

THE HARASSMENT AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN SOLOMON NORTHUP'S "12 YEARS A SLAVE" MEMOIR

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas tentang pelecehan yang dialami oleh Solomon Northup dan mekanisme pertahanan yang digambarkan dalam memoar 12 Years a Slave. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dan studi pustaka dengan teks memoar sebagai sumber datanya. Teori pelecehan, teori pengembangan pribadi, dan teori mekanisme pertahanan digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Setelah menganalisis data, ditemukan berbagai bentuk pelecehan yang dialami oleh Northup seperti pelecehan verbal, pelecehan fisik, dan pelecehan ras. Pelecehan juga berdampak dan mengubah karakter dan kepribadian Northup dari orang yang optimis menjadi orang yang cemas dan putus asa. Namun, Northup juga mengembangkan berbagai jenis mekanisme pertahanan untuk mengatasi kecemasannya seperti Denial, Intellectualization, Regression, Projection, Rationalization, Sublimation, Displacement dan Repression. Mekanisme pertahanan itu memungkinkan Northup bertahan di tengah kesulitan perbudakan sampai akhirnya dia mendapatkan kembali kebebasannya.

Kata Kunci: Pelecehan, Pengembangan Pribadi, Mekanisme Pertahanan, Memoir

Abstract

This research discussed about the harassment suffered by Solomon Northup and the defense mechanisms depicted in the 12 Years a Slave memoir. This research used qualitative method and library research with the memoir text as the source of data. The harassment theory, personal development theory, and defense mechanism theory were used to analysed the data. After analysing the data, it can be found that there are various forms of harassment suffered by Northup such as verbal harassment, physical abuse and racial harassment. The harassment also impacted and changed Northup's character and personality from being an optimist person into an anxious and hopeless person. However, Northup also developed various types of defense mechanism to cope with his anxiety such as Denial, Intellectualization, Regression, Projection, Rationalization, Sublimation, Displacement and Repression. Those defense mechanisms enabled Northup to survive in amidst the hardship of slavery until he finally regained his freedom.

Keywords : Harassment, Personal Development, Defense Mechanism, Memoir

1. BACKGROUND

In life, human beings always experience various things which help to develop their character and personality. According to Hurlock (1974), the personality of an individual is influenced by many aspects. There are two main aspects which influence individual's personality development. The first aspect is the individual's experiences with the family inside the home, and the second aspect is the experiences with the society or outside the home may also affect the individual's social attitude and behaviour. (1974:234)

There are many outside experiences which influence individual's personality. One of the experiences is harassment. Harassment is an unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age and disability or genetic information. (Shetty, 2017) The harassment can occur anywhere in societies such as in workplace. According to research from Einarsen (2000), many workers felt humiliated, offended and mistreated by their co-workers and supervisors during work hours.

According to Munoz (2015), workplace harassment has been repeatedly linked to several negative consequences for individuals. There is also wide empirical evidence of the negative effects of exposure to harassment behaviours such as changes in personality. Specifically, among all job-related stressors considered in the study, harassment was the strongest significant predictor of anxiety and depression. (Munoz, 2015) Anxiety is a psychological situation or condition of uneasiness and worry which caused by internal or external conflict. When a person experiences anxiety caused by conflicts such as harassment, then the conscious will deploy defense mechanism to reduce the anxiety. (Fiqih, 2015)

One example of workplace harassment is the harassment against African-American in America which has been occurred since the times of slavery. The slavery on America centered around the Africans who were bought, sold and used as workers on American soil and

it became so popular in the daily routines of the Americans. Therefore, the slavery is inseparable in the history of America because it produced various topics of discussion, for example is the life of slaves. (Vanny, 2003)

After the slavery abolishment, many former black slaves wrote narratives in the form of memoirs which tell the story of their experiences as slaves. These slave memoirs which called as "Slave Narratives" became an essential part of the anti-slavery movement. Some of these narratives bore a "frame" or preface attesting to their authenticity and to the sufferings described within. (Andrews, 2018) The slave narratives tell about the story of the authors themselves when they worked as slaves including their experiences with harassment and how they endured, struggled and survived against it.

