

Shrinking Violet: Media Role in Identity Construction in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks Of Being A Wallflower*

Aninda Pradita Haryawan*
aninda.pradita@gmail.com

*Aninda graduated in February 2013 from Literature Major at English Language and Literature Study Program, Indonesia University of Education Bandung

ABSTRACT

The present study entitled *Shrinking Violet: Media Role in Identity Construction in Stephen Chbosky's The Perks of Being a Wallflower* focuses on the issue of identity construction and media role on the main character of the story. The study investigates the main character's, Charlie, identity construction in the novel and the contribution of media role, particularly print-rich environment, in the construction of Charlie's identity. The study is conducted within a descriptive text analysis by applying a qualitative method and is framed by theoretical frameworks such as identity theory (Hall, 2000) and young adult literature (Nilsen & Donelson, 2001). The results demonstrate that Charlie's identity is constructed through two different contexts: 'home and family' context and 'school and friends' context. The study also finds that there are roles of print-rich environment play to the construction of Charlie's identity: as a tool of literacy and critical thinking improvement as well as a bibliotherapy.

Keywords: Identity Construction, Young Adult, Media, Print-rich environment, Bibliotherapy.

INTRODUCTION

Young adult is a transition stage from childhood to adulthood. Young adults are considered to be in age of 12 until 20 develop faster physically, cognitively, and socially (Bucher & Hinton, 2010, p. 1-2). In their process of maturation, young adults mostly experience the awkwardness from leaving their childhood and preparing to enter their early adulthood. Thus, there must be some different identities formed during their adolescence. One of the most important developmental challenges of adolescence is identity construction.

The issue of young adult identity construction is often adapted as a story in young adult novel. One example of the novels is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a popular coming-of-age novel written by Stephen Chbosky. It tells about a 15 year-old Charlie who finds the awkwardness of being a new adolescent. In the process of searching his identity, he is

surrounded by different environments and exposed by various media, such as books, music, television, and magazines. Chbosky wrote his novel in an unusual yet unique way by compiling the stories of Charlie in a series of letter form. The study chooses to use *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* because it is a good example of new realist fiction for adolescents that reveals how young adult overcomes his or her awkwardness in adolescence stage and constructs his identity through various circumstances.

Due to the issue adapted in the novel, The present study is aimed to analyze how the identity of the main character, Charlie, is constructed in the novel and the role of print-rich environment that contributes to the construction of Charlie's identity in the coming-of-age novel entitled *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. This study focuses on constructing identity which is influenced by media, in fictional character of the novel. The presentation of Charlie's identity construction can be seen and

investigated through the main and acts in the form of words

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The data were collected by reading the novel thoroughly. It is because the study mostly deals with narrative textual analysis. The data which are in the form of words, phrases, and sentences were critically selected as textual evidence to answer the research questions. In analyzing the data, the study intersects two frameworks, one that talks about identity theory by Stuart Hall (2000), and the other one is new realist fiction for adolescent by Nilsen & Donelson (2001). This study is expected to describe how a young adult's identity is constructed as shown in the novel, where the main character is highly exposed into a print-rich environment. The results of the study are expected to give some useful and positive impacts on English Department's students and larger society by critiquing a literary work. To add more, the

character's statements, thoughts.

five key concepts – young adult, media, print-rich environment, bibliotherapy, and identity – become the major theoretical frames that inform the study. According to Knickerbocker and Rycik (2002, p. 208), young adult literature can help younger adolescents find themselves in book and begin to think critically about literature. They also state that young adult literature reflects the change of adolescents' experience as they make their first entry into adult territory and learn to take responsibilities for their own actions. However, young adults do not want to take moral lessons from reading book for granted and fake realities, thus many printed reading materials in form of fiction books are made in various genres, new realism in particular which is a genre in young adult literature which deals with themes that are very much related to young adults' realism of life and problems (Nilsen & Donelson, 2001, p.113). Aronson

(2001, p. 55) states that new realism is a first-person “self-help and coping” novel which comes as a reflection of teenage readers that the characters are the same like them and have their own problems in which they can overcome by themselves.

Books are believed as one type of media that can impact children and adolescents as their searching of their selves and often considered as an escape to young adults from their complicated life to find their own freedom and opportunity (Nilsen & Donelson, 2011). The environment of living and growing up with books is recognized as print-rich environment. Print-rich environment, according to Weaver (1990, p. 122), is an environment in which printed reading materials are given and used for everyday purposes, such as to attract children and adolescent’s interest in literature. Nimon (1998, pp. 21-23) says that reading also allows people to examine issues at their own pace and it is in this role that fiction

poses its greatest potential to educate.

Fiction books with new realism genre become young adults’ preference because they can relate their own problems which are alike with the characters’ and they are often used for bibliotherapy (Bucher & Hinton, 2010). Bibliotherapy is defined as the ‘use of books to help people solve problems’ which the individual reader can identify themselves with the character in the book, find how the catharsis effect works when the characters solve the problem, and internalize their reflection on the story to develop personal problem-solving skills (Aiey, 1993; Afolayan, 1992; Halsted, 1994; as cited in Bucher & Hinton, 2010, p 139). By reading a certain genre like new realism books, young adults are believed to, eventually, find the answer to their personal problems that may have in common with the characters in the books.

