

WAYS TO RELIEVE TRAUMA IN MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE AMAZING ADVENTURE OF KAVALIER AND CLAY*

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Abstrak

Tujuan penganalisaan ini adalah untuk mengetahui sejauh mana novel ini merefleksikan cara yang bisa dilakukan seseorang untuk terlepas dari trauma yang dimilikinya. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan menginterpretasi teks dan konteks serta menganalisa keterkaitan elemen fiksi (karakter dan plot) satu sama lain. Elemen fiksi tersebut dianalisa berdasarkan teori Dominick Lacapra tentang acting out dan working through trauma dan teori tentang konsep tokoh superhero yang dirumuskan oleh Danny Fingeroth. Hasil analisa menunjukkan bahwa seseorang yang memiliki trauma dapat terbebas setelah orang tersebut dapat menerima trauma tadi sebagai bagian masa lalunya. Dengan membuat karakter superhero fiksi sebagai perlambangan dirinya di dalam buku komik, protagonist dapat terlepas dari trauma yang dimilikinya.

Kata kunci: relieve, trauma, alter ego, karakter superhero

A. Introduction

Many people use the word trauma in every day language to mean a highly stressful event. The definition of the word trauma in oxford dictionary (2010) has two meanings. First, word trauma is used to define a serious injury or shock to the body that come from violence or an accident. The second definition is an emotional wound or shock that creates substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person. Very frightening or distressing events may result in a psychological wound or injury. Those events may lead a person to have a difficulty in coping or functioning normally following a particular event. In order to live their life normally, a traumatic person has to find a way to cope with their trauma.

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One example of very frightening or distressing events is an event called the Holocaust. Holocaust is a term used to refer to the genocidal persecution and killing of approximately six million European Jews during World War II that done by Nazi party in Germany. As the effects, the survivors is showing symptoms of mood swings, impulsivity, emotional irritability, anger and aggression, anxiety, depression and dissociation (Kathleen, 2005). In order to lessen the effect of traumatic events, the holocaust survivors have to find a way to cope with their trauma.

There is an alternative way to help trauma victims to relieve their trauma. The way can be by giving a therapy or by maximizing someone's ability to cope with his or her traumatic past. There is a study that done by Roberta R. Greene (2001) entitled *Holocaust Survivors: A Study in Resilience* which presents the results of interviews with thirteen Holocaust survivors. The results of the study showed that using positive matters such as made a conscious decision to go on living, to celebrate life, and to think positively can help the survivors cope with their trauma and make their life better.

In order to have a better understanding of this analysis, there are two terms that need to be explained. They are relieve and trauma. The first term that needs to be explained is the word relieve. The word relieve define in Cambridge dictionary of psychology (2009) as a long term process to set free from pain and stress as coping effort to adapt. The second term that needs to be explained is trauma. The definition of the word trauma that will be used in this analysis is the one that explain as a disordered psychic or behavioral state that resulting from emotional stress or physical injury. In order to lessen the after effect, the person has to find a way to cope with their trauma. Ways to relieve trauma in this analysis means the efforts that done by the protagonist in order to set him free from pain and stress as the effect of traumatic event.

The Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay (2001), a novel written by Michael Chabon reflects the ways to relieve trauma. In this novel, the way to relieve trauma is done by the protagonist Josef Kavalier. He is a 19 years old Jewish refugee from Prague. He was trying to find his own way to relieve his trauma that caused by the Nazi. It can be seen from his two efforts. Protagonist's first effort is creating two different superhero alter ego named *The Escapist* and *The Golem* in his comic books. His second effort is by joining the army in order to release his anger directly to the Germany.

Protagonist's first effort to relieve his trauma is by creating two different superhero characters in his two comic book named *The Escapist* and *The Golem*. In his first comic book he created a fictional character named *The Escapist*. He used *The Escapist* in order to deal with his feeling of disempowerment. In his first comic book, the protagonist is acting out his trauma. That was because when he drew *The Escapist* story, he only focused on the violent that he can pay back to the Nazi party. *The Escapist* fights and kills Nazi in every chapter that he made. *The Escapist* comic book helped him to escape only for a while because he tends to draw all of his wishful figments rather than reality to deal with the helplessness he feels.

