

## Father-and-son's Conflicts in Webtoon *Bastard*

**Ivania Tanoko**

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,  
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA  
E-mail: a11170057@john.petra.ac.id

### ABSTRACT

Webtoon is a popular digital-comic media. For this thesis, I will analyze a thriller Webtoon *Bastard* because it has a great theme, plot, drawing style, and good reviews. The story focuses on the conflicts between a father (Dongsoo Seon), who is also a murderer, and his son (Jin Seon), which inspires me to take the failure in a father-and-son's relationship as my topic. Therefore, I want to explore what factors trigger father-and-son's conflicts and how those factors lead to the failure in the father-and-son's relationship. I apply the theory of father-and-son's conflict. I want to show Dongsoo's and Jin's different ways of thinking on concepts of happiness and love, parental roles, and parental authority create conflicts because of no emotional bond and agreement related to familism values, discrepancy between expectations and reality, and no room for adolescent's independence. In conclusion, the complexity in this relationship can attract Webtoon's readers.

**Keywords:** father and son, single parent, adolescent, conflicts in the family, webtoon

### INTRODUCTION

Webtoon is a well-liked digital comic platform or application among youngsters in many countries. In order to read the comics, people can download the application for free in the Play Store (application platform for Android smartphones) and App Store (application platform for iOS). Webtoon is different from any other mobile-comic application since it contains original stories, while other mobile-comic applications only have digital versions of the printed comics. The way people read Webtoon is by scrolling up, which is more efficient rather than reading it horizontally and sometimes makes readers confused about the order.

Conventionally, Webtoon can be divided into 16 genres; among others are slice of life, superhero, romance, and thrillers (Webtoon, n.d.). In fact, thriller is a less popular genre in Webtoon. According to the Webtoon English version on February 26, 2021, *My Giant Nerd Boyfriend*, a slice-of-life comic, has received 42.7 million likes (fishball, 2021). A superhero comic, *unOrdinary*, has gotten 38.2 million likes (uru-chan, 2021). An ongoing romance series *True Beauty* has 33 million likes (Yaongyi, 2021). Those numbers are too far away compared to the most famous thriller story, *Sweet Home*, which only got 15.5 million likes (Kim, 2021). Despite the fact that thriller is unpopular in Webtoon, I still choose thriller for this thesis. I really enjoy reading it because I always want to know what will happen to the main character in the upcoming episode and have fun guessing the next plot. Patterson called this feeling created by thriller as "rich literary feast" (2006). Readers are dragged into the story, hoping for the protagonist to achieve the goal in whatever the unpredictable events are.

Although thriller is not the most popular genre, there are still some outstanding thriller comics, such as *Bastard* and *Sweet Home*. These two titles were created by Carnby Kim who collaborated with Youngchan Hwang as an illustrator. *Bastard* gets its fans' translation in other 26 languages and has been printed into the form of a paper-book by Sodam Publisher (MAL Rewrite, n.d.). *Sweet Home* becomes a thriller Webtoon that receives the highest likes among other titles in the same genre and gets its Korean drama adaptation on Netflix in 2020 (Robinson, 2020).

In this thesis, I choose to analyze *Bastard* because it is interesting. First, *Bastard* has a great theme, plot, and drawing styles. Carnby Kim brought up a thriller story of a disabled adolescent as the main protagonist with relationship issues. The drawing style also catches people's attention. Youngchan Hwang uses a chromatic monochrome (neither colorful nor totally black and white) comic. The second reason, *Bastard* can still invite people to start reading or re-reading *Bastard*. *grammatical.mistake* (2020) wrote at Episode 0, "I've been avoiding this one cause I'm a chicken, but on one ep I'm hooked. It's as good as I've heard." For these two reasons, I think that analyzing *Bastard* is worth it.

*Bastard* talks about a high school boy named Jin Seon and his father, Dongsoo Seon, who is a CEO of a big company. Jin is the only child in the family, while his mother died when Jin was a young boy. The truth is, this father and son relationship is not only as a parent and a child, but also a serial killer and an accomplice. They have worked well together since Jin was a little boy. Despite the close relationship between the killer and his accomplice, they do not have a good relationship as father and son. Jin really hates his father; he even calls his father evil since Dongsoo makes him become an accomplice. While actually, Dongsoo does the best thing he can as a father. He provides everything Jin needs and wants, but those actions cannot bring him closer to Jin. In the end, both of them should face a rough way to reach understanding in between.

