in his preference towards fitness and exercise. Kafka spent his days in junior high school to train himself to be stronger. He also implies that being strong is the way to survive (Murakami, p. 10). Kafka seems to feel that he becomes his true self when he is exercising. Therefore, exercise can be considered as something personal for him. He finds relaxation in his routines, in other words, it can be said that exercise is his very own meditation. Thus, it is indicated that fitness and exercise as Kafka's preference isolates him from his surroundings, and at the same time builds his sense of self.

Another element that indicates isolation as part of Kafka's identity construction is the setting of the novel which is the woods and the library. As Kafka strays away from the society, he seems to make the library as a substitute for his home. According to Wattanagun and Chotiudompant (2009), the library in *Kafka on the Shore* can also be considered as a site of memory for Kafka where he replaces the unfulfilled desire as a

child with the memory he collected during his stay in the library. Different with the library, the woods, as another setting of this novel, contribute to Kafka's identity construction by providing isolation as means to enhance his sense of self. Kafka makes the woods as the core of his inner self to understand his identity. Being isolated in the forest makes Kafka realize that in order to set things right, he needs to understand himself first; he needs to conquer his own fear and lonesome.

Because of his tendency to distance himself from the society, Kafka seems to use his interests in music and literature as tools to gain his sense of self. It can be said that literature and music give an impact on Kafka's way of thinking. By reading more books and listening to more songs, he gains many insight and knowledge that many of the teenagers his age do not. Through literature, he is able to reflect himself to the characters in the novel he read, and by appreciating the lack music, he learns how to grow into acceptance of the current situation that he is in. In conclusion, this novel suggests that

teenagers need to distance themselves to construct their identities. In the process of distancing themselves from the society they live in, teenagers will face some circumstances that trigger their sense of selves.

AN ESTABLISHMENT OF FATHER-CENTERED ISSUES

In *Kafka on the Shore*, the role of Koichi Tamura as Kafka's father serves as the source of conflict. Kafka's father becomes the main reason why he wants to run away from his home in Nagano, Tokyo. In the novel, Kafka's father is described as a well-known sculptor who spends most of his time in his studio, and his mother left home with his adopted sister leaving him when he was four. Kafka blames his father for his mother's leaving resulting in anger and resistance towards his father. It can be said that authority figures in this novel are described in a controversial manner. Authority figures in YAL are usually depicted in ridiculous and funny characterization (Trites, 2000), but in this novel, Kafka's parents are depicted in

grotesque ways: his mother left him and took his adopted sister instead, and his father put a curse on him.

Kafka's resistance towards his father affects his personal identification of himself. When he looks at himself in front of the mirror, he seems to be dissatisfied with his appearance, not because he is unattractive, but because he inherits his father's genes (Murakami, p. 11). It can be said that Kafka's resistance towards the authority figures is seen in how Kafka seems to hate everything that has become part of his identity, for example DNA and thick eyebrows, because it is related to his parents. Therefore, he thinks that to be someone else means he has to get rid of his current identity constructed by his parents. Thus, it can be said that the genes represent his parents' power over him that prevents him to be free to construct his own identity.

His father's prophecy also seems to portray his father's power which represses Kafka's actions and belief by manifesting ideas of killing his own father and sleeping with his own mother and sister. Kafka thinks that if he leaves Tokyo and goes to

Shikoku, he will not have to fulfill his father's prophecy since he would be far from him. In other words, he will not kill his father and be with his mother and sister. However, his plan on eluding the prophecy seems to fail because he unintentionally follows every word said in the prophecy. Thus, it can be said that by rebelling against the prophecy, Kafka has already caught in the system created by his father's language. It shows that despite the physical absence of an actual parent, a repressive surrogate will always be present in an adolescent's life; in this case, the parent's language.

It can be implied that the main character is actually in a patriarchal society where everything that happens is based on the words of a man. Unlike many adolescent characters in conventional young adult novels who rebel against the authority figures by being mischievous, the rebellion of the main character in this novel is a portrayal of a successful repression of a parent figure. It means that Kafka's effort to escape his father curse is actually a part of the curse itself that Kafka

cannot outrun from no matter how far he distances himself from the "source".

