IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF SKEETER IN THE MOVIE *THE HELP* (2011)

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Abstract

In life, every person has an identity. To reach certain identities, a person needs to undergo several stages of identity construction. Throughout one's life, whether or not the person realizes, the processes still keep on going. Starting from the moment a person is born, the person actually has already acquired certain identities. As the person grows up, many factors create several changes on his or her identity. This complex process keeps going simultaneously as the person gets older. This paper attempts to identify the identity construction of the main female character in the movie *The Help*. Using Erikson's theory of identity development, this paper concludes that the main female character's present identity is affected by her adolescent experiences. Adolescence appears to be the most significant stage that constructs her identity. This result is seen through her treatments toward black and white people and her relationships with her family, friends, and boyfriend.

Keywords

identity construction, identity development, adolescent experience, adolescence

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze how the identity of the main female character in *The Help* is constructed. *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor, is a movie published in 2011. This movie is set in Mississippi during the 1960s when racism was one of the biggest issues there. What makes it interesting is that the story tells about the character named Skeeter who, in the midst of racism, on the contrary to what most white people do, treats African-Americans nicely. Based on this, her identity certainly has a significant role that affects her in doing certain actions throughout the story. As we all know, identity is something that everybody has. Identity itself is constructed through many aspects of one's life. This paper will show how Skeeter's identity is shaped and how it relates to identity theories. The result will make a contribution in explaining how particular factors can give influence to one's identity. This will also shed light on the study of identity from the

perspective of Erik Erikson's theory of identity development¹.

The Help (2011), adapted from a novel² with the same title, tells about a girl named Skeeter who has just graduated and got a job as a journalist. She works for a newspaper company and is assigned to write in a column that discusses housework. Lacking housework experience, she decides to ask Aibileen³, her friend's maid, who is a black woman, but at that time the tension between white and black people is high. Black people are discriminated in almost every aspect of their lives. However, Skeeter does not act like the rest of white people. She even comes up with an idea to write a book that reveals the facts about how black people, in this case, maids, are treated when they work for white people. At first, many maids are not willing to share their stories with Skeeter because of their fear of racial threat. After a long negotiation, finally, they agree to tell their stories. Skeeter's book, after it is published, gets various reactions that affect Skeeter's relationship with people around her.

This research is conducted in the following steps. First of all, I will watch the movie and find aspects that are related to Skeeter's identity. Then, I will gather data from previous researches, books, or the Internet that discuss identity as the main issue. After that, I will analyze the relationship between Skeeter's identity and identity theories. To analyze this problem, I will firstly outline the factors that can affect Skeeter's identity construction and later on will associate them with the theories to dig deeper on how they can influence her identity. Finally, to conclude, I will show that Skeeter's identity construction shows that identity is something that always changes.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are many researches that focus on identity issues. Through several different approaches, identity can be seen in many dimensions. By interviewing several people on what activities they should engage as a spouse, Burke (2006) analyzes how identity can change as a result of the existence of role, perception, and identity standard. He believes that those aspects have a big influence in producing certain behavior and emotional responses. Meanwhile, Smedley (1998) focuses more on race by examining historical facts of African Americans to draw her conclusion on how race is taken seriously as a very influential aspect of identity constructions. She mentions that, even though race is a social construction, it plays the biggest role in determining one's identity, exceeding religion, language, occupation, education, and other human attributes. A different

¹ His theory is a form of modification of Freud's psychoanalysis. However, he focuses more on society's influence and the social aspects of development (Muuss, Velder, and Porton 1996).

² The novel, published in 2009, is written by Kathryn Stockett. It has won several awards, one of which is New York Times Bestseller in fiction.

³ She is one of the protagonists in the movie *The Help*. She is also the narrator of the movie.

method is used by Monroe (2003) in analyzing identity. She interviewed the rescuers of Jews during the World War II to examine the relationship between identity and moral choice. In her essay, she disagrees with classical psychoanalysis approaches that describe early childhood experience as the main factor of one's basic personality or, in this case, identity. She argues that it has something to do with its connection with ethical behavior.

