

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Many inappropriate romantic stories with a vast age gap between adults and teens are still evident nowadays. Unfortunately, these kinds of stories primarily result in sexual abuse suffered by the minors. It has been reported that 95% of the statutory rape incidents involved 60% of the victims as female adolescents aged fourteen and fifteen, with 45% of the male offenders being age twenty-one or over (Hines and Finkelhor 2007, 303). Ironically, it is not uncommon to find these issues in places that have always been considered the trusted safest surroundings, such as in their own families and schools. Consequently, it is found that most cases of child sexual abuse are conducted by a family member or a teacher as the perpetrator. According to studies conducted by Crimes Against Children Research Center, 20% of girls are victims of child sexual abuse, with 63% of these victims suffered sexual abuse by a family member or someone they know (Finkelhor and Angela 1986, 2).

Interestingly, in these types of cases, one thing in common is always found—the act of grooming conducted by the offender to initiate the abuse. The term grooming itself generally means activities related to maintaining personal hygiene or the health of our pets. Yet, in this sexual abuse victimization context, the term grooming refers to nonviolent techniques employed by child offenders to begin the abuse through manipulative seduction (Lanning 2018, 7). Apparently, the usage of this term dated way back to the late 1970s when law enforcement

investigators started to use it to define how offenders imposed manipulative seduction towards children. The term grooming then evolved in the 1990s during the emergence of the internet, when pedophiles began to seek child victims through chatrooms across the internet (BBC News 2008). Therefore, the definition of the term has shifted and is now mainly associated with the behaviors of child offenders. Considering the magnitude of this issue, it is no wonder that many authors have included it within their literary works. Focusing on this sickening issue, both Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) are literary works that portray these kinds of romanticized child sexual abuse stories.

Although *Lolita* has received criticisms and controversies over the years, its contribution is undeniably immense to the literary world. It has influenced many novel authors and media creators over the years after its release. Yet, surprisingly, many have read it as a love story instead of the child sexual abuse story it explicitly portrays. Likewise, enchanted by *Lolita* during his teenage years, Kate Elizabeth Russell initially wrote her debut novel entitled *My Dark Vanessa* as a romantic love story between an adult and a young girl. Nonetheless, as she has grown up over the years, Russell has shifted the focus of the novel into reflective writing of a young girl who experienced sexual abuse by also incorporating her personal life experience within the story. As a result, *My Dark Vanessa* offers different perspectives in depicting this romanticization of child sexual abuse from the child victim's perspective, unlike the pedophile perpetrator's perspective in *Lolita*.

By switching back and forth between 2000 and 2017, *My Dark Vanessa* explores the child sexual abuse experienced by Vanessa Wye. The story begins in 2017, during the virality of the #MeToo movement reaches its peak, when Vanessa sees a post on Facebook about sexual assault allegations towards Jacob Strane, her high school English teacher, by one of his former students. Unbeknownst to many, Vanessa was also in a sexual relationship with the same forty-two-year-old high school English teacher when she was still fifteen years old. Hence, upon reading the news, Vanessa is forced to redefine the romantic story with her teacher as the story of a victim who experienced sexual abuse and rape. Deep down inside, however, Vanessa only wishes to remember the sexual relationship as her first love story. Moving back to the year 2000 during her high school, Vanessa has never kissed a boy before, yet she surprisingly welcomed her English teacher Strane who initially touched her knee and kissed her after class. However, it then escalated until they slept together in Strane's house.

From these brief plot points, it is apparent how Russell cleverly lures the readers inside the maze of a teenage mind filled with hormonal drive and obsession towards sexual fantasy. It is also important to note, on the other hand, that Strane has shown special affection towards Vanessa by praising her writing and giving her a nickname, "My Dark Vanessa," which originated from Vladimir Nabokov's poem entitled *Pale Fire*. Unsurprisingly, he also gave her *Lolita* novel that has influenced her and made her obsessed with it. Thus, she was eventually unable to differentiate her experiences from those of *Lolita* and Humbert Humbert. In other words, to understand more thoroughly the primary influence that tremendously affects

Vanessa Wye's actions in *My Dark Vanessa*, it is mandatory to have a grasp of knowledge regarding *Lolita*.

Lolita tells a gripping psychological erotic thriller about a middle-aged European expatriate living in the United States who has a disturbing obsession with a twelve-year-old girl named Dolores Haze. The story itself is told through the perspective of the pedophile protagonist Humbert Humbert, who writes confessions of his past actions while in prison awaiting his murder trial. Surprisingly, he is highly intellectual and well-educated, shown by his choice of words in his confessions and proven academic track record as a literature professor. Nonetheless, he is mentally unstable and constantly lusts over young girls, whom he refers to as "nymphets," albeit he has already indulged in romantic relationships with adult women and also married one of them in the past.

