A Puppet No More:
A Novella Exploring Self-Esteem Issues in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The process of maturation for adolescents happens simultaneously and stems from demands from their surroundings. As a result, they are dissatisfied with themselves and develop detrimental practices, such as low self-esteem. This creative work aims to explore the struggles of low self-esteem in adolescents. Specifically, it discusses the symptoms, causes, and solutions. It is written in the form of a novella supported by Carl Rogers' Theory of Personality Development and Paul Gilbert's Social Mentality Theory. The protagonist's low self-esteem is shown through her anxiety, dependency on parental regard, and acts of denial which are caused by the high expectations from her family and social environment. She constantly tries to fulfill these expectations which cause her confidence to deteriorate. Eventually, she learns how to overcome her struggles by coming to terms with herself and learning self-forgiveness. This work falls under the coming-of-age genre as it showcases the protagonist's process of maturity.

Keywords: adolescence, coming-of-age, low self-esteem, social mentality theory, theory of personality development

INTRODUCTION

Before stepping into adulthood, a young adult must endure the transitional period towards maturity often known as adolescence. A study by Sawyer et al. (2018) defined the adolescent stage as the period where it "encompasses elements of biological growth and major social role transitions, with the timing of these development patterns varying across time and place" (p. 223). In other words, they will encounter various developments, ranging from physical, cognitive, and social, to emotional aspects. Adolescents going through this stage are aware that their entire body is advancing; however, they also feel other aspects of themselves do not develop at the same rate as the former. As a result, young adults are unable to experience maturity because they are still adjusting to the changes. Furthermore, demands from their close associations, such as parents, also contribute to the fluctuating self-crisis in adolescence. These often take the form of exhibiting expectations on the young adult as he/she matures. If these are unmet, parents may respond critically which will produce negative impacts on their kids in the long run. Among the many kinds, the authoritarian parenting style, where parents employ strict and rigid rules the children are obliged to follow lest they should endure corporal punishments (Jadon & Tripathi, 2017, p.910), is the most severe to be inflicted on the maturation of adolescents. Here, young adults are demanded to perform better than they are currently doing. At the same time, the parents hardly explain the reasons why such regulations are enforced and to be followed. As a result, this parenting style arouses adolescents to also demand high personal autonomy in shaping their future (Bi et al., 2018). When parents exert too much control over the young adults' lives, they are less likely to participate in the conversation as they feel as if their chances to negotiate and define proper boundaries are stripped out (Bi et al., 2018). Additionally, adolescents are prone to think they are not being good enough at the task they are doing. This dissatisfaction would eventually lead young adults into viewing themselves negatively which will lead to detrimental practices, such as low self-esteem.

To combat such demeanor, adolescents need to be able to develop high self-esteem. Self-esteem itself is defined as an "overall assessment of the individual's worthiness, expressed in a positive or negative orientation towards them" (Minev et al., 2018, p.114). In its evaluation of worthiness, a person needs to be aware of his/her competence to be enacted when dealing with the challenges of his/her life. Only by doing so, can a person achieve high self-esteem. Because of its important role, self-esteem is chosen as the topic highlighted in this creative thesis. As self-esteem becomes a crucial tool for young adults, issues revolving around low self-esteem are still prevalent as they are pressured to fulfill many expectations. In Indonesia, parents tend to compare their kids with other children who are doing better when these young adults start to mature. This inclination stems from parental hope for their children's capability as a measure of their parental system (Bahira, 2018, p.12). They believe the more successful their kids are, their parenting style is better. Because of this, parents will be more than willing to spend time and energy shaping their children to become the best of the best. The outcome, however, is young adults feeling pressured and unconfident in themselves. This is because the process of meeting expectations serves as a self-evaluation to reach an ideal self-image (Fukuoka, 2017, p.61). When a young adult fails to measure up to the demands, this necessarily means that the adolescent is incapable of fulfilling such a desired standard. This type of failure poses a detrimental stand on the formation of the adolescent's self-esteem as he/she tends to internalize such beliefs, especially ones coming from the parents, and "incorporate them into their own expectations for success" (Ma et al., 2018, p.2507). As a result, young adults have a distorted perception of themselves and become dependent on achieving such demands to avoid disappointment for not living up to the ultimate ideal. In support of this, research conducted by Hanum et al. (2016, p.93) on 89 advanced students at SMA 2 Kudus reported that parental expectation contributes to 50,6% chances of developing academic stress. This great number proves high parental demands significantly impact young adults' self-worth. Due to the negative impacts of low self-esteem and its concrete existence among Indonesian adolescents, this creative work is intended for young adults as its target reader.