Furthermore, like many other teenagers, the main character constructs parent figures to replace the absence of his actual parents. Interestingly, the substitutes that are constructed by the main character in this novel (Oshima and Crow) are controversial characters. One of them is resisted by the dominant culture due to his complicated identity, and the other one is a materialization of the main character's anger and disappointment. These characters can introduce teenagers to the controversial issues exist in the society and influence them to be open-minded.

SEX AND DEATH AS THE CONFLICTS RESOLUTION

Kafka on the Shore uses sex and death as the resolution for the conflicts experienced by the main protagonist. According to Trites (2000), in many young adult literature, the text always tries to liberate adolescent sexuality by saying that being curious towards sex is normal. However, this message

is interfered by series of message framed by institutional discourse that imply teenagers should not have sex, or they will feel guilty if they do (Trites, 2000). In other words, it is implied that adults as one of the institutional discourse in young adult literature tries to teach teenagers that having sex is wrong. However, in *Kafka on the Shore*, the idea of sex itself is implemented by the main character's father himself.

Kafka is introduced to the concept of sex by his father through his prophecy which insinuates him that he will "be with" his mother and sister. It can be seen that Kafka's father as an adult seems to influence Kafka to see sex as a part of a bad omen, it is something that needs to be avoided.

Kafka's attraction towards Miss Saeki which is depicted in the novel may be seen as an unfulfilled desire or as a result of unsuccessful childhood. Kafka was left by his mother when he was four and the memory wounds him. He then desires the role of a mother which he later finds in Miss Saeki. His intention to have sex with Miss Saeki may be seen

as his effort to be attached to his mother like when he was still a child. According to Trites (2000), experiencing sexuality can mark as rites of passage in which teenagers leave their childhood behind. However, it seems that this novel tries to say the opposite. Sex in this novel is an effort to go back to childhood.

Besides using sex as an effort to fulfil Kafka's desire of a mother figure, sex in this novel can be viewed as a resistance towards his father's prophecy. It is seen in the relationship between Kafka and Sakura.

Kafka experiences a sexual fantasy with Sakura even though it is only in his dream, and the sexual *jouissance* experienced in this incident can also be considered as realization of his father's prophecy which says that he will have sex with his own sister. By dreaming about raping Sakura, Kafka seems to use Sakura to break free from his father's prophecy. Ironically, his decision has made his father's prophecy comes true. Thus, the rape is not about Kafka who wants to have sex with Sakura because he desires her, but it is about

Kafka who tries to resist his father's power.

It can be said that sex in *Kafka on the Shore* is not something that is celebrated by the main character as many adolescent characters in young adult literature do. It is something that needs to be avoided. Therefore, it seems that this novel does not try to introduce the idea of sex as a natural curiosity of teenagers in which they realize their own power (Trites, 2000). Sex in this novel teaches teenagers to realize the power that surrounds them, and to accept it.

Besides sex, death also acts as conflicts resolution in this novel. In adolescent literature, death oftentimes depicts teenage protagonists' maturation when they accept the "permanence of mortality" (Trites, 2000, p. 119). Adolescents finally mature when they learn that death is an inevitable process of life, and it is final (Trites, 2000). Death in *Kafka on the Shore* contributes in resolving Kafka's conflicts with his parents.

The death of Miss Saeki puts an end to Kafka's journey. By forgiving Miss Saeki who might be his mother, Kafka is able to overcome

the grief and anger as the result of the abandonment of his parents. After he redefines his anger towards his parents, it can be said that Kafka successfully constructs a new identity which is hinted by his decision to come back to society. After the series of adventure that he has been through, Kafka decides to come back to Tokyo and go to school. It means that the "brand new world" that is suggested by Crow is ironically the world that Kafka intends to leave behind. The only thing that is changed is Kafka's perspective after he has been exposed to the controversial things during his journey.

REACHING THE SHORE: THE QUEST OF CONSTRUCTING A COMPROMISED IDENTITY

Based on the analysis of *Kafka on the Shore*, the quest of constructing identity is depicted in this following diagram:

Putting a distance >> resisting the society >> being exposed to controversial circumstances >> understanding the power of the

repressor >> appropriating the identity with the society

This novel suggests that in order to detach themselves from the influence of the institution that constructed their identity in their childhood, teenagers need to distance themselves from the society. They tend to see themselves as aliens or pests; resisted beings in the society. This tendency can help the teenagers to gain their sense of selves. Changing their names, moving to a new place, and setting their own preferences may be the examples of how teenagers try to construct their identity.

