The Psychological Conflict of Megan in Erin Cressida Wilson's *The Girl On The Train* Film in Terms of Kurt Lewin's Approach- Avoidance Theory

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Abstract

A psycholinguistic theoretical framework, namely, Approach - Avoidance Theory, devised by Kurt Lewin, is adopted to investigate, analyze and interpret *The Girl On The Train*, a film written by Erin Cressida Wilson. This film is about relationship troubles from three different women's narratives. The aim of the current study is to describe the types of psychological conflict of Megan, one of the main characters in the film, the causes of her psychological conflict as well as the impact of her psychological conflict based on Kurt Lewin's perspective. According to Kurt Lewin's theory, psychological conflicts are divided into three types: (1) approach-approach conflict (a person presented with two desirable options), (2) avoidance-avoidance conflict (a person presented with two unwanted alternatives), and (3) approach-avoidance conflict (a person presented with two options which are both desirable and undesirable at the same time). Lewin's theoretical framework is basically applied to detect the inner conflict of Megan in the film. The film is examined through the three types of inner conflict of Lewin's theory by analyzing Megan's speeches that show her interpersonal conflicts. The analysis proves that Megan has a lot of inner conflicts about her dead brother, her dead child as well as her relationships with her husband.

Key Words: Kurt Lewin, inner conflict, psychological conflict, *The Girl On The Train*, Erin Cressida Wilson, Megan

الصراع النفسي لشخصية ميغان في فيلم "الفتاة في القطار" للمخرجة إيرين كريسيدا ويلسون عن طريق تطبيق نظرية كيرت لوين "الاقتراب- التجنب"

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الملخص:

تم اعتماد الإطار النظري اللغوي النفسي، وهو نظرية الاقتراب- التجنب، الذي ابتكرها كيرت لوين، للتحقيق في وتحليل وتفسير فيلم "فتاة القطار" الذي كتبته إرين كريسيدا ويلسون. يدور هذا الفيلم حول مشاكل العلاقات من ثلاث روايات نسائية مختلفة. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى

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وصف أنواع الصراع النفسي التي تعاني منها ميغان وهي إحدى الشخصيات الرئيسية في الفيلم، وأسباب صراعها النفسي وكذلك تأثير صراعها النفسي من وجهة نظر كيرت لوين. وفقًا لنظرية كيرت لوين، تنقسم الصراعات النفسية إلى ثلاثة أنواع: (١) صراع الاقتراب والاقتراب (شخص يُعرض عليه خياران مرغوبان)، (٢) صراع التجنب والتجنب (شخص يُعرض عليه بديلان غير مرغوب فيهما)، و(٣) صراع الاقتراب والتجنب (الشخص أمام خيارين مرغوب فيهما وغير مرغوب فيهما في نفس الوقت). يتم تطبيق الإطار النظري للوين بشكل أساسي للكشف عن الصراع الداخلي لميغان في الفيلم. يتم تحليل الفيلم من خلال الأنواع الثلاثة للصراع الداخلي في نظرية لوين من خلال تحليل خطابات ميغان التي تظهر صراعاتها الشخصية. يثبت التحليل أن ميغان لديها الكثير من الصراعات الداخلية حول شقيقها المتوفى وطفلها المتوفى وكذلك علاقاتها مع زوجها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كيرت لوين، الصراع الداخلي، الصراع النفسي، الفتاة في القطار، إيرين كريسيدا ويلسون، ميغان

1. Introduction

Psychology and literature are considered as two inseparable sciences. There is a close connection between psychology and literature in both the treatment of people and their reactions, perceptions of the world, desires, and their conflicts, using a variety of methods, and approaches. Psychology is seen as the science that studies the mental life, including its phenomena and their conditions… phenomena are the things that we call sensations, perceptions, desires and decisions (James in Ladd, 1887).

In human life, conflict is divided into two types: internal and external. Internal conflict emerges inside a person. It occurs within a character's mind, when s/he is torn between two or more conflicting beliefs or goals. However, it develops when we are obliged to make difficult decisions in our daily lives. On the other hand, external conflict puts a character against something out of his / her control, such as another character, society, or nature. Such external powers hinder the character's motivations and create tension as the character seeks to achieve their aims (Bruno, cited in Goh, 2019).

