The Impact of Traumatic Childhood Experience on Martin Vanger’s Sadistic Personality in Stieg Larsson’s The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo

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Abstract

This study discusses about the impact of childhood trauma depicted in the antagonist character, Martin Vanger, in Stieg Larsson’s novel The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo. This study focuses on Martin Vanger’s sadistic personality as a product of his childhood trauma and the defense mechanisms developed from his traumatic childhood. Martin, as a victim of his father’s sexual abuse develops strong impulse to rape and kill women. The impulse is suspected as the impact of his trauma and disruption on psychosexual stage. The analysis was conducted using Sigmund Freud’s theory of Psychoanalytic Criticism. The parts of the theory that were carried out in this study were psychosexual stages and defense mechanisms. In the process of analysis, the writer used qualitative method by providing descriptive analytic and justification through the events related to analysis. The study was done by collecting data, selecting data, analyzing the problems, and concluding the findings. The study proved that Martin Vanger was fixated on anal stage because of his abusive trauma. It caused the disruption and failure in the next stages. In addition, Martin Vanger also displayed repression, denial, reaction formation, rationalization, displacement, and fantasy as defense mechanism towards his trauma. This indicates that the disruption on psychosexual stages and development of several defense mechanisms take significant part on the formation of personality.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, dysfunctional family, impulse, sadism

1. Introduction

The personality of human being is shaped during childhood. Traumatic experiences happened during childhood would lead to behavioral and psychological problems in adulthood. In shaping human’s personality, family plays the crucial role during childhood. Ironically, traumatic experience during childhood mostly takes place in family institutions. If the role of family is broken, children would grow with unstable mental state as an adult. According to Tyson, the family plays crucial aspect in psychoanalytic theory, because humans are each product of family-complex (13). This study will mainly focus on analyzing the antagonist’s adulthood personality as the product of his childhood trauma by discussing how traumatic childhood experience shapes the antagonist’s impulse to torture and kill using Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalytic Criticism. It will be further investigated whether the antagonist’s sadistic personality can be considered as a defense mechanism towards his trauma or not.

The writer of this study finds this topic is intriguing to discuss because there are many cases which do not end like the antagonist’s sadistic personality. However, the antagonist grows up as an exact figure like his abusive father. The impulse to rape and torture on him does not emerge without any motives. The development of those impulses is strongly influenced by many factors. Thus, the writer finds it interesting to analyze how the development of Martin’s strong urge to rape and torture shapes his sadistic personality.

The novel, The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo, addresses the issue of abusive family impact on individual’s personality. Its antagonist character is Martin Vanger, a sadist with an abusive childhood, who is responsible for kidnapping, torturing and killing women over 40 years. Martin has a horrible childhood and grows up in a dysfunctional family. Not only is he sexually abused by his father, but his mother also neglects his needs for affection and comfort when he was a child. The traumatic childhood
experience on Martin shapes and influences his adulthood into a serial rapist and killer. Martin’s personality might also be influenced by his instinct as a human being that always seeks pleasure and avoids pain. He loves the process of hunting and dominating his victims. Martin considers his sadist and killing behavior is pleasurable and enjoyable.

In order to support the analysis and avoid the use of the same issue on the same object in other thesis, the writer tries to find the previous studies. Cathleen A. Cerny, MD and Susan Hatters Friedman, MD in their study, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo: Forensic Psychiatric Perspectives*, written in 2013 examined the enigma behavior of Lisbeth Salander. The study found that Salander’s behavior is diagnosed for PSTD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder). Salander’s emotional detachment, hypervigilance, and trauma of her childhood are the diagnosis for PSTD.

