



SOCIAL PHOBIA IN NINA LACOUR'S NOVEL WATCH OVER ME (2020)

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Abstract

This research is an analysis of the novel *Watch Over Me* by Nina LaCour (2020). The analysis reveals the issue of social phobia which is one of the anxiety disorder types experienced by the main character in the novel. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method and the data is taken from quotations related to the topic. The theory used in this study is Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud, which examines how anxiety develops and is influenced by several factors in three parts of the human psyche: id, ego, and superego. The purposes of this research are to find out the symptoms of the main character's social phobia, factors that influenced the causes of social phobia, and the role of peers in overcoming the social phobia suffered by the main character in the *Watch Over Me* novel. The result of this study is that the main character can overcome social phobia with the help of friends where she works.

Keywords: social phobia, symptoms, causes, role of peers, *Watch Over Me*

A. INTRODUCTION

Most human beings have experienced anxiety as a normal human emotion that happens at certain times or events. The National Institute of Mental Health (2016) reports that anxiety symptoms can lead to several kinds of anxiety disorders, one of which is social anxiety disorder or social phobia. This kind of anxiety can occur in childhood where this is the first stage of personality development and may last for a long period of lifetime if left without treatment. For that reason, it is certain to say that anxiety disorder is a serious matter because it is a common problem during the teenage years and needs special attention.

Adler & Rodman (1991:30) explain two factors that can cause anxiety disorder. The first is negative experiences in the past and the second is irrational thinking. Someone will feel anxious if they imagine something bad happening in the future, which can be called negative thinking. Negative experiences in the past can cause anxiety because this experience is not considered as a good experience that makes an impression and overshadows what will happen in the future. As a

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result, the person with anxiety feels worried about facing the future. Meanwhile, in irrational thinking, anxiety does not happen because of the situation, but it appears because of the belief about the situation. Irrational thinking means that someone does not think logically and is only concerned with emotion. In conclusion, these causes are the responses when someone interacts socially and feels judged by others, then the emotions and thoughts negatively come up in their mind which make them anxious. Excessive anxiety disorder can turn into a phobia. A phobia is an irrational fear caused by an event or particular situation. Someone who has a phobia will feel afraid and anxious if they are facing or seeing something that is the cause of the phobia. There are many kinds of phobias, one of which is social phobia, defined as a marked and persistent fear of one or more situations where the person is exposed to possibly being observed by others and may do something or act in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing (in Henderson, L., & Zimbardo, P. page 5-6).

Many university students develop social phobia symptoms or their current symptoms worsen. This phenomenon can also be found in literary works such as Nina LaCour's novel *Watch Over Me* (2020). This novel is very interesting to discuss because it exposes the issue of anxiety that leads to social phobia. The main character of this novel, Mila, can no longer live with her foster family who will have a baby. Her mother left her when she was a child after her stepfather died in a fire accident. After graduating from high school, she chose to work instead of continuing to college. She bravely applies for a job in a remote area since she has no choice because she has no family or friends. She is always hiding her insecurities; the past that she is afraid people would know and judge her negatively. The bad memories in her past made her difficult to interact with others and it always haunted her like a ghost. The ghost is a symbol that represents the traumatic memories in the past for the people on the farm and they should be dealing and accepting it to live a normal life.

Watch Over Me is a psychological fiction novel that uses one of the anxiety disorders as the conflicts suffered by the main character which is social phobia. This conflict can be analyzed by using the psychoanalysis theory of Sigmund Freud which focuses on the importance of early childhood experiences and parental relationships as guiding forces that shape personality development. In addition, the unconscious mind and motivation are much more powerful than conscious awareness (Feist, Feist, & Roberts, 2018:8).

1. Psychological Approach

The concept of Psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud explained how anxiety can develop and influence someone's behavior. This theory helps to understand human behavior that is related to past traumatic events. The theory discusses the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious mind with the treatment of the mental disorder. The conscious mind is everything that humans are aware of, such as what they see, read, listen, and think in real time which relates to the outside world. While the unconscious mind is mostly all that is beyond our awareness. Many of our words, feelings, emotions, and behaviors are motivated by this part of the mind that people cannot see or control. Freud discovered three psychic zones in the mental process in shaping someone's

personality which are id, ego, and superego. The id is the pleasure principle which always tries to find pleasure and fulfill satisfying desires. The ego is the decision-making between the demands of the id and the superego to fulfill the needs. The superego is a part of the personality that develops from the ego and is responsible for conscience and sense of morality.

