

CHANGES IN THE LIFE OF THE MAIN CHARACTER AS A PERSON WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME IN KATHRYN ERSKINE'S *MOCKINGBIRD*

Anisa Asri^{a)}, Ni Made Widisanti S^{a*)}, Tetty Yukesti^{a)}

^{a)}Universitas Pakuan, Bogor, Indonesia

^{*)} Email correspondence : wsarkana@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The main topic in this research is changes in the main character as a person with Asperger's syndrome in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird*. The process of this research involves the whole story, intrinsic elements: character and characterization, conflict, and setting. This qualitative research is supported by descriptive analysis method and library research technique that shows the main character as a person with Asperger's syndrome can experience character changes even though the research states that person with this syndrome is quite difficult to progress in terms of social interaction. A person with asperger syndrome has a persistent nature, but gradually the main character is able to pass through all the processes of change in her life.

Keywords: character changes; asperger syndrome; main character.

I. BACKGROUND

Humans are individual beings and social beings that need social interaction with the surrounding environment that normally causes development and change in their lives. Changes experienced by humans occur over time including the amount of experience experienced by them in their lives. Through this life experience, humans recognize and undergo various events in their lives that have an impact on their changes, ranging from physical development to the way they think.

Changes obtained by humans in their lives do not necessarily come just like that. Many efforts were made to realize these changes, but the results did not always lead to success. Success or failure of a result, will greatly affect the self-change experienced by humans. If it does not end well, humans will try to learn the lessons from their mistakes in order to be better in the future. Likewise, with the success achieved, humans will certainly enjoy the changes in themselves and strive to remain consistent with these changes. The meaning of changes itself, according to the *Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language* (kbbi.web.id) are things (conditions) changing; transition; exchange.

This vast world is very possible for humans to experience changes in their lives. Even humans who are very difficult to adapt can experience changes in their lives.

The novel *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine tells the story of a 10-year-old girl with Asperger's Syndrome. The girl's name is Catlin Smith. Catlin, who bears the syndrome was devastated when her brother, Devon, was shot dead. The story also tells how Catlin struggles to "recover", in other words, to adapt herself with the syndrome that she bears, as for children her age, it is not easy to adjust with the syndrome. Lots of efforts she had made to realize the changes and developments in her, ranging from her efforts to build friendships in her school environment to her efforts to see colors other than black and white which is an amazing thing.

At first, Catlin faced difficulties to interact with her environment, but thanks to the encouragement of her father, counseling teacher, and belief, she was able to undergo the process of adjusting herself with the syndrome that she was carrying out through the process of her struggle against the syndrome. Asperger's Syndrome is a medical diagnosis that is in the category of autistic spektrum disorders. Duli, (2015: 7) mentioned that this type of disorder is

characterized by a deficiency of social interaction and difficulty in accepting changes in daily routines. For a person with Asperger's syndrome, language skills are not a problem. However, children who suffer from this type of autism are less sensitive to pain and cannot cope with exposure to loud noise or sudden lights. Children with Asperger's Syndrome have above average intelligence so that they are academically capable and have no problems coping with it. According to Attwood (in Tanriady et al., 2013: 1) the school period or commonly known as Middle Childhood (ages 6 to 12 or 13 years) is an important time to build relationships with the outside environment. Another understanding of Asperger syndrome is the developmental disorders which is a group of pervasive developmental disorders that have a disruption in the development phase, especially in limited social interactions and behavior and lack of curiosity towards the surrounding environment. Based on the initial survey, it was found that children with asperger's disorder had a deficit of social skills, especially in terms of communication with the surrounding environment. Children with asperger's disorder tend to communicate without considering the context and social rules that exist in the environment. The social skills deficit experienced by children with asperger's disorder is related to pragmatic communication skills (Attwood in Tanriady et al., 2013: 1). Social skills include the ability to communicate, build relationships with others, listen to the opinions of others, give or hear criticism, or act according to applicable norms (Tanriady et al., 2013: 1).