The second study was done by Johanna Scorn, *Empowerment Through Violence: Feminism and the Rape-Revenge Narrative in The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, in 2013. Scorn stated despite of Larsson’s success to portray feminist role model of rape victims, but his idea of rape culture and its patriarchal basis was misapprehension. The last study was written by Elise Riedlinger entitled *Somebody’d get a fat lip if they ever called me PippiLongstocking: Gender, Sex and Red Hair in Stieg Larsson’s The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* in 2011. The study revealed Lisbeth Salander was depicted a fierce, independent, and intelligent as a product of the stereotype of redheaded woman originated from Astrid Lindgren’s *PippiLongstocking*. Meanwhile the writer does not find any previous studies of the same novel in psychoanalytic analysis discussing and analysing Martin Vanger’s impulse as a product of childhood trauma.

Freud mentioned that human’s personality is made of the id, the ego, and the superego. The id represents basic instinct of human as a living creature. According to Hall and Lindzey, the id consists of psychological element that already exists since birth (36). It operates according to pleasure’s principle and needs a release of excitation, tension, and energy in functioning (Pervin and John 8). The ego exists because of the id’s impulse in seeking pleasure. If the id operates in fantasy, the ego seeks the realization of the id’s need. In other words, unlike the id which functions in pleasure principle, the ego works according to the reality principle (Pervin and John 81). The next system is the superego as a representative of standard moral value and ideal society. This value is introduced by parents and it carries out the award and punishment system during childhood. Unlike those two systems before, the superego functions in ideal and attempts to a perfection rather than pleasure (Hall and Lindzey 38).

The relationship of literature and psychoanalysis is closely related. Freud is a founding father of Psychoanalysis as a system of curing psychological problem. Freud believed the behavior of individual is driven by unconscious motive. Freudian system does not only focus on the psyche of human being, but also uses literary works such as drama, poetry, and novel as objects of researches. According to Bettelheim in *Freud’s Vienna and Other Essays*, an American literary critic and author, Lionel Trilling mentioned that the relationship of Freud and literature is reciprocal. Freudian psychology is the exact methodical system to undermine the complexity and tragic power of literature (91).

According to Freud, the formation of child’s personality occurs at several stages during the first five years of life, called psychosexual stages (Hall and Lindzey 54). The oral stage develops between 0 to18 months the first year of life. During this stage, the pleasure source comes from mouth and on the fulfillment of sucking, biting, and chewing (Mischel 54). The second is the anal stage occurring between 18 months to 3 years old. Its pleasure satisfaction and frustration release takes place in anus. This stage associates with the holding and expulsion of feces (Pervin and John 100). During this age, the child will receive toilet training that its methods will determine their adulthood personality. The next stage is the phallic stage develops between 3 to 6 years old. During this stage, a child will realize the different between men and women. Freud hypothesized during the realization of this stage, a boy comes to understand about the active position of men over a passive position of women in society (Watts and Hook 46). The latency stage develops between 6 to 12 years old. The child’s sexual urges has been repressed and directed into socially accepted manner through defense mechanism and sublimation. The fully developed superego transforms the child from baby with primitive urge into rational human being (Carducci 96). The last stage...
is the genital stage which develops from puberty until adulthood. During this stage, adolescent’s sexual desire to their object changes into genuine love (Hall and Lindzey 58).

In facing threatening situation, human’s mind develops a certain signal called anxiety. This anxiety signal emerges when there is a conflict between drives and superego (Bateman and Holmes 235). There are six types of defense mechanisms will be used in this study, which are repression, reaction formation, rationalization, displacement, denial, and fantasy. Repression is the defense mechanism that represses and distorts unwanted memories into less frightening objects (Mischel 46). The second defense mechanism is denial. It blocks the painful reality that would cause psychological upset. Then, reaction formation is the defense mechanism that attempts to hide individual’s unconscious feeling. In this case, the abused child can behave as if he/she loves the abusive parents. Rationalization is a defense mechanism which is used to justify unacceptable social behavior or act by inventing good reasons for it and thus attempts to deceive other and himself (Mangal 56-57). Displacement is the defense mechanism that reduces tension by altering an inaccessible object into an accessible object. Lastly, one of dominant form of defense mechanism used by children in late childhood is a fantasy.