This creative work will take the form of a novella. Fuchs (2019) defined the novella as a work of fiction whose form "contain one major storyline that centers around one decisive turning event" (p. 400). He further explained that due to the limitations a novella has, the exploration of the protagonist, place, and atmosphere could not be developed as much (p.400). Therefore, the focus of the narration will emphasize the crucial scene at hand. This central attention a novella brings is beneficial for young adults as the target reader of this creative work as they are able to grasp the comprehension of the narration (Simanjuntak et al., 2022). By doing so, adolescents are enabled to maintain their reading interest throughout the whole plot and come to a conclusion about the bigger picture. Additionally, a novella aims to relate the events to those happening in real life so that it can "impact the world of its reader" (p.402). Constructing the narration as such will help adolescents relate the events with the courses of their lives, especially when the topic revolves around self-discovery.

The genre of this creative work is the coming-of-age genre. The coming-of-age genre itself centers on the growth of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. According to VanderStaay (1992, as cited in Staine, n.d., p.7), the coming-of-age genre is suitable to deliver various aspects of culture, especially about the fundamental aspect of pain and suffering a young adult must go through in the process of growing up. For example, Stephen Chbosky's 1999 novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* depicts the struggle of Charlie to overcome his traumatic experience as a victim of sexual abuse. Ananda (2022, pp.47-48) believes that the protagonist is not only seen to solve his problem and find his identity gradually, but it also showcases the series of events related to pain and suffering, for example through heartbreak and conflicts in the friendship that will build his self-esteem throughout the whole plot. Additionally, it addresses the unspoken origin of the source of maturity. Fajarrani (2013) emphasized that such a

genre discovers the why and how experiences happen during adolescence as well as depicts "the process of coming of age to reach a point of maturity (p.118)." By understanding the transitional period from childhood to adulthood, readers can make sense of who they are better.

The first theory implemented in this creative work is Theory of Personality Development by Carl Rogers. This theory believes that the formation of self-esteem is achieved through self-actualization that is derived from the sole experiences an individual has. Every stimulus a person receives will be used to build his/ her own self-concept. To establish maximum self-esteem, Carl Rogers defined two contributing terms, namely the real self and the ideal self. According to Tekke and Ismail (2015, p.144), the real self, commonly known as self-image, is the way a person sees himself to produce self-value. This means that someone will regard himself based on the discernment of one's character. On the other hand, the ideal self is another version one has in hopes to fulfill (Tekke & Ismail, 2015, p.145). In other words, the ideal self is often associated with goals or ideals an individual has and is to be achieved to acquire maximum comfort in the wholeness of being. These two need to form high congruence for high self-esteem to occur. However, incongruence happens when the experiences an individual attains do not match his/her formation of the self-concept. When external parties, such as parents and/or significant others, dismiss the individual's subjective experience, he/she is likely to perceive the experience selectively and even distortedly (Rogers, 1959, p.226). This will result in the person experiencing internal confusion because his behaviors are then forced to adjust to the incongruence. Completing Rogers' theory, Russian researcher Sergey A. Kapustin (2016, p.63) noted that incongruence existing between the real self and the ideal self of a person produces an abnormal personality or a mask that forces the individual to hide his/her real personality as the foundation of her self-esteem and create a cover to be liked by external parties. The big outcome of this incongruence is an individual experiencing anxiety. Besides that, a person may adopt defensive behaviors such as denial and perceptual distortion due to this incongruence.