Based on the above explanation, it can be said that Asperger is considered a mild form of autism. In this case, persons with asperger do not experience difficulties in learning, speaking, or processing information. They actually show intelligence above the average, quickly mastering new languages and vocabulary, and are able to memorize various things in detail. A person with Asperger's syndrome can generally function well and do daily activities, although it requires certain adjustments. People with Asperger's Syndrome usually have characteristics including, among others, difficulties in communication. Although people with this syndrome are skilled with language skills, they will usually

interpret everything literally or in real meaning. They are also very difficult in interpreting and expressing things that are abstract or that have double meanings. They will interrupt the conversation if the interlocutor uses words or sentences that are circular or wordy, even they will speak straightforwardly and very honestly. In addition, people with Asperger's Syndrome experience problems in social interactions. They often feel different from others and have difficulty understanding or being understood in society and they tend to withdraw from relationships. Because of this, people with Asperger's Syndrome are a little difficult to build stable relationships. As stated by Kasran (2003: 25), that one distinct characteristic which is commonly seen in them is their tendency to bend their backs back away from their caregivers or care for them to avoid physical contact. *Mockingbird* is a novel written by Kathryn Erskine that was published in 2011 by Puffin Books. Kathryn Erskine was born in the Netherlands. Since childhood she lived in different places, in various countries, ranging from countries in Europe, Africa, Canada to America, where she lives now. Before wrestling with the world of writing, she worked as a lawyer in America and eventually became a writer like she has always wanted. Kathryn got all the inspiration from the people around her and also from her personal experience including from her childhood who attended eight different schools because she moved around a lot. Kathryn also wrote many novels including *Quaking* (2007), *Seeing Red* (2013), *The Badger Knight* (2014) and many more. *Mockingbird* as one of her very famous works also has a story that is very interesting to readers. In addition to the plot of the story with the case of the main character as a person with Asperger's Syndrome, this story is filled with positive morals, so this novel is also very good for children to read. Erskine's *Mockingbird* also received many awards, including the *National Book Award Winner* (2010), *Junior Library Guild Selection* (2010), *Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award* (2012). Therefore, this novel is very interesting to be discussed, especially matters relating to the main character in the story. Looking at the life changes experienced by the main character, *Mockingbird* shows that the main character, as a person with Asperger's Syndrome, also has her own

principles and perspectives. In fact she always learns everything she encounters that causes changes in her life. This novel is full of messages that humans with autism spectrum are also able to make choices to live their lives and whatever they want to do on the basis of their own thoughts. Likewise with their enthusiasm, they have an extraordinary passion to realize their desires.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a qualitative research that will be analyzed by using descriptive analysis method. The technique used in this research is library research technique by observing the corpus, which is the novel *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine and supporting theories from theory books, scientific journals, and articles that support the discussion of this research.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Caitlin Smith is a 10-year-old girl with Asperger syndrome. During her life, Caitlin only saw the extent of right and wrong. She felt unable to accept things such as making jokes, and therefore, everything is very confusing for her. She also had difficulties in interacting with people which makes it hard for them to understand her, especially peers. Mrs. Brook, who is her counseling teacher, understood her more than others, although one step at a time. She helps her little by little to open up her mind and heart to accept the outside world. Mrs. Brook said that being friends with fellow humans is good, because humans can share happiness and sadness with one another, but Caitlin somehow still denied it, for she has difficulties digesting such understanding. When Caitlin read about the definition of the word "Closure", she looked up for the meaning of the word, but apparently not many people know exactly what the meaning of the word is. Even Mrs. Brook also can not explain it well according to her.

Caitlin is a child who never gives up easily despite her difficulties. Therefore, she was still determined and persistent to find out the meaning behind the word until she finally found it out and understood what the word "Closure" actually means. She realized that this was what everyone needed, she found the meaning of the word through experiences

and life lessons that she underwent as a person with Asperger's syndrome. In her search for "Closure", she thought that it was very unfortunate if people had to miss out the beauty of this world, even the creation of the color gray was due to the mixture of black and white colors. Things like that gave Caitlin the courage to live her life as a child with Asperger's syndrome.

Based on its physiological dimensions, the main character in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* is a ten-year-old girl with Asperger's syndrome named Caitlin Ann Smith. It can be stated that Caitlin is the main character because in almost all of the events in the story, her intensity of involvement is dominant, including the conflicts she experience with her surroundings.