What makes *Bastard* even more interesting to be analyzed is the struggles between Dongsoo and Jin. Jin wants to have a normal father figure who spends good time teaching and guiding him to understand the world. Sadly, he cannot find that figure in Dongsoo. The fact that Dongsoo is a psychopath makes Jin unable to feel at ease living with Dongsoo. However, Dongsoo also tries hard to be a good single parent for Jin. Unfortunately, what Dongsoo thinks is best, may not be the best for Jin himself, which leads to a not-going-well-father-and-son's relationship. According to Foster (2013), conflicts happen between father and son because of the existence of a generation gap. When a child enters adulthood, he thinks he is mature enough to be an independent person in society. He brings his idealism and tries to prove its existence in reality. Meanwhile, father as the older generation feels that he has already experienced many things in this society. He encourages his son to think and see things realistically (Vogt & Sirridge, 1991). Furthermore, the condition of single parenting can also be the factor of this relationship's problems. The absence of a parent, because of either divorce or death, has its own impact on the child (Lang & Zagorsky, 2001). Because of these interesting father-and-son's struggles, in addition to their unique family status, I will analyze the failure in father-and-son's relationship. I want to explore what factors trigger father-and-son's conflicts and how those factors lead to the failure in the father-and-son's relationship, both from Dongsoo's side and Jin's side.

In analyzing *Bastard*, I will apply the theory of father and son's conflicts. Padilla et al. (2016) writes that there are several factors that trigger parent-youth conflict. The first one is different familism values. Dizard and Gadlin (1990, as quoted in Connor, 2007, p. 58) define familism as "a reciprocal sense of commitment, sharing cooperation, and intimacy that is taken as defining the bonds between family members." There are material and emotional dependence with loving responsibility between family members that involves "solicitude, unconditional love, personal loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice for others" (Connor, 2007, p. 58). Each family member has different circumstances, which affect his or her familism values. When those familism values contradict each other, it creates and increases conflict. The second factor, different perspectives, occurs because each family does not share the same experience (Padilla et al., 2016). In a father-and-son's relationship, different perspectives can appear because of the reality that the father has faced and the son's expectations. Father, who fights alone to provide a better life for his son, tries his best to educate the son about reality (Ransaw, 2014). On the other hand, it is seen to be normal for a son to idealize his father to have some behaviors different from what his father

actually behaves (Vogt & Sirridge, 1991). The last factor is related to parental authority. Dixon et al. (2008) stated that adolescents have a strong desire to be independent. Yet, these children are still tied to their parental authority. Normally, parents will modify the parental authority to be a two-way authority, in which children are also invited to discuss the changes (Youniss & Smollar, 1985, as stated in Smetana & Asquith, 1994). However, this issue of parental authority can also create conflict, especially when parental authority does not go the same way as what the children want or need (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012).

## **ANALYSIS**

Here I explain what factors that trigger conflicts between a father and his son. Moreover, I will also show the way those factors lead them to the failure in a father-and-son's relationship. The analysis will be seen from Dongsoo Seon (the father) as well as Jin Seon (the son). The family relationship between Dongsoo and Jin does not seem harmonious because they often get into conflicts. There are three factors that trigger conflicts between them. The first factor, different concepts of happiness and love, will show how Dongsoo and Jin think of these two concepts. These differences can lead their relationship into failure because there is no emotional bond and agreement related to familism values. The second factor, different perspectives, will point out how parental roles should be in a family. The expectations that they have in their perspectives are not fulfilled because of the different situations they are facing in reality. The last one, different perceptions on parental authority, will reveal how the parental authority is in Jin's family, whether it is an authoritative parenting practice, an authoritarian parenting practice, or a permissive parenting practice. This parental authority can be an obstacle for Jin especially because Jin is an adolescent now who needs more space for his independence.

### **Different Concepts of Happiness and Love**

Dongsoo and Jin have different concepts of happiness. From Dongsoo's point of view, there are three types of true happiness that can be gained without having to lose or sacrifice something: kindness, service, and love. Although he receives bad responses from other people after doing kindness and service, he still calls it as his form of happiness. On the other hand, Jin's concept of happiness should be from people he knows around him, in the form of acceptance. Jin is happy because Kyun Yoon accepts him as her friend. After a long time being alone at school, he finally has his first friend. Jin also receives acceptance from Manny Kim, one of the bullies in his school. Jin's happiness comes from other people who accept him for who he truly is, not because he is trying to do something to get happiness.