Surakhmad (1979) argues that the psychological conflict is usually caused by two or more motives that appear in the same time and it can never be separated from human life because it is born because of the interactions in life. It can also occur between two or more groups that are interdependent about specific object. However, having some psychological conflict produces certain behaviour due to that conflict (Sarwono, 2005). In addition, it occurs because of the differences in interests and the efforts to fulfill the aims by opposing the opposite parties accompanied with violence or threats (Soekanto, 2006).

2. Psychology

Watson (1913:10) defines psychology as "the science of mental behavior and the human mind, and the professional application of such knowledge toward the greater good". So, it is a field that deals with humans' behavior, individually as well as concerning their environments. The behavior, here, is the personality that is whether conscious or unconscious, visible or invisible. On the other hand, in literature, psychology is a study of the behavior of humans that is applied in the analysis of the personalities of

individuals or the personalities of characters who are involved in a literary work. Most literary writers use the psychological analysis to analyze a character's personality or the paper that is related to psychoanalytic, a set of theories and a therapeutic approach developed by Sigmund Freud in 1890s. To analyze a text, psychoanalytic theory can be applied to interpret or reveal the hidden meanings in the text analyzed, or to a better understanding to the writer's intent (Nolen & Arianto, 2020).

3. Psycholinguistics

Psycholinguistics is the science that deals mainly with language comprehension, acquisition and production. It is a part of the emerging field of study called "cognitive science" that comprises linguistics, psychology, neuro-science, anthropology, and computer science. The neurology of language is the current interest of psycholinguists, especially those who are studying sex differences, aphasia (language disorder caused by some damage in an area of brain), and dysphasia (developmental disorders of language) . Some psycholinguists extend their interests to experiment nonhuman language learning (such as: chimpanzees and gorillas) to discover whether our language as we know is a "uniquely human phenomenon" (Levelt, 2013:4).

As mentioned above, psycholinguistics is part of cognitive science, which is an interdisciplinary adventure that draws the attention of psychologists, linguists, neuroscientists, and philosophers to study the mental processes (Stillings et al., 1995). Problem solving, imagery and memory are the main topics that have been studied by cognitive scientists. Anyone who is interested in any one of these topics should be prepared to cross disciplinary lines, "for the topics do not belong to any one field of study but rather are treated in distinctive and yet complementary ways by various disciplines" (Carroll,2008:4).

4. Psychological Conflict

Hocker and Wilmot (1991:6) define conflict as "expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals". That is to say, a conflict occurs when the decrease of an motivating stimulus includes an increase in another, so that a new adjustment is required.

Bellafiore (2004) argues that conflict causes hostility, resentment, and may be the ending of a relationship. Thus, if conflict is well- handled, it will be productive, leading to mutual respect, closeness and deeper understanding. However, a relationship, regardless whether it is healthy or not, does not depend more on the number of conflicts between participants, rather, on how the conflicts are solved. Sometimes, the person may feel that his /her underlying anger may go out of their control if s/he opens the door to conflict, or they find it difficult to face.

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According to Akinman (1990:24), "conflict   can be internal (intrapersonal) or external (interpersonal). Internal conflict (also called mental conflict or internal conflict) is a conflict between the hearts and minds of the characters in the story". Additionally, Lewin (2013) defines inner conflict as an intern problem of a person thinking that it is a problem which occurs as a result of conflicting motivation occurs inside the character itself. Inner conflict is always linked to human existence and it is described as a struggle between the character and himself. This struggle usually arises inside the mind of a character who is distorted between opposing goals or thoughts. This struggle is fundamental for a character and it must be solved by the character him/herself (Nurgiyantoro, 2010).

Psychological conflict, which is also known as interpersonal conflict, is a condition that we sometimes face in our daily lives and it is caused by the character itself. A psychological conflict usually arises when we make difficult decisions. As human beings, we are obliged to face situations in life, and we have to decide whether the decision is difficult or easy. That occurs because of considerations that lead to the appearance of the inner conflict of the person him/herself which then leads to the appearance of psychological conflict (Damayanti et al. 2016).