The method that will be conducted in elaborating the issue in Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* is qualitative approach. The objective of this approach is to comprehend the process of how humans apprehend their social realities within their social worlds. The writer uses qualitative approach due to its broad hypothesis on social explanation in human personality. A qualitative method consists of three elements; those are the data, the analysis, and the formation of the written report.

The first step is collecting primary and secondary sources in order to analyze the statements of the problem. The primary sources are plot of Martin Vanger during the abusive act on childhood and his adulthood personality in Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo*. The secondary sources that will be used in this research are *The Theorist of Personality* by Calvin S. Hall and Gardener Lindzey, and *Personality Theory and Research* by Lawrence A. Pervin and Oliver P. John. Afterwards, the process will be extended by finding other references which support the issue’s findings, which are journals and articles.

The second step is analyzing data, using psychoanalysis theory. The objective of this research is to reveal that Martin Vanger’s impulse to rape and torture is strongly influenced by the process of traumatic childhood experiences and to ensure that his sadistic personality is considered as a defense mechanism from his childhood trauma. First, the writer will investigate the abusive treatment in his childhood, particularly in what age the abusive acts happens and who the performers of the abusive acts are. The next is analyzing the process of dealing with the trauma thorough his age of developing from a child into full-grown man. Then, the writer will try to reveal Martin Vanger’s process of adapting and transfer his trauma into serial rapist and serial killer. The last is concluding the findings.

2. Discussion

In order to answer the statements of the problem in this study, the writer divides the analysis into two parts. The first part, the writer attempts to investigate the process of childhood trauma in the character of Martin Vanger. In order to examine the process of childhood trauma in influencing Martin Vanger’s personality, the writer will try to identify the stages of his childhood during he became a victim of abused child. The second part, the writer will reveal whether Martin Vanger’s personality is considered as defense mechanisms or not.

2.1. The Abusive Acts on Martin’s Psychosexual Stages

According to Freud the formation of child’s personality occurs at several stages during the first five years of life called Psychosexual stages (Hall & Lindzey 54). The anal stage occurs between 18 months to 3 years old. Its pleasure satisfaction and frustration release takes place in anus and the holding and expulsion of feces (Pervin & John 100). During this age, the child will receive toilet training that its methods will determine their adulthood personality. Smith explained those who are fixated on anal stage resulted to anal-sadistic personality become obsessed in controlling and dominating (Smith 63). Martin Vanger possessed a sadistic personality that displayed cruel behavior. He obsessed to the act of dominating and controlling his victims.
“…You’ve already started to adapt to the submission principle. I hold your life in my hands, Mikael. You pleaded with me to improve your quality of life, and you did so by using reason a little god manners. You were rewarded.” (Larsson 490)

The quotation above shows that Martin explained to his victim that he was the one who was on control over his victim’s life. He also showed his tendency to derive sexual pleasure from causing pain to others. Martin had brutally tortured a young women when he was eighteen years old. It implies that he did those acts because he simply enjoyed it. Those sadistic tendencies on Martin Vanger’s personality indicates that he is fixated on anal stage.

Freud believed that sadism is the aggressive instinct towards other people, and masochism is the aggressive instinct towards self (Chancer 83). However, sadism and masochism are closely interrelated. Someone who gains sexual pleasure through inflicting pain on other is also able to gain sexual pleasure through his own pain and vice versa (Chancer 83). It indicates that sadist can also become masochist, and vice versa.

In Martin’s case, he was sexually abused by his father since childhood. That incident may shape him as a masochist. Being accustomed by his pain that caused by his father, he felt that the only way to reach the sexual pleasure through feeling pain. Martin never showed any resistance on his father’s sexual abuse. In fact, he considered his duty was to serve his father’s sexual needs (Larsson 496). However, his father also taught him how to rape and torture other woman including his sister. Thus, Martin is not only a sadist but also a masochist, he gains sexual pleasure related to inflicting pain on others and vice versa. It indicates that Martin has been fixated on anal stage because of his excessive aggressive drive which resulted in his sadomasochism personality.