In his second comic book, the protagonist created a character named *The Golem*. *The Golem* itself is the Jewish symbol that was supposed to help the Jewish community when it is threatened. By creating *The Golem*, the protagonist can work through his trauma. It was because after creating this second comic book Kavalier can reunite again with his traumatized self. It is different from the first one, in this second book the protagonist was not only focused in expressing the anger that he felt toward the Germany, but more like pouring his own self in to his work.

Joining army is the second effort that is done by the protagonist. By joining the army, he wanted to act out his trauma in reality. He wanted to fight the Germany face to face in combat war. Protagonist's trauma comes from the threat that done by the Nazi to Jewish people and his family. When there is a chance to fight back the Germany in combat war he took it. Unfortunately, he is stationed on Antarctica as a radioman, with no chance of engaging in combat.

In analyzing the novel, the context of Golem is also need to be explained. The legend of the Golem is essentially a legend about creation. It is a myth about a Jewish rabbi or another Jewish person fabricating a powerful being out of dirt or clay, thus defying God's power of creation. The golem, who was mute, was created to serve the Jewish community and protect it from the blood accusations their enemies were raising against them. This concept of Golem will be used later to explain why the protagonist can relieve after using this image in his second character.

There are two studies that give contribution and inspiration in analyzing this novel. The first analysis was written by Noella Jeo (2005) entitled "*Perry Smith and Josef Kavalier: Historical and Literary Victimsized Victimsizers*". In this analysis Jeo compared the protagonist in the novels *Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay* and *In Cold Blood*. It discusses about a better way for traumatize people to be helped rather than doing violent action to themselves or to others. By sharing stories, isolated victims can be reintegrated back into communities that before did not understand or care about the victims histories because they now have greater empathy of their struggles.

The other study that gives contribution to this study is written by Nele Van Den Bossche (2010), entitled "*Discovering trauma of Nazism and the Cold War in the Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay and Watchmen*". In this analysis Bossche compared the protagonist in the novels *Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay* and *Watchmen*. She focuses on character and plot because both of these protagonists have same problem with Nazi. Bossche analysis focused on potential healing that can results from comic books and superhero.

The analysis in this novel deals with LaCapra concept of acting out and working through trauma and the concept of superhero by Danny Fingeroth. Dominick LaCapra in *History in Transit* (2004) formulates two processes to deal with trauma. LaCapra uses the term "acting out" of trauma and "working through" trauma to indicate a process of learning to cope with trauma. When a person is acting out the suffered trauma, it means that he is compulsively repeating it. To work through trauma, the victims have to integrate the traumatic events into his life and into his past.

In dealing with trauma by using superhero alter ego, Danny Fingeroth considers the dual identity to be one of the most important traits of superheroes. According to Fingeroth, the most important thing that should be noted that is when someone creating a superhero alter ego, the alter ego should have one or two representative point from the creator. This is to make sure that the alter ego represents the creator's identity.

The combination of these concepts can be seen on the main character of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001). He was going through both of acting out and working through trauma. The protagonist was acting out trauma by creating *The Escapist* character in his first comic book and by joining the army. Then he was working through his trauma by creating *The Golem* in his second comic book.

B. Research Method

The analysis of this novel is done through text and context-based interpretation. Furthermore, it is done by analyzing fictional devices such as character and plot (conflicts). Character is used to show the ways that can be done to relieve from a trauma. This is done by analyzing character action and dialogue through his life. Meanwhile, plot (conflicts) plays important role in conveying the meaning of this novel. Moreover, these elements are analyzed based on the LaCapra concept of acting out and working through trauma and the concept of superhero by Danny Fingeroth.

C. Discussion

One of the central problems of a trauma is the feeling of disempowerment that experienced by the victim after traumatic events. This is happened because the victim did not have enough power to stop the event and cannot do anything about it. In this novel, the feeling of disempowerment that feels by the protagonist is because he cannot do anything to help his family back home. The protagonist in this novel tries to find the ways to relieve his trauma so he can live his life normally without any fear, stress, and pain. The protagonist chooses comic book as a media to relieve his trauma because he has the right skill and arrived in America at the right time. The protagonist arrived in America when the comic book is at its golden era. The two superheroes that create by the protagonist called *The Escapist* and *The Golem*. The use of his best skill as a strength point is the proof that the protagonist is doing his best in finding a way to relieve his trauma.

In creating his superhero alter egos, the protagonist takes a model from different sources. His first superhero alter ego, *The Escapist* is based on the protagonist favorite escape artist Harry Houdini. And the second superhero alter ego that is called *The Golem* was based on legendary Jews creation. The difference sources of the superhero will bring a different result in helping the protagonist to relieve from his trauma.

