

## PARENTAL ROLE AND NARCISSISM IN CONSTRUCTING SELF-IMAGE IN JOICE CAROL OATES'S SHORT STORY

### POLA ASUH DAN NARSISME DALAM MENINGKONSTRUKSI GAMBARAN DIRI DI CERITA JOICE CAROL OATES

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#### Abstract

This research attempts to find the parental role and narcissism in constructing self-image in *Where Are You Going Where Have You Been* by Joice Carol Oates. This research was qualitative. By using object relation theory, this research finds that less attachment and abandonment leads to depression. To avoid further rejection, self can split to different personalities. Unpleasant experience during maturing process produces low self-esteem. Narcissism works to soothe the anxiety on developing the self-image.

**Keywords:** *abandonment, depression, split personality*

#### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menemukan pola asuh orang tua dan narsisme dalam membangun gambaran diri dalam *Where Are You Going Where Have You Been* karya Joice Carol Oates. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif. Dengan menggunakan teori hubungan objek, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa kurangnya kedekatan dan rasa penolakan memunculkan depresi. Untuk mencegah penolakan lebih lanjut, diri dapat terbagi menjadi karakter yang berbeda-beda. Pengalaman pendewasaan yang tidak menyenangkan dapat menyebabkan anak memiliki rasa penghargaan diri yang rendah. Narsisme bekerja untuk meredakan kegelisahan dalam mengembangkan diri.

**Kata kunci:** *penolakan, depresi, karakter ganda*

#### Introduction

At adolescence period, children are developing into adult physically, psychologically and socially. At this time, teens are constructing their self-image. It is one of individual psychological aspects on recognizing and understanding the

environment. On defining self-image, teens become the active agents. According to George Herbert Mead, self is something that has development; it is always in “ongoing process”.

*The self... arises in the development of the behavior of the social form that is capable of taking the attitude of others involved in the same co-operative activity. The pre-condition of such behavior is the development of the nervous system which enables the individual to take the attitude of the others. ... [O]ne is dealing throughout with the relation of the conduct of the individual to the environment. (1934, 335-36)*

Heinz Kohut (1913 – 1981) is an American- Austrian psychoanalysis who develops self-psychology theory. Kohut shows his interest on developing “self-image” through narcissism. He criticized Freud’s concept of narcissism; for Kohut, it isn’t only a self-damage condition but normal in some condition. Narcissism can soothe the inferior feeling. By talking more about self, it can solve worthless feeling. Kohut emphasizes on the aspects of healthy narcissism such as love between parent and children, children’s happiness towards self and their world, ambition and expectation as in positive narcissism.

Self-psychology emphasizes on the changes of relation. Life experiences and interactions with other people form the self. Family as the closest environment has its role in forming self-image. Parent has key-position on forming children’s self-image to be positive or negative. Joice Carol Oates is an author who writes many stories mostly about mother-daughter relation. *Where Are You Going Where Have You Been* is one of her stories published in 1970. Some researchers have done digging the story deeper. G. J. Weinberger is one of the researchers who write an essay *Who is Arnold Friend? The Other Self in Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”* in 1988. To augment the view, this research entitled *Parental Role and Narcissism in Constructing Self-Image in Joice Carol Oates’s Short Story* discusses the relation between parental role and narcissism in constructing daughter’s self-image in *Where Are You Going Where Have You Been* by Joice Carol Oates using object relation theory.

## Object Relation Theory

This psychoanalytic theory accents a social view of psychological development (Kernberg, 1976). There are three characteristics of object relation theory (ORT) which differentiate it to Freud’s theory. First, ORT emphasizes more on the consistency of interpersonal connection than biological impulse. Second, on the contrary of Freudian theory which is patriarchal, ORT is more matriarchal; it emphasizes on the intimacy and maturing process of mother and children. Third, it beholds connection and relation as the main motive of human behavior. This theory advocates people to create successful relation with other. As the closest environment, the bond between family members is emphasized in this relation especially mother-children relation.

