

The Influence of Cultural Background to the Psychosocial Development of the Main Character in Asali Solomon's *Disgruntled*

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Abstract. This research paper discusses the influence of cultural background to the psychosocial development of Kenya Curtis as the main character in Asali Solomon's novel *Disgruntled*. The purposes of this study are to analyze main character's cultural background, the stage of development as influenced by such cultural background, and the effects of the psychosocial development itself. The writer employs library research as the method of data collection, while the psychological approach is used as the research approach, specifically by using Erik H. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development theory. The results indicate that Kenya is an African-American girl with conservative, Afrocentric cultural background. As she undergoes the school age stage of psychosocial development, the cultural discrepancy between her and her peers lead to the negative effect in form of her sense of inferiority. This finding affirms the interlinked relationship between cultural background and one's psychosocial development.

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1 Introduction

The complex nature of human development has long been a subject of interest across various disciplines, including psychology [1]. While the scholars in this area are primarily concerned with determining the stages of a development, the discourse on what factors influence a development the most also becomes an important topic to be addressed. Among the considered factors, cultural environment prevails as one of the major determinants in development. This nomination is reasonable considering the fact that culture, as a dynamic construct, often shape the identity and worldview of an individual, hence showing a direct influence towards psychological development.

The phenomenon of how culture influence psychological development is reflected in Asali Solomon's novel *Disgruntled*. While the plot primarily follows the main character Kenya Curtis in her journey to move on from a traumatic past, *Disgruntled* also talks about her, as a part of minority culture, having a difficulty interacting with mainstream society. As a young girl, Kenya is raised in a conservative and Afrocentric family that teaches her to cherish the cultural heritage of her ancestor. However, as she steps out of her family environment, Kenya must face the reality that her upbringing sets her apart from her fellow African-American peers, exposing her to a sense of alienation. This sense of alienation inevitably influences Kenya in how she perceives herself and the others, ultimately affecting her identity development.

Therefore, in this paper, the writer intends to analyze the psychosocial development of Kenya Curtis by focusing on the main character's cultural background, the stage of development as influenced by such cultural background, and the effects of the psychosocial development itself.

2 Methods

2.1 Method of Data Collection

The writer employs library research with close reading to collect the data. George defines library research as a method of "identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research question" [2]. The data are classified into primary data and secondary data. The primary data are original data collected for a specific purpose of research, while secondary data are the data collected by other people for other purposes as well [3]. The primary data in this study is Asali Solomon's novel *Disgruntled*, and the

secondary data are taken from books, scientific journal articles, and the internet.

2.2 Research Approach

As for the research approach, the psychological approach in literature is applied as the main tool of analysis. Holman states that psychological approach is an approach to examine the character's motives and actions in a literary work [4].

Specifically, the writer will use the stages of psychosocial development theory proposed by Erik H. Erikson to analyze Kenya Curtis's psychosocial development. Erikson theory is chosen since he emphasizes that one's psychological development is shaped more or less by social and cultural experience [5]. As a note, not all of the stages will be incorporated, since the discussion relevant to the topic only includes Kenya's development in the fourth stage of Erikson's theory.

In this stage, children are more focused on mastering the technologies and competencies of society which can be accessed through schooling. In addition to learning, interaction with other children of his/her age is also of great importance [6].

Positive development yields a favorable outcome in the form of the sense of industry, which is the sense of being able to craft something and make it perfect. On the other hand, adverse experiences might lead to a negative outcome of the development, that is, the sense of inferiority, where one is discouraged and lacking confidence in executing tasks [6].

3 Discussion

3.1 Kenya Curtis's Cultural Background

Kenya Curtis is the main character in Asali Solomon's novel *Disgruntled*. At the beginning, she is told to be a nine-year-old girl from West Philadelphia. Her physical features resemble a typical African-American person, as directly described in the following quotation: "Her skin was not light, her brown eyes unremarkable, her hair standard-issue nappy" (Solomon, 2015: 105).

However, what sets Kenya apart from her fellow African-American peers is her strong belief on conservative African values. This attitude is resulted from the conservative, Afrocentric culture introduced by her parents Johnbrown and Sheila Curtis. During her upbringing, Kenya ought to follow the rules and traditions within the family. In terms of religion, it is not exactly mentioned what religion the family believe

in. The only hint regarding this aspect is that the family addresses their prayer to the Creator instead of God. Kenya and her parents also do not celebrate the holidays of religion such as Christmas. Instead, they celebrate secular and cultural-based celebrations including Kwanzaa and Umoja Karuma.