The next stage is the phallic stage develops between 3 to 6 years old when the child starts to realize the difference between male and female. According to Freud, a boy develops Oedipus complex and Electra complex for a girl. Both those complexes refer to the sexual desire to the parent of the opposite sex (Mischel 56). The boy fears his father to punish him for his desire by castrate his genital, so he tries to repress his desire, its frustration is called castration anxiety. The boy tries to become like his father in order to overcome his anxiety, this process is called identification. The process results to the development of superego (Pervin& John 100).

In this stage, Martin Vanger was likely became the victim of abusive father. During this stage, Martin experienced identification process. He feared his father and tried his best to become like his father. The goal of this stage is to resolve the castration anxiety and develop morality on his superego through identification. As a child, Martin learned he would avoid punishment by obeying his father to engage in sexual activity with him. The father of Martin Vanger did not provide proper moral education for him, but it is true Martin feared him because of his abusive personality. “…I’ve never touched another man, as a matter of fact…except for my father. That was my duty.” (Larsson 496)

He did not share the same moral standard with common people. In order to fulfill his impulse, he kidnapped and raped women then killed them. When the protagonist asked him the reason of his personality, Martin Vanger answered confidently and no guilty feeling.

“...Try to look at it this way: a human being is a shell made of skin keeping the cells, blood, and chemical components in place. Very few end up in the history books. Most people succumb and disappear without a trace.” (Larsson 494).

Jones mentioned that unloving or absence of parents is the crucial factor leading to the failure of development a proper superego. A weak superego is strongly related to the self-centered and guiltless person that can be categorized as psychopath (63). Therefore, Martin’s guiltless feeling is the manifestation of failure on proper superego development during phallic stage.

The latency stage develops between 6 to 12 years old. During this phase, the development in oral, anal, and phallic stage has been completed. The child’s sexual urges have been repressed and directed into socially accepted manner through defense mechanism and sublimation. The fully developed superego transforms the child from baby with primitive urge into rational human being (Carducci 96).
During this stage, the development on Martin Vanger has not been completed. He failed to resolve his conflict in every stage. The most important, his development of moral standard on superego was a failure. His sexual urges have been directed into another personality that fit into his learned moral standard. Unlike other kids that have been grown up by learning proper social moral standard, Martin did not experience this so that his perspective of true and wrong were distorted and different. It is shown by the conversation between Martin Vanger and the protagonist regarding his motive.

“You can’t have any notion of how demented this is.” (Larsson 488)

“You are a very ordinary little person, Mikael. You would not be able to understand the....” (Larsson 488)

“You enjoy torturing and killing women, Martin.” (Larsson 489)

The last stage is the genital stage which develops from puberty until adulthood. During this stage, adolescent’s sexual desire to their object changes into genuine love (Hall &Lindzey 58). In this stage, adolescent begins to differentiate and evaluate the proper manner that should be applied in society. The failure of this stage leads adolescent to grow with selfish manner in satisfying their own sexual desire (Hall &Lindzey 60).

During the puberty, Martin’s father started to teach him raping and murdering. He did not experience what other adolescent commonly experiences. “He was the one who taught me. He initiated me when I was fourteen…. I was sixteen. It was the first time I had a woman. My father taught me. I was the one who strangled her.” (Larsson 488). It resulted to his selfish manner in fulfilling his own sexual desire which is by raping and killing. He grew up as a serial rapist and killer because of his failure to resolve the anxiety in every stage of psychosexual development.

