

THE DISTORTION OF REALITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S NOVEL *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS*

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Abstrak

Tujuan pembahasan ini adalah untuk mengetahui sejauh mana novel ini memperlihatkan penyimpangan realita yang dilakukan oleh protagonis. Teks novel ini dianalisa dengan menggunakan *text-based approach* yang difokuskan pada unsur sastra, seperti ironi dan paradoks. Penganalisaan unsur-unsur sastra ini dikaitkan dengan teori denial oleh Anna Freud dan *self-deception* oleh Brian Mclaughlin. Hasil penganalisaan menunjukkan bahwa seseorang yang memiliki pengalaman buruk di masa lalu memiliki tendensi untuk melakukan penyimpangan realita. Penyimpangan tersebut dilakukan dengan berbohong dan mengarang cerita untuk menutupi kejadian yang sebenarnya.

Kata Kunci: penyimpangan realita, penolakan, ironi, paradoks.

A. Introduction

Reality is a part of everyday life. People face it every second, every minute, every moments of their life. Eventhough there are some people who have difficulty to accept it. They tend to change their version of reality in order to alleviate guilt, hide the truth, help make themselves feel better, and to avoid emotional pain or rejection. Charles Shahar (2006) stated that;

We all create certain safe and predictable ways of dealing with the world that involve some slanting of reality. In order to cope with life, and make it more tolerable, we may distort, embellish or ignore certain aspects of our environment, our feelings, or our memories. There are things we just don't want to deal with because they are too painful, we fear them, or because we may get overwhelmed by such information.

¹ Mahasiswa penulis Skripsi Prodi Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris untuk diwisuda periode Maret 2013

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People tend to create certain ways to deal with the reality. Some events are distorted to comfort themselves from painful reality. They distort the reality so that the others will not know what is happening to them. This happens because they find it's easier to withdraw rather than cope with a reality that is out of their expectation. It implies that by distorting the reality, they can hide the truth of some painful things in their life, in order to make it more bearable.

The distortion of reality was firstly introduced by a group of German psychologists at the beginning of the twentieth century. They discovered a distortion in human perception of reality. They argued that the distortion of reality arise when people react to the way they expect the reality occurred rather than accept the reality itself. They may include or omit details that are not consistent with the expected theme of the story.

Meanwhile, distorting reality is well known among the people. Many people had already done the distortion of reality in their life. One of the examples is the case of Oprah Winfrey, a television host as well as actress who is most famous for her talk show named after herself. In her talk show, she has always been very verbal about her abusive past and her poverty upbringing environment. However, Kitty Kelley's new book entitled *Oprah: a Biography*, includes claims from Oprah's family members that Oprah lied about her traumatic childhood life. **It is** include an interview with Oprah's cousin, Katharine Esters. Esters paints a different picture of Oprah's childhood by telling that Oprah's claim of being sexually abused is a lie. Not only that, but Oprah also embellished the story of her troubled childhood for financial gain. According to Katharine (2004) in an interview with *RadarOnline*, the story of sexual abuse helped launch Oprah and make her what she is today. True or false, Oprah Winfrey seems to distort her past reality in order to reach some purpose.

The phenomenon of the distortion of reality is not only found in reality, but also appeared in literary works. One of the literary works which expose the distortion of reality is the novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) by Kazuo Ishiguro. Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, on 8 November 1954, and came to Britain in 1960. Up to now, he has published several novels, shorts stories and screenplay. He has been awarded and shortlisted for several literary prizes and awards, among which can be cited: Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize 1982. Booker Prize for Fiction for *The Remains of the Day* 1989. He also awarded OBE in 1995 for services to literature and Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, etc.

This novel is interesting to analyze since the character shows the distortion of reality. It can be seen from his action; tells a lie and creates story. In this novel, the protagonist tells a lie about the truth of his childhood experience by building his childhood image as a happy child. He pretends to life in peaceful environment in Shanghai. He claims to have a perfect life in England. He tells a lie about his condition at his journey to England. He also claims to have a good school life at the English school.