Caitlin's characteristics in its social dimension is described as a person who was born from a family that can be said to be a simple kind of family. However, on the other hand, her father was very confused when he had to think about schooling Caitlin because of the psychological state of the child who was quite difficult to be in a regular school environment. For her father, to send Caitlin to a private school was difficult because her father was financially unable. Caitlin, as the main character, is also displayed in a psychological dimension related to the events experienced by the character. The main character can be said to have a lot of psychological difficulties because the main character is a person with Asperger's syndrome, making it difficult for the main character to interact socially. But this only took place before there was a process of change in her. The main character does not want to be in a crowded place. When her house was crowded with visiting relatives, the main character tried to avoid her father's call to participate in welcoming the guests by hiding in her room and address herself with drawing. It was clear that before there was a change in the main character as a person with Asperger's Syndrome, there was an inconvenience feeling that the character felt to be in a crowded situation even though it was in a place that she considered safe. In addition, an irony is found when the main character wants the existence of her brother but turned out to be something impossible because her brother has died. This causes the main character to suffer a great deal of sadness.

Indirectly, the main character is also described as unable to make eye contact while talking or interacting with others even though she has often received encouragement to do that from her counseling teacher. But she believes that the eyes look just the same as each other. She prefers and feels comfortable seeing the mouth or lips of her interlocutors during their social interactions, because for her, the mouth or lips perform movements when speaking and that makes it easy for her to absorb information from the interlocutors. This situation triggers a conflict that is felt between the main character and her environment. She felt disturbed by it only because she was encouraged to follow what the environment considers an ordinary thing. In addition to avoiding and not being able to make eye contact, the main character as a person with Asperger's Syndrome also has difficulties in making physical contact

In the story, the main character also shows an uncomfortable attitude when making physical contact with others. One example is when the main character was given a candy but accidentally touches the hand of his interlocutor. It can be seen from this situation that the main character does not want to linger physical contact. Although the main character still makes physical contact, she will end the activity by quickly accepting the goods from others using her hands. Nonetheless, this has become one of the beginning of the process of changes in the life of the main character which is quite difficult because she felt unable to make eye contact with the interlocutor, moreover if she had to make physical contact when interacting.

The main character presents an attitude of how difficult it is for her to understand the social context in communicating with the speaker. Not infrequently the main character acts less understanding towards the meaning or message when engaging in a conversation with the interlocutor. Not to mention the difficulties in interpreting the figure of speech in the conversation that she responds by paying attention to the shoes of other people around him which is actually just an instruction using the word figuratively. As stated earlier, Asperger's Disorder individuals find it very difficult to use social context as a basis for understanding messages when people talk. They find

it difficult to understand that different intonations and stresses can change meaning or message. Because of this, the main character was avoided by children her age who do not understand the problems around the autism spectrum. For them, the main character is seen as very rigid, not being able to understand the meaning very well when having a conversation.

The main character goes through the day with assignments given by Mrs. Brook, her counseling teacher at school. Some of the assignments were to understand how to build friendship at school, how to feel empathy, in terms of being able to understand the feelings of others, which of course are not an easy for a girl with asperger's syndrome. Despite her many refusals to receive these encouragements, the main character still carries out what was being instructed by her counseling teacher, who always helped her to face the difficulties she encountered in her life. The main character's efforts to process changes in her life was considered more than enough to cause her difficulties in holding back her discomfort. Even so, a person with Asperger's Syndrome like the main character is an intelligent individual that can be seen through how she was able to overcome the problem by consistently continuing to do the instructions from her teacher.

As the process of change takes place, the main character increasingly shows changes in herself, without realizing it, she manages to do all the instructions from her counseling teacher. Such progress is seen when the main character empathizes with her father who is still unable to withstand sadness over the death of Devon. Mrs. Brook assumed that the main character had given her empathy to her father, who was grieving over Devon's passing. The main character did not refute all the advice from her counseling teacher because she wants to try to make her father happy and forget about the grief.

The process by which the main character goes into fruition, although not infrequently she does it in her own way that many are difficult to accept her doings. Her empathy was also channeled in her school environment when she found her classmates crying because they heard the sound of police sirens which caused trauma. She brought Rachel to the table and chair she had provided facing the classroom wall. The main character does that on the basis of her empathy and does it the same way as what she does when she is

sad. But in this context, the main character is still unable to position her empathy correctly. She does not understand that what she feels comfortable according to her, does not necessarily mean that other people will also agree with her.

The main character increasingly shows changes in attitude in responding to the words of others. Although it still looks indifferent, but the main character has managed to bring herself to open up more. In addition, the main character is also trying to build friendships and dare to do social interaction with school friends. The main character is still looking for friends even though her first attempt was rejected. This shows again that the main character is a girl with Asperger's Syndrome who does not easily give up on the things she fights for. It is also said that people with Asperger's syndrome are persevering individuals and will continue to try until they get what they want.

