

An Analysis of Power Relations in Kanae Minato's Novel *Confessions* (2008)

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ABSTRACT

This study which is entitled *An Analysis of Power Relations in Kanae Minato's Novel Confession (2008)* aims to find and investigate the how power is exercised in Kanae Minato's novel *Confessions*. Using Foucault's theory of power, this study is expected to analyze the writer's purposes of constructed power relations in the novel. Focusing on how power is exercised, the data is expected to be found by analyzing the novel using qualitative research design with descriptive nature. After the data is collected, this study aims to analyze the meaning of exercised power in the novel. This qualitative research analyzes the data by the form of words, phrases and sentences.

Keywords: *Power Relation, Foucault*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is often believed to bring responses and criticism on what happened in the real world. Song (2013) in his journal article argues that Science fiction writers in China emerges due to the rapid changes in economy and technology in their country.. For that, literature fills one of its purposes, which is to bring realization to the readers of the issue that is happening in the real world.

Not only with science fiction, the purpose of responding and criticizing events in the real world is often seen in any kind of genres. Because of that, any work of literature can raise realization and building a new perspective in seeing certain events that happened in the real life. In this case, *Confession* can be an interesting case where thriller is used to convey a lot of criticisms about crimes and the dark or grotesque behaviours of Japanese people. It is interesting why the novel brings responses about said issues through a construction of narrative.

Kanae Minato, famously known in Japan as one of the ‘queens of *Iyamisu*’ (a Japanese term of a new

subgenre of mystery which deals with the darkest side of human nature) lives up her name by writing many horrific and complex psychological thriller novels. One of her novels is *Confession*, originally published in Japan in 2008, gained its own film adaptation by Tetsuya Nakashima in 2010 and was translated by Stephen Snyder in 2014. This novel has also won Alex Awards in 2015 even though *Confessions* is not considered as a young adult novel (“2015 Alex Award Winners”, 2015). Minato delivered complex stacks of power relations within the characters’ relationship. Moreover, this novel uses uncommon motifs such as junior high school students as murderers and teacher being gruesomely manipulative. Yet those motifs are delivered with justifications and explorations in the characterizations so the readers can understand why the characters acted in such a way. This novel takes place in everyday life situation with darker approaches on the characters, such as lifting up issues about child abuse but from a point-of-view of a child who thinks that he deserves the abuse.

Despite the novel's successes on being a bestseller and getting its adaption as a movie, unfortunately there are only a few studies conducted in this novel; with most of the studies focuses on the psychology aspect of the movie. It is very possible to examine and explore the narrative construction of power relation in *Confession* because the relations of the characters themselves are stacked with actions and reactions toward each other's actions. Not to mention the main theme of this novel is about a series of revenge in which the characters are expected to exercise the power that they have in order to hurt each other. Furthermore, it is interesting that the writer may or may not construct the exercised power to create thriller genre by showing the dark side of humanity as she put uncommon motifs in the novel.

Moreover, this novel is indicated to bring up social issues that are closer to Easterners' problems. To be exact, issues that was happening in Japan. While most studies in the field of literature are rather dominated by Western literature, this study also is expected to give a contribution in

seeing literary works in Eastern view. A study by Aguirre (2007) shows that even more than the differences between the works of science fiction in Western and Eastern nations, he found that works of science fiction between Japanese and Indonesian writers are different. He found that in the works of science fiction in Japan polarizes religion and science as something entirely different. While Indonesian works of science fiction integrated religion and science as one and supporting each other. For that, it is interesting to see whether the social issues that are raised by *Confession* are any different than social issues that happened in Western nations.

This study focuses on how power is exercised by each of the characters, added by how do the other characters react to the exercised power. Therefore, this study is done by the writer to explore the meaning of said grim and dark depiction of power and its connection in creating thriller.