Furthermore, the protagonist also creates stories about his life. He announces himself as an orphan, however deep in his heart he believes that his parent still alive. He creates story about his childhood friend. He claims a

Japanese soldier as his friend. He also rejects his orphanhood by creating story about his disappearance parents.

There are two studies that give the contribution on analyzing this novel. The first study that gives contribution to this analysis was written by Soren Helling and Cecille Skaarup (2005) entitled *Delusions: Memory and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction*. This is a study about the novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), both by Kazuo Ishiguro. This study analyzed the narrative technique and psychological character depictions in Kazuo Ishiguro's two most recent novels. This analysis was based on theory Mark Freeman about the psychological mechanisms of memory. The result of this analysis, the protagonists in both novel realized that they maintains a faulty self identity.

The second study that gives contribution to this analysis was written by Emily Cappel (2009) entitled *Repression and Displacement in Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans and Never Let Me Go*. This is a study about the novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005), both by Kazuo Ishiguro. This analysis was based on theory Sigmund Freud about the repression and displacement. Especially for *When We Were Orphans*, the study was done by exploring the narrator's psychological defense mechanisms. Besides, it analyzed how the repression and both familial and cultural displacement can affect the protagonist's whole life. This study contains the struggle of the protagonist to make him feels at home in his homeliness, and placed in his displacement.

The studies above give contribution and inspiration to the topic, the distortion of reality in *When We Were Orphans*. Unlike the studies above, this analysis focuses on how far the novel reflects the distortion of reality through the figuratives language (irony and paradox) used by the protagonist on the novel.

The analysis of this novel is engaged with the concept of denial by Anna Freud, and Self-deception's concept by Brian McLaughlin. In order to deal with conflict and problems in life, Freud stated that the ego employs a range of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings or make things feel better for the individual.

Several experts have described a wide variety of different defense mechanisms. Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna Freud, described ten different defense mechanisms used by the ego in her book, *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense*. However, denial is probably one of the best known defense mechanisms. It is use to describe situations in which people seem unable to face reality or admit an obvious truth. Freud in Boeree (1998), stated that denial involves blocking external events from awareness. If some situation is just too much to handle, the person just refuses to experience it. It deprives the individual of the necessary awareness to cope with external challenges and the employment of adequate strategies for survival as well.

Another action related to the distortion of reality is self-deception. Self-deception is the process of misleading the fact in the mind to accept some claims as true or valid when they are false or invalid. McLaughlin (1988) said that, self deception is one of the popular escapement methods that people use to prevent themselves from feeling guilty, while in the same time allowing them to escape

from something that they don't want to face. It implies that some people go beyond self-deception and believe in lies that erode their self-confidence.

McLaughlin (1988) stated that in some people, the tendency of self-deception seems to be an inborn personality trait. Others may develop a habit of self-deception as a way of coping with problems and challenges. However, people do not deceive themselves on intention but it's their subconscious minds that come up with such tricks in order to protect their psychological well-being. In short, self-deception is a way people justify false beliefs about themselves to themselves.

The analysis of this novel is also supported by text-based interpretation. Guerin (2005) stated that "*the text based-interpretation is concentrate on the work itself, on the text, examining it as art.*" It signifies that the presence and the meaning of this story are found by examining the interrelation among the elements of text.

Fictional devices involved in the analysis of this novel are focused on the figurative language (irony and paradox). Paradox is the important element in enclosing the topic of this analysis. Bredin (2003) says that paradox is a statement that is apparently self-contradictory but really contains a possible truth. It is also used to describe an opinion or statement which is contrary to generally accepted ideas. Often, a paradox is used to make a reader consider the point in a new way.

Another element of fictional device that will be used in this analysis is irony. Bredin (2003) says that irony involves a difference or contrast between appearance and reality - that is a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, and what is expected or intended and what happens.