One of the slave narratives which depict the struggle against harassment is *12 Years a Slave*. It is a slave narrative written by former slave Solomon Northup and published by Derby & Miller in 1853. Solomon Northup was an American farmer, labourer and musician who was born as a free man in July 1808. In 1841, he was approached and abducted by two white men who offered him to join their circus act as a fiddler and sold into slavery. He spent the ensuing 12 years as a slave named Platt Hamilton in the Bayou Boeuf plantation region of Central Louisiana's Red River valley. After 12 years in slavery, Northup managed to regain his freedom on 1853 with the help of his family who finally found him. After won his freedom, Northup returned as a free man and wrote a memoir telling his 12 years experiences as a slave. (Cole, 2013)

Therefore, the analysis of this research is about the forms of harassment suffered by Solomon Northup as the main character of the *12 Years a Slave* memoir. Besides harassment, it also analysed about how Northup's personality changed and developed throughout the memoir and how he coped against the anxiety caused by harassment in the memoir.

The Harassment Definition and Forms

Bjorkqvist (1994) said that harassment is repeated activities with the aim of bringing mental or physical pain and directed to towards one or more individual who are not able to defend themselves. Kreps (1993) also said that the imbalance in power between the harasser and the victim obviously makes the victim has difficulties to defend themselves from the harasser. (Einarsen, 2000, p.382) In short, harassment occurs when one or more individuals are exposed to negative acts conducted by other individuals which have more power than the victims. According to Brodsky (1976) and Yahnke (2018), there are many forms of harassment, but the most common ones are discriminatory harassment, physical abuse, sexual harassment, scapegoating and verbal harassment.

- **Discriminatory Harassment:** Act of harassment with intention to humiliates or insults the victim's protected characteristics such as race, religion, ethnic, gender and sexual orientation.
- **Physical Abuse:** Act of harassment which characterized by overt physical violence or assault such as hitting, shoving and kicking.
- **Sexual Harassment:** Unwelcomed sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of sexual nature.
- **Scapegoating:** Move blame and responsibility away from self and towards a target person or group so that the victim feels wrongly persecuted and receives misplaced blame and criticism.
- **Verbal Harassment:** Acts of yelling, cursing or insulting with harsh and inappropriate language, and also threats to cause physical harm or inappropriate actions towards the victim.

Personal Development Theory

Hurlock (1974) stated that human life consists of two aspects, which are individual

and social aspect. For the individual aspect, it is concern with physical changes and human personality development. Human personality development itself is influenced by two factors which are experiences from the family and the experiences from the society and environment. (p.234) In society and environment factor, Hurlock said that people outside family and the home may have a role to affect and shape individual's personality. Hurlock also stated that there are two ways environment can influence individual's personality which are by giving models and learning opportunities. In giving models, the environment will provide a certain model for the individual to imitate and making the model become prestigious that the individual will want to imitate it. In learning opportunities, the individual can take initiatives or instructed and motivated by someone else to continue his practice until he has achieved an end result valuable for him.

Defense Mechanism Theory

Freud (1894) noted that human mind has the capacity to keep certain painful feelings hidden from consciousness and developed his tripartite of personality consisting of Id, Ego and Superego. The concept of Defense Mechanism was considered to be one of the Ego functions. Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna said that defense mechanism serve the purpose of reducing anxiety produced from psychic conflict, including external threats to the self. The operation of defence mechanisms is mostly described as unconscious blocking, transformations or distortions of unacceptable impulses and their transformation into acceptable forms. There are ten mechanisms of defense described by Anna Freud. They are denial, displacement, intellectualization, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, regression, repression, sublimation and suppression. (Longhofer, 2015, p.53)

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research used qualitative method with library research to support the obtained data.