However, there are only a few researches that examine identity construction of certain characters from movies or novels. Tjahjono (2008) examines the identity construction of a character named Lily in the novel *Sweetness in the Belly*, written by Camilla Gibb. One of her purposes in writing the essay is to show that identity is something dynamic, and it never stops changing. She sees the construction of Lily's identity from the cultural identity point of view. In undertaking her research, she mainly refers to Stuart Hall's theory of identity. Unlike any other research above, this essay examines character's identity construction in the realm of racism. This essay will also outline the factors that shape the identity of the character.

In "Identity Change", Burke mentions, "when an identity is activated, perceptions of meanings are controlled (by modifying the meaningful behavior in the situation) to match meanings in the identity standard" (2006: 81-96). To elaborate this problem, he also points out the relationship between identity and role. Using his theory, I will analyze Skeeter's role and people's perceptions toward her, and relate them to her identity construction. In "'Race' and the Construction of Human Identity", Smedley says that race is the most important aspect in determining one's identity more than "religion, ethnic origin, education and training, socioeconomic class, occupation, language, values, beliefs, morals, lifestyles, geographical location, and all other human attributes" (1998: 690-702). I do not think that this is fully true. Thus, I will show that her theory does not apply in the construction of Skeeter's identity. I, also, view childhood experience as an influential factor in shaping one's identity, unlike what Monroe (2003) believes. In addition, this essay refers to Stuart Hall's identity theory as well, just like Tjahjono (2008) did on her research.

THEORY AND METHOD

This research will mostly refers to Erik Erikson's theory of identity development. Erikson⁴ believes that every person has *syntonic* and *dystonic* reactions which "are necessary for human adaptation" (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). These adaptations later on will form one's identity. According to Muuss et al. (1996), Erikson thinks

⁴ According to Muuss, Velder, and Porton (1996), Erikson, in search of his own identity, traveled in Italy and attended art school. After he got back to Germany, his native land, he was offered to teach a private school in Vienna where he met children patients of Sigmund and Anna Freud. From that point, he started to be interested in psychoanalytic studies. He then published several books such as *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968) and *The Life Cycle Completed* (1982).

that identity is formed through eight stages⁵ that influence one another and cannot be separated from one another. Thus, in other words, they are intertwined with each other. He mentions that they are connected “whether in the form of an earlier condition or of a later consequence” (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996: 42-57). Erikson says that identity shaping essentially occurs from the relationship between a child and his or her parental figure, from infancy and throughout the period of growth (Kroger, 2004). The stages that are related to my research are *identity versus identity confusion* and *intimacy versus isolation*. The first stage happens within the adolescent ages and the latter happens when the person enters the age of young adult. As stated in “Erik Erikson’s Theory of Identity Development”, Erikson considers adolescence as the period when a person starts questioning his or her own identity. Meanwhile, *intimacy versus isolation* occurs when “peer group conformity has lost much of its earlier importance” (Muuss, Velder, Porton, 1996).

Aside from Erikson’s stages of identity development, identity can also change “when major role changes occur” (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). This is quite similar with what Burke (2006) believes to be the determiner of identity construction. In addition, seeing identity in a wider sense, Erikson (1968) points out that identity is not the end result of the process of construction, but it is “forever to-be-revised sense of reality of the Self within social reality” (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). It appears that this understanding is agreed by other theorists. One of them is Stuart Hall (1997: 51) who sees “identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”

While some theorists do not consider childhood or adolescent experience as a significant determiner in identity shaping, I believe, through the character Skeeter, that there is a very strong relationship between childhood or adolescent experience and present identity. In other words, I assume that past experience, especially adolescent experience, is one of the most influential factors that shapes one’s identity. The reason why I believe so is, first, because the movie shows Skeeter’s deep relationship with her maid Constantine that later makes her treat people not based on the color of their skin. Second, her past experience as an ugly and unattractive girl seems to construct her own ideas to have a happy life. Third, I see that in her present identity, or when she is older, she is not really affected by other people’s treatment toward her. She does not simply follow what most of her friends do either. Other than childhood or adolescent experience, there are certainly many factors that construct Skeeter’s identity. However, in this paper I will consider those factors as minor issues.