B. Research Method

This analysis is supported by text-based interpretation which examines the interrelation between the language styles in fiction. The language styles are irony and paradox. These devices are inseparable since they support each other. This analysis is going to reveal the distortion of reality by analyzing the protagonist's paradoxically statements with another character. The irony emerges in the analysis as a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, and what is expected or intended and what happens. Moreover, these elements are analyzed based on the concept of denial by Anna Freud and self-deception by Brian McLaughlin.

C. Discussions

When We Were Orphans (2000), the novel written by Kazuo Ishiguro exposes phenomena of the distortion of reality. The distortion of reality refers to a memory report that differs from what actually occurred. In this novel, the distortion of reality is represented by the protagonist, Christopher Banks. His entire life is affected by the situation that his parents were kidnapped when he was ten years old in Shanghai. In fact, his father was not kidnapped but he ran off with his mistress, and died a few years later. While, his mother agreed to live as the concubine of the Chinese warlord to secure her son's future in London. However,

he did not want other people to know about his painful past time. Thus, he distorted some parts of his childhood experience to hide the truth. It is done through telling a lie and creating story.

1. Telling a lie

The protagonist lies to build his past-self image as a happy child. He convinces others that he had a perfect childhood experience. It is started by pretending to be in good condition when he is leaving to England. Then it is continued by lying about his condition in school. The irony that related with lying can be seen from the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, then what is said and what is done. The paradox emerges when the protagonist has different opinion with another character. Thus, all the actions of pretending and lying are supporting each other in distorting the reality of his past life.

The protagonist builds the image of his past self by pretending to have a perfect childhood experience. He portrays himself as a happy child unaffected by the tragic circumstances of his disappearance parents. It is supported by the following quotation;

For according to my own, quite clear memory, I adapted very ably to the changed realities of my circumstances. I remember very well that, far from being miserable on that voyage, I was positively excited about life aboard the ship, as well as by the prospect of the future that lay before me. Of course, I did miss my parents at times, but I can remember telling myself there would always be other adults I would come to love and trust.

The quotation shows a mature reaction for a ten-year old boy who has recently lost both of his parents, and forced to move to a new circumstance which he does not know anybody. The utterances, “*I adapted very ably*”, “*I was positively excited*”, and “*far from being miserable on that voyage*”, explains that the protagonist obviously likes to think of himself as a rational, well-balanced, adaptable and agreeable human being. He describes himself as a good boy with no hesitation about his future life in England. Moreover, the statement “*I can remember telling myself there would always be other adults I would come to love and trust.*” shows the greatly self confident of ten years old boy after the disappearance of his parents. He makes himself believe that the disappearance of his parents is not a big problem for him, because he can find another adult as his parents. This is irony, because it is impossible for a ten years old boy to think that rationally since he just got a painful experience about his parents. However, he is being so confident about the reliability of his childhood memory. It is supported by the utterances, “*for according to my own quite clear memory*”, and “*I remember very well*”. The utterances explain that he is pretty sure about the accuracy of his memories of some thirty years before. In fact, there is nobody that can represent the memory exactly the same as when it happened. In short, he tries to show the others about his happy child. Ironically, he was shocked because of his disappearance parents and his forced leaving from Shanghai to England.

The previous quotation reveals that the protagonist tries to show the others about his good past-self condition. He tries to portray himself as a happy child unaffected by the tragic circumstances of his disappearance parents. However, there is a paradoxical statement from Colonel Chamberlain – the man who accompanied him on his boat trip from Shanghai to England. It is supported by the following quotation;

I found myself becoming somewhat irritated. For gradually, from behind his cheerful anecdotes, there was emerging a picture of myself on that voyage to which I took exception. His repeated insinuation was that I had gone about the ship withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing. No doubt the colonel had an investment in giving himself the role of a heroic guardian, and after all this time, I saw it was as pointless as it was unkind to contradict him. But as I say, I began to grow steadily more irritated.