In his first comic book the protagonist creates a superhero alter ego named *The Escapist*. The protagonist creates *The Escapist* based on model from the person he admires the most. The person is his favorite escape artist Harry Houdini. It can be seen from quotation below;

"The Escapist" Joe tried it out. It sounded magnificent to his unschooled ear—someone trustworthy and useful and strong. "He is an escape artist, like Houdini, in a costume. Who fights crime."

"He doesn't just fight it. He frees the world of it. He frees people, see?"

"What do you mean? How can you not get it? He's a superhuman escape artist. No cuffs can hold him."

Coming to the rescue of those who toil in the chains of tyranny and injustice. Houdini, but mixed with Robin Hood and a little bit of Albert Schweitzer."

"He is here to free the world," said Joe.(p:83)

The quotation above shows the effort that done by the protagonist to find the ways to relieve his trauma. The choosing of his favorite person to become the model of his superhero is a proof that he wanted to become like that once in a while but he could not. *The Escapist* did not only have the ability as same as the person that the protagonist admire the most, but also can do what the protagonist cannot do. This is why *the Escapist* only help the protagonist for a while. The protagonist only escapes from his problem by creating *the Escapist* not deal with it.

The quotation above also shows that how the protagonist used *The Escapist* in order to deal with his feeling of disempowerment. Because he feels the disempowerment, he gives his character the aspect that the protagonist did not have. The protagonist did this in order to have a satisfaction, because his character can become the person that he wanted to be. The utterance *He is an escape artist, like Houdini, in a costume. Who fights crime. He doesn't just fight it. He frees the world of it. He frees people* show how *The Escapist* can fulfill the protagonist wishful figments. *The Escapist* can fight crime and help other people while the protagonist cannot.

The protagonist even creates *The Escapist* which has a superpower in order to fulfilling his lack of power and strength in real life. It can be supported by the utterance *what do you mean? How can you not get it? He's a superhuman escape artist. No cuffs can hold him. Coming to the rescue of those who toil in the chains of tyranny and injustice. The Escapist help the protagonist escape from his reality by providing the protagonist with all of his wishes. When the protagonist drew The Escapist, he tries to relieve his trauma by fulfilling all of his need and he tried to cover up all the things what himself is lack of.*

The protagonist creates *The Escapist* that has superpower to fulfill his needs of power. Moreover, by creating the battle scene of *The Escapist*, the protagonist wanted to take revenge and solve his conflict with the Germans. The protagonist used *The Escapist* as the way to relieve his trauma. He used *The Escapist* only in order to settle his conflict toward the Germans. This things become more clear after his editor asked to change the enemy of *The Escapist*. If

the protagonist wanted to sell his art rather than acting out his trauma through *The Escapist*, he will agree to that. However, because in this first comic book the protagonist only acting out his trauma, he did not accept the changes. It is supported by quotation below;

"We've got plenty of problems right here at home, and I don't mean spies and saboteurs. Gangsters, crooked cops. I don't know. Jack?"

"Rats," said Ashkenazy. "Bugs."

"Let The Escapist and the rest of 'em take care of that sort of thing for a while."

"And so what if we don't agree to the condition?"

"Then you don't get any five percent of Luna Moth. You don't get the raise. You don't get a piece of the radio money."

"But we could still keep on doing our stuff. Joe and I could keep fighting those Nazis?"

"Certainly," said Anapol. "I'm sure Marty Goodman would be more than happy to hire you two to lob grenades at Hermann Goring. But you'd be finished here."

"Boss," said Sammy, "don't do this."

Anapol shrugged. "Not up to me. It's up to you. You have an hour," he said. "I want to get this all squared away before we meet with the radio people, which we are doing over lunch today."

"I don't need an hour," Joe said. "The answer is no. Forget it. You are cowards, and you are weak, and no."(p:196)

The quotation above shows the true motives of the protagonist in creating *The Escapist*. By creating *The Escapist*, the protagonist hopes he can find a way to relieve his trauma. But what happened is in the contrary, by doing acting out of his trauma *The Escapist* keep dragging the protagonist away from his reality. It is happened because in order to relieve from a trauma, the person must done a working through trauma process also, not only acting out his trauma.