⁵ The eight stages of development can be seen in Erikson’s “Eight Stages of Man” (1950). It modifies and expands psychosexual development stages that has been proposed by Freud, focusing more on the social context of development (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996).

Personally, I think *The Help* (2011) is an interesting movie. The story of Skeeter and her responsibility to write articles about housework, which connects her with many black maids, builds my curiosity. I wonder how and why Skeeter, a white American woman, has stronger relationships with black people than with white people. The story shows how Skeeter deals with her surroundings that often put pressure on her. She has several friends who have quite similar backgrounds but, most of the time, she does not seem to be comfortable around them. I suppose the most important part of the movie is when Skeeter reminisces her time with Constantine, her maid since she was just a kid. The story gets even more interesting when conflict appears between Minny, a black maid, and Hilly who employs her. The story ends pretty well with Skeeter's book gets published. Overall, although the movie is quite long, it leaves good impressions on me. To analyze a movie, I believe that descriptive analysis is one of the best methods. Thus, I will use this method in this research. In order to accomplish it, I will watch the movie three times. First, I will watch it to see the story as a whole. I will pay attention to the plot and try to understand the conflict. Then, on the second time, I will focus on Skeeter in order to see her identity construction. In this step, I will also take notes on how Skeeter's identity gets influenced by several factors. Lastly, I will watch it again to make sure that I get all the important points of the movie. If I happen to miss some important points from the movie, I will add them up to my notes. I will also check whether my findings are correct. As I mentioned before, after I am done watching the movie, I will find some sources that are related to identity construction. Then, finally I can relate them to my findings and analyze them altogether.

ANALYSIS

Skeeter is portrayed as a white woman who does not treat people based on their colors. This character somehow seems to break down the stereotype of white people. According to Noonan (1991), one's identity is mostly determined by bodily identity. However, identity is not only about one's appearance, but also inner personality. Thus, Skeeter's identity is not as simple as declaring that she is a white American woman. Identity is far more complex than that. More importantly, identity is not born within people, but it is constructed and changed over time through complicated processes. As I mentioned before, I believe that one's identity is shaped through past identity, in this case adolescence experience. In this movie, Skeeter appears to be someone who has certain personality. How she becomes such person has a very strong relationship with her young age, which is shown in the movie.

Skeeter's Treatments toward Black and White People

I suppose that Skeeter's treatment towards black people is the most important thing to be discussed. Growing up in a wealthy family, Skeeter obviously has a nanny.

She is a black woman named Constantine. Erikson (1968) believes that identity is shaped through a child's relationship with his or her parental figure (Kroger, 2004). From the movie, it is clear that Constantine has taken care of Skeeter since she was very little and they have a very strong relationship. Thus, Skeeter sees Constantine as her parent besides her own biological parents. Because she gets Constantine as a wise and caring person, Skeeter considers black people as humans, not less. She does not treat them differently because of their colors. She knows that a person can be good or bad, but again, it is not based on their skin. In her present identity, some of her actions reflect her neutral behavior towards black and white people. When her friends are gossiping about black people's disease, she tries to change the subject. At that time, Skeeter notices that Aibileen, a maid, is overhearing their conversation. After that, on the next day, Skeeter speaks with Aibileen to apologize. She also asks her to help answering questions for *Miss Myrna*, the column that Skeeter is assigned to do. Elizabeth, Skeeter's friend who employs Aibileen, gives permission to this, but later on she does not want Skeeter to get help from Aibileen. However, in other opportunities, Skeeter still talks with Aibileen.