The second theory is Social Mentality Theory by Paul Gilbert which places an emphasis on the evolved mind. Bailey and Gilbert (2000) explained this by stating that the thoughts and images created in the mind generate complex patterns of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, such as "thoughts of self as inferior, defeated, and trapped can activate depressed mood, sleep disturbance, and social withdrawal" (p. 123). These prove that the evolved human brain may disrupt the construction of the self based on the effect it produces. Because of this, individuals may behave in self-attacking way where, according to Rowan (1990, as cited in Bailey & Gilbert, 2000, p.126), individuals build the foundation for "possible selves or sub-personalities" which could employ different parts when an individual is in different states of mind. These sub-personalities could be labeled and the individual could interact with them. These sub-personalities create different influences that will interact with the mind. If the more aggressive sub-personalities actively send signals to the mind, the person may struggle with self-attacking behavior. The sub-personality that is known to enact such an effect is called the hostile-dominant inner figure. In order to combat this, an individual must develop compassion between oneself build through four processes namely: identifying hostile-dominant inner figure, where the person personify his/her inner bully and its effects (Bailey & Gilbert, 2000, pp.134-135); activating care-giving mentalities through a mental persona, where imagines another figure opposite of the inner bully by "focusing on appearance, facial expression, and voice tones" (Bailey & Gilbert, 2000, p.139); activating care-giving mentalities through emotional warmth and challenge, where individuals "generate alternative thoughts to their self-attacking ones" (Bailey & Gilbert, 2000, p.140); and reaching self-forgiveness, where individuals learn to accept his/her human fallibility as a part of something natural (Bailey & Gilbert , 2000, p.143).

This creative work will follow the story of Sophia, a 16-year-old girl, who has always lived under her parents' expectations to preserve their legacy as respected academicians. In doing so, she cannot help but feel that she needs to constantly fulfill her parents' demands to feel like she is doing enough. As time goes by, she begins to lose her confidence when she starts failing her classes and becomes the talk of the school. In the end, she cultivates her interest in karate to combat such a negative feeling while at the same time breaking free from her parents' demands.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of this novella is that the achievement of the fullness of well-being lies in the liberty to build on one's self-esteem. In order to project this theme to the readers, Sophia, my protagonist, will have to go through a series of events where she struggles against the constraints of her parents to define her own self-esteem. The pain of having to succumb to the feeling of low self-esteem due to having to live up to her parent's expectations is solved through the discovery of her passion for martial arts. Here, she is to fight for her interest as a way to prove that she has the right to define who she is without having to constantly wait for her parent's approval. Although experiencing limitations and prohibitions from her parents, Sophia's persistence in following her passion leads her to create a healthy mental persona to combat her low self-esteem while at the same time liberating herself from her parents' demands. Thus, her attainment of high self-esteem is reached when she is able to win a competition by following her interest.

Plot

The story begins with Sophia running through the front door of her house to show her parents the medal and certificate she won in a science project competition at school. She begs her parents to join their banquet event as her reward in which she received lots of compliments. However, one of the guests named Mr. Desmond thinks Sophia should have done better in the competition. Pissed, Sophia gets into an argument with him. The first foreshadowing takes place when Mr. Desmond comments about how Sophia will destroy the parents' good reputation if she does not give her best. Problems start arising when Sophia discovers that her parents believe she has not been doing enough. She goes back to her room and is restless upon recalling what Mr. Desmond says at the dinner table.

Restless upon the events at the banquet, Sophia could barely focus on preparing for her math test the next day. Deciding on a rest, Sophia plays her tactical game and loses track of time which causes her to fail her exam. Embarrassed, Sophia blames the teacher's poor teaching skills. The following day, she attends the remedial class as the only advanced student, walks back to her classroom, and notices her friends acting strangely. Feeling as though she is being gossiped about, she confronts her classmates and hides in the toilet to calm down after finding out the truth.

Problems start escalating when Sophia is practicing basic karate moves with her academic rival, Clarence. During the practice, Clarence tries taunting Sophia and accidentally punches Clarence too hard in the abdomen. When school is over, Sophia is called to the principal's office about the Sports class' incident and forced to apologize to Clarence. The principal also tells her she might lead to attracting a 'big storm' that will affect her academic performance if she continues her acts. Hearing the report from the principal, Sophia's parents

threaten to lock Sophia in her room if she continues to misbehave. Afraid of the punishment, Sophia attempts to avoid Clarence at school while trying to stay on top of her classes.

However, it does not get better when Clarence accuses Sophia's parents of bribing the target university to achieve the scholarship. Enraged, Sophia fulfills the principal's 'big storm' foreshadowing by punching Clarence which results in her being sent into a one-month suspension and termination of her scholarship. This leads to Sophia being locked in her room by her parents and enrolled in additional courses to make up for her failure. In the midst of her frustration, Sophia adopts a mental persona of her own grandmother and learns that her failures are a part of her growing up. Upon returning to school, Sophia decides to join Aidan's karate community and is able to help the other kids who are struggling with their moves.

