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# THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT FACED BY WOMEN IN KATE ELIZABETH RUSSELL'S "MY DARK VANESSA": A STUDY OF THE MAIN CHARACTER

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**Article History:** Accepted: January 27, 2024; Revised: March 25, 2024; Approved: April 21, 2024

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## ABSTRACT

This research was designed to show the sexual harassment experienced by the main female character in the novel *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell. Her name is Vanessa, a 15-year-old minor student who was sexually abused by her English teacher, Strane. The descriptive analysis method describes the problems that occur with the main female character. The research technique employed is library research. The study encompasses both intrinsic elements, such as plot, characters, setting, irony, and conflict, as well as extrinsic elements such as child sexual abuse, gender concepts from a cultural perspective, the concept of love, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and power relations, as per Michel Foucault's theories. The research results prove that sexual harassment occurs because of the patriarchal culture and the power relations that dominate. Sexual harassment can have several causes, including psychological conditions, different concepts of love, and the setting. It often leads to feelings of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the victim, which requires psychotherapy for treatment. Additionally, the victim may need to work on self-acceptance as a part of her healing process from the trauma she has experienced.

**Keywords:** *Sexual Harassment; Sexual Assault; Woman; Patriarchy*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal culture has long been ingrained, and it is difficult to change its behavior, especially for men who were once perceived as superior to women and possessing greater authority (Farid, 2019). This phenomenon is often observed in societies with gender inequality. As long as gender inequality does not result in injustice, it is not an issue. Women's positions put them at risk for gender inequality, leading to sexual harassment problems. Hanifa et al., (2022) stated that an individual's attraction to the opposite sex drives their sexual conduct.

Sexuality is a basic human need that should be decided upon by both parties involved. It is important to recognize that when discussing women's rights, the issue of bodily autonomy cannot be overlooked. Sadly, women are often denied full ownership of their bodies. (Fujiati,

2016). Pornography has been linked to an increase in sexual harassment and rape instances in society, with women being the primary victims of these sexual crimes (Surahman, 2018).

A woman who experiences gender inequality is often objectified by men for their pleasure. "Woman objectification is a theory in which a woman is seen as an object" (Artana, 2018). This implies that the objectification of women is related to sexual harassment which occurs because of the desire to objectify women.

Sexual harassment often happens unconsciously. This is because a variety of harassment behaviors have been categorized as commonplace by society. Some people may be reluctant to speak up and choose to keep quiet despite the possibility that they have been the victims of sexual harassment (Kusumardani, 2020). Minors are frequently among the unintentional victims of sexual harassment. Some children who have experienced

sexual abuse can overcome their ordeal and go on to lead healthy, socially conscious, and productive lives as adults (Yuliatin, 2008).

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative research that will be analyzed by using descriptive analysis methods to describe the problems that occur with the main female character. The research technique used is the library research technique by observing and comprehensively reading the corpus, which is the novel *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell. The research explores the connections between intrinsic elements such as plot, characters, setting, irony, and conflict, and extrinsic elements such as child sexual abuse, gender concepts from a cultural perspective, the concept of love, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and power relations as per Michel Foucault's theories.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis will concentrate on Vanessa, the main female character in Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa*, who becomes a victim of sexual harassment by her English teacher, Strane. The analysis aims to explain and describe some of the intrinsic and extrinsic elements found in the book, which are based on observation and a thorough reading of the novel. These elements will be connected to analyze the sexual harassment endured by the female main character in the story.

Two individuals who play an essential role can be found in the novel. Vanessa Wye and Jacob Strane are the two figures. Each has unique traits and personalities. Although both characters are significant, this essay only examines Vanessa due to her dominating role and its limitations on addressing sexual harassment.

Physiologically, Vanessa is described as having a good dressing style with red hair which looks like the color of maple leaves. Because of Vanessa's attractiveness and beauty, Strane is drawn to her. Vanessa is seen as a woman who attracts men sexually. Therefore, Strane wants to objectify Vanessa to satisfy his sexual desire.

Apart from physiological characteristics, there are several psychological characteristics possessed by Vanessa in this story. As a child, Vanessa is described as an introvert who avoids socializing and has fewer friends than the majority of her peers. Given that Vanessa is portrayed as a young child who lives away from the bustle of the city, it is understandable that she has such strong antisocial impulses. In the somewhat remote area where Vanessa and her parents live, surrounded by trees, there are hardly any residential neighborhoods. This environment has a significant impact on the main character's personality. Vanessa experiences loneliness due to her isolated home and lack of friends and neighbors, causing her to become introverted and dislike large crowds of people.