In his first comic book, the protagonist used *The Escapist* only as a mean to take revenge and acting out his trauma. He chooses to fulfill his wishful figments through *The Escapist* rather than dealing with his real problem. He did not agree with his editor to change the enemy of *The Escapist*. This is happens because when he did it, *The Escapist* itself will lose the meaning. Which is the protagonist think can hope him to relieve his trauma.

While creating *The Escapist*, the protagonist become apart from his reality. This is happened because the protagonist takes model from the person he admire, so rather than helping him to relieve from his trauma, the superhero alter ego even drag the protagonist far from reality. When someone wants to use an alter ego to help them deal with their trauma, the alter ego should have a representative point from the creator. This is crucial because if the alter ego has a representative point from the creator, the alter ego will take a place of the creator and help them to relieve their trauma.

It is different from his first comic book, the protagonist succeed in finding the way to relieve his trauma through his second comic book. In his second comic book, the protagonist creates another superhero alter ego named *The Golem*. In this time the protagonist creates his superhero alter ego based on the Jewish legendary creation. The Golem is a legend about Jewish symbol that is supposed to help the Jewish community when it is threatened. However, in protagonist's side, *The Golem* that he creates will help him relieve from his trauma.

The Golem helped the protagonist accepting his traumatic past and helped him to make the stress and pain disappear. The choosing of character The Golem in his second comic book is showing the theory of working through trauma. By choosing to draws a Jews legend as his representative in his second comic book rather than creating another new hero, the process itself will help the protagonist in relieving his trauma.

The creation of *The Golem* has given a direct impact to the protagonist life. The process of working through his trauma has made the protagonist feel a thing that he has never felt before. It is supported by the quotation below;

All of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express, before or afterward, not to a navy psychiatrist, nor to a fellow drifter in some cheap hotel near Orlando, Florida, nor to his son, nor to any of those few who remained to love him when he finally returned to the world, all of it went into the queasy angles and stark compositions, the cross-hatchings and vast swaths of shadow, the distended and fractured and finely minced panels of his monstrous comic book. Something paradoxical had occurred in the five years he had worked on *The Golem*: the more of himself, of his heart and his sorrows, that he had poured into the strip—the more convincingly he demonstrated the power of the comic book as a vehicle of personal expression—the less willingness he felt to show it to other people, to expose what had become the secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution. (P.401)

Based on the quotation above, it is clear how the process of creating *The Golem* has helped the protagonist. Through *The Golem*, the protagonist finally able to express his deep feeling which is he never been able to, which is supported by the utterance *All of the grief and black wonder that he was never able to express, before or afterward, not to a navy psychiatrist, nor to a fellow drifter in some*

cheap hotel near Orlando, Florida, nor to his son, nor to any of those few who remained to love him. The process of creating *The Golem* was able to help the protagonist relieving his trauma. In his second comic book, the protagonist was finally able to express his feelings.

By creating *The Golem* the protagonist is able to receive his past. This is happened because previously, the effort that done by the protagonist only focuses in acting out his trauma. In acting out his trauma, the protagonist only get a temporary satisfaction. But it is different while he is creating the story about *The Golem*. The creation of *The Golem* can give the protagonist satisfaction that he cannot get from anyone before.

The Golem finally able to help the protagonist solved the conflict between him and his traumatic past. The process of creating *The Golem* has helped the protagonist to cope with his trauma. At the end, the protagonist even was not willing to share and publish his second comic book. It was because the comic book itself has become a secret record of his mourning, his guilt and retribution rather than an artwork to be enjoyed by his reader or to be sold. The story of *The Golem* itself has become a memento about his trauma and about the story of protagonist life. The process of working through trauma is finally able to help protagonist in relieving his trauma.

The second way that is done by the protagonist to relieve his trauma is by joining the army. The searching to find the way to relieve his trauma is not only done by the protagonist in his comic book, but continued in reality. This is happened because the comic book that he creates at first, only help him to escape from his problem not really deal with it. Joining the army is the best options at that time. The setting at that time creates a possibility for the protagonist to take revenge directly to The Germans. The setting at that time took place when the war between Germany and America during World War II has just begun.