METHODOLOGY

The data are collected from *Confession* written by Kanae Minato. Firstly, in order to obtain the data, intense close reading is conducted more than six times. The close reading focuses on characters' relations with each other and how power is exercised throughout the story. Then, the collected narrative events will be divided into two parts which are power exercised by the media and by the society. The collected data are analyzed using Foucault's theory of power (1982) in order to search the criticism and response that the novel is trying to convey through the novel.

Foucault in his book, *Discipline and Punish*, (1976) believes that contrary to the common beliefs, power is exercised rather than possessed. It is argued that power exists only by exercising it. He believes that power is constructed through discourses within practices between human relationships. For example, the notion of objectivity that differentiate each of us in categorized groups such as "good" and "bad" is only a product of discourses that are

practiced among us. It is argued that the discourse of which is good and which is bad is not only controlled or implanted by a certain individual but also nurture and accepted by certain groups of people, making it a norm and morality.

Foucault did not explicitly discuss about media, yet media always plays a big part along with power in influencing its consumers. In line with Foucault's theory that power is exercised through communication, according to McCullagh (2002), mass media can be seen as means and intentions that are transmitted and produced by organizations, taking form in contents and received by audiences. The contents presented by media usually are carefully constructed, purposing to create a certain message to be spread to the society. Thus, Foucault's theory of power supported the argumentation that media is a form of power that spread the discourses about a variety of issues to influences public's view.

Another article by Marandi, Ramin, and Shabanirad (2017)

explores on discourse and power in Nadine Gordimer's novel *Occasion for Loving*. Using Foucault's theory on Power and discourse, this article explores on how discourse in society reproduces power where social inequality such as based on race, class, sexuality, and gender are perpetually legitimated by discourse. Foucault (1982) believes that power constructs human life and their morality due to discourses constructed by the social relations. The notion of colored people as low class and white as high class is constructed by certain cultural and societal acts, which then firmly believed as a norm by the society. However, as Foucault argues that if there is oppression, then there will be resistance. In line with that, this article finds that the relationship of two main characters here represents the resistance toward racist oppression that the society had established strongly. Mills (2003) supported this idea by stating that discourses constituted each individual in regard of what can be said or not be said about himself/herself, especially

on the groups that are marginalized by society.

However, the power that certain people/institutions hold may shift due to another nature of power. In Foucault's *The Subject and Power* (1984), he argues that if there is power exercised then there will be resistance toward it. The power determines who the subject in the power relation is. For example, when power is exercised from parents to their child, the child is the subject of power. Thus a reaction of resistance toward the power will occurred as a nature of power and resistance. This does not mean that the parents are powerful since they may also be the subject of power whether from the child or from other people or group. However, the resistance as an outcome of power does not always directed to all the power fields, rather it may be directed at the power's manner within the field. Later, added by Heller (1996) that resistance will always occur to the exercised power. There is no subject of power who is unable to resist the power; instead it might be that the subject simply hides his/her reaction to the exercised power. It is

argued that the resistance to power emerges during the process of exercising power, which means the resistance will be less powerful than the power. Power as defined by Foucault (1980) is dynamic and ought to be seen as “Something which circulates in a certain situation”. This leads into the idea that power can shift. Any individual may lose his/her power due to many reasons due to the nature of power that has the change to shift and change.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, it is found that in the novel power is exercised dominantly by two institutions, which are the media and the society. The media exercised power by producing discourses about a murderer by selecting its contents and constructing the portrayal of Lunacy and Shuya Watanabe. Meanwhile, the society exercised power by producing discourses about punishments executed on the characters who were seen as norm breakers, which include Shuya Watanabe, Naoki Shitamura, and Mizuki Kitahara. Both

institutions heavily influenced the characters' viewpoints and actions, creating beliefs about what is considered acceptable and not acceptable action. This belief is seen to be a narrow meaning of Foucault's normalization.

Normalization, as Foucault (cited in Bell, 2011) explained, is a system that provides information and lines about what is considered "normal" and "abnormal", produced by discourses spread by individuals, groups, institutions, and government. Foucault's concept of normalization itself is very wide and complex, but in this study, it is simplified into the context of which actions that are acceptable in the society and which are not. For example, according to Moriguchi, the murder act is not acceptable. However for Shuya it is acceptable. In this novel, the discourse distributors are media and society. The media includes the portrayal of Lunacy that is spread through news transmission and magazine articles while the society includes the teacher and the students.