The primary source data for this research is come from the memoir entitled *12 Years a Slave*. From the memoir, the narration and dialogue of the main character that leads to the statement of the problem were observed and discussed. The secondary sources for this research were the previous studies regarding harassment, personal development and defense mechanisms.

There were some steps to collect and analysed the data from the memoir. First step was read the whole content of the memoir several times to get a deep understanding. After that, classified and marked the parts and dialogues of the story that related to the statement of the problems. Further was identified the forms of harassment suffered by Northup and determined the category of harassment. After that, the changes and developments in Northup's character and personality were analysed by comparing Northup's personality before and after suffered harassment. Lastly, the part of the narration which contain an act of defense was analysed to determine the types of defense mechanism he used. The part of narrations which contain the data related to the research question were also included to strengthened analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. The Harassment Forms

As mentioned in harassment concept that there are behaviours or acts that categorized as harassment. In the memoir, Northup frequently suffered harassment from his white masters when he was worked as a slave. The harassment suffered by Solomon Northup found in the *12 Years a Slave* memoir are mostly in the form of verbal harassment, physical abuses and also racial harassment. First, the verbal harassment suffered by Northup were in the forms of verbal insults and curses. In the memoir, Northup always received

harsh words and insulted by his white masters despite the mistake he did not do. Some examples of the verbal insults received by Northup in the memoir can be proven by the following narration:

Finding he could not quiet me, he flew into a towering passion. With blasphemous oaths, he called me a black liar, a runaway from Georgia, and every other profane and vulgar epithet that the most indecent fancy could conceive. (p.43-44)

Besides verbal insults, Northup also received some verbal threats of assault. The threats directed to Northup were intended as a warning for him to not do anything reckless such as resistance or speak anything related to his condition. If he dared to ignore it, then he would either be punished or assaulted. The proof is the narration below:

Thereupon, Burch desisted, saying, with an admonitory shake of his fist in my face, and hissing the words through his firm-set teeth, that if ever I dared to utter again that I was entitled to my freedom, that I had been kidnapped, or any thing whatever of the kind, the castigation I had just received was nothing in comparison with what would follow. He swore that he would either conquer or kill me. (p.45-46)

The second form of harassment suffered by Northup in the memoir is physical abuse. In the memoir, there were many physical abuses suffered by Northup. Some abuses were very brutal and almost resulted in his death. The physical abuse suffered by Northup was in the form of physical assault such as whipping, beating and attempted murder. The text below is the example of physical abuse suffered by Northup in the form of brutal whipping by James Burch:

With the paddle, Burch commenced beating me. Blow after blow was

*)Penulis Korespondensi

inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before. (p.44-45)

The third form of harassment suffered by Northup in the memoir is racial harassment. The racial harassment in the memoir was in the form of racial calling “*nigger*” which is a crude term for African-Americans, but it was a common calling for the black slaves in times of slavery. In the memoir, Northup was frequently called *nigger* by his white masters and usually followed with some insults. The dialogue below is the example of racial calling received by Northup:

“You’re the nigger,” he said to me on my arrival – “you’re the nigger that flogged your master, eh? You’re the nigger that kicks, and holds carpenter Tibbeats by the legs, and wallops him, are ye? I’d like to see you hold me by the leg – I should. You’re a ‘portant character – you’re a great nigger – very remarkable nigger, ain’t ye? *I’d* lash you – *I’d* take the tantrums out of ye. Jest take hold of my leg, if you please. None of your pranks here, my boy, remember *that*. Now go to work, you *kickin’* rascal,” (p.127)

From all explanations and proofs above, it is found that the harassment suffered by Solomon Northup were caused by his masters’ unpleasantness towards him, even though he did not make any mistake or just expressed his opinion. The harassment also could be interpreted as an act of superiority of a master towards his slave. Therefore, they had a power and authority to controlled and did as they please towards their slave, such as punishing and harassing them. Because of it, Northup was greatly suffered, both physically and psychologically for being a target of harassment

frequently and it also changed Northup’s personality.