The protagonist hopes that by joining in the army, his anger and hatred can be vanished after he kills his enemy, especially the Germans. This second effort of protagonist is also consider as acting out trauma because this time the protagonist focuses in dealing with his trauma by doing violent act back to his enemy. It is described by following quotation which is showing the true motive why the protagonist joined the army;

Joe did not stop at home to pack a bag. He did not want to risk running into someone who would try to talk him out of his plan. Anyway, there was nothing he needed that he could not buy in a drugstore or find in a bus-station vending machine; his passport and visa he carried with him at all times. The Royal Air Force would dress and shoe and feed him. All his doubts were counterbalanced by a powerful urge to kill German soldiers. (p:129)

From quotation above, it can be seen that the reason why the protagonist joined the army. By joining the army, the protagonist thinks that he would relieve after he finished his conflict with the person who has made him trauma. He also thinks that after he could kill at least one of the people who made him trauma, it could

satisfy him. It is supported with the sentence *All his doubts were counterbalanced by a powerful urge to kill German soldiers* which is shown the true motives why the protagonist joined the army. During a war time like that, the motive of the soldier who joined the army would be more like to defend his country.

The result of using acting out trauma only as the way to relieve trauma has been clear since the protagonist failed to cope with his trauma using *the Escapist*. By using the same method to relieve his trauma, the result that will get by the protagonist of course will be the same. It can be revealed from the quotation below;

In seeking revenge, he had allied himself with the Ice, with the interminable white topography, with the sawteeth and crevasses of death. Nothing that had ever happened to him, not the shooting of Oyster, or the piteous muttering expiration of John Wesley Shannenhouse, or the death of his father, or internment of his mother and grandfather, not even the drowning of his beloved brother, had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization, when he was halfway to the rimed zinc hatch of the German station, that he was hauling a corpse behind him. (p:319)

The quotation shows that how the person who only done the process of acting out trauma will end. When a person only focuses in paying back the trauma through violent, they will end in despair only. This is happen because when the person has reached their ultimate goal, they will lose their purpose in their live. The same thing happened to the protagonist. After he finally was able to kill the German's geologist he did not feel any joy or happiness in his attempt.

The protagonist finally realized that resolving his conflict by doing violent act only give him despair in the end. It is supported by the utterance *Nothing that had ever happened to him, not the shooting of Oyster, or the piteous muttering expiration of John Wesley Shannenhouse, or the death of his father, or internment of his mother and grandfather, not even the drowning of his beloved brother, had ever broken his heart quite as terribly as the realization, when he was halfway to the rimed zinc hatch of the German station, that he was hauling a corpse behind him* which is showing the protagonist deep sadness and regret. After the protagonist realized that killing is not the answer to make him satisfied, he even tried to save his enemy that can be seen from sentence *that he was hauling a corpse behind him*. The protagonist finally understands that seeking for revenge for so long only drags him to an end which is full of despair. He must learn the hard way before he could realize that acting out of his trauma will only give him nothing. The protagonist must learn from the failure of his first comic and also from accidentally killing one of the German people who he hates the most to realized it.

In short, creating a superhero alter ego and joining the army are the effort that done by the protagonist to relieve his trauma. This effort is done by the protagonist in order to make him free from pain and stress so he could live his life peacefully. Through long and hard way, the protagonist learned that the process of acting out has to be followed by the working through in order to get the result

fully. The goal of acting out and working through trauma is to cope with the trauma that possessed by the protagonist. In this topic the process of acting out and working through trauma has been able to make the protagonist relieve from his trauma and help him to live his life normally again.

D. Conclusions

The novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001) by Michael Chabon reflects the ways to relieve trauma. It is exposed through text based and context based interpretation by focusing on fictional devices such as character and conflicts. The protagonist in this novel has a trauma that caused by forcing separation from his family since he was a child. In order to live his life normally, the protagonist tries to find the ways to relieve from his trauma. The protagonist tries to relieve his trauma by creating two different alter egos in the comic books that he creates and joining the army.

The creating of his two different alter egos has helped the protagonist in different ways. *The Escapist* helped the protagonist to escape from his problem and from his miserable life. Different from *the Escapist*, *the Golem* helped the protagonist in accepting his past. By creating the story that resembles to him, *the Golem* able to helped the protagonist finishing his conflict with his traumatic past. After the protagonist finally accepts his past, he can enjoy his life in the present without any pain or stress left. Meanwhile in the army, the protagonist learns that there will be nothing in the end if someone only after his revenge but despair.

In short, when people have gone through traumatic event they will suffer from stress, pain and any other sickness whether its affect them physically or mentally as an effect. To get over from such a trauma people have to find a way to cure their trauma. It can be done by taking any medical treatment or finding their own way to relieve their trauma. Different ways of relieving trauma is possible since the trauma itself has bring different effects depend on its causes.

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