Different concepts of happiness can be a source of conflict when there is no emotional bond related to familism values. In familism values, each family member has emotional dependence, hoping to get the same in return. This dependence can create strong bonds in the family. What happens between Dongsoo and Jin is they do not have emotional bonds because of their different concepts of happiness. Dongsoo's concept of happiness cannot give the same happiness to Jin. His classmates use that concept to bully him, asking him to do anything they ask. Doing what his father believes can bring happiness is not applicable to him. Instead, it contradicts Jin's concept of happiness. No one accepts him as a friend because his classmates only make fun of him. Moreover, he sees Dongsoo as a hypocrite since he only does kindness, service, and love for society, not for Jin. Jin does not see his father doing kindness to him because his father has made him an accomplice and done murder since Jin was young. The same thing goes to Jin's concept of happiness. The first person who accepts Jin is not Dongsoo because Jin never feels Dongsoo accepts him as a son. While actually, from Dongsoo himself, he actually wants to build an emotional bond with his son by applying his concept of happiness. Good reputation he receives can help him save his son easily if they have to deal with the police. The effect of a big CEO doing kindness, service, and love to people is beneficial in

making sure the police that Dongsoo can take care of his son by himself. Jin does not have to be prisoned and has a criminal record.

Not only do they have different concepts of happiness, Dongsoo and Jin also have different concepts of love. A psychopath Dongsoo defines love as giving a better life. He kills innocent girls and sells those girls' organs to organ traffickers. The girls do not die for nothing. Those victims are still useful because their organs can be transplanted for those who are in need. This concept, then, is also applicable to his own self. He thinks his death can give a better future for Jin. He does not mind at all, even though he should give his own life for his son, in the name of love. Dongsoo believes love is about giving a better future to the one he loves, although it requires the death of the victims or his own death. On the contrary, Jin's concept of love means protecting the one he loves with all his might. Love gives him the power to think of the best way to save Kyun from danger. He even dares to rebel and intimidate his psychopathic father. He does not care if he puts himself in danger, as long as the important person in his life is safe.

As stated by Connor, familism values involve several things, such as "unconditional love" and "willingness to sacrifice for others" (2007, p. 58). When someone does something, he or she should do it wholeheartedly. Looking at Dongsoo's and Jin's concept of love, I think Dongsoo is the one who really applies his concept of love into familism values. He shows his willingness to die for the sake of his love to Jin. Jin's concept of love can be called unconditional love. Yet, it does not fit with familism values as the one he protects is Kyun, his girlfriend. Although Dongsoo's concept of love fits with the definition of familism values, it also creates conflict between Jin and Dongsoo because Jin cannot accept his father's actions as the way he shows love. For Jin, Dongsoo's concept equates to killing people. Familism values require "a reciprocal sense of commitment" (Dizard & Gadlin, 1990, as quoted in Connor, 2007, p. 58). Both Dongsoo and Jin should agree to do the same thing for each other's concept of love. However, since there is no agreement between them, conflicts occur and lead them to the failure of father-and-son's relationship.

### **Different Perspectives on Parental Roles**

First of all, I will talk about a father's role as a supporter. From Dongsoo's point of view, as a single parent, he should provide a good life for Jin. In order to do that role, Dongsoo works really hard to collect money. As a result of his hard work, Dongsoo can give a huge amount of money for Jin. In other words, Dongsoo supports Jin financially. However, Jin has a different perspective on the parental role as a supporter. A supporting father is a father that also gives emotional support, as well as financial support to his son. Jin wants his father to care about him, even only a small detail like a cut on his face.

From this first parental role, I can see Dongsoo's and Jin's perspectives contain expectations that do not fit in reality. Dongsoo expects he can be a good supporting father by giving more than enough money to Jin. Looking at the old-parental-roles custom, Dongsoo has become a good father because father is the one who works for money with the purpose of paying the household expenditure (Dufur et al., 2010). Furthermore, I believe Dongsoo also understands that children these days become high consumers (Chengnan, 2016). Dongsoo gives a lot of money so that Jin can buy anything he wants, which can make him. In reality, money cannot fulfill Jin's needs. Jin also needs his father's presence in paying attention to him directly, just like his mother. Despite the fact that Jin needs emotional support from his father, Jin's expectation also does not meet with reality that Dongsoo is facing right now. Jin expects his father to spend more time with him rather than working in the office. In reality, Dongsoo is a CEO of a big company. He cannot leave his work because he has lots of employees and business competitors. If he did not work, no one would help him with the household expenses.