Kohut rejects Freud’s’ analysis which focuses on sexual drive of self-organization. He refuses Freud’s concept, Id Ego and Superego, and suggests three parts of self: idealization, mirroring, and twin ship (alter ego). These three parts of life can develop only if the need of “self-actualization”, includes feeling of value, happiness and relation to others, are fulfilled. Kohut (1971, 1977) believes if narcissism is a self-

instinct (self-centered). Self seeks for well-being feeling. It needs to be praised for who they are and what they do. It has two narcissistic basic needs: to show the greatness (*grandiose-self*) and to reach the ideal expectation of parent.

The process of constructing self begins with vague and undifferentiated individual identity to be clearer and precise. A process when an infant absorb whole and classify it as the representation of reality is called as introjects or object. The infant discovers "Being Me" and "Not Me" or object. Term "object" refers to people with whom a subject is involved emotionally (Marshall, 1998). It won't be an argument that mother is the first infant's object. "Mother Object" can be interpreted as an experience with other older female. Heinz Kohut develops self-object experience; experience with other that give contribution on defining self-image. Mother, as the caregiver, has a role on constructing children self-image since they have deeper emotional connection and interdependence. Although object relation theory emphasizes on the development of infant but Kohut believes childhood isn't the end of self-object relation; it develops dynamically until the end of life.

Winnicott (1949) said that in order to develop a true sense of self, the child must experience "Good-Enough Mothering" – a mother who usually is in tune with what the child wants. According to Kohut, flaw of self-structure leads to psychological problem. Unpleasant experiences during maturing process, example no intimacy and lack of attention, disturb self-development. As a result, the child failsto mature emotionally and does not have the ego strength required to maintain healthyrelationships (Klee, 2007a).According to Riso and Hudson (2000:315), a person generally goes through three stages in life that construct self-image; those are attachment, depression and rejection.

They are universal and mutual dependent emotional state, having one is to have them; they are between the self and the other object. Attachment refers to the desire to have secured and comfortably relationto others. It is such a love and enjoyment between a mother and daughter. Mother isn't always a woman who gives a birth but it can be other woman who takes care of children as their birth mother. To get secured feeling, children try to transform their self-image become more acceptable and be appreciated by others. Others learn to be more independent and free to create their own comfort zone. According to Bowlby, the failure of creating strong attachment in early age will disturb the capability of self-attachment to others (1973:377)

Feeling rejected leads to frustration stage. At this stage, children have uncomfortable and dissatisfied feeling of life. According to Melanie Klein's theory, children are all "split". Since they are not mature yet, they interpret an object to be all good or all bad based on the present experience of the object. At rejection stage, "self" is considered as weak and victimized while others are considered powerful and abusive. At this stage, children protect themselves in different ways. They often alter their self-image to defend themselves against further rejection.They will employ all particular skill to make them accepted.

This article concentrates on mother-daughter relation and unpleasant experiences during maturing process. To do so, a short story *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been* by Joyce Carol Oates was taken as an object material. It discusses few matters related to the questions in how parental role constructs children's self-image. The discussion will start with analyzing how rejection feeling

leads children to depression. Finally, it will explain how narcissism calms anxiety on developing self-image.

## Discussion

Oates begins the story by describing the mother. Connie's mother is described as a mother who gives attention on everything but appearance. She keeps mind on her children so she doesn't have time to take care of herself.

*Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?" she would say. Connie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar old complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything. Her mother had been pretty once too, if you could believe those old snapshots in the album, but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Connie. (Oates: 1970)*

Connie is fifteen years old who tries to identify her position in the world. Her sister, June, is a twenty-four years old girl. As siblings they have different character. Connie always keeps up on appearance. She loves to look at the mirror and compares her face to other to make sure that hers is alright. Every time her mother scolds her habit, Connie then compares two of them. She agrees that her mother is beautiful, but as if she believes to be the most beautiful girl in family, she thought that her mother's beauty has gone. Connie convinces herself that she doesn't need to be worry. By saying *she knew she was pretty and that was everything*, she convinces herself that she has something better than others. Her narcissistic instinct arises to get more appreciation. She decides her own standard of happiness. By talking more about self, Connie tries to overcome her anxious feeling.