In this case, Skeeter's identity as a writer may affect her decision to be close with Aibileen, to get a story. As believed by Burke (2006), role and perception are essential in shaping one's identity. A writer's role is obviously to write something good to make people enjoy, or at least to deliver certain information. It is true that Skeeter's strong will to write is built through people's perceptions toward her as a writer. Role and perceptions take part in creating her identity, but more importantly, her background ideas of writing her book that titled *The Help* are because of her concern towards maid's job that is always underestimated. Through Skeeter's phone conversation with Miss Stein from *Harper Row Publishing*, Skeeter points out that it is not fair for a maid who has been working to raise white children to get discrimination in using toilet. This scene really shows that Skeeter wants her book to represent the feeling and the reality of what the maids experience during their job. In addition, Skeeter's action never implies that her main goal of publishing her book is money. She even splits the money with the maids when the book gets published.

On the other hand, Skeeter does not simply treat white people better than black people. When Hilly, a white woman, asks her to put *The Home Help Sanitation Initiative* in the newspaper, she refuses. She does it because the initiative aims to separate black and white people's bathroom. Skeeter finds this idea unfair and discriminating. Her refusal creates problem to her friendship with Hilly. However, she still chooses to get close with black people and so she ruins her friendship with Hilly. This fair treatment also applies to her parents. Knowing that Constantine was fired instead of retiring, Skeeter gets very angry at her parents. She defends Constantine and gets mad at her parents because she knows that they are wrong. She does not really care what color Constantine is. According to this, Skeeter shows her fair treatment based on what she believes as true. Contrary to

what Smedley (1998) believes, this explanation shows that race does not stand as the most determining identity shaper. Even though perhaps people see Skeeter as a white woman, on the inside she sees everybody equally. Her actions never depend on one's skin color.

Skeeter's Relationships

In her early 20s, Skeeter has never dated anyone. Society considers this as something unusual. I believe it has a strong connection with what happened in Skeeter's young age. In one flashback scene in the movie, Skeeter appears very sad that no one asks her out to the ball. She feels very ugly because of that. Suddenly, Constantine comes to console her. Skeeter tells her that she feels ugly that no boy wants to dance with her. Skeeter also mentions that her mother was one of the winners at the beauty pageant when she was at her age. Skeeter starts to compare herself with her mother. She feels the urge to fulfill her mother's expectations. She also compares herself with other girls at her school and wonders why she is different. Through this excerpt, we can see how insecure Skeeter is and how Constantine tries to console her. Skeeter: "All the boys say I'm ugly. Mama was third runner-up in the Miss South Carolina pageant." Constantine: "I wish you'd quit feeling sorry for yourself." (*The Help*, 2011, 00:24:03-00:24:14). This is when the stage Erikson labels as *identity versus identity confusion* occurs. Skeeter experiences identity crisis at that time. Although Muuss, Velder, and Porton (1996) mention that in this stage, "youth rarely identify with their parents; on the contrary, they often rebel against parental control, value systems, and intrusions into their private life", Skeeter somehow shows that her mother still takes a big part in being her role model. She does not show any rebellious actions to her mother at this stage of her identity shaping. Looking at this, it seems that Erikson's theory does not really apply in Skeeter's character. However, when we look deeper, her crisis is more likely happens because of peer pressure. Without peer pressure, and people telling that she is ugly, she will not consider her mother as a role. Skeeter may just ignore the fact that her mother has ever won a beauty pageant. Thus, just like what Erikson (1959) believes, adolescents are preoccupied with what others think of them and how to fulfill it. Moreover, Erikson continues by saying, "Many a late adolescent, if faced with continuing diffusion, would rather be nobody or somebody bad, or indeed, dead than to be not-quite-somebody" (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). Fortunately, in the middle of her confusion, Constantine is there beside her. She tells Skeeter that she can be better than her mother so she does not need to worry. Constantine reassures her that she gets to pick her own way of life instead of following her mother's.

