

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Empathy is such a complex concept but necessary for human beings. Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps firstly introduced it through the German word *Einfühlung*. Empathy has several meanings depending on the field of issue. In general, empathy means “the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions” (Krznicaric 2014, 8). According to the definition, the importance of empathy is placed in managing human’s social life, in which they need to help and care for each other. Empathy has existed since infancy (McDonald and Messinger 2011, 2). Although it is considered an “inborn” ability for that reason, there is no assurance that humans can perform it suitably. Therefore, the empathic ability can (and is necessary to) be taught and trained as it may direct to either positive and negative responses (Breithaupt 2018, 166).

Empathy can be said as an indicator of one’s humanity as it motivates prosocial behavior. If one does not have or cannot perform empathy (or other related actions caused by it), they will be regarded as heartless beings. For that reason, they will have a less desirable social life. Although it has been said above that empathy may also lead to negative responses, to not have it is worse. It causes low morality and antisocial behavior such as manipulating and harming others without feeling remorse (Woodworth and Porter 2002, 437). It can be seen how not

having empathy will lead to undesired personalities and unfortunate events. People without empathic ability will be troubled in engaging in society actively and positively.

As it guides people even until adulthood, empathy is even more important in adolescence. This particular period of life is significant for empathy development as adolescents go through biological and social transition (Allemand, Steiger and Fend 2015, 230). In searching and defining identity, teenagers interact and socialize with their surroundings. They enhance their empathic emotion in the neighborhood, class, after-school community, and others. This ability helps build extrafamilial peer relationships, maintain friendships, and develop strong communities, which are very important in the youth period (231). Empathy is significantly related to youth issues, such as bullying, defending victims, and outsider behavior (Rieffe and Camodeca 2016, 1). How adolescents manage their empathic ability will affect the youth issues mentioned and how intense it will be. It is proven how empathy is significant in building a teenager's adolescence. Otherwise, the absence will cause social problems, disorder, criminality, and inhumanity (Keen 2007, 10).

Adolescence has been a topic of interest in fiction. It is represented in a literary genre called Young Adult (YA) literature. YA fiction as a "fictitious" reality often uses and depicts real-life problems for its target readers around age 12-18 (American Library Association 2008). Youth issues depicted are developing and more complex, such as school life, romance, identity, youth struggle, family issues, even sexual exploration and abuse. The story in YA fiction commonly starts with a teenager as the main character and how they deal with their

problems. In the process, they find a companion and face the problem together—that is how most YA fictions work. It shows how in most cases, the characters are in confusion with and because of their feelings. What has rarely been the case is how the story goes if the characters, especially the main one, do not and cannot feel. All the themes and issues mentioned above emphasize empathy to solve the conflict in the story. It is still the same as the chosen novel; it only discusses a peculiar one.

Almond is one example of the depiction of the issues. Published firstly in 2017, *Almond* is a South Korean novel written by Won-Pyung Sohn. The story starts with a boy named Yun-Jae who has Alexithymia, a condition in which the person has difficulty in identifying, expressing, and experiencing feelings (Rahmawati and Halim 2018, 200), since birth. For the sake of peace in life, his mother and grandmother work hard to teach him how to feel and how to react. On his 16th birthday, a tragedy happens which changes his attitude and view towards life. At this point, his journey to be humane starts, along with making friends in the process.

After getting much attention, the English translation was published in 2018 with the same title. The choice of word “almond” was meant to describe the *amygdala*, an almond-shaped nerve (Davis and Wallen 2001, 13) that functions as “a generation, expression, and experience of negative emotions” (Banks, et al. 2007, 303). It is Sohn’s literary debut that has won Changbi Prize for Young Adult Fiction (Changbi Publisher n.d.). Changbi Prize is a contest by Changbi Publisher who targets unpublished works and awards the winner with publishing it and other prizes. Catching many readers’ hearts in South Korea and outside the country, it

has been awarded 2020 Japanese Booksellers' Award in translated fiction novel category, becoming the first Asian to win it (Kang 2020).