The second parental role is a protector. From Dongsoo's point of view, protecting his son means he should help Jin solve the problem to the root. If the problem comes from the existence of a person, then the only one and best solution is killing him or her. He kills Manny because Manny wants to destroy Jin's future. Meanwhile, from Jin's perspective, killing people is not an action that shows a caring and protecting father. Because of Dongsoo's action in killing Manny, Jin loses one of his important friends.

In the story of Dongsoo, Jin, and Manny in *Bastard*, I found here there is a gap between Dongsoo's and Jin's expectations and the reality of a father as a protector. Jin expects his father to apply toughening discourse. He does not expect his father to be directly involved in his own problem, even taking a serious step: killing Manny. In reality, Dongsoo must get involved directly with Manny using confrontational discourse. As a parent, he sees that Manny's intention has already crossed the line. Dongsoo expects his confrontational act can put Jin at ease since his enemy is already gone. Yet, the reality is Manny is one of the most precious people in Jin's life. If Jin has a problem with Manny, Jin wants a space for him to figure out his own problem since he is a young adult.

### **Different Perceptions on Parental Authority**

In Dongsoo's family, the parental-authority style that he uses is authoritarian parenting practice. Yet, in this family, the authoritarian parenting style is different from the general one. There is only one rule, unlike general authoritarian parenting that creates a lot of rules that restrain many aspects of children's life. The rule is, "If you are not useful, you might as well die" (Kim, 2014, p. 4). This rule has been implemented to Jin since he was young.

For Dongsoo, authoritarian parenting is the best type of parental authority for Jin. I think it does happen not because Dongsoo wants to make Jin as his accomplice, but because Dongsoo knows Jin is actually the same as him. Both of them are psychopaths. In order to prevent prejudice of society on Jin, Dongsoo chooses authoritarian parenting. It makes Jin able to live only with Dongsoo, who truly knows who Jin is and totally accepts him.

On the contrary, Jin expects his father to be more approachable and open to his son's opinions. It does not mean that Jin never wants to respect his father at all, or even worse, asks his father to have no authority over his son. Jin refers to the authoritative parenting style. He hopes he can talk to his father like a friend and create many sweet and memorable memories, but it will never happen because of that "deadly" rule.

Having issues on parental authority can become the factor that leads to the failure of father-and-son's relationship because the son does not get his independence, although he has reached adolescence. Normally, parents will change their authority from one-sided authority into two-way authority (Youniss & Smollar, 1985, as stated in Smetana & Asquith, 1994). It means that the created rule not only comes from parents, but also comes from open discussion between parents and adolescents. The purpose is to give more space or freedom for the adolescents to explore adulthood, but still within parental supervision. However, there are many parents who stick to the old parental authority since they think that authority is always the best for children, without considering the developmental stage that those kids have been into. The same case happens in *Bastard*. Dongsoo knows that Jin has got his puberty, but still, Dongsoo applies authoritarian parenting style. The fact that his son is running away from home is not strong enough to make Dongsoo change his mind about his parental authority.

Jin decides to rebel because as he has grown up to be a man, he deserves to do things he wants. There are two personal reasons why Jin is trying hard to get his independence. The first and main reason is his desire to beat his own father. Jin wants to be free from his father, because Dongsoo has made Jin become an accomplice and commit crime since he was very young. He

could not fight back at that time, but now he is a man. He can have more power to make his own stand. The second reason Jin is trying hard to get his independence is Jin's desire to protect Kyun. Kyun is an important person in Jin's life because she is Jin's first friend and also first love. Because of those two reasons, Jin really wants to be an independent man, creates solutions for his own problems, and makes his own decisions.

Adolescent's desire to be independent is very strong. However, when parental authority gets in the way for the adolescent to explore and improve, since the father does not understand that he should change the wisdom, it creates conflict between father and son. Son wants to be free, but the authoritarian parental role is still applied. One day, the son will explode because the tight rule(s) of authoritarian style puts huge pressure on the son's desire. This leads them into the failure of father-and-son's relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Webtoon is a popular digital-comi platform not only in its origin, South Korean, but also in many other countries, including Indonesia. Many Webtoon genres are available to attract readers; one of them is thriller. Beside its purpose as entertainment, Webtoon can become a way to educate readers about important issues that happen in society. The thriller Webtoon I analyze, *Bastard*, focuses on conflicts in relationship between Dongsoo Seon, a father and also a serial murder, and Jin Seon, his son and also his accomplice. People might think they are close to each other, while in fact; there is a huge gap between them. Conflicts keep happening, getting more complicated until the end of the story, when they finally tell everything about what they think and feel of each other. Since the first time I read this, I was always wondering what factors cause conflicts in this family. I finally got a chance to find more about the answer to that question through this thesis. Therefore, I choose failure in the father-and-son's relationship as my topic. This thesis covers two things: the factors that trigger conflict in father-and-son's relationship and the way those factors lead to the failure in a father-and-son's relationship.