Strane then took advantage of Vanessa's character because he thought Vanessa was unique among the other students. Strane believed he had a chance to approach Vanessa and began harassing her by flirting with her and giving her compliments. The sexual harassment she endured was without realizing it because she had entered Strane's manipulative realm.

According to June Hunt's theory of child sexual abuse, one form of sexual harassment against children is seduction. In this case, Hunt believes that the harasser uses some emotional techniques. Therefore, saying words of praise and flattery might result in sexual harassment. Giving preferential treatment, and being a

caring “friend” with the same hobbies and the same interests is the way these seductions can build trust with hidden motives.

Teasing and seduction are types of sexual harassment that are quite prominent in this story. According to Beauvoir, a woman’s highest happiness when falling in love is to be recognized as part of that man. A woman feels fully justified in her love for a man as long as she receives his love and attention. This is the reason why Vanessa easily accepts different treatment from Strane and feels that she is special compared to other students.

Strane frequently gives Vanessa books such as novels and poetry with sexual themes to help her perspective. This aligns with Michel Foucault’s theory of power relations, in which power does not come by force but by knowledge. That instance, novels or poems containing sexual themes supply knowledge rather than force. Vanessa is thus impacted by this knowledge.

In this story, there is also an ironic situation that occurs when Strane shows one of the stanzas in the poem entitled *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath. The word “overstep” appears in one of the poem’s stanzas and Strane expresses his desire to go farther and beyond. While it is expected of the reader that a teacher and student will maintain boundaries in their relationship and not cross predefined limits, Strane truly wants to go in the other direction.

Strane tries to harass Vanessa in ways that are so subtle that Vanessa does not even notice. This method is illustrated by frequent compliments and even treatment that stimulates Vanessa to have intimate relations. According to Hunt, regular and gradual physical contact can encourage victims of sexual harassment, making

victims of sexual harassment unaware and insensitive to increasingly inappropriate touches.

In other ways, there are sociological aspects that Vanessa has. Besides she does not have social skills in the classroom, Vanessa is a reclusive individual at home. She described being reluctant to discuss the problems or thoughts she is going through because she is not very close to her parents, especially her mother.

The conflict began when she started feeling pressured to have sex. In this case, Strane is more powerful in sexual concerns, it is evident that men and women play different roles in this situation because she is weak and defenseless. She can only accept any treatment from a man.

Vanessa and Strane have different perspectives on what love means. Women devote themselves entirely to the men they love, but men show their devotion by sexual acts. Simone de Beauvoir states that both genders have different perspectives of love. This finally results in varying attitudes on how to understand the intended meaning.

When talking about patriarchal ideologies, men are seen as having a domineering character that frequently looks down on women and feels free to do anything. Like what happened with Vanessa, Strane took measures to silence her. This exemplifies the fallout from doing whatever one pleases and devaluing women. Vanessa is prohibited from disclosing the sexual harassment she endures at the hands of Strane due to various threats or statements made by Strane. Strane does not want this sexual harassment lawsuit to ruin and undermine the solid reputation he has earned thus far. Thus, it is evident from this instance that victims of sexual harassment in a school may be silenced as a result of power relations.

Furthermore, Vanessa seemed to be eliminated by Strane after all the abuse she had to endure from him, as evidenced by his attempts to have her transferred to a different school and expelled from Browick School. This describes suppression in which Strane assumes a more dominant role. An act of intimidation committed by a more powerful against a less powerful one.

This problem has a very negative impact on Vanessa's psychological aspect. She felt the effects of sexual harassment she has faced, such as getting easily overwhelmed, having hallucinations, and easily panicking. These symptoms are associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is caused by sexual harassment experience.

In the cases of sexual harassment, the victims must make attempts, especially if they are minors. Vanessa attempted to see a psychiatrist as a result of getting help for the horrific emotions she was going through. She adds, nonetheless, that this will only diminish the traumatizing experience, not entirely eradicate it. The only way she can do this is through self-acceptance, making peace with her past, and going with her life.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, this study identifies factors contributing to the victimization of women by sexual predators. Psychological aspects such as introversion and antisocial, as well as men's authoritarian behavior, are the reasons why women are often used as objects of sexual crimes. Other factors such as the different concepts of love, give rise to differences in the attitudes of both genders.

Cases of sexual harassment against women have a negative impact and create feelings of trauma for the victims. That is why it is very important for someone

who has been sexually abused to have further treatment with experts. Though treatment cannot remove the trauma completely, it can help reduce the feeling of trauma experienced by the victims of sexual crimes.

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