For that mean, both of the media and the society are criticized by

this novel. This novel criticizes the media as an institution that exercised power manipulatively. Meanwhile, the society also is criticized by this novel as an institution that exercised power inhumanly.

CRITICISM TO THE MEDIA

The novel criticized the media who had constructed certain mindsets and ideas through the exercised power by distributing discourses in the portrayal of a murderer. The media proposed the idea that murder is an acceptable act, even more, murderer is seen as a celebrity. These ideas were criticized by the novel through the monologue of the main characters. The criticism revolves around how the media distributed the discourses by selecting the Lunacy's Incident to show up in the news, presenting constant and excessive transmission of news about Lunacy, choosing the name "Lunacy" for the murderer, and to put the blame not to the murderer but to another innocent figure.

In line with Foucault's theory that power takes form in discourses distributed through communication in order to construct people's mind and control their actions, according to

McCullagh (2002), mass media can be seen as means and intentions that are transmitted and produced by organizations, taking form in contents and received by audiences and influence the audiences opinions and actions. In the novel, the media's transmission of news about the Lunacy's Incident created discourses about a murderer and resulted in influencing public's opinion about a murderer. First, the media had selected Lunacy to be a portrayal of a murderer, resulting in characters which have similar age, tendencies, and gender with Lunacy to relate to the murderer. Second, the media had used its power by popularizing Lunacy with constant transmission of news that revolves around the murderer, resulting in tendency in people's mind in treating sensational murderers like celebrities. Third, the media had presented the teenage murderer with a fancy name, created a powerful and positive identity constructed in the audiences' mind. Fourth, the media had influenced that the one who was truly guilty in the Lunacy's Incident was her innocent

science teacher, implied that the power media had in altering the truth.

These discourses that cycled in society also greatly influenced two main characters in the novel, which are Mizuki Kitahara and Shuya Watanabe. However, the influences that media created to the characters were not positive reaction. The discourses that the media constructed through Lunacy's portrayal created more tendencies on those teenagers mind in doing murder crime. In the previous subsection, it is mentioned that Lunacy's portrayal which is created by the media is prone to influence "younger consumers" and "the minor of their peers". The younger consumer in this case was children around Lunacy's age who was prone to seeing Lunacy as a role model. Then the minority in this case was people who also had tendencies on twisted mind like what Lunacy had. Mizuki Kitahara and Shuya Watanabe, who was in the same age with Lunacy and has the same tendencies with Lunacy had played as the proof to the society's fear about the media's influence toward its audiences. The fear is that the

portrayal of murderer may encourage other people to mimic the murderer and create a self-identity based on the murderer as the role-model.

The problem that the media caused was not entirely unique to be Japanese societal issue. In a study by Gould (2001), it is found that the portrayal of suicide by both fictional and non-fictional media is considered contagious to teenagers. Because of that, Centers for Disease Control in United States has published recommendations in order to minimize the contagiousness of what media presented. Most of them rotate around how media portrays suicide, in which media should not portray suicide as romantic fashion. The same was suggested by Moriguchi in this novel, in which she argued so that murderers must not be portrayed in romantic fashion. Instead, she suggested to her students to call Lunacy as "loser" or "idiot".