5. Kurt Lewin's Theory

Lewin's Theory , which is also called Field Theory, the field of physics and psychic power, is strongly influenced by Gestalt psychology. So, in his study of the human soul, it is not surprising that Lewin's theory highlights the whole rather than parts or the elements (Sarwono, 1998).

For Lewin (2013), humans are individuals in psychological environments with some main interaction patterns. His theory is for "personality structure, dynamics, and development in relation to the psychological environment". His theory is specialized in "inner conflict and ways to overcome it". He argues that inner conflict drives a person in two or more goals or thoughts simultaneously and it is one of the psychological factors that can be managed. However, according to Lewin's theory, inner conflict is divided into three forms: "approach-approach, avoidance-avoidance, and approach-avoidance".

5.1 Approach-approach Conflict

This type of conflict occurs when someone is presented with two desired alternatives, and only one alternative can be chosen (Sarwono,1998). In this conflict, one must select between two equally positive valences. If s/he chooses one of the options, his/her selection will not lead to negative consequences. This is because of the fact that both options are favorable. "The strength of one power will increase if the valence of the target area strengthens and the psychological distance to the region decreases. If this happens, then the

conflict is resolved" (Hasanah,3004). For example, a student who has to choose to study at Harvard or Oxford University and the two choices are good and mutually desirable.

5.2 Avoidance-avoidance Conflict

Sarwono (1998) states that this type of conflict happens when a person wants to be away from or avoid two undesirable alternatives which are called negative goals. That is to say, two powers are hindering the opposite direction. They may be characterized as two bad motivations. As a result, confusion emerges because they move away from a desired motive and they satisfy other negative motives as well. Confronted with this kind of conflict, a person will feel anxious. An example is when a father obliges his lazy son to do his homework immediately and threatens to lock him inside his room all day if he does not do it. In this case, the son will have "avoidance-avoidance conflict" because he faces two wishes that he does not like. First, he is lazy to do his homework and in the same time, he also hates to be locked in the room all day.

5.3 Approach-avoidance Conflict

The third type of conflict occurs when we want to decide to do or not do something when one option of the choices is desirable while the other is negative. In other words, two powers, one encourages and the other obstructs the goal. This kind of conflict develops when two opposite forces are emerging from the same aim at the same time. However, it is the most difficult to resolve. The reason is, "if someone approaches a region that has a positive valence, the negative valence becomes stronger than the positive valence, because the destination area cannot be achieved, then one can experience frustration" (Sarwono, 1998). For example, a boy would want to accept a dinner invitation from his friend, but he is on his diet. If he accepted the offer, he would be obliged to eat with his friends and destroying his diet; but on the other hand, he does not want to depress his friend.

6. *The Girl On The Train*: Background

Based on Paula Hawkins' well-known 2015 novel of the same name, *The Girl On The Train* is a 2016 American mystery psychological thriller film, directed by Tate Taylor and written by Erin Cressida Wilson. The movie centers on a divorced alcoholic woman who becomes involved in a search for a missing person (Pamela & Gregg, 2015).

Three different women's perspectives are used to tell the first-person narrative of the story. **Megan**, **Rachel**, and **Anna**. The narrative opens with Rachel, the primary character who is an alcoholic woman in her mid-thirties. She and her now-ex-husband Tom just separated, and in the midst of crippling battles with infertility, depression, and alcoholism, she also lost her house and her career.

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As the story goes on, the writer switches between Rachel's narration—which takes place throughout the summer of 2013 after Megan Hipwell, the lady who lives at number 15, goes missing—and Megan's own narration. Anna, Tom's new wife's voice also appears occasionally. Beginning in the spring of 2012, Megan's narration describes the turbulent year leading up to her abduction. Megan has marital issues with her controlling yet passionate husband, Scott, throughout this year, and she sees Dr. Kamal Abdic, a therapist, who helps her unravel the threads of her troubled history. Additionally, she has a relationship with Tom Watson, whom she met while watching his daughter Evie.