2.2. Martin’s Defense Mechanism

The second part of the analysis, the writer would reveal the defense mechanism in Martin Vanger’s sadistic personality. Defense mechanism protects human’s mind by denying, reducing, redirecting or eliminating stressful or traumatic thoughts or feelings from the conscious mind (Rosenberg 75). In psychoanalysis, human’s mind is equipped with mechanisms in order to protect their mental state from anxiety, called defense mechanism (Tyson 15).

According to Hall &Lindzey, there are two common characteristics in defense mechanisms “(1) they deny, falsify, or distort reality, and (2) they operate unconsciously so that person is not aware of what is taking place” (52). Defense mechanism channels, represses, and transfers threatening experience into other forms. There are six types of defense mechanism will be used in this study, which are repression, denial, reaction formation, rationalization, displacement, and fantasy.

In Martin’s case, being a victim of sexual abuse to his own father, he tried to repress the trauma by distorting his perception on his father’s abuse. Researches and professionals in the field of child sexual abuse believe that children repress their memory if the abuse is committed by the father, because it is hard to bear the person they trust the most sexually abuse them (Kinnear 67). It can be assumed that Martin as a victim of his father’s sexual abuse keeps repressing his trauma for many years. His repression results on the emergence of other forms of defense mechanism that will be discussed in the following sections.

Near the end of the story, Martin told about his childhood to the journalist. He did not say that his father had molested him, but he simply told the journalist that his duty was to sexually satisfy his father’s sexual needs. Later, the journalist knew the whole story about the sexual abuse that Martin received from his father was occurred in the long term. However, Martin’s admittance regarding his father’s sexual abuse and his duty to sexually satisfy his father proves that Martin has not resolved his conflict after more than thirty years.

Abused victims often suffer denial as a defense mechanism to avoid their painful memories. Martin as a child could not face the harsh reality of his father’s abuse and his mother’s neglect. Rather than realizing his own father’s abuses and his mother’s neglect, Martin as a kid chose to believe that incestuous relationship between him and his father was normal. The marriage life between his parents was in chaos and caused his father left the house. Martin’s sister, Harriet, suspected that her parents rarely had sex with each other after she was born (Larsson 539). Martin considers that satisfying his father’s sexual need is
his duty. He rationalizes his father’s sexual abuse. His father’s marriage was on the rock and his father was very afraid of his mother, so Martin replaced her mother’s duty to fulfill his father’s sexual desire and obey his father. According to Dorais and Meyer, some of sexually abused boys rationalize their fathers’ behavior by believing that their fathers molest them because of their fathers encounter problems such as depression and lack of affection from their wives (26).

The relationship between parents and children is very crucial. Martin faces conflict between the harsh reality of his father’s abuse and his refusal to acknowledge that his father molestes him. Thus, he resolves his anxiety by developing defense mechanism, denial. Martin turns a blind eye of his father’s abuse by insisting on his unconscious that his father loves him. In exchanging his father’s love, he should obey and fulfill his father’s needs which means satisfying his father’s sexual needs and legacy.

Reaction formation replaces individual’s impulse into the opposite (Hall & Lindzey 53). This original impulse is inaccessible to conscious awareness, so that individual does not aware his/her original feeling. This type of defense mechanism is accompanied by extravagant feeling which leads to obsession. This kind of defense mechanism attempts to hide individual’s unconscious feeling. In this case, the abused child can behave as if he/she loves the abusing parents. The failure of this type will create extremely unthinkable personality in individual, such as a model student who shoots his/her parents (Pervin& John 91).

In Martin Vanger’s case, he spoke like he admired his father’s works which are raping and killing. Martin considered himself as his father’s successor. “Unlike my father, I don’t leave traces. But he was smart, too. He spread his victims out all over Sweden” (Larsson 488). The quotation showed how obedient Martin was to his father but as an abused child he felt hatred towards his father. He could not reveal his true feeling knowing how dominant and scary his father was. Here, his psyche felt anxiety and conflict between his hatred and his fear. Thus, his unconsciousness developed reaction formation which diverted his hatred to admiration. Nevertheless, his true feeling was still repressed in his unconsciousness. It was showed when he witnessed his father’s death, he did not feel sad.