Constantine: "Every day you're not dead in the ground, when you wake up in the morning, you're gonna have to make some decisions. Got to ask yourself this question: "Am I gonna believe all the bad things them fools say about me today?" You hear me? "Am I gonna believe all the bad things

them fools say about me today'?" All right? As for your mama, she didn't pick her life. It picked her. But you... you're gonna do something big with yours. You wait and see."
(The Help, 2011, 00:24:39-00:25:34)

It is clear that Constantine really cares about Skeeter. She strongly encourages her to be better by doing things that she likes; she does not have to care about people who let her down. As said by Erikson (1982), a person can develop *syntonic* (positive) or *dystonic* (negative) reactions toward the events he or she experiences (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). Derived from here, Skeeter seems to build up *syntonic* reaction to Constantine's advice. She also develops *syntonic* reaction to her mother's figure as a beauty queen and to her friends who mock her. Related to Erikson's belief, Kroger (2004) considers that.

During childhood 'being like' admired others and assuming their roles and values reflects the mechanism of *identification* as the primary means of by which the self is structured. It is only when the adolescent is able to select some and discard others of this childhood identifications in accordance with his or her interests, talents and values that *identity formation* occurs.

Skeeter clearly chooses to follow Constantine's advice. This can be seen when Skeeter has grown up. She never dates someone, but she undoubtedly has a bright future because of her education and career. She starts to stand her own identity without comparing it to others. She does not feel the need to be a beauty queen like her mother nor to try hard to get a boyfriend. Skeeter focuses on her own interest which is to be a good writer. It all happens because of the presence of Constantine that means so much in Skeeter's life.

When Skeeter has grown up, she enters the stage Erikson called *intimacy versus isolation*. In this stage, Erikson proposes that peer's influence becomes less important in creating one's choice or identity (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). It is because at this stage, unlike in the previous stage of identity development, people do not need to worry about "losing" their identity (Boeree, 2006). It is told that most of her friends in her circle are married; some of them even already have children. However, Skeeter seems very easy dealing with the topic of marriage. I believe that it is strongly related to her adolescent experience. She picks to focus on her dream to be a writer and puts aside things that are related to dating, or even marriage. She is even a little cynical when her mother tells her that all of her friends are married. Skeeter says that they are married but they do not have higher education like her. As all of her friends are married, they do not have any job. They stay at home and only depend on their husbands' income. Because of that, Skeeter does not want to rush things just because her friends and her mother ask her to settle down immediately. However, things always change. Later on, because of the demand from them, she gives in and finally decides to meet Stuart Whitworth. Again, relating to Burke (2006), this decision is made because of Skeeter's role as a daughter. She

somehow wants to see her mother happy. On their first meeting, Skeeter hates Stuart. As times goes by, they somehow fall in love with each other. This shows that Skeeter does not start a relationship because of her concern and fear of being single forever. It is more likely because she has found the right man for her. As stated by Erikson, in early adulthood, a person will start to establish intimate relationship with his or her partner (Hall and Lindzey, 1993) and so are Skeeter and Stuart, who have built a relationship based on love, and that they grow close to each other.