In the midst of helping her friends with a basic karate movement, Sophia is encouraged by Aidan to join a regency karate tournament. This causes her to get into an argument with her parents when they find out. When she is about to withdraw from the match, she recalls the feeling of enjoyment she feels when practicing karate with Aidan's martial arts community. She decides to pursue her interest even without her parents' approval. On the day of the match, Sophia takes down her opponent although battered and bruised. In the end, she wins the match and a dean from one of the most prestigious universities offers her a full scholarship for her outstanding achievement. She gladly accepts which elevates her self-esteem and heals her relationship with her authoritarian parents.

Characters

1. Main Characters

● Sophia Prayoga
   A 16-year-old who is raised in a well-off family. She is the daughter of the renowned academicians Mr. and Mrs. Prayoga. She has long, wavy hair that is always tied up in a half-up-half-down hairstyle. She always wears her clothes neatly to mirror the profile her parents want her to be, which is a well-mannered and well-educated girl. In school, Sophia is a pupil of the advanced class and is known to be one of the brightest kids in school. Deep down, Sophia is actually a low self-esteem person. She often feels pressured in her school days as being the daughter of respected academicians and an advanced-class student, Sophia is expected to be capable of securing a good reputation. In her daily life, Sophia is also dependent on her parents' good regard for her because that makes her feel secure in her activities. Due to her upbringing, Sophia appears confident and obedient to what her parents say about her. In her academics, she is coerced by her parents to always excel in everything she does. The constant pressure she receives from her parents causes her to become easily angry and seems aggressive in both her speech and action. Tired of the pressure from her parents, Sophia finds a way to let out her frustrations by joining a karate community. Discovering that she is passionate about karate, she decides to enroll in a national karate competition despite her parents' disapproval. When she wins the competition, she becomes united with her true self.

● Mr. and Mrs. Prayoga
   The parents of Sophia Prayoga. They make their names famous by being academicians who are excellent in their work. Mr. Prayoga himself is a man with a well-built body whose hair has a tint of gray in it. He also wears glasses and button-up shirts, even in his own house. Mrs. Prayoga, on the other hand, is a woman with a bob-cut hairstyle who dresses elegantly. Initially, Mr. and Mrs. Prayoga did not plan to have Sophia in their second year of marriage. When Sophia was born, things between them started to go haywire as they had difficulty accomplishing their tasks and taking care of Sophia. As a result, hardly any institutions wanted

their participation. Once Sophia starts school, Mr. and Mrs. Prayoga want to preserve their reputation by coercing Sophia to follow in their footsteps. Because of this, they despise any unladylike behaviors Sophia shows, such as joining non-academic activities. They believe such actions will distract Sophia; thus, damaging their reputation as highly-respected academicians.

2. Supporting Characters

● Aidan Winaryo

18-year-old boy and captain of the martial arts community in the school. Back then, he had quite a temper. Due to his short posture, his friends often made fun of him which provoked Aidan to let out his anger either by punching a wall or his friends. His outrage became severe to the point where he was suspended from school in ninth grade for punching his friends. During the school break, he visited his grandfather and learned how to channel his negative energy through martial arts. Aidan is equipped with a bulky body and agile movement. His hair is in a short quiff and he has tan skin. When school break was over, Aidan started actively participating in martial arts extracurricular. He is also friendly and playful with the members of his martial arts community.

● Clarence Wijaya

16-year-old girl and Sophia's academic rival in school. Clarence's rivalry with Sophia starts when the teachers at school always prefer Sophia's work to hers although they are both deemed as intelligent students. Tired of constantly being the second best, Clarence is encouraged by her parents to join non-academic activities, specifically basketball, to boost her academic performance. Due to her passion for basketball, Clarence is blessed with an athletic figure. She is also quite arrogant, especially if she is the only one who receives the reward. Additionally, Clarence is also competitive to the point where she will despise the person who achieves a higher standing than she does. When Clarence sees that Sophia also gets the university scholarship, she accuses Sophia and her family of committing bribery.

● Grandmother

Born to a renowned warrior father in Madiun. Because of her father's status, she spent most of her youth practicing *Pencak Silat*. She used to despise training due to her father's cruel methods but began pursuing this martial art after learning the reason behind it. Grandmother was little in posture, but through the rigorous training, she was strong and agile. She was also a courageous and confident woman. Although she was bold in character, she was also a warm-hearted person as she would not hesitate in giving advice to her granddaughter, Sophia Prayoga, so she could be a strong person. When her father passed, Grandmother continued his legacy and taught the skills she learned to her granddaughter. Later in life, Grandmother died of natural causes.