There are three factors that trigger conflicts in this father-and-son's relationship: different concepts of happiness and love, different perspectives on parental roles, and different perceptions on parental authority. Each factor is discussed from both Dongsoo's side and Jin's side. Moreover, the factors also lead to the failure in the father-and-son's relationship because of no emotional bond and agreement between family, discrepancy between expectations and reality, and no room for adolescent's independence.

The first factor is different concepts of happiness and love. As a father who is also a public figure, since he is a CEO of a big company, Dongsoo says directly that his concept of happiness is kindness, service, and love. For Jin, his happiness comes from acceptance of other people around him. Next, Dongsoo and Jin also have different concepts of love. Dongsoo defines love as giving a better life. He does murders because of love. He is even willing to die in order to prove his love towards his son. Jin has the opposite concept. His love means protecting the one he loves. These different concepts make them feel they do not have any emotional bond and agreement as a family. Therefore, conflicts keep happening and lead them to the failure of father-and-son's relationship.

The second factor is different perspectives on parental roles. As a single parent, a father has a responsibility to be a supporter and a protector for the son. Dongsoo's point of view sees a supporter as a financial supporter. He expects that by working hard and depositing a huge amount of money in Jin's bank account, he can make Jin happy. He also learns the fact that children these days love online shopping. Still, Jin wants more than that. His situation is he needs a father who is not only supporting financially, but also emotionally. He expects his father to be on his side, spending time together as a little family. Unfortunately, he does not get what he wants because Dongsoo is a CEO of a big company and cannot leave his work easily. Both

of them also have different perspectives on how a father should be a protector. Dongsoo thinks he needs to eradicate the root to help solve Jin's problems. That is why he uses contradictional discourse when he knows Manny has a plan to destroy Jin's future. In the same case, Jin does not think his father is protecting him. He expects his father to use toughening discourse and let Jin solve his own problems. This discrepancy between expectations and reality leads them to failure of father-and-son's relationship.

At last, different perceptions on parental authority can also become a factor that triggers conflicts between father and son. Since Dongsoo has known that Jin is also a psychopath, he chooses the authoritarian parenting style. He hopes he can control his son by creating only one rule: Jin should be a useful son. He does not apply a physical punishment. Instead, he uses a threat of taking his son's life. Of course Jin does not like it. It does not mean that he never wants his father to have authority on him. He will respect Dongsoo and his authority, as long as his father is willing to discuss it together and open to his son's opinions. This factor, then, leads to failure in the father-and-son's relationship when there is no room for adolescent's independence. When the son reaches adolescence, their desire to be independent becomes stronger. However, parental authority can be a limiting factor for his freedom, especially when the father sticks to authoritarian parenting style. The father holds full control over his son's life. When this happens, the father should be ready for his son's rebellion. Yet, if the father is ignorant, the conflicts afterwards will become worse than before.

In conclusion, I think *Bastard* can be a popular thriller Webtoon because its story attracts people to follow the complexity of this father-and-son's relationship, especially when a psychopath becomes a father for his son who is also his accomplice. They are a perfect duo in doing crime since no one can expect them to be murderers. Some episodes show that they really care for each other in front of other people. Yet, when readers are invited to see the situation of this relationship besides being a murder and an accomplice, readers will see their struggles in understanding each other as a father and a son. Jin as a son often gets confused by his father's perception of him. He is not sure whether his father thinks of him as a son or as a "tool" in doing murders. Dongsoo says that he loves Jin, his one and only son. He even dares to die in order to show how much he loves Jin. However, at the same time, Dongsoo also threatens to kill Jin everytime Jin tries to rebel. These kinds of confusions lead this father-and-son's relationship into failure since they always have conflicts. Another interesting point of *Bastard* is that readers can also join in valuing if Dongsoo is actually a good father or not. Besides being scared of Dongsoo's expressions in this Webtoon, readers can find out good things about Dongsoo as a father; things that Jin does not know about his father's mindset. It is great that *Bastard* was created in Webtoon, so that readers can see clearly every event from the provided visuals and get immersed into the story, waiting for what is going to happen in the next episode.

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