Stuart Whithworth is the son of a senator. He is a successful businessman who seems to have everything in his life. With his reputation, some people try to get close to him to get senate seat. William, Hilly's husband wants to get that seat through the help of Stuart's father. In other scenes, Skeeter's mother is also amazed when Skeeter introduces her to him. Knowing that her daughter goes out with him, she feels somehow proud. However, Skeeter herself does not really care about Stuart's background. She chooses him because of her feeling, not because of his money or reputation. Nevertheless, her relationship with Stuart does not always go well as she wants it to be. Explaining Erikson's theory, Muuss, Velder, and Porton (1996) say that intimacy is the fusion of the identities of two people. When this does not happen, the intimacy, or later on marriage, cannot be achieved. Muuss, Velder, and Porton continue that intimacy stage is "We are what we love", and like any other occurrence in the world, this stage can create positive and negative reactions; negative reactions can result divorce or separation. In the end of the story, Skeeter and Stuart break up, just after Stuart proposes her. At that time, Skeeter tells Stuart that she is the one who writes the book called *The Help*. Skeeter thinks that it is necessary for him to know the truth, since Stuart has proposed her and they will soon to be married. Because the publication of the book evokes certain reactions in the society, Stuart finds it somehow dangerous. The book itself is a reflection of how black people experience their lives as maids who work every day for white people. Some are good experiences, some are bad ones. Stuart thinks that Skeeter only writes for *Miss Myrna*, but it turns out that Skeeter has her own ambition in writing from the perspective of black people. This is Stuart's reaction when he finds out that Skeeter is the one who writes the book.

Stuart : "Why go stir up trouble?"

Skeeter : "Trouble's already here, Stuart. I had to tell you this. You needed to know."

Stuart : "Goddamn right I needed to know. You should have told me this from the start. You're a selfish woman, Skeeter."

Skeeter : "Stuart."

Stuart : "I think you're better off being alone."

(*The Help*, 2011, 01:58:26-01:58:47)

In this scene, Stuart is very upset. He finds the book silly and stupid. Thus, in the end, they break up. From this, Skeeter appears to be an honest person. She believes that in order to be happy, she needs to tell the truth. Stuart's decision to end their relationship just because of the book clearly makes her feel very sad. However, through the way she acts after the break up, she shows that she cares more about her job of being a writer than being Stuart's lover, or wife. This also proves what Constantinople (1969) says, "The giving of oneself to another, which is the mark of intimacy, cannot occur until one has a self to give" (Muuss, Velder, and Porton, 1996). In short, Stuart's identity cannot blend into Skeeter's and the other way around. Thus, Erikson's point about *dystonic* outcome of this stage of identity development can be seen through their separation.

From Skeeter's relationship with her family, friends, and boyfriend, we can see that her identity is very much constructed within her adolescent age. Even though she feels the need to fulfill her mother's expectation, she decides not to follow her to be a beauty queen. She chooses to follow her own dream to be a writer because of Constantine's advice, which she got when she was young. Then again, she does not easily change her mind because of her friends. Her closest friends are married but she does not simply follow them. This is initially because her identity is already different with the other girls in her circle, and it refers back to Constantine. While in her romance, she starts a relationship quite late since she is never busy to find the right man. She focuses more on her job than her love life. Thus, it is not shocking that she fails her relationship with Stuart, since it is her first.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned before, this paper attempts to analyze Skeeter's identity construction through the perspective of Erik Erikson's theory of identity development. His theory proposes eight stages of identity development that are closely related with one another. In this research, I referred to two stages; they are *identity versus identity confusion* and *intimacy versus isolation*. The dynamic of Skeeter's identity construction is supported by Erikson's theory, and aside from that, to role and perceptions as proposed by Burke (2006). To reach the conclusion, I analyzed the findings and the theories altogether.

Skeeter's present identity is very much influenced by her adolescent experience. In addition, her roles and people's perceptions toward her roles as a writer and a daughter affect her in shaping her identity. These can be seen through her treatments toward black and white people and her relationships with her family, friends, and boyfriend. She shows that her identity never stops changing.

While the result applies to Skeeter's identity construction in the movie *The Help* through Erikson's and Burke's theories, other researches using other theories may yield different results. In other words, this conclusion only covers one specific area of identity construction, which focuses on Skeeter and is analyzed through the theories I stated

above. As we all know, identity is a very complex thing that can be analyzed through many different theories and methods. Further research in other areas may shed light on other aspects of identity studies.

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