CRITICISM TO THE SOCIETY

Then, this novel criticizes how the society exercises power by presenting the punishments that the society delivers to the characters as destructive and inhuman. In the case

of Shuya Watanabe, the novel criticizes the destructive power exercised by Shuya's mother. Shuya was shown to be immune to the punishments exercised by Moriguchi and his classmates due to the stronger distribution of discourses exercised on Shuya by his mother. Because the power that Shuya's mother exercised on him had bigger effect on the boy than the power exercised by Moriguchi and the class members, Shuya's sense of "normal" and "abnormal" was different than other people under the distribution of discourses constructed by society. Shuya was not terrified of HIV virus because he did not fear death and do not appreciate life. His abnormal trait was a product of the power his mom had exercised on Shuya by punishing Shuya for his own existence. The punishments delivered by his mother had resulted in Shuya believing that his death would make his mom happy. Thus this lead Shuya to think that life is not to be appreciated, resulted on him to easily murder people around him. Another abnormality that Shuya had was his anti-social trait. The isolation and the bully acts that his

classmates had delivered on him did not create negative result on the boy such as loneliness or guilt. Instead, he felt peaceful now that his classmates ignored his presence.

Shuya's "abnormality" was constructed by the treatment he received by his mother. Power constructs the discourses that cycle around our social life and influences our sense of reality, actions, and thoughts (Foucault, cited in Marandi, S. M., Ramin, Z., & Shabanirad, E., 2017). His mother often hit him as a punishment for every little fault he had done. This had constructed Shuya's durability in facing punishments. Then his view of punishment was also biased by his love toward his mother. No matter how hard he was hit by his mother, Shuya never hate her, instead he tolerate her and agreed with her that he is better to die. According to Raven (2008), the subject under coercive power would feel a strong negative feeling and more likely to resist to the agent of power. Yet Shuya's mother had stronger base of power, which was referent power, on Shuya as the boy love his mom too much to the

point of obsession. Shuya loved his mother too much and failed to see that her treatment was a norm breaking action. As a result, the physical abuse that Shuya's mother had delivered to the boy resulted not in resistance or negative feeling, but resulted in self-hatred that made Shuya did not appreciate his own life. Then, Shuya's lack of appreciation in his own life influenced him to see others' life as also meaningless, resulting in him easily murder people. These webs of actions and reactions created discourses that constructed Shuya's characterization in the novel.

The novel also criticized how punishments were delivered by the students that dragged Mizuki who was innocent to be punished. The students were portrayed as brutally forced Mizuki to choose a side. The students demanded Mizuki to follow them by exercising coercive power where she was physically hurt and mentally scared. Then they also offered a reward if Mizuki follows their demand to punish Shuya. When Mizuki was known to show a little empathy on Shuya, she was heavily punished and forced to be put in the

same categorization of "guilty" like Shuya. The novel criticized on how black and white the society can be in punishing those who are seen to be guilty. The portrayal of teenagers delivering punishments inhumanly shows how the society can be as reckless and narrow-minded as teenagers. The novel shows the horror of those who are the defenders of justice can be as terrible as the norm-breakers themselves.

Meanwhile in Naoki Shitamura's case, the punishments were inferred as excessive. The novel depicted that the concept of punishment that the society exercised on him had already deeply ingrained in his mind. Foucault (cited in Balan, 2010) mentioned that the norms in modern societies are a product of self-surveillance and self-regulation encouraged by institutions. Naoki's conscience has already constructed by the discourses of that the society believes as "normal" and "abnormal". This was due to the power exercised by Naoki's mother in constructing norms and creating "self-surveillance" in the boy's mind. Foucault, as cited in Nye (2003),

argued that the state will do surveillance easier when the one that controls society was not legal codes but self-surveillance which is constructed through “perpetual distinction between normal and abnormal”, where normality is greatly stressed and practiced constantly to build the sense of reality in society's mind. Naoki, who was educated by a mother who cares so much with people's view on her life, learn to have strong conscience and resulted on him minding others view too much that it stressed him. Thus Naoki's conscience has worked too well as the “self-surveillance”, resulted in him punishing himself even though he had desperately avoided the punishments delivered by the society.

But Naoki's already heavy self-surveillance was worsened by the inhuman punishment that Moriguchi and the class members had exercised on him. Moriguchi punished Naoki by giving him milk injected with HIV positive blood, resulting in him believe that he would die because of it. Then, his classmates punished him by giving him isolation, enough for Naoki to think that he would be killed

by the students. Both punishments drove him even more to believe that the next punishment he would get is actual death, resulted in Naoki to be paranoid and turned into a hikikomori.