At the end of the summer of 2012, Megan leaves her work as a child caregiver because she did not like having to take care of a baby every day and she was getting worried that Anna would find out about her romance with Tom. While Megan attempts to sort out her sexual and love impulses for Tom and Scott, she is also plagued by a persistent restlessness brought on by earlier traumas. She confides in Dr. Abdic about her traumatic history at this time, particularly about a connection she had when she was a teenager with Mac, a friend of her late brother Ben, and the child they had (and ultimately lost), Libby. Over time, Megan has love emotions for Dr. Abdic, and when she learns she is pregnant and considers the possibility that the child may be either Scott's or Tom's, she consults him for guidance. She has made enough progress in life, he tells her, to be a decent mother. Abdic's confidence in Megan gives her the confidence to inform Tom about the baby. When he advises her to get an abortion, Megan becomes furious and yells at Tom, threatening to sue him for the cost of the child. Tom grabs a rock and kills Megan with it.

7. Kurt Lewin's Theory in *The Girl on The Train*

This section is devoted to analyze the film *The Girl on the Train*. The film is examined through applying a psychoanalytical approach, namely, **Kurt Lewin's Theory**. The psychoanalytic approach helps to understand the psychological development of characters as well as the author's personality (Kumari, 2016). Then, the results are discussed in details and commentaries and interpretations are offered. As such, the study adopts an **qualitative approach** to read the film in pursuit the types of inner conflict which are given by Kurt Lewin (2013) and detailed as follows:

7.1 Approach-approach Conflict

As it is mentioned in the theoretical part, Approach-Approach conflict occurs when a character is presented with two liked alternatives and s/he has to choose only one. In *The Girl On The Train*, Megan's inner conflict results from various reasons such as: her brother's death, her baby's death as well as her relationship

with her husband, Scott. Before that, depending on the theoretical framework, Megan's first type of conflict happens because of her job:

1. **MEGAN: I got another job.**

   Anna: ...You what?
   MEGAN: I'm really sorry, Anna.
   Anna: I thought you were happy here. I mean, you seemed happy here...

   MEGAN: I am. It's just this isn't what I "do."
   Anna: ...Take care of children...?
   MEGAN: Or laundry. Another gallery head-hunted me.
   Anna: ...That's great.

According to Lewin's theory of conflict, Megan experiences approach- approach conflict when she is faced with two options that are both good for her. Keeping working with Anna, a character in the film with whom Megan is working, or working in another place as a child caregiver or doing laundry when she is offered by "a gallery head" to work with her. However, all alternatives are desirable for Megan, but she must choose only one of them, the thing that creates her an inner conflict.

Another example of this type of conflict, when Megan quits taking care of children, Megan makes up her mind among doing a photography course, setting up a market or selling jewellery or learning how to cook, and all these options are desirable too:

2. **I could do a photography course, or set up a market stall, sell**

   jewellery. I could learn to cook.

7.2 Avoidance-avoidance Conflict

Avoidance-Avoidance conflict occurs when a character tries to avoid two undesirable alternatives which are called negative aims. The main problem with this type of conflict is that avoiding one of the negative goals leads to another. However, this kind of conflict is experienced by Megan when she has difficulty to sleep.

3. **I can't sleep in this heat. Invisible bugs crawl over my skin, I have a rash on my chest, I can't get comfortable. And Scott seems to radiate warmth; lying next to him is like lying next to a fire. I can't get far enough away from him and find myself clinging to the edge of the bed, sheets thrown back. It's intolerable (129).**

In this example, Megan faces two choices which are both equally bad for her. On one hand, she feels that she has disappointed her husband and feels guilty for not satisfying his desire to have a baby. On the other hand, she has sleeping troubles with him to the extent that she feels like there are invisible bugs over her skin. Actually, the reason of her difficulty to sleep, which disturbs her very much, is due to her

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household problems. Megan cannot satisfy her husband's desire who wants to have a baby because of her dilemma with her baby who died due to her carelessness when she accidentally fell asleep. Then, she has realized that her baby was under water when she woke up and she did not know what to do when she found him cold and not breathing. This is in the following example:

4. **It was dark and very cold. I wasn't in the bath any longer. I don't know exactly what happened. I remember waking up, I remember knowing that something was wrong, and then the next thing I know Mac was home. He wascalling for me. I could hear him downstairs, shouting my name, but I couldn'tmove. I was sitting on the floor in the bathroom, she was in my arms. The rainwas hammering down, the beams in the roof creaking. I was so cold. Mac cameup the stairs, still calling out to me. He came to the doorway and turned on thelight. I can feel it now, the light searing my retinas, everything stark and white,horrifying. (165)**

7.3 Approach-avoidance Conflict

Approach-avoidance conflict happens when a person observes the same aim in both positive and negative meanings. It arises because the person is faced with two valences that are positive and negative at the same time. This conflict is experienced by Megan when she wants to tell her husband, Scott, about the reason for not wanting to have a child with him.

5. **He's waiting for me to start, but it's hard, harder than Ithought it was going to be. I've kept this secret for so long – adecade, more than a third of my life. It's not that easy, letting goof it. I just know that I have to start talking. If I don't do it now, Imight never have the courage to say the words out loud, I mightlose them altogether, they might stick in my throat and choke mein my sleep. (166).**

In this example, Megan faces some choices, which at the same time, contain elements that she likes and does not like. The first option is that Megan wants to tell Scott the reason behind not wanting to have a child with him, which is considered as a desirable choice for her. On the other hand, the second alternative, which is seen by Megan as a undesirable, is that Megan knows that her husband is going to be disappointed and angry of her when he realizes that she does not want to have a child with him. The statement above shows the state of not being in harmony in her household. Here, Megan does not dare to say the reason of her problem about getting a child from her husband. Later on, it becomes a very bad thing and brings disagreement   between the two.

In another example of approach- avoidance conflict, Megan gets more conflict in her mind when she wants to live a happy live with her husband, but in the same time she has betrayed him and adds to the burden in the household:

6. **Well, sometimes they do. Sometimes all I need is Scott. If I canjust learn how to hold on to this feeling, this one I'm having now– if I could just discover how to focus on this happiness, enjoy themoment, not wonder about where the next high is coming from –then everything will be all right. (64)**

In the quote above, Megan's approach-avoidance conflict occurs when she wants to get back to her past, to her goal (having a child), and live a happy and comfortable life with her husband, but, at same time, she feels very guilty for betraying him to make relationship with others especially with Dr. Kamal Abdic, her psychiatrist whom she likes very much because of his "tender nature" that eventually makes her very interested to approach him and later, she becomes a woman who begged attention to him. So, when she feels agitated, she prefers meeting Kamal instead of her husband. However, what Megan has done has brought her into a very bad relationship with Scott and she makes a wide distance between her and her husband. That is, the conflict continues and her household is still in a bad state and it is very hard to make a good relationship with her husband again. So, there is no place for Megan to solve her dilemma.

7.4 Conclusion

The study concludes that all the three types of Lewin's inner conflict are experienced by Megan. The dominant kind of these psychological conflicts is Avoidance-avoidance conflict because Megan always faces two options and both of them have been equally bad for her.

These psychological conflicts affect her mental state, especially making her get psychological distress and physical unwellness. She has even quitted her job as a child caregiver to overcome her dilemma. Megan's traumatic experience causes disadvantages to her marriage life, having affair with Rachel's ex-husband and her psychiatrist. It causes her to have conflicts in her mind because her expectations of her life are different from the reality. Further, the loss of her baby obstructs her chance to reach her goal of living a happy life with her husband. The conflict develops in her thoughts as a result of her brother's death leaving her feeling alone during survival in her life. In addition, the memories of Megan's child, her tension over her husband, and her worry over her sense of security as a result of her close closeness to her psychiatrist all contributed to her sleep-inducing reaction.

Furthermore, Megan's conflict creates bad effect not only on her life, but also on other characters. Megan's husband has a tendency to press her for having a baby right away, but she does not

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believe that she is healthy enough to do so. Due to their situation, they are unable to support each other. Finally, because of her romance with Rachel's ex-husband and having affair with her psychiatrist, Megan cannot be a suitable wife for her husband.

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