Conflict

There will be two types of conflicts that exist in my novella, which are internal and external conflicts. Internal conflict, also called man versus self, exists within the character himself triggered by the differences between "morality, fate, desire, and belief." (Muttaqi, 2016, p.17). In my novella, the internal conflict will showcase my main character's internal debate about whether to be subjected to her parents' conduct on defining herself or fight for her own self-esteem even if it means receiving constant opposition from her parents. External conflict, on the other hand, means "a character struggles against another character" (Muttaqi, 2016, p.17). Here, Sophia experiences a great clash with her parents and academic rivals.

CONCLUSION

This creative work aims to explore the symptoms, causes, and solutions of low self-esteem issues as experienced by my protagonist, Sophia. The first purpose explains Sophia's symptoms of low self-esteem which are shown through anxiety, dependency, and acts of denial. In the story, Sophia's anxiety makes an appearance whenever she is alone after facing confrontations. For example, after hearing Mr. Desmond's prediction that she will further bring shame to her parents' reputation if she keeps on being second of the best, Sophia struggles to fall asleep as she keeps rethinking Mr. Desmond's words and hopes they will not come true. Her anxiety reaches its peak when she punches Clarence, her academic rival, for the bribery accusation against her parents which causes her scholarship to get retracted. As the dean who gives Sophia the scholarship is present during the fight, Sophia can only tremble as she watches the dean walks away. Additionally, her dependency is on her parents' regards when she finds out that her parents are pretending to be happy about her science competition's achievement during the banquet event. From that night on, Sophia determines to fulfill her parents' desires by involving in activities they will accept, such as constant studying. Furthermore, Sophia's acts of denial are featured when she fails in her activities that are caused by her fault. Abiding by Rogers' theory of personality development (1959, p. 226), this tendency stems from her dependency on her parents' good regard whenever she succeeds. When Sophia fails, she internally realizes that she does not fulfill her parents' expectations which mean she will not get her parents' good regard. One of the most apparent examples is when Sophia fails her math test because she plays her tactical game until late and blames the teacher's poor teaching skills instead.

The second purpose shows that the causes of Sophia's low esteem stem from expectations that are exhibited by her parents and social environment. As stated by Rogers (1951, p.488), a person must gain his/her autonomy in perceiving his/her experiences so that he/she can build his/her self-concept. Additionally, Kapustin (2016, p.63) completed Rogers' theory by stating that the lack of autonomy a person has will cause the individual to reach an incongruence because he/she will then produces a mask that forces him/her to conceal his/her real personality and create another persona that will be liked by external parties. Additionally, Rogers (1951, p.500) also stated that individuals who experience this treatment are likely to develop resentment toward the party that inflicts such pressure. In the story, Sophia is actually a low self-esteem girl. Due to her upbringing in an academician family, she masks such a personality by appearing as if she is confident and excellent. This is shown by how Sophia is regarded as one of the brightest students in school. Abiding by her status, it becomes a shock to everyone when Sophia is the only one who fails her math class among her advanced class classmates and accidentally punches Clarence too hard during Sports class. When her parents find out, she is locked in her room as a way to redeem her faults. Because of this, Sophia grows to resent her parents by visibly ignoring their efforts in creating conversations with her as well as defying their orders.

The third purpose speaks about Sophia's way of overcoming her low self-esteem. Based on Social Mentality Theory, Bailey and Gilbert (2000, p.120) explain that the evolved brain is a tricky part as it triggers complex patterns of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. When this happens, a person may behave in a self-attacking way and feels subordinate. In order to defeat this, a person needs to identify the hostile-dominant inner figure, activate a care-giving personality, and learn self-forgiveness. Sophia's identification of her hostile-dominant inner figure takes place when she is incapable of understanding the tasks that she is supposed to submit the following week. Frustrated, Sophia tries to block the taunting sentences the voice inside her head does and accidentally hits her knees as she tells the voice to quiet down. As she takes a breather while rubbing her aching knees, she catches sight of her bruised wrist and comes to the realization that the hostile figure that taunts her that day is the same voice that

provokes her to hurt herself and end her life. After calming down, Sophia starts pursuing her passion for karate by watching karate moves on the internet and practicing it in her spare time. She uses this technique to combat her hostile inner figure when it starts urging her to inflict harm upon herself. Eventually, she learns self-forgiveness when she learns to divert her frustration on a dummy on the gym instead of on herself.

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