Another criticism to the power exercised by Moriguchi is shown by the state where Naoki suffered paranoia toward the punishments that he believed will be delivered to him. Harper (2008) explained Foucault's view on surveillance that the observed subject will create suspicion as the surveillance is exercised. In the novel, Moriguchi practiced surveillance in order to terrorize Naoki by sending Yoshiteru Terada, who was the new homeroom teacher, to the boy's house. This was done to monitor the condition of Shuya and Naoki while also manipulate the students more to punish both boys. Naoki, who was already heavily stressed, was suspicious that Moriguchi was everywhere through the presence of Terada and the probability of HIV in his blood. Thus it resulted in Naoki losing his mind and ended up murdering his own mother. This indicates that the self-surveillance in

Naoki is very high that causes him to snap even with indirect surveillance from Moriguchi.

The occurrence of Naoki becoming a *hikikomori* is quite unique as it is heavily indicated to be Japanese social issue. A study by Katsumata (2011) argues that *hikikomori* problem that happened in Japan is caused by many reasons which some of them are similar causes that this novel also has raised in Naoki's case. Naoki withdrawn from the society because of the high expectation that is forced on him, culture of bullying, and collectivism vs individualism. In high expectation, Naoki was highly expected to do successful things that pushed him to be stressed. Then, Naoki was scared of the bullying, as Katsumata stressed that bullying is expected not only in child phase but also in adult phase in order to create perfect society. Next, Naoki was alienated by the rest of the students in his class, creating a situation of an individual versus collective people. Katsumata believes that the process of individualism in Japan is the core problem in *hikikomori* problem as in Japan it is

expected for each individual to be the same with the collective majority.

THE NOVEL AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

While every characters and institutions written in the novel were depicted as corrupt and dark, this novel also presented hope that series of resistance toward the exercised power will always prevail. As what Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1990) believes that the link between power and discourse is considered complex and unstable, in which discourse can be an effect and instrument of power, yet also can be an obstacle, a stumbling-block, and starting point in resistance and opposing strategy. In line also with another Foucault's argumentation that "As soon as there is power relation, there is a possibility of resistance" (Foucault as cited at Sawicki, 1991), in the novel the media and society had exercised power excessively and manipulatively and thus leads to a series of resistance by the main characters, which resulted in more resistances. The resistances create an endless cycle of power that emerges everytime the exercised power is seen

to be excessive and inhuman. When the media's power is indicated to be inflicting serious damage on its audiences' behavior, the main characters resisted and criticized it in order to stop the spreading discourses. Then when the society's power has come to be inhuman and excessive, the main characters once again resisted said power. The series of resistances found in the novel were a proof of Foucaults' argumentation that there is no absolute reign of power because there will always be resistances emerge to change and fix the situation.

The dark and grotesque depictions of resistance themselves are a form of resistance done by the novel in order to criticize the power exercised in the real life. Foucault (1982) argues that power is pervasive, which means that power comes from everywhere. Not only the main characters, the novel itself is a form of resistance to the exercised power in real life. The media and the society had constructed discourses that greatly influenced the characters' mind and action. But in this case, even the media and society were not aware

of the damage they caused and did not realize the guilt they share with these norm-breaking characters. For that, the characters in the novel were the victims of abused power that media and society had exercised. Also, their acts of resistance were also criticized by the novel to be excessive and inhuman. As Mizuki Kitahara boldly asked to Moriguchi in the end of her letter where she retold to Moriguchi about of the implications after the teacher exercised her power, this novel also asks the same question, "Moriguchi-sensei, do you mind if I ask you one last question? What do you think of your revenge now?" (Minato, 2014). The punishers who should be the justice defender were portrayed just as bad as the murderer, creating discourses that every character can be as bad as the murderers, which are Shuya and Naoki.