2. Solomon Northup’s Personal Development

As stated by Hurlock (1974), human personality development can be influenced by experiences with the family in home and the environment or society outside home. In the memoir, before kidnapped into slavery, Solomon Northup was an optimist yet humble person. This was caused by the influences of his family members such as his father and wife. When Northup was young, his father always taught him morality and to become humble. After married with his wife and had children, Northup began to develop self-reliance and decided to use his own strength and effort to support his own family. His optimism also encouraged him to enter the industrial work despite the hardship he would face because of his African-American identity. This could be proven by the following texts:

Deprived of the advice and assistance of my father, with a wife dependent upon me for support, I resolved to enter upon a life of industry; and notwithstanding the obstacle of color, and the consciousness of my lowly state, indulged in pleasant dreams of a good time coming, when the possession of some humble habitation, with a few surrounding acres, should reward my labors, and bring me the means of happiness and comfort. (p.21-22)

Later on, as Northup and his family moved to Saratoga, he frequently with some of the black slaves and had a conversation with them about slavery. From their conversation, Northup was touched and influenced by the slaves’ story about their troubled life and their desire to be free. He became to develop empathy with them. Besides, because of his father’s teaching since young, he also had a

strong sense of morality. He disapproved the system of slavery and could not comprehend the morality in it. This was proven by the following text:

I was too ignorant, perhaps too independent, to conceive how anyone could be content to live in the abject condition of a slave. I could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery. (p.26)

However, Northup was also a person who easily believed in other people. This could be found in the memoir where Northup was met by two white people, Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton who offered him to work as a violinist for them. With a tempting offer, Brown and Hamilton managed to persuade Northup into joining them. In their journey, Brown and Hamilton treated Northup well until he fully trusted them. However, Northup did not realize that it was all just an act by them to kidnap him. At one night after they drink together, Northup suddenly experienced headache and became unconscious. When he awoke, he found himself already chained and imprisoned and there was no one, including Brown and Hamilton could be found.

After kidnapped and subjected into slavery, Northup began to underwent changes in his personality. The factors which influenced Northup personality changes and development are his experiences in his life as a slave, such as the slavery environment and from the bad treatment and harassment from his white masters. Started from his experience with James H. Burch and Ebenezer Radburn who were two white people Northup first met when he was detained in the slave pen.

Although at first, Northup was confident that his imprisonment was just misunderstanding and asked Burch for his release. However, Burch did not grant his demand and brutally assaulted Northup instead. This caused Northup to lost his

confidence and he also began to develop anxiety. Radburn also advised him to not frequently asked for his freedom so he would not receive punishment.

This could be proven by the following texts:

In rather a patronizing and confidential manner, he gave it to me as his advice, that less I said on that subject the better it would be for me. (p.46)

Realizing his powerless condition and the consequences if he acted recklessly, Northup was forced to change his personality and attitude to adapt in his new life if he wanted to survive. Although Northup attempted to find a way to freed himself many times, but as soon as his attempt failed, he would eventually consume by anxiety and fell into despair. The experience from Burch not only made Northup develop anxiety, but also sense of insecurity. His insecurity was based on his experience with Burch that because of his current position as a slave, then no one would believe him if he said his freedom. Moreover, he was afraid that he would suffer if he revealed his real identity it to the wrong person.

The anxiety and fear of not getting rescued, live and die as a slave without able to see his family again frequently consumed Northup until he fell into despair. However, Northup's personality was changed and developed again from his experiences with John M. Tibbets. When Northup was sold to Tibbets, he also suffered harassment and cruel treatments from him. However, the influence of Tibbets made Northup who previously was a helpless slave, managed to develop bravery. He was able to eliminate his fear and changed it into a courage and did some resistance for the first time,

Tired of Tibbets's bad treatment and false accusations to him, Northup's fear then changed into anger which encouraged him to stand against him. Northup's courage managed to save him from Tibbets' attempted assault and he even retaliated against and subdued him. Consumed by his anger, Northup then snatched the whip from