Her basic need of happiness encourages her to praise herself more. For always being compared to her sister, Connie feels lack of appreciation. She knows that her mother is more interested to talk about her sister than her.

*Her sister June was twenty-four and still lived at home. She was a secretary in the high school Connie attended, and if that wasn't bad enough—with her in the same building—she was so plain and chunky and steady that Connie had to hear her praised all the time by her mother and her mother's sisters. June did this, June did that, she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked and Connie couldn't do a thing, her mind was all filled with trashy daydreams. Their father was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed. He didn't bother talking much to them, but around his bent head Connie's mother kept picking at her until Connie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over. "She makes me want to throw up sometimes," she complained to her friends. She had a high, breathless, amused voice that made everything she said sound a little forced, whether it was sincere or not. (Oates: 1970)*

Connie sometimes feels inferior toward her sister. She realizes June is able to do everything better, June is success financially. On the other side, by comparing what June has and what she has, she needs to convince herself that she is better than June. Using her standard of happiness, she compared both of them physically. Connie thought that as a secretary, June isn't beautiful and fashionable enough. Body and physic become the important point of her narcissistic instinct.

It can be seen from the paragraph above that Connie is lack of praise; neither from her mother nor her father. Connie's father is described as a man who spends most of his time for working. At home, he never asks his family about their activities or their feelings that day. He spends his time at home by doing his own activities. He doesn't keep enough attention to his family. There isn't enough communication between the members of the family; there isn't strong emotional connection between them. "Mother" who knows everything and "father" who cares of nothing make Connie get more depression. She feels rejected by both of her parent. Her aggressive instinct or death of physic leads her to imagine that death can be a way to solve her depression. Everything would be over if both of them died. It shows that Connie does really love her mother. As a loved object, Connie feels ambivalent toward her mother. Fail to meet her needs; it turns the mother becomes a whole bad object. It frustrates her more since she couldn't get "the goodness" from the loved object.

Connie's Aggressive instinct causes her to "kill" that object in fantasy. When Connie has killed the bad object in fantasy, she feels instantly sad. She has just killed the mommy that she loves. She doesn't want to hurt her mother; she feels as if she hurts her mother, it would also hurt her. This sad state is the depressive position. The sadness motivates the child to re-integrate the good object back into the bad object by an act of love. Connie prefers to drag away herself than to start a fight with her mother. To be more accepted, she split "self" to be like what her mother wants at home. It can be seen from the paragraph below.

*Connie had long dark blond hair that drew anyone's eye to it, and she wore part of it pulled up on her head and puffed out and the rest of it she let fall down her back. She wore a pull-over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk, which could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head; her mouth, which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out; her laugh, which was cynical and drawling at home—"Ha, ha, very funny,"—but highpitched and nervous anywhere else, like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet. (Oates: 1970)*

Connie prepares everything in two sides, for home and not home. She alters herself to avoid more rejection. This is a way to protect herself. She splits her character differently to be more accepted. She does know that her mother is so simple; she just needs to be what her mother wants.

Not enough good maturing experience makes her less self-worth. The frustration doesn't develop a sense of omnipotence; Connie focuses on what the mother wants, how to get the mother's attention, how to be what the mother wants, in order to get their needs met. This is the origin of the development of the false self instead of the true self.

Connie tries to protect herself by thinking that the way how her mother treats her isn't because she hates her. She feels that it is just a way to make them connected. Comparing physically to her sister, she thought that her mother prefers her to June. Her mother was ever once beautiful and she is now.