2. Anxiety Disorder

Anxiety may occur in everyday activities or unexpected situations such as when interacting with others, when someone faces a problem, or when responding to stressful conditions. According to Freud (1926), anxiety is a signal of danger that comes from internal and external factors. Freud claimed that anxiety is the same feeling as the emotions of fear. Anxiety disorder is an uncomfortable feeling of fear that disturbs daily activity and is followed by particular symptoms (Asyifa, Suharyati, & Widianti S., 2019:1). According to American Psychiatric Association in Rector et. al (2016:8), there are several main categories of anxiety disorder, which are panic disorder, specific phobias, agoraphobia, selective mutism, generalized anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, and social anxiety disorder which is known as social phobia.

3. Social Phobia

According to Alkhatami (2015), people may experience anxiety because of the different social expectations where they live that related with social interactions. Consequently, excessive anxiety may lead to social phobia as stated by American Psychiatric Association (2013) that defined social phobia as intense fear or anxiety in one or more social situations in which the person is exposed to possible being observed by others. Social phobia is indicated by a strong fear of being humiliated or embarrassed in front of others and difficulty to adapt in social situations such as talking to someone, being in an interview, or having dinner with a workmate. People who suffer from social phobia may worry that the fear will occur during social interaction with other people when they are doing something under observation, or even in situations where there is just the chance that they may attract attention. (American Psychiatric Association (2013) in Alkhatami (2015:28).

4. Symptoms of Social Phobia

People with social phobia can experience several symptoms, including in the way people think (cognitive), the way the body feels and works (physical), and the way people act (behavioral). According to Rector et. al (2016:10), there are three kinds of symptoms of social phobia which are cognitive symptoms, behavioral symptoms, and physical symptoms. The cognitive and emotional symptoms can be triggered by thoughts of being watched and scrutinized by other people. Alkhatami (2015:34) mentioned that people with social phobia may experience negative thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions about their self and social situation. According to Alkhatami (2015:80), people with social phobia are concerned about how they will be perceived in social environments because they fear of negative judgement which can be seen by their behaviors such as avoiding talking too much, less eye contact when talking, and being comfortable alone. People with social phobia might feel physical symptoms like sweat, blush, tremble, stomach cramps, or feel a fast-beating heart rate. Those who suffer from

social phobia tend to avoid these physical reactions because of their anxiety (Rector, Bourdeau, & Kitchen, 2016:10).

5. Causes of Social Phobia

The exact causes of social phobia may not be precisely the same for some cases, but research has found that environmental and psychological factors may be involved. According to Alkhatami (2015:57), there are four causes of social phobia factors which are internal factors, environmental factors, and cultural factors. Internal factors come from tension which is a physical and emotional response that may develop into anxiety and panic attacks if the individual cannot control or cope with the tension. In addition, the feeling of guilt or sin may become the cause of phobia and anxiety disorder. People who feel guilty or sinful may fear being punished or rejected. They may also experience negative emotions that they felt if they committed the “sin”. The humiliation of being negatively evaluated is the main reason and the root of social phobia that leads to social interaction avoidance. Bandelow et al (2004:397) expose environmental factors such as traumatic or stressful experiences like bullying, abuse, or neglect, can contribute to the development of a social phobia. The causes of social phobia or anxiety disorders are influenced by cultural factors that may occur from individualism, collectivism, and social expectations in the culture and society.

6. The Role of Peers in Overcome Social Phobia

Support from peers are one of the many aspects which have an important role to overcome social phobia. Peers defined as people who generally have similar background, interest, age, and social status. These people likely have a significant role to influence someone’s belief and behavior. Leigh and Clark (2019:3) claim that peer interactions have a lot of impact to increase the vulnerability of people who suffer from social phobia. Pickering, Hadwin, & Khovsoff, (2019:1) mentioned that negative friendship quality significantly affects social options and social phobia. In other words, teenagers who have a negative quality of friendships will have a greater chance to experience social phobia.