Almond has a unique story for YA literature. Therefore, this study intends to discover the effect of the absence of empathy in the character's adolescence and what he does to achieve it. Some related and previous studies regarding the novel and the issue are used to support the study. Chae et al. (2020), the researchers, discuss the character formation in the novel by applying the attachment theory by John Bowlby. It shows how different kinds of attachment given result in different kinds of characteristics. Discussing the theme of hospitality, Mi-Kyung Jung (2020) uses four different Korean novels to discover the concept of hospitality in YA fiction. The study focuses on the disabled characters and shows how hospitality is a pursuit of symbiosis in life. Particularly in these two studies, they have explained how affection and hospitality are significant in human beings' relationships. However, they do not cover the generator of those phenomena, which is empathy.

Other studies analyze how empathy is portrayed in literary works. Alisha G. Scott (2017) analyzes numbers of science fiction literature. As the genre is either using the theme of dystopia or utopia, it concludes that the lack of empathy will only lead to catastrophe: death, destruction, psychopathy, and the like. It results from irresponsible acts by humanity. Using a classic, Katie R. G. Pryal (2010) argues how the novel fails to demonstrate empathy, unlike what common readers think. It gives another perspective on how the character only applies sympathy, but not empathy. These two studies choose fiction works with more complex genres and weighty delivery. Instead of analyzing such works, this study brings the issue

of empathy in YA genre literature which has a more direct delivery and eventually elevates its value.

This study is particularly inspired by Hwa-Young Lee's (2019) study, in which she uses *Almond* to analyze reader's empathy and emotional ability in responding to a literary work. However, rather than finding the relation between reading literary works and readers' empathy, this study will see how the concept of empathy is portrayed in the literary work itself. The emotionless main character is the spark of fire in the story. Therefore, the importance of empathy is considered suitable to be discussed. The study intends to focus the discussion only on the novel itself without relating it with things outside it. New Criticism is a form of criticism of literary work concerning only the work itself. It is considered devaluing the work's aestheticism to consider external information such as the author's background, also historical and social background (Tyson 2015, 130). In this framework, it relies a lot on close reading and the information provided by the work. Formal elements such as characterization, plot, and linguistic devices will be analyzed to create an organic unity to support the theme as the result of the analysis.

Empathy may sound like an overused and over-glorified concept. However, it cannot be denied that it enhances communities' sustainability and humanity through this ability. As for fiction, it reflects the reality that people live in. Although there are illusive elements added, the lessons given can be applied in real life. Its concept needs to be carefully explained as it may be incorrect and overlap with other similar concepts. Therefore, through this study, the importance of empathy will be analyzed and highlighted. It will provide the practice of empathic ability

through a unique character like Yun-Jae. It is also to show that empathy is still worthy of being discussed.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The study attempts to answer the question regarding the focus of the study and the object, as follow:

1. How does Yun-Jae's effort in achieving and performing empathy support the theme of the novel?

1.3. Objective of the Problem

Based on the statement of the problem above, the study will try to discover:

1. The theme of the novel supported by Yun-Jae's effort in achieving and performing empathy.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The writing of this study is intended to enrich the knowledge about empathy as a theme, even also a result brought by YA fiction. In this case, the particular issue is represented by the chosen object. By understanding the concept of empathy through literature work, it is also hoped to give particular awareness about empathy in life, especially in adolescence. The study can be an example of life lessons in the novel as it reflects reality. This way, the novel and the study fulfill the nature of YA fiction and the study. As it seems there have not been many studies about the novel *Almond* specifically, this study can be the start of understanding the work as the work itself, with other previous studies regarding it. The novel has unique characterizations that will lead to other researches with a more specific and different point of view. This statement is supported by the application of New Criticism

theory in analyzing the work. Practically, the study hopefully can be another reference to do New Criticism reading. However, the framework is considered better for prose and short story analysis but still fit for a “long” work like a novel.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Adolescence : the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, sometimes interchangeable with “youth,” which shows significant change and growth in adolescents.

Empathy : human’s essential ability to share and understand another’s feelings and perspectives, and use that understanding to guide the response.

Emotion : psychological state experienced subjectively and correlated with thoughts, feelings, and responses.

Relationship : the connection of two or more people that may differ in depth may also change depending on the dynamic and familiarity between each other.