In addition to religious beliefs and rituals, Kenya's parents also teach her distinguishable social norms. Most of these norms are proscriptive rules regarding subjects deemed as racist or creations of white society. For example, she is not allowed to eat pork because of the historical significance of African slaves being forced to eat hog innards. Her family also forbade her from watching TV shows that displays mockery of black people. Kenya also must not speak the Pledge of Allegiance because it is a white culture product. The rules even delve into mundane aspects such as calling her father "Baba", which is an African word for and a manner of addressing one's father, instead of "Daddy" (Solomon, 2015:3-4).

3.2 Kenya Curtis's Psychosocial Development as Influenced by Her Cultural Background

3.2.1 Kenya's Psychosocial Development at School Age

Through her family's strict upbringing, Kenya develops a strong sense of pride to African culture. It shaped her worldview, leading her to believe that many other will view the world the same as her. Her peers, however, have adopted a different cultural perspective.

The discrepancy between Kenya's cultural values and her peers' is evident when she enters the fourth stage of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, which is the school age. It manifests into the bullying committed by Kenya's schoolmates at Henry Charles Lea School. Led by L'Tisha Simmons, the kids harass her because of her conservative African beliefs and practices. For example, Kenya's classmates do not understand when she tells them about Kwanzaa, one of the traditional African ceremonies that she celebrates. They also begin to label her as a "bootyscratcher", which is a racial slur referring to a native person from Africa (Solomon, 2015: 3).

In relation to Erikson's theory, Kenya's bullying can be regarded as a form of negative community attitude [7]. The bullying is largely a form of cultural discrimination because Kenya is made to feel that her conservative, Afrocentric culture is inferior compared to her schoolmates' modern, Christianized culture. This is proven when Kenya feels ashamed of the fact that she celebrates Kwanzaa instead of

Christmas like her friends. She wishes to lie about it to stay relevant with her schoolmates, as quoted: “And anyway, she could have lied about Kwanzaa like she suspected Fatima McCullers did” (Solomon, 2015: 3). As Kenya feels that she does not stand in the equal level with her friends, it discourages her wish to learn.

3.2.2 *The Effect of Kenya’s Psychosocial Development as Influenced by Her Cultural Background*

While the stage of school age is supposed to be a phase where children acquire positive influence from learning and interacting with their peers, the bullying Kenya experienced contribute to the emergence of her inferiority. Inferiority itself is the negative outcome of a problematic development at the school age stage.

In Kenya’s case, she rarely shows a willingness to participate in learning or playing activities. As her classmates ostracize her, Kenya prefers to stay passive. This statement is proven when she chooses to watch with Charlena while her friends play a game of Double Dutch. Kenya is actually not fond of just sitting and watching the game, indicating her desire to join it (Solomon, 2015: 5). However, she does not even try to participate in the first place, and it is arguably caused by the mean treatment committed by her friends.

Even further, by being bullied, Kenya appears uninterested in interacting with the children of her age. Since school life does not offer the social interaction she needs, Kenya looks for an alternative by joining the meeting of the Seven Days, an African-American social organization formed by Johnbrown (Solomon, 2015: 21). Since most of the members are Johnbrown’s friends, of course, they are adults and far from being Kenya’s age.

4 Conclusion

Asali Solomon’s *Disgruntled* is a coming-of-age novel that perfectly captures the phenomenon of psychosocial development as influenced by one’s cultural background. Kenya Curtis, the main character, is an African-American girl raised by conservative, Afrocentric parents. Having developed a sense of cultural pride, Kenya is surprised when she enters a wider social scope in the form of school, as it turns out that her peers do not possess the same cultural values she holds. This discrepancy leads to Kenya being bullied by her friends, which influence her psychosocial development at the given stage negatively. At the stage where she is supposed to learn and play with her peers, Kenya

is discouraged by her peers' mean treatment, leading to her feeling inferior. In conclusion, these findings affirm that there is an interlinked relationship between one's cultural background and psychosocial development.

Kenya's case, despite its fictitious nature, depicts how cultural background may influence the psychosocial development. To conclude the final implication of this study, a better research on the relationship between cultural background and psychosocial development is argued, since it will lead to a better understanding of human psychological development in general.

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