The roles from peers in overcoming social phobia and other mental health issues is varied including role of peer in counseling, role as facilitation support and the role as moral support. Pickering, Hadwin, & Kovshoff, (2019:18) mentioned the factors that can decrease the development of social phobia which are peer acceptance and peer support. Role in moral support is reflected in the way peers encourage, show as a caring listener, and be present when someone faces difficult situations which contributes to the emotional or psychological. From research conducted by Korkiamäki (2009:108), moral support is formed by closeness, trust, being willing to give and receive support, and creating safe space to talk without judgement. Being a trusted and caring listener can create a close relationship that makes someone feel comfortable where they can talk about their problems or feelings without feeling judged or pressured. This also formed the role as facilitation support that can be seen when someone gives support and creates a safe place where everyone feels comfortable without wanting feedbacks

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The data is analyzed using the qualitative method and the concept of psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud. The source data is collected from the novel *Watch Over Me* by Nina LaCour, published September 15, 2020 by Dutton Books for Young Readers. This research focuses on the novel's main character, Mila, who suffers from an anxiety disorder which is social phobia. The qualitative method is procedure research that produces descriptive data about issues experienced by the subject in the form of action, behavior, perception, or motivation with the form of written or spoken words (Moleong, 2017).

The phenomenon found in *Watch Over Me* (2020) novel by Nina LaCour as the source data is analyzed using the text and context-based by close reading. The source of data is used in the form of quotations, phrases, and sentences from the novel. The novel is analyzed by using fictional elements such as characters, plot (conflict), and setting. These elements are related to each other and will contribute to revealing the meaning of the novel. The character's element is used to expose the issue of social phobia and the role of peers in overcoming this anxiety disorder.

In analyzing data, the writer focused on the social phobia symptoms, the causes, and the role of peers on the farm to overcome the social phobia of the main character in the novel *Watch Over Me* (2020) by Nina LaCour. The steps of the research technique of data analysis are quoting the source of the data, applying the theory, and after that drawing the conclusion based on the analysis. Quoting step is used in a literature review with reading certain books, journals, and articles to find correlations between the research topic and the Psychoanalysis theory of Sigmund Freud. In analysis, the finding of from three major parts which are constructing arguments in analyze the symptoms of social phobia experienced by the main character in *Watch Over Me* (2020), the causes of the social phobia, and the role of the main character's peers to overcome the social phobia in *Watch Over Me* (2020). The finding of analysis from these major parts are discussed and relate it to the Psychoanalysis theory and other essential sources.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *Watch Over Me* novel by Nina LaCour (2020) analyzes based on three important points which are; the symptoms of social phobia that the main character suffers, the causes of social phobia, and the role of peers to help overcome the social phobia of the protagonist. There are three symptom categories of social phobia which are behavioral symptoms, cognitive symptoms, and physical symptoms. The causes of the social phobia experienced by the female protagonist which are influenced by internal and environmental factors. In addition, it also can be seen that the important role of peers which are role as moral support and role as support facilitations in efforts to heal someone who suffering from anxiety disorder including social phobia.

1. Symptoms of Social Phobia Suffered by the Main Character

There are three kinds of social phobia symptoms experienced by the main character of the novel which are behavioral symptoms, cognitive symptoms, and

physical symptoms. First, the behavioral symptoms can be seen the the main character frequently avoiding talking too much, less eye contact when talking, and being comfortable alone. It can be seen in the following quotation:

The female main character shows behavior symptoms when she gets interviewed for a job to work as a teacher in a remote area. The interview starts in her foster family's house and the interviewer comes to visit her. It can be seen some of the behavioral symptoms in the following quotation:

“How are you doing?” he asked after we sat.

“Well, finals are over, so that's good,” I said.

“Yes, congratulations. Your transcripts are solid. Have you considered college?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I'll go at some point.”

He nodded, but I saw that he felt sorry for me. My eyes darted to the window. I didn't know how to talk about my life with someone who understood. I clenched a fist in my lap and forced myself not to cry. I was ready to prove my work ethic, talk about the hours I spent volunteering at the library, and assure him that I was not afraid of dirt or messes or children throwing tantrums—but I was not ready for this.” (Page 5)

From how she deals in the interview, it can be seen that this is her first interview. She shows some symptoms of her behavior when she clenches her fist and holds back her cry which are signs of nervousness and anxiety. She may be worried the interviewer will ask more about her bad past memories and being judged or misunderstood. People with social anxiety tend to avoid social interaction when they feel that will be judged or evaluated by others. She may be afraid of saying the wrong thing or doing something embarrassing. Therefore, she feels comfortable when they spend time alone without anyone around her. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“Summer was fading, the days still warm but the nights colder, and while the sky had been clear only a moment ago, a fog settled as I made my way to the other end of the field. I wished I had thought to take a lantern, but I made it to the barn door and let myself in. I felt across the inside wall for the switch and found it—but stopped before turning it on. What would the others think if they saw the schoolhouse suddenly bright? I wanted to be left alone there, without anyone checking on me. So I waited for my eyes to adjust before making my way to the closet, where beeswax taper candles rested in a basket, their holders in another. By the woodstove was a box of matches. I struck one and lit the candle, set it on the table.