Tibeats' hand and used it to whip him repeatedly as proven by the following texts:

Before the blow descended, however, I had caught him by the collar of the coat, and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle, and pushing him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot around his neck. He was completely in my power... In the frenzy of madness I snatched the whip from his hand... I cannot tell how many times I struck him. (p.111)

Northup was then sold to Edwin Epps and he became his slave for a decade. Even after being in the slavery without rescue for years, the desire of freedom had not left Northup yet. However, because of the strict surveillance in Epps's plantation, Northup realized that he could not just run away recklessly. Therefore, he decided to write a letter regarding his condition to his family and post it secretly. This proved that Northup has developed into a smarter and cautious person. He has learnt from his previous experience that instead of act recklessly, he chose to write a letter which is much safer and has considerably high rate of success. This was proven by the following text:

My great object always was to invent means of getting a letter secretly into the post-office, directed to some of my friends or family at the North. (p.230)

Despite his failed first attempt to send the letter, Northup was able to regain his hope after he met with Samuel Bass. Bass was a carpenter hired by Epps to build a new house for him. When Northup was working, he heard the conversation between Epps and Bass. From their conversation, Northup found a bit of hope in Bass. After conversed with Bass, Northup became certain that Bass was the right person he could trusted and immediately asked his assistance to send the letter again. Later on,

*)Penulis Korespondensi

Bass managed to send the letter which resulted in Northup's whereabouts was known to his family. It ended with Northup being rescued and gained back his freedom. The meeting between Northup and Bass was able to return Northup's hope and confidence that he would be saved from the slavery.

3. Solomon Northup's Defense Mechanisms

In his 12 years of slavery, Northup was subjected and suffered cruel treatment and harassments from his owners. This caused Northup to develop anxiety and defense mechanisms to cope it. The types of defense mechanism used by Northup that found in the memoir are Denial, Intellectualization, Regression, Projection Rationalization, Sublimation, Displacement, Repression and.

In *12 Years a Slave* memoir, Northup first used denial to suppressed his anxiety when he was imprisoned. The confused Northup anxiously thought that he was kidnapped. Judging from Northup's condition that he was unconscious before and suddenly found himself imprisoned after he awoken, it is clear that he was kidnapped when unconscious. However, to avoid panic, he denied his suspicion and thought that there must be some misunderstood or mistake.

Aside from denying his suspicion, Northup also used intellectualization in the form of thinking logical and positive thoughts to suppressed his negative thought. When he was first realized that he was chained and imprisoned, he quickly became anxious and many negative thoughts appeared in his mind. However, Northup tried to think positively and assured himself that his imprisonment was a mistake and Brown and Hamilton would search and released him from the imprisonment. However, the reality was Brown and Hamilton actually were the ones who kidnapped and imprisoned Northup. This could be proven by the following texts:

Then did the idea begin to break upon my mind, at first dim and confused,

that I had been kidnapped. But that I thought was incredible. There must have been some misapprehension – some unfortunate mistake. (p.38-39)

Though suspicion of Brown and Hamilton were not unfrequent, I could not reconcile myself to the idea that they were instrumental to my imprisonment. Surely they would seek me out – they would deliver me from thralldom. (p.48)

After suffered brutal assault from Burch, Northup also experienced regression and his psychology was unconsciously regressed. His mind was filled with the thoughts of his family. In his sleep, he dreamed about his days as a free man and his family. This regression allowed Northup to temporarily escape from the harsh reality and his condition in the slave pen. This could be proven by the following text:

I was heart sick and discouraged. Thoughts of my family, my wife, and my children, continually occupied my mind. When sleep overpowered me, I dreamed of them – dreamed I was again in Saratoga – that I could see their faces, and hear their voices calling me. (p.47)

Northup also used projection to released his negative emotions. When he was on the way to New Orleans, Northup saw a flock of birds was singing on the trees. With his enslaved condition, Northup projected his feelings of anger and envy towards the birds. He also wished to have wings and became free as them so he could go back to his family. This could be proven by the following text:

The happy birds – I envied them. I wished for wings like them, that I might cleave the air to where my birdlings waited vainly for their father's coming, in the cooler region of the North. (p.57-58)

In his daily life in slavery, Northup frequently used rationalization in order to defend himself and avoid punishment. The rationalization Northup used was in the form of rational and logical excuses. Because of it, Northup was able to avoid suspicion or attempted assault from his masters. The text below is one example of Northup used rationalization by making excuse towards Epps when the latter accused him for attempting to write a letter:

“All I’ve got to say, master,” I replied, “is, there is no truth in it. How could I write a letter without any ink or paper? There is nobody I want to write to, ‘cause I haint got no friends living as I know of.” (p.234)

Another defense mechanism developed by Northup was sublimation. In the memoir, Northup used sublimation in the form of playing his violin whenever he felt sad or depressed in his life as a slave. He calmed himself by releasing the negative impulses from his mind through playing his violin. By doing so, Northup was able to attain peace and slowly reduced his anxiety. This can be proven by the following text:

Alas! Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage... Often, at midnight, when sleep had fled affrighted from the cabin, and my soul was disturbed and troubled with contemplation of my fate, it would sing me a song of peace. (p.217)

In the memoir, Northup also used displacement in the form of scapegoating to defend himself and released his aggressive impulse towards another person. After been betrayed by Armsby, Northup became disappointed and angry towards him. When he

was interrogated by Epps and in order to avoid his suspicion, aside from using rational excuse, Northup also decided to scapegoating Armsby. He said to Epps that Armsby was a drunken liar and what he said was a lie to made Epps hire him as his overseer. This could be proven by the following dialogue:

“That Armsby is a lying, drunken fellow, they say, and nobody believes him anyway... Now, master, I can see what that Armsby is after, plain enough. Didn't he want you to hire him for an overseer?” (p.234)

After being freed from slavery, Northup used repression to repressed his bad memories in slavery. However, when Northup wrote the memoir, he recalled all the events in his slavery time including the memory of being whipped and beaten brutally by Burch. Because of it, Northup remembered again the painful feeling he felt when being assaulted. This could be proven by the following text:

Even now the flesh crawls upon my bones, as I recall the scene. I was all on fire. My sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell. (p.45)

All the explanations above are the types of defense mechanism used by Northup when he was in the slavery. Subjected into harsh labour, treated cruel and unjustly, and suffered punishment and harassment were the reality experienced by Northup as a slave which caused him to become anxious and fear. Fortunately, Northup was able to developed defense mechanisms which helped in reducing his anxiety and prevented him from frequently fell into despair.

4. CONCLUSION

From the research, it can be concluded that Solomon Northup has suffered various harassment forms in the *12 Years a Slave* memoir. They are verbal harassment, physical abuse such as physical violence and threats of

assault, and also racial harassment. The harassment suffered by Northup were caused by his masters' unpleasantness towards him, even though he did not make any mistake or just expressed his opinion. Because of Northup's position as black slave, he was treated as an object by them. Therefore, they have more power and authority to control and do as they please towards him, such as giving punishment and harassment.

Became the victim of slavery and harassment, Northup was greatly suffered both in physically and psychologically. Northup who previously was an optimist and confident person, became an anxious, insecure and desperate person when he was kidnapped into slavery and suffered physical violence from Burch. However, as he adapted in his new life and gained more experiences, he developed a bravery and able to survived and even stood tall against Tibbeats. From his experiences with Epps, Northup also regained back his confidence and he once again tried to fight for his freedom despite facing hardship and obstacles from Epps himself.

Despite frequently consumed by anxiety and fell into despair, Northup was able to rise and also developed defense mechanism to cope his anxiety. Northup was able to develop and used various types of defense mechanism to protect him from his anxiety and helped him in surviving the life of slavery.

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