The next defense mechanism displayed was rationalization. It involves a justification to remorse the guilt of having an unacceptable impulse. Guilt is associated with superego. Rationalization operates by making excuse so that the unacceptable impulse does not oppose superego’s disapproval. The act of killing for love is an illustration of rationalization in individual (Pervin& John 91-92).

Martin Vanger’s motive to rape and kill is reinforced by his impulse and his failure over the development in psychosexual stages. He was already aware of his unacceptable impulse but he made up excuse to justify his deeds. He described his actions was an artwork and science and no ordinary man would understand. “…It’s a science with thousands of details that I have to weigh. I have to identify my prey, map out her life, who is she,….” (Larsson 489).

The last form of defense mechanism that was displayed by Martin Vanger is displacement. It reduces tension by altering inaccessible object into accessible object. The object will be varied because individual will keep searching substitute object to fulfill his/her impulse. This type of defense mechanism will produce restlessness behavior. Displacement creates conflict between the urge forces of instinct and the struggle of ego and superego (Hall &Lindzey 50).

Martin Vanger’s sadistic personality can be considered as displacement towards his parents. His father was an abusive man who sexually harassed him and his sister. His mother always neglected him as a child. Martin felt powerless to fight against his parents, thus, he diverted it to other accessible objects. His parents was an authority symbol for him even he was already adult he could not against them. Martin also chose women as his victims, not only because they are weak but also it is representation of his hatred towards his mother who always neglected him.

Martin Vanger is classified into a serial killer thrill. These types of killers enjoy the process of leading it up to kill. These serial killer thrill love to engage in the preparation killing process such as selecting targets, planning, stalking, kidnapping, deriving pain to his victims, and finally they have no other choice but to kill their victims (Vronsky 186). Martin admitted that he was more likely a serial kidnapper than
serial murderer. In facts, he got excitement from the act of planning and stalking. These types of serial killers always lose interest when their victims die (Vronsky 187).

Martin always throw the bodies into the sea after he finished killing his victims. Holmes and Holmes stated that the serial killers thrill’s motivation is sexuality. They make a link between sex and personal gratification. Serial killers thrill gain sexual pleasure from the plan to kidnap and the process of torture (129). These types of serial killers deal with fantasy, particularly sexual fantasy.

The act of planning, stalking, kidnapping and torturing become significant part in Martin’s sexual fantasy. Fantasy is one of defense mechanism types. It refers to the momentary escape from frustrated reality into a world of fantasy where one’s desire can be fulfilled through imagination (Bustos et al 231). Fantasy releases anxiety and trauma. Most people often fantasize or daydream during their life. However, it can become a compulsive form of release in abused, neglected, or traumatized children (Ressler et al 34-35). The source of Martin’s anxiety comes from his traumatic experience, thus his coping method is involving in imagination and fantasy.

Since a kid, Martin had become a victim of his father’s sexual abuse. Moreover, his father instructed him to torture and kill during his adolescence. Traumatic childhood experience and his involvement of violence form a dominant fantasy of torturing and killing. Ressler et al explains that fantasy can be substitute or prepare actions (34). Thus, it becomes a factor on the formation of his sadistic personality.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds that Martin Vanger’s sadistic personality as a product of abusive childhood experience that he received from his parents. During childhood, individual develops personality at several stages of psychosexual development. The stages of psychosexual development are oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Martin Vanger failed to complete the oral, phallic, latency, and genital stage because of his situation as abused child. Due to his failure in psychosexual stage and his circumstances with his father and mother, he developed sadistic personality. In addition, Martin Vanger also displayed defense mechanism in his sadistic personality. The writer reveals six forms of defense mechanism that are repression, denial, reaction formation, rationalization, displacement, and fantasy.

4. Works Cited