Considering that child sexual abuse is vividly depicted in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita*, both texts are the ideal sources to analyze child grooming within literary works. Therefore, in this study, the writer aims to examine the interconnectedness of child grooming within both novels by using the intertextuality theory by Julia Kristeva along with the female literary canon as the opposition to the male literary canon by utilizing gynocriticism theory by Elaine Showalter that will be applied in *My Dark Vanessa*. As for intertextuality, it is also essential to differentiate which text is the hypogram or the former text and the transformation or the latter text by examining both texts. Taking a look at the story of *My Dark Vanessa*, it can be inferred that *Lolita* plays a significant role in shaping the meaning of the text. In other words, it can be hypothesized that *My Dark Vanessa* is the transformation text

while *Lolita* is the hypogram text. Moreover, in applying gynocriticism, this study also finds out the modification or expansion of the male literary canon in the female literary canon.

Apart from that, to strengthen this study and avoid the same discussion with other studies, the writer searches the previous studies that use *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita* as the object. As for the earlier studies regarding *My Dark Vanessa* as the object, they are yet to be found. However, concerning child grooming, researchers have conducted studies focusing on examining the depiction of child sexual abuse by Vladimir Nabokov in *Lolita*. Lawrence Ratna, in *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: The Representation and the Reality Re-Examining Lolita In the Light of Research into Child Sexual Abuse* (2020), revealed that Nabokov's pedophile protagonist, Humbert Humbert, was written with such clinical accuracy and beautifully eloquent language that made the novel truly one of a kind (Ratna 2020, 28). Ratna's analysis also proved that Nabokov had a profound understanding of the mind and methods of a pedophile, as portrayed by the main character in his novel. It was evident by the actions of child sexual abuse carried out by Humbert Humbert towards the young girl Dolores Haze.

Although Ratna has explained the notion of child grooming as a way to seduce and maintain control of the victim, the research was very limited to the actions and sexual innuendo of the pedophile perpetrator. This study, on the other hand, primarily focuses on the behaviors shown by the victim as a result of the long-lasting effects of child grooming experienced during her teenage years, as shown in *My Dark Vanessa*. Thus, this study of the intertextual relation of child grooming

between *My Dark Vanessa* as the transformation and *Lolita* as the hypogram is worth exploring. Last but not least, from the gynocritic perspective towards *My Dark Vanessa*, a thorough comprehension of child grooming experienced by the women as suggested in the female literary canon could also be found.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

Based on the background of the study, this study posits the following research questions:

1. How is the intertextual relation of child grooming in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita*?
2. How does *My Dark Vanessa* as the female literary canon oppose the male literary canon of *Lolita* according to the gynocritic main models?

1.3 Objective of the Study

Based on the statement of the problems, this study aims to answer the previously mentioned research questions:

1. To scrutinize the intertextual relation of child grooming in *My Dark Vanessa* and *Lolita*.
2. To reveal the opposition of *My Dark Vanessa* as the female literary canon towards the male literary canon of *Lolita* according to the gynocritic main models.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Despite its controversies regarding the socially inappropriate age gap relationship, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is a well-known classic commonly deemed a masterpiece. Following a similar story, Kate Elizabeth Russell's 2020 debut, *My Dark Vanessa*, also talks about the forbidden love story between an adult and a teen. Based on this statement, the findings of this study could show the intertextual relation between a classic and a modern work of literature that similarly depicts a taboo topic persisting within society. Furthermore, the findings could show how modern women's writing challenges the classic male literary canon.

As for the most crucial significance, this study analyzes child sexual abuse, mainly in the form of child grooming, which is a dangerous act haunting children yet still overlooked within society and not many people are aware of. Thus, considering that this issue has existed for a long time, it is expected that the readers could understand more thoroughly regarding the act of child sexual abuse, primarily child grooming, and then protect their underage relatives or family from its danger. Eventually, this study could also benefit the readers, especially English Department students of Universitas Airlangga, who analyze literary works using the intertextuality or gynocriticism theory.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Child Grooming : The act of establishing an emotional connection with a child through various methods with the aim of conducting sexual abuse (Ost 2009, 32).

- Child Sexual Abuse : Any sexual activity and sexual contact, whether through the use of force or not, between an adult and a child where consent is not given (Klika and Conte 2017, 95).
- Gynocriticism : A feminine framework for analyzing women's writings based on the female experience to replace the male literary canon (Childers 1995, 129).
- Pedophile : A sexual disorder suffered by adults who have sexual attraction primarily towards prepubescent children under the legal age (Seto 2018, 10).