Bean and Moni (2003, p. 639) state that the materials young

adults read may help them to understand their own selves as individuals by providing the models of different identities so that young adults are able to relate the models of identities with their real life as a comparison. Speaking of identity, most people recognize it as something that an individual should possess. Hall (as cited in Du Gay et al, 2000, p. 12) states that identities aren't fixed and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. He further explains that one's identity can be identified through how people in his or her circumstance address him or her. In the process of its construction, identity is always changing along with the change of contexts and influences (Kellner, 1992, p. 142). An individual possibly have more than one identity, depending on his or her social engagements. To add more, Bean and Moni (2003, p. 64) describe identity as "a matter of self-construction amidst unstable times, mores, and global consumption". It indicates that the meaning of identities is shifting through time and circumstances.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analyzed data, the present study finds that the main character's, Charlie, identity is constructed through two contexts; they are 'home and family' context as well as 'school and friends' context. 'Home and family' context has a role as the context of Charlie's identity construction of being a wallflower, whereas 'school and friends' context plays as the context which stimulates the changes in Charlie's identity. The study also discovers that print-rich environment which is created by Charlie's teacher, Bill, plays important roles in constructing Charlie's identity. The roles of print-rich environment among others are as a tool of literacy skill and critical thinking development as well as bibliotherapy.

The first context portrays how Charlie's identity is constructed at home with some influences from the members of his family. It proves what Hall (2000) states that identity can be identified through the ways

someone acts which are considerably influenced by labels that he or she is attached as well as the way people in his or her circumstances constantly treat him or her. Whereas, the second context 'school and friends' context provides the atmosphere and situation are different from 'home and family' context because those contexts require Charlie to have a social interaction with new people. In the process of constructing his identity, Charlie who at first was still a shy person gradually attempts to break the wall within and comes out of his own shell to be more open-minded with his society due to the influences he gets that mostly come from his teacher in school and his friends, Sam and Patrick. It proves that identity is not fixed and is constantly in the process of change and transformation (Hall, 2000) and "identity undergoes changes and evolves along with the adaptation of changing contexts and influences" (Kellner, 1992; Bauman, 1996; and Gauntlett, 2002) where 'school

and friends' contexts seem to play a more part in reconstructing Charlie's identity.

In the novel, it is also told that Charlie is bombarded by print-rich environment that his teacher, Bill, creates to support Charlie. Bill assigns Charlie some particular books to read in which these books surprisingly help Charlie a lot in the process of his search of identity. Print-rich environment, books in particular, helps Charlie to improve his literacy skill and critical thinking. It is shown by how Charlie's writing style changes from his teacher point of view and how he sees things in facing a problem. In other words, his reading experiences help him to be more critical, it also helps him to improve his intertextual ability.

Charlie often uses books as his excuse to temporary escape from his problems. By relating himself to the character in the books and putting what the authors write in terms of his own life, Charlie gradually realizes that there is someone else who has a

problem like him or even worse than his problem. He eventually learns from his readings how to overcome his own problems by reflecting to what the characters in the books have been going through. These findings prove what Bean & Moni (2003) state that 'young adult can construct their identity through the text they are reading'.

CONCLUSION

Relying on the findings and discussions, it can be concluded that Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* novel portrays the life of a young adult who is in search of his identity. The way people treat and label someone in different contexts affects the way one perceives himself or herself as an individual in society. It also can be said that young adult fiction, to some extent, teaches young adult how to survive in the phase of growing up and in facing the problems which are commonly experienced by young adults. With the help of print-rich environment, in addition to get

more improved literacy and intertextual ability; young adults also can solve their own problems by experiencing things safely through books they read. Therefore, print-rich environment should be provided more for particularly young adults with regard to the construction of their identities.

Regarding the investigation on novels, the study suggests that further researchers may discuss some other researchable issues in young adult novels, for instance the portrayal of coming-of-age issue in the novel, character's development as a young adult, and the uniqueness of narration in the novel. Further study of identity construction and media can also be conducted by obtaining the data from particular films which currently emerge as medium to portray young adults issues from popular novels.

REFERENCES

- Aronson, M. (2001). *Exploring The Myths: The Truth About Teenagers and Reading*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.
- Bauman, Z. (1996). From Pilgrim To Tourist - or a Short History of Identity. In S. Hall, & P. Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 18-36). London: Sage.
- Bean, T. W., & Moni, K. (2003). Identity and Critical Literacy in Young-Adult Fiction. *International Reading Association*, 638-648.
- Bucher, K., & Hinton, K. (2010). *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation, and Appreciation*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gauntlett, D. (2002). *Media, Gender, and Identity: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (2000). Who Needs Identity? In P. Du Gay, J. Evans, & P. Redman, *Identity: A Reader* (pp. 9-30). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Kellner, D. (1992). Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities. In S. Lash, & J. Friedman, *Modernity and Identity* (pp. 141-117). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Knickerbocker, J., & Rycik, J. (2002). Growing Into Literature: Adolescents' Literary Interpretation and Appreciation. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 196-208.
- Nilsen, A., & Donelson, S. (2001). *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (6th Edition ed.). Boston: Longman.
- Nimon, M. (1998). Orana. *Finding the Acceptable Boundaries: the Challenge in Young Adult Literature*, 18.
- Weaver, C. (1990). *Understanding whole language: From principles to practice*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.