In the end, this novel is indicated to create an awareness to the implications of power that is exercised by every part of societal life. Just like Shuya who were influenced by the media to do murder and Naoki who ended up killing his

mother because of the stress the society put on him, it is indicated that this novel tries to create discourses where the murderers are more or less the victims of the exercised power. “*Confession*” is a novel that lifts up the awareness issue of how every part of societal life including individuals, groups, institutions, and even the government are responsible in every crime that happened.

CONCLUSION

exercised by the media and the society, including the resistances toward both institutions by the main characters in the novel. The distribution of discourses practiced by media and society ended up creating normalization toward the characters’ mind. Normalization here is narrowed and simplified as a system that tells the subject under it about what is “normal” and what is “abnormal”. It also works as a norm. In this novel, media constructed ideas of a murderer by producing discourses with portrayals of Lunacy. Meanwhile, society implanted ideas to its members by punishments. In the

novel, it is shown that the power relations exercised by both media and society was abused and done without responsibility.

The media exercised power by choosing Lunacy to be news material, airing constant and repetitive news about Lunacy, deciding to name the murderer as “Lunacy”, and blaming other figure for Lunacy’s crime. These actions resulted in the ideas that a murder is normal thing and a murderer is to be idolized. The media then received resistance by the main characters in the novel, which are Shuya Watanabe and Yuko Moriguchi. Shuya resisted by blaming the media for the murder crime he had done. Meanwhile, Moriguchi resisted by using her legitimate power as a teacher to influence her students to resist the media’s power.

Proceeding to the next finding, it is found that society exercises power through punishments. The ones who exercised power as the society are Yuko Moriguchi (as a teacher) and the students. As a teacher, Moriguchi exercised power by influencing her students to think that murderers

should be punished as much as society could do. This is realized in punishment to Shuya and Naoki by giving them milk cartons injected with HIV virus and by indirect surveillance to remind both murderers about the crime they had done. Then, the students exercised power by supporting the series of punishment that Moriguchi had done to Shuya and Naoki. Their punishments include societal isolation and mental tortures in a form of bullying.

It is found that the punishments are delivered to three main characters which are Shuya Watanabe, Mizuki Kitahara, and Naoki Shitamura. The punishments that Shuya received did not affect him because he had received different discourses from his mother that resulted in him being anti-social. Meanwhile, the punishments that Mizuki received resulted in her resistance toward society and her coalescence with Shuya. Then, the punishment that Naoki received affected him too much that his mental state was snapped and murdered his own mother as an action of resistance.

From all of the findings, it is indicated that this novel shows how powerful and dangerous the exercised power by the media and the society. The media is depicted as manipulative and irresponsible while the society is depicted to be excessive and inhuman. The media is shown to have possible influence in creating more tendencies to commit murder on its audiences. Meanwhile, the society is shown to deliver excessive and inhuman punishments that make things worse. By knowing about how power is exercised, it is indicated that this novel creates impression to criticize the power that is exercised by the media and the society.

As a conclusion, the novel *Confession* works as a criticism toward abuse of coercive power and irresponsible media's power in the production of normalization practiced in everyday life. It also acts as a reminder that power is a dangerous thing if does not controlled with precaution with its possible side effects. Then, it is meant to open the readers' mind to be critical toward the responsibility that media and society share with crimes that happen. The

novel creates an impression that media and society are likely to play a part in influencing the criminal's mind and action.

Regarding to the analysis of power in the novel *Confession*, this study suggest for future researches to explore the notion of power and gender studies or feminism in the novel. This is due to the construction of the novel where all the characters who got murdered are all female characters and those who murdered them are all male characters. It is also suggested for future researches to explore more about the notion of power and identity due to the issue of identity created by the decision to resist or not to resist the power exercised to the subject of power. Another suggestion is to analyze this novel in young adult literature perspective due to the three teenage main characters presented in the novel.

Furthermore, this study suggests the readers to do researches in analyzing the notion of power, resistance, and normalization in other novels with different genres. It is encouraged to explore more on the notion of power presented in novels written by writers of non-western cultural base in order

to enrich the knowledge of power and normalization in different cultures

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