

THE IDENTITY CONFUSION OF ARNOLD SPIRIT JR. AS A MINORITY ADOLESCENT DEPICTED IN ALEXIE'S THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN: A PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This research aims to reveal the factors which cause identity confusion of the main character of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* on the fifth stage of psychosocial development. To answer the objective, this research employs the psychosocial theory by Erikson. The researcher applied a qualitative research method with content analysis technique. The source of the data of this research was taken from Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The researcher finds that on the fifth stage of psychosocial development, the main character is experiencing identity confusion. The researcher, based on Erikson psychosocial development theory i.e. Identity vs Identity Confusion reveals that there are three factors which causes the main character to face identity confusion: unsupportive family, discriminative school peers and teachers, and abusive neighborhood. The three factors affect his personality in his quest of identity for it can be seen that the main character feeling rejected and feeling lost about where he belongs.

Keywords: *identity confusion, minority, adolescence, psychosocial development, Erikson, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence age is the age when individuals start to leave the childhood and entering the adulthood. This period happens during the age of 10 until 20. In this age, the main task of individual is to achieve the sense of identity. However, due to the rapid changes that come from inside and outside of adolescents, many experience identity confusion.

In this period, questions such as *Who am I? Where do I belong? What I want in life?* are the main trigger for adolescent to explore the self and surrounding. Adolescent starts to explore the wider world and deals with people from different backgrounds such as race, ethnicity, religion, and lifestyle. Therefore, this period is very important for adolescents because in this time they must learn how to adjust and negotiate with the society.

As the main task of this period is to commit to identity, Harter (in Casanova, 2011: 11) mentions that the creation of identity as being a social construction, peers, family, teachers, influence the search of "the self" taking place during adolescence. These social factors are strongly influence individuals on the identity searching.

America, as the melting pot of so many cultures and ethnicities from all over the world, considered as one of possible examples to discuss about majority and minority.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010, the table of *Population by Hispanic or Latino Origin and by Race for the United States* reveals that the biggest population of America is the whites dominating with 75.1%. As the

consequences, the other races or ethnics are the minorities, even the Native American.

Faircloth and Tippeconnic (2010) state that, compared to the other races or ethnics in America, the Native American is in the lowest position of the education grade. The low education standard triggers reservation students to transfer from local school to public school, which is located outside the reservation.

However, referring to 'the sense of sameness', the Native American transferred students are facing obstacles especially in adjusting to the new environment. To adolescent, differences can affect their social relationship. Condor and Chira (2015:1) state that to be accepted into the group, the teenager should not differ greatly from others physically, not to become the object of mockery. Adolescents who are too different in appearance or in acts are seen as weird because it is as if they are against the majority's ideal. However, it is not only the stereotype of others, Native American students who transferred schools themselves also face confusion about where they actually belong to, because the dominant culture is very contrast to their ethnic group culture.

Yet, in the process of identity searching, adolescents of minority group tend to struggle more than those of the majority. As ethnic minority adolescents, they may hold different values from those of the majority. The values are less well represented in society so that they often became the subject of prejudice. Moreover, they

belong to groups that are lower in status and power in society.

According to Phenice and Griffore (2000:1), minority groups are said to have unequal or limited access to power in a society. In this period, adolescent of the ethnic minority starts to understand that they are often labeled and treated unequally based on their cultural or physical differences. Therefore, adolescents of ethnic minority tend to have lower self-esteem than those who came from the majority ethnic or race because they are fully aware that the differences they have are considered to be the main cause of discrimination committed to them.

The researcher analyzes the main character in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* named Arnold Spirit Jr., a Native American adolescent who faces a crisis in defining himself after transferred into public school dominated by the white. His crisis is aroused when he transferred school. The impact of the decision is that he loses his only friend, he is recognized as a traitor by the people on the reservation and he has a hard time in the new society. Moreover, combined to the physical differences, his self-esteem is considered low that he never feels good enough to be or get something bigger or better. Therefore, the researcher decides to examine his psychosocial development because the researcher is interested in revealing the factors influencing his confusion and also how those factors affect his adolescence life.

This research is expected to give some benefits both practically and academically. Academically this research reveals that social factors strongly affect the life of adolescents in the search of identity. Thus, the researcher hopes it can enlarge the knowledge of the students that social factors can cause individual to experience identity confusion. Practically, by reading this research, it can be a part of information for students to understand that identity confusion is a normal thing to happen in adolescence age because it depends on how significance the social factors affect the individuals. Also, the researcher hopes that this study can encourage the young individuals to keep exploring the possible selves in order to find the answers of the questions on their mind and finally find the most comfortable self.