I sat alone in the quiet.” (Page 100)

She enjoys being alone and does not want to meet anyone. She sat alone in a dark haunted place where she hoped people would not find her. According to Rector et al (2016:10), the causes of behavioral symptoms by avoiding meeting people and being comfortable alone because of the feeling of being haunted by their past trauma and protecting themselves from anxiety.

The main character shows cognitive symptoms when she has unpleasant thoughts and fear of negative evaluation in particular situations. The unpleasant thought first appears after she has done the interview and gets the job, but she still feels that she is not capable enough if the interviewer knows her past.

“I didn’t tell him about the terrible thing I’d done. He didn’t ask those kinds of questions. Funny, when interviewing for a job to work with children, that a person would ask about college and remoteness and not say, *Tell me the worst thing you ever did. Tell me about your wounds. Can I trust you?*

Had they known the truth about me they might not have given me the job, I thought, even though I was determined to be good. Even though I held on fiercely to my own goodness.” (Page 7)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the main character thought she would not get the job because of her bad past experiences. She tells herself that she will be good and hold on to her goodness. She thought that if she was being honest in telling the mistakes and terrible things she had done in the past, she would not be trusted by others and people would be afraid of her.

The protagonist also experiences several symptoms of how the body responds to fear, anxiety, and trauma that she feels in particular situations. She frequently wakes from nightmares about her past memories when she lived with her stepfather which can be seen in the following quotation:

“I covered my pounding heart with my hand.

“This is my home,” I said to myself.

I found my way back—to the soft pillow under my cheek, to the glow of the moon through the skylight, to the steadiness of my breath.

“This is my home,” I whispered as I shut my eyes. “All the rest is over.”

(Page 27)

The physical symptoms experienced by the main character are triggered by memories of the traumatic event in the past. It comes up in the nightmare or illusion of the unpleasant treatment from her stepfather. The main character often experiences psychical symptoms which are a racing heart and shortness of breath.

2. Causes of the Main Character's Social Phobia

The main character's social phobia causes are influenced by environmental factors such as the unpleasant childhood memories that being abused by her stepfather and abandoned by her mother, and also the traumatic experiences. According to Freud (1926), traumatic experiences may be threatening a person with an anxiety disorder that can make the person feel helpless and unable to cope with the physical or emotional strain. It can be seen on the following quotation:

“As soon as I let myself in, my exhilaration left me. In its place came an ache—from my hip to my ribs to my shoulder—an ache I remembered from sleeping on the hard floor of Blake’s house. I felt a sting on my foot. Touched it and felt wetness between my fingers. Saw a half-moon of blood in the spot where Blake’s shell had sliced me.

I went through the motions of building the fire. I pressed a tissue against my cut to blot the blood. I climbed, shivering, into bed. I rubbed my sore hip. I rubbed my shoulder. I closed my eyes and saw Blake. Wondered, again, whether his ghost had followed me here.” (Page 106)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that she had been struggling for a long time. She thinks that going to the farm where she works in a remote area could make her forget about her past, but turns out, the haunted memories still follow her there. The flashback occurs one by one revealing the maltreatment and abuse from her father.

The social phobia experienced by the main character is also caused by internal factors such as the feeling of guilt and fear of negative evaluation. In this novel, the main character is blamed by her mother who accused Mila of being the one who responsible for Blake’s death because she didn’t save him in the fire accident. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“The next night we fell asleep in a shelter. Two cots side by side in a large room full of sleeping women and girls. I woke to her shaking my shoulder in the dark.

She was my mother. It was the two of us again. Once, I’d been smaller than a speck of dust but she’d loved me.

“Why didn’t you save him?” she asked.

“I saved us,” I said.

Her face crumpled in pain, in fury.

She grabbed me by the shoulders, dug her fingers in, shook me hard. She kissed me on the mouth. And then she was gone.

Morning came, with bruises on my shoulders.

She never returned for me.” (Page 235)

After that, her mother was gone and never returned leaving Mila in the wild forest with the scar from her mother’s grip. This makes the main character live with the feeling of guilt and sin for the mistake. In addition, this is also one of her insecurities that makes her often see herself in a negative way, fear of negative evaluation and judgment.