Although the main character has dared to try to build friendships and have a fairly good communication with the environment, she still has difficulty in agreeing that using different colors when coloring is something extraordinary. The main character does not like colors other than black and white and also does not like the colors that can be blended into one, creating other colors. For her, black and white are consistent colors and cannot be changed into a new color. At the end of the story, it is depicted that the state of the main character, although with Asperger's Syndrome, is very capable of living her days by carrying out social interactions even with people she knows. All the efforts of the main character are very fruitful and she passed it in her own way.

She amazed everyone around her that they were able to accept the existence of the main character with the syndrome she was carrying. The changes that the main character made after passing through all her difficulties in learning to interact with the surrounding environment resulted in her ability to make friends by working on group assignments with her friends. It has never been easy for children with Asperger's syndrome to start social interaction, but the main character being reviewed in this study is presented differently, one of which is having the courage to make decisions. In the beginning of the story, the main character is described as a child who was unable

to do a group work or to work in a group. But in this story, the main character confidently follow the rules instructed by her teacher to try work in a group. Eventually she was able to interact in a study group and build her sense of empathy. Her willingness to help others comes originally from within the main character are very clearly visible.

The main character shows changes in almost every aspect in her life that she previously felt uncomfortable with. Not only was she able to receive physical contact with her interlocutors, the main character was also described as being able to use color as she colored the pictures she made. She began to realize how beautiful colors are even if they fuse become one and become another color. Likewise with black and white, which she considered to be consistent colors, can also be combined into one resulting into the color gray. Realizing this made her very happy.

Everything that Caitlin did yielded with extraordinary results. Even though she is a girl with Asperger's syndrome, she finally manage to defeat her ego to stay in her world. Caitlin was able to change her world in her own way through the encouragement and support of her father, her counseling teacher, her brother Devon whom had died and her friends. She also manages to complete her brother's projects that have not been completed. Her father whom she considered to be difficult to work with was finally able to be motivated and convinced to take part in the completion of Devon's project. She currently is very proud of her father. In spite of having Asperger's syndrome, she has successfully overcome all obstacles in her own way.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, Caitlin is the main character in the story. A 10 year old girl with asperger's syndrome. As explained before, a person with Asperger's Syndrome is a person who has difficulty interacting socially. Even so, people with Asperger's syndrome are very proficient in language, but are still unable to interpret or digest words with double meanings as how it is illustrated by the main character in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird*. This condition makes it difficult for the main character to

interact, not to mention the deep sorrow she had to bare because of the death of her brother which makes it even more difficult for her to live her days.

The main character underwent several process of changes in her life to adapt to the surrounding environment. At first, she was uncomfortable being in public places even when she was at school. Therefore, she chose to be alone and withdraw herself from taking part in a study group as instructed by her teacher. She also has difficulty in empathizing with her environment, making her look indifferent from typical people. In addition, the main character, as a person with Asperger's Syndrome also avoids physical contact and feels uncomfortable when looking into the eyes of the speaker. Not only that, she also struggles to understand the variety of colors when it comes to coloring in every picture she draws. She only uses the color black and white, for these are the two colors that she perceive as consistent colors.

Nevertheless, despite all her difficulties, the main character received encouragement from her counseling teacher, Mrs. Brook, who taught her how to interact with the surrounding environment. Initially she always refused to do the things requested by Mrs. Brook, but Caitlin is a child who has perseverance and an unyielding soul. She saw that interacting was a good thing and there she found something that made her become more optimistic about life. She managed to carry out all the processes of change in her own way as she was also able to contribute in terms of drawing and taking part in a study group so that the surrounding environment would accept her and her unique nature.

A person with Asperger's Syndrome has a special interest in something, which in this context, the main character considers the process of change itself as a matter of special interest that she considers interesting. This drove her to be persistent with the process of changing herself, namely to interact socially with the surrounding environment and to carry out verbal and non-verbal communication.

Thus it can be concluded that based on the review on the main character, a person with Asperger's Syndrome can change. Although it was difficult at first, but eventually with the right encouragement and motivation, it is possible for a person with Asperger's syndrome to build interactions

with the surrounding environment in their own way. In other words, they can be successful in every aspect of their life despite all their difficulties.

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