*If June's name was mentioned her mother's tone was approving, and if Connie's name was mentioned it was disapproving. This did not really mean she disliked Connie, and actually Connie thought that her mother preferred her to June just because she was prettier, but the two of them kept up a pretense of exasperation, a sense that they were tugging and struggling over something of little value to either of them. Sometimes, over coffee, they were almost friends, but something would come up—some vexation that was like a fly buzzing suddenly around their heads—and their faces went hard with contempt (Oates: 1970)*

At this point, Connie identifies herself to the object she admires. She compares herself to the mother who she thought has the same image as her. Like a mirror, she introspects herself then it is reflected by another object. Her mother is another object who reflects her image. She is mirroring herself through empathy and affection given by the mother. She thought that her mother prefers to her than her sister because they have the same image. This experience helps her to calming down the self and strengthens the well-being feeling. Connie becomes the "biggest self". At this twin ship period, the more feeling she has means the less and less.

Grandiose exhibitionistic-selfis formed when an infant is connected to mirroring self-object to show the acceptance of behavior. Self then constructs rudimentary self-image by giving messages "if others see me perfect, then I am totally perfect." Idealized parent image is in contradiction to grandiose-self because it implies that other who is perfect. To fulfill her narcissistic needs, infant posture "You are perfect and I am part of you." Narcissistic self-image is needed to develop healthy personality, but it must change when they adult. If they couldn't differentiate themselves, it can be narcissistic-self pathologically.

Grandiose-self must become more realistic and so does idealized parent image. Healthy adult keep looking at self positively while looking at parent and other as good figure. Since narcissistic adult couldn't transcend infantile needs and keep converge only on self so he wants the world to be the spectators who admire him. Connie holds two contradictive thought in her mind. She couldn't make it as a complex thought. She is seeing the object as a whole good or bad. To obtain and project good object, she splits her thought by creating another character, Arnold Friend. Arnold appears in a condition when Connie is calm and relaxes "And Connie paid close attention herself, bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and lay languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest". She starts her imagination in contemplation.

There are some clues indicates Arnold Friend is just Connie's imagination. At first, Connie recognizes him as a boy but then she recognizes him as 18 years old boy. Arnold Friend knows everything about Connie. It brings a strange feeling like déjà vu.

*She recognized most things about him, the tight jeans that showed his thighs and buttocks and the greasy leather boots and the tight shirt, and even that slippery friendly smile of his, that sleepy dreamy smile that all the boys used to*

*get across ideas they didn't want to put into words. She recognized all this and also the singsong way he talked, slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little melancholy, and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other in homage to the perpetual music behind him. But all these things did not come together. (Oates: 1970)*

Arnold's appearance is taken from the boy she met before. Her mother labels her as a "daydreamer"; Connie and her trashy daydreams. Relate it with her habit on seeing the mirror, Arnold can be her reflection. As discuss before "she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right"; Connie is infatuated with her own image, "Connie stared at him, another wave of dizziness and fear rising in her so that for a moment he wasn't even in focus but was just a blur standing there against his gold car, and she had the idea that he had driven up the driveway all right but had come from now here before that and belonged nowhere and that everything about him and even about the music that was so familiar to her was only half real."

Connie and Arnold show some similarities and differences. They both concern about their looks. Connie is constantly worried about her hair and Arnold Friend seems anxious about small details in his appearance, such as making sure his sunglasses stay on top of his head. Arnold knows everything about Connie, the song she is listening at and her parent's barbeque party in detail. It shows a shared consciousness exists between the two. Since Arnold is a split of her, she uses Arnold to camouflage. There are sides of Connie that she wants to hide; her innocence could not accept the bad comes out within her good personality, "She watched this smile come, awkward as if he were smiling from inside a mask. His whole face was a mask, she thought wildly, tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered makeup on his face but had forgotten about his throat." Connie discovers her "other," but rejects its existence. She is initially interested on him but she does realize the danger they hold so she tries to bargain with herself. In the end, she accepts Arnold as being a part of her psyche, and decides to walk out to join him.

## **Conclusion**

The process of constructing self-image arises internal and external conflicts. Teens have eager desire and curiosity to construct self-image to set their own way of life. Narcissistic instinct arises due to the lack of mother-daughter attachment in maturing process. Abandonment feeling leads Connie to frustration. To be accepted, she splits into another different personality. Therefore, the nature of parental role determines child's self-image construction in their social and psychological well-beings.

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