RESEARCH METHOD

The Kind of the Research

This research is a qualitative research employing content analysis method.

The Time and Place of the Research

This research conducted since April 2015 to August 2017 in Yogyakarta.

The Object of the Research

The main source of this research is a novel entitled *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie.

The Data, Instrument, and Data Collection Technique

The data of the research were in the form of words, phrase, clause, sentences, having correlation with identity confusion factors of the

main character, Arnold Spirit Jr.. the instrument of the research is the researcher herself. The data collection technique are by reading the novel comprehensively and by observing the data related to the factors which cause Arnold in experiencing identity confusion, by taking notes on the detail issues to be analyzed which are related to the topic, and finally by putting the data into a table first and then transferred into data sheets.

The Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis technique of this research is conducted through five steps: reading and re-reading, classifying and categorizing, interpreting and scrutinizing the meaning of the data, checking the measure of worthiness by triangulation, and making conclusions based on the results of the analysis.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. Factors which Affect Arnold's Identity Confusion

As an individual who is on the age of pursuing identity he faces a little more traits than the usual teenagers. He experiences confusion because of his unreadiness in dealing with the larger society that is caused by his family, school, and neighborhood.

1. Family

Family is the first community an individual joins. The identification process first started in a family when the younger member identifies the older members. As Erikson (1959: 57) mentions that the growth of an individual consists of a series

of challenges to develop the potentialities for social interaction, the parents or the older member of the family are responsible to help during the development. It is required for the older member especially the parents to give a good example to be identified and also to give a proper guidance and encouragement to the individual before or during joining the larger community.

Arnold represents the life of adolescent who lives in two environments which are very different one from another. He is a minority in both environments and treated negatively for his differences.

Arnold is the smartest student in Wellpinit, his old school. His teacher suggest him to transfer to a better school outside the reservation, which is dominated by the whites. When he discusses the idea to his parents, they do not give him support nor forbid him. Instead they give him a bitter truth about his choice.

"It's going to be hard to get you to Reardan," Dad said.

"We can't afford to move there. And there ain't no school bus going to come out here."

"You'll be the first one to ever leave the rez this way," Mom said.

"The Indians around here are going to be angry with you."

(Alexie, 2012: 38)

The conversation above between Arnold and his parents shows that his parents do not to give him a proper encouragement and guidance regarding to the situation. They do want him to have a better future, but since they are poor and cannot always give him what he needs, they tell him that it is going to be hard to leave the rez to

study instead. However, Arnold parents should give him a better encouragement and motivation.

Beside financial support, Arnold needs emotional support as well to gain a sense of safety and security from his parents. He needs to be assured that even though he is different he has the same right in pursuing dreams as everybody else does.

The facts mentioned by his parents confuses him even more and it proves that his parents do not give him a proper encouragement and lower his confidence instead.

Arnold learns a lot from his family that life is hard and unfair. He keeps seeing proofs that being Indian and poor are the sources of a series of an unfortunate life. Arnold always adore his sister Mary for her intelligence and fearless personality. Yet, from Mary as well, he knows that being smart and passionate cannot warrant a good life.

The rumor that ethnic minority adolescents have fewer educational and career opportunities than those from dominant culture is now make sense to Arnold. The letter Mary sends to Arnold shows how passionate Mary is about life. Yet from the letter as well Arnold can conclude that even smart people like Mary, who passionately pursues her dream, cannot have a good life because she is a minority.

These bad events happen to him and his family put him in a very great pain and makes him become more pessimistic. From his family he learns one big point which is there is no future for minority.

2. School

School is the first formal community an individual enters. As the task of this stage is to commit to a certain identity, the identification process that is already started at home continues at school. At school, adolescents will start to see that people group themselves based on the sameness they share. Adolescents value sameness very highly because it is the thing that will help them to find their clique. As the consequences they cannot tolerate any odds or differences and be cruel about it. Erikson (1995: 262) points out that young people can be clannish, and cruel to those who are different in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in such petty aspects of dress and gesture.

Arnold is a boy with an unusual appearance. He has a condition named hydrocephalus, a condition where he born with too much cerebral spinal fluid inside the skull. By the differences, Arnold often has hard times at school because it is the reason why he is bullied and excluded.