The quotation above shows the colonel's opinion about him, a boy who was shocked because the disappearance parents. The Colonel described him as a boy who was sullen, helpless and on the verge of tears during the whole trip. It is supported in the statement, "*withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing*". That statement is paradoxically from what he said before, "*I adapted very ably*", "*far from being miserable*", and "*I was positively excited*". This contrary opinion leads to assumption that he tries to deny the reality of his condition at the time. He also implicitly rejects the colonel's opinion about his condition in the utterance, "*No doubt the colonel had an investment in giving himself the role of a heroic guardian*". He convinces that the colonel just want to be a "*heroic guardian*" after the tragedy of his disappearing parents. This paradoxical opinions proves that his previous statement just a way to show his good past-self image and hide the reality.

2. Creating story

The second action of the distortion of reality is creating story. There are two significant actions which included as creating story; first about his childhood, then his parents. The irony emerges in the analysis as a discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, what is said and what is done, and what is expected or intended and what happens. These action of creating stories reflect his effort to escape from the reality of his past life.

The protagonist creates story about a Japanese boy named *Akira*. By doing that, he tries to convince the reader that his childhood life is perfect. It can be revealed from the following quotation;

From his very first day in Japan, Akira had been thoroughly miserable. Although he never admitted this explicitly, I surmised that he had been mercilessly ostracised for his 'foreignness'; his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different, and he had been taunted not just by his fellow pupils, but by his teachers and even - he hinted at this more than

once - by the relatives in whose house he was staying.

From quotation above, it can be understood that he tries to build sympathy about Akira's condition. By telling the reader about Akira's situation, he emphasizes that his childhood life is not like Akira's. Ironically, it is infer that Akira's situation in Japan is analogical to the protagonist's when he is sent to England. Akira struggle to integrate by copying the other children's behavior, but everything that he is doing just remarked him as "*foreignness*". It is also supported by the utterance "*his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different*". The statement shows that how hard he tries to be the same with his English friend, he will never be. It can be assumed that Akira's experience is the reflection of the protagonist condition. Ironically, this is affirm that Akira's misery in Japan is foretells of the protagonist's unhappiness in England. It is supported in the utterances, "*he had been taunted not just by his fellow pupils, but by his teachers and even by the relatives in whose house he was staying.*". When the protagonist said "he", it also means "him". The protagonist claims that Akira is his real friend. Ironically, Akira is his imaginary friend that represented of himself. By telling the reader about Akira who has the same experience with him, the protagonist implicitly said that his past life is normal.

Moreover, the protagonist tries to hide the identity of Akira from his mother. It can be revealed from the following quotation;

I cannot remember ever attempting to challenge Akira on any of these claims. Once I mentioned casually to my mother something about my friend's adventures and I remember her smiling and saying something to cast doubt on the matter. I was furious at her, and thereafter I believe I carefully avoided revealing to her anything at all intimate concerning Akira.

The quotation above reveals his reason to hide the identity of Akira from his mother and another person. It is supported by the utterance, "*I carefully avoided revealing to her anything at all intimate concerning Akira*". That statement clearly shows the will of the protagonist to keep secret about his imaginary friend. This is ironic, since commonly a child tend to tell everything about his best friend to their parents. This is becomes one more evidence that Akira just his creation.

D. Conclusions

The novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) by Kazuo Ishiguro reflects reality distortion. It is exposed through text based interpretation by focusing on the figurative language such as paradox and irony. The protagonist in this novel has a painful experience in his past life. This condition affects his entire life. To deny the factual truth and release his feeling of sadness and sorrow, he tries to distort some reality in his past. He chooses to do that in two ways, there are by telling a lie and creating stories.

The irony that related with lying and creating stories can be seen from the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, then what is said and what is

done. The paradox emerges when the protagonist has different opinion with another character. These actions reflect his effort to escape from the reality of his past life. In short, people can find some purpose to distort their reality in the past. However, the best way of dealing with reality is to solve the problems that cause it. By choosing to face reality as it comes, accept the past without any regrets, people can stand strong.

Note: This article is written based on the Risna Ristiana's thesis under the supervision of Dr. Kurnia Ningsih, M.A., 1st advisor, and Delvi Wahyuni, S.S., M.A.. 2nd advisor.

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