The kind of society that the teenagers resists may vary. However, in this novel, the main protagonist appears to resist the patriarchal society in which he lives. The main protagonist tries to rebel against the words of his father by running away from his home. Ironically, the rebellion done by the main protagonist can be seen as a portrayal of a successful repression of a parent figure. By rebelling against the words of the authority figures, the main

protagonist is actually inside the system created by the words.

In resisting the authority figures, the main protagonist learns that there is no such thing as absolute freedom. Even though they assume that they are free for being parentless, they need something or someone to limit their liberty. Therefore, they will find a replacement for the absence of their actual parents. As they grow up, teenagers often have different expectation from their parents. So that, they resist their parents expectation. Therefore, teenagers will find or construct substitute parents who they assume to have the same expectation.

Interestingly, the substitutes that are constructed by the main character in this novel are controversial characters. One of them resists and is resisted by the dominant culture due to his complicated identity. The other one is a materialization of the main character's anger and disappointment. These characters can introduce teenagers to the controversial issues that will trigger their construction of identities. It means that in order to

mature, teenagers will have to face controversial issues in the society. They need to be exposed to the things that are repressed or filtered by their parents, and they also need to respond to the controversial issues open-mindedly.

One of the controversial issues is sex, because the concept of sex is problematic. On one hand, sex is a biological need of the teenagers, but the other hand, the need of sex has to be repressed because experiencing sex for teenagers can bring shame and disgrace. Therefore, the concept of sex is most likely filtered by the parents, so that the teenagers must expose themselves to this concept. In this novel, sex is not something that is celebrated by the main character, but it is something that needs to be avoided. It represents the fulfilled incestuous prophecy which emphasizes the power of an authority figure in the main protagonist's life. Thus, sex in this novel can be used as the tool to make the teenagers understand the power that represses them and learn to accept it.

By accepting the power of the repressor, teenagers will learn to

compromise with the society. In this novel, the compromise is marked by the settlement of the conflicts. After the series of adventure that the teenagers have during their quest of identity, they will return to the society they intend to leave. Upon returning, the main protagonist in this novel has a changed perspective about the society. He develops a new attitude towards the society and learn to accept the dominant society's norms and values. Thus, the quest of identity of someone may not construct a "new" and "free-willed" identity, but rather a compromised identity who grows into acceptance of his/her society.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the issue of identity construction in *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami, this study employs two main theories. Nikolajeva's (2003) concept of implicit characterization is used in this analysis in order to explore the kind of identity that Kafka intends to construct based on his preferences. Another theory used in this analysis is Trites's (2000) theory on identity

construction in young adult literature. This theory is employed as the tool to explore the identity construction of the main protagonist in the novel. The results of the analysis show that in order to grow, teenagers may have to construct their identity by way of: (1) constructing a character who distances himself from the society; (2) establishing father-centered issues; and (3) using sex and death as the resolution to the conflicts.

From the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* can be considered as young adult literature. It can be seen from the issues faced by the main protagonist which show the characteristic of a young adult literature. The main protagonist in this novel undergoes a quest of constructing his identity as the result of his resistance towards authority figures.

In this story, Murakami shows his inclination towards the dominant society. Even though he gives a space for the teenage character in his story to develop themselves, the text implies that in the end even the most rebellious teenager has to make

compromises. It seems that Murakami tries to implement the idea that teenagers need to be challenged with some experiences that are deviant to the dominant culture's norms and values.

Despite the controversial issues which are presented in this novel, conventional values are still preferable in the dominant culture. As portrayed in this novel, teenagers will only mature when they have successfully constructed a compromised identity; an identity that accepts the power of the society and appropriates itself to the values and expectations of the society.

Therefore, even though Haruki Murakami is well-known for breaking the conventional way of writing, the content of this particular story proves otherwise. It appears that this particular story is very conventional and it abides by the dominant culture.

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