3. The Role of Peers to Overcome the Main Character’s Social Phobia

In the *Watch Over Me* novel by Nina LaCour, the main character’s friends in the workplace have a great impact in overcoming her social phobia. According to Leigh and Clark (2019:3), peer interactions mean a lot to influence someone’s susceptibility to social situations. There are two main roles of peers in overcoming the social phobia of the main character which are the role as moral support and the role as facilitation support. There are some people on the farm who help the main

character overcome the social phobia one of them are Julia and Terry. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“She left,” I said. “After the fire.” I traced the bird again, and then the branch it perched on, and the leaves that sprouted from the branch. By the time I looked up I was able to meet their faces. “I don’t want to talk about the fire if that’s okay.”

“That’s just fine,” Julia said.

“Your past is your own,” Terry said. I nodded. We sat quietly for a minute or two. Julia said, “Thank you for playing for us. Thank you for your openness.” She stood up and stretched her arms over her head. “It’s past nine already. I’m going to check on the children. They’re so looking forward to meeting you in the morning.” (Page 20-21)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that Julia and Terry want Mila to feel welcome and give a good impression in their first meeting. They do not pursue Mila to talk about her past and how all her family had gone when she was a child. It can be seen in the following quotation:

“Something is wrong with me.” I was shaking so violently my teeth chattered. No way to hide it. “I don’t know what it is.” “

You’re scared,” Liz said. “That’s all. Come with me.”

I followed her to her cabin, which was just like my own. Billy was there, too, blowing out a match, closing the door of the wood-burning stove.

“Sit here,” Liz said, pulling her chair in front of the fire. She draped her quilt over my shoulders.

“You can talk to us,” Billy said, sitting at my feet.

“We’re here for you,” Liz said, settling beside him.” (Page 148)

They have an important role as support facilitation who help Mila feel safe and calm her when the trauma and panic attack occurs. They even accompanied Mila when she was sleeping and waking up from the nightmares. They show the main character many things and facilitate her from when she arrives and the whole day until the main character feels comfortable living on the farm.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The social phobia experienced by the main character is reflected in several symptoms, which are behavioral symptoms, cognitive symptoms, and physical symptoms. The protagonist shows behavioral symptoms such as avoiding talking too much, less eye contact when talking, and being comfortable alone. The cognitive symptoms experienced by the protagonist such as unpleasant thoughts about other’s opinions, having a negative view of herself, and feeling inferior in society around her. The physical symptoms include a fast-beating heart, shortness of breath, trembling hands, and often sensitive emotionally.

The symptoms of social phobia the main character suffers are triggered by internal and environmental factors. The memories of when she lived with her stepfather in the skeleton house caused traumatic experiences for her. She was also subjected to physical and emotional abuse by her stepfather. Her mother

blamed her for her stepfather's death and then abandoned her in the wild forest. These are considered as environmental factors that disrupt the protagonist to live a normal life. The nightmares and delusions of the trauma memories often come up. These traumas and the feeling of guilt lead to internal factors which as fear of negative evaluation. This is also the reason that often makes her have a negative view of herself. Consequently, these factors may trigger the development of social phobia and may impact negatively on someone's future and career if left without treatment.

Lastly, this novel shows the importance of peers in supporting someone who experiences social phobia. The peers are friends and also students of the main character's workplace who never judge for her mistakes in the past, even though some of them already know about the whole story and also her trauma. The role of peers as moral support is to make the main character feel safe when sharing everything without judging in a negative way. They support Mila as the facilitation support to make her be the best version of herself and never pursue her to be a perfect teacher or coworker. The place of the farm has complete facilitation for the occupants in the farm. They provide handbooks and information for teaching, gardening, cooking, and other activities on the farm. They tend to create an environment where people can feel supported and valued to improve their abilities by encouraging and providing them with resources and support. Her friends and students on the farm are always on her side whenever anxiety and panic attacks occur. The occupants on the farm always try to accompany her until she finally overcomes the trauma and anxiety, and accepts herself for who she is. Therefore, it is clear that the main character's peers on the farm are supportive and caring since they have similar backgrounds which are unpleasant memories and traumatic experiences.

Based on the conclusion, it can be seen that the role of peers is very important to support in overcoming anxiety disorder including social phobia experienced by someone. There are many other ways that help the victims of anxiety disorders heal from their mental health problems such as the role of peers in counseling, positive social and natural environment. This research focuses on the role of peers as the facilitation support and moral support to help overcome the social phobia experienced by the main character in the novel *Watch Over Me* (2020) by Nina LaCour. For future research, it is suggested to explore other ways to overcome social phobia and other kinds of anxiety disorders. It is essential to analyze the methods and management of anxiety disorder in order to provide support to people with mental health issue and help them live a fulfilling life.

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