Due to his differences, Arnold is having a rough adolescence life. As appearance is the first thing people would notice, Arnold cannot avoid a single bully. Most of the time of adolescence is spent at school, not home. It means that peers play an important role in adolescence life. Arnold mentions that Rowdy could be more important than his family because he always spends time with him. It makes Rowdy as the person who can understand him the most.

Arnold knows that he is different because he has been different his whole life. Back at home he is different because of his unusual body shape, but in Reardan he is different physically and ethnically.

"What's your name?" Penelope asked.

"Junior," I said.

She laughed and told her girlfriend at the next desk that my name was Junior. They both laughed. Word spread around the room and pretty soon everybody was laughing.

They were laughing at *my name*.

(Alexie, 2012: 48)

Their attitude successfully makes him feels smaller than before he came to Reardan. And it is only his first day there.

Adolescents sometimes being cruel to those who are new and different. Most of the object of cruelty cannot do anything about the situation because as minority they are afraid of a bigger attack and no one will stand for them.

Arnold starts to feel confuse about where he belongs because he lives in two different worlds and does not feel home in both places. He is suppressed in reservation and excluded in his new school. This situation that is experienced by Arnold shows that if an adolescent does not have any friends nor joins any group he will feel lost about himself and the world.

To be cruel about differences is one of adolescents' nature but when a teacher does that it means that he does not have the integrity of a teacher. Farkas (2003: 379) has argues that 'teachers' perceptions and expectations of minority students contributes to the gap between

ethnic minority and majority students. It means that beside to teach school materials, teachers' task is to give a good example on treating another human being without looking at their life backgrounds. They have a strong influence towards the students because the set of roles provided by them are considered as the right roles to be identified.

In adolescence age, to be recognized by others is considered as important. The way the society define an adolescent is somehow will be the way he define himself. If the society thinks that he is good he will think so. As the consequences if the society thinks that he is not good, he will also think that way. Moreover, individual with low self-esteem is easily influenced. When an individual starts to look down on himself, he will fail to see his own good. He will put aside his own belief, keep taking other's opinion seriously and see it as the truth.

3. Neighborhood

Neighborhood is the third wider community that an individual joins after family. Here individuals will meet various type of people from any age. Individual will see that it is not only at school people praise the idea of sameness, but also in the neighborhood.

Everybody on the rez calls me a retard about twice a day. They call me retard when they are pantsing me or stuffing my head in the toilet or just smacking me upside the head. I'm not even writing down this story the way I actually talk, because I'd have to fill it with stutters and lisps, and then you'd be wondering why you're reading a story written by such a retard.

Do you know what happens to retards on the rez?

We get beat up.

At least once a month.

(Alexie, 2012:4)

The neighborhood cannot tolerate differences and when it is if the weak ones' have it they will automatically become their "toy". Because of his physical differences, Arnold is treated differently and always become the object of discrimination, verbally and physically. This cruelty keeps happening and slowly causes Arnold to see himself low. He casually narrates himself as a retard because the neighborhood gives the image to him. It proves that body image is likely become the most crucial thing of adolescents since adolescent value himself based on how the others see him.

CONCLUSION

Family gives a huge contribution in the confusion that is faced by Arnold in his adolescence age. As the early source of identification process, Arnold's family does not give him a proper example. Arnold always having a long-term doubt in decision making process because his family members do not really give him the proper example. Arnold learns hopelessness from his own family. He is smart yet his self-esteem is very low and it almost becomes a wasted talent because there is no proper encouragement from the family. As Arnold is always bullied by the neighbors and school peers, his family does not say anything to help him because bullying is a

very common thing in reservation so they do not see it as a big deal.

Due to his physical differences and race he is always become the target of bullying and abuse by his school peers. It is not only the students but also the teacher that is being discriminative. He feels rejected and excluded both in his old and new school. As the consequences Arnold feels lost about where he belongs.

Arnold has a bully and abusive neighborhood. The difference is only that in reservation the bully and abuser come from every age. Arnold is hated by his own tribe and called as a traitor for moving to Reardan School. He cannot define himself as an Indian due to his “betrayal” and the way the tribe treats him, yet he cannot say that he is the white either.

It is normal to experience a confusion in adolescence age, yet from the findings above there are factors that can hardens the confusion. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a novel by Sherman Alexie (2010) proves that Arnold as a minority adolescent having a harder times in his adolescence life because he does not get a proper guidance and encouragement from the family, discriminated by the teacher, and has bully and abusive peers both at school and neighborhood.

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