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The main character's awareness of death as reflected in Lauren Oliver's *Before I Fall*: A psychological approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper is related to the idea of death as seen in the novel *Before I Fall*. The major theme is about people's awareness of death from a different perspective. The novel presents a young girl's interpretation of death when she once confronted with it. The idea of death appears as the most unwanted thing at first and turns out to be something that has to be accepted because it is inevitable. This paper will discuss people's awareness of death that include fear and anxiety, stages of dying, and personal growth and the implication on human's life.



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1. Introduction

Death is a sensitive yet interesting and mysterious issue to talk about. Several theories have discussed how each person sees death, and it goes to the absolute conclusion that death is a certainty. While death is a certainty, nobody knows where, when, or how they will die. Death is believing in something that is certain and there is no doubt about it. As mentioned in the quran, *kullu nafs in za iqotul-maut, tsumma ilaina turja'un* (Al-ankabut: 57) which means; every soul will surely die, and to God Allah we will be returned.

The writer used the novel *Before I Fall* by Lauren Oliver as a primary source. *Before I Fall* was published on March 2, 2010, by Harper Collins in the United States and by Hodder & Stoughton in the United Kingdom. The novel received a nomination for Best Young Adult Paranormal or Fantasy Novel in 2010. The main character is forced to relive the day of her death for a week, in an attempt to understand why all these things, happen to her. As she tries to change her fate, she takes new action each day until she comes to the point that life must go on and death is a certainty.

The novel begins with the main character, Samantha Kingston, wakes up in the morning with a nightmare that seems real in her mind. In her dream, she had a car crash with her four best friends and she was the victim; indeed, she was the one who died. It all feels even more strange when everything she does is repeating every previous event. At first, she thinks that it is a part of *dejavu*. But as we know that *deja vu* happens in a short time while what happened to her is reliving the whole day up to seven times. It is like being imprisoned in an uncertain situation

The concept of death really affects the main character's life. During the reliving days, Samantha really going through everything. The idea of death brings fear and anxiety toward her. She also experienced five stages of dying starting from denial, anger, bargaining, depression, to acceptance. The last is after confronts with death, she really gains a stimulus for personal growth. This topic is observed from psychological point of view. Therefore, this research will show the reader the main character's experience and interpretation of death and how the novel really affects the main character's life.

2. Research Method

The research used a descriptive-qualitative method. According to Endraswara (2011:5) in the qualitative descriptive method the process of interpreting literature is the most important thing. The main focus of the research method is how to explain and describe it in words rather than numbers. The primary data taken from the novel *Before I Fall* by Lauren Oliver. Meanwhile, the secondary data are obtained from an international journal, books, some articles and also searching for sources on the internet.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The main character's awareness of death

1) *Fear and anxiety*

Since fear and anxiety are present together, it is natural for humans to fear and feel anxious about death because they are born with it. Hidayat (2012: 14) simply assumed that there are three factors that make people afraid to die. First, people are spoiled by the world. Second, they do not know what will happen after death. Finally, they feel they are sinful. Another fear of death is the certainty and uncertainty of it.

“I’ll be serious when I’m dead” That word sends a shock straight through me. Dead. So final, so ugly, so short. (Oliver, 2010: 77)

When Samantha heard the word “dead” that Spoken by Lindsay, she was extremely shocked. The reason for it is none other than the nightmare she experienced it describes a horrifying and painful death. In her dream, she had a car accident with her four best friends on the way back home from a party and she is the one who died. Therefore, the idea of death brings an uneasiness feeling or anxiety comes toward her.

2) *Stages of Dying*

According to the theory of dying by Kubler-Ross (1969), when people find themselves would die soon, they will experience the dying stages that go through five stages to the impending death. It begins from denial, anger, bargaining, depression to the acceptance.

a) *Denial*

It is the first stage of dying. The concept is also strengthened by the statement of Gibson (2007:280), defining that the first stage to manage death is the denial of it. In psychological terms, denial is something or mechanism that can protect someone when facing an event. Hence, denial here is related to the stages of dying and people decide to deny all the horrible possibilities and the facts that they will face. This is a mechanism that can protect them and releases them from anxiety.

“I ignore the bad feeling buzzing through me, and I think, this is my day, this my day, this my day, so I can’t think of anything else.” (Oliver, 2010: 66)

From the line above we can see how Samantha tries to calm herself by rejecting all the dreadful feelings that approached her one after another. She also tries to present the best feeling or possibilities toward her. All she did is trying to focus on the music so she will not think of anything else and telling herself that everything is fine. This is how denial works. It gives a sense of serenity and even can protect someone from facing unwanted events, particularly death. It really proves that denying will eliminate all the anxiety and provide a sense of composure.

b) *Anger*

This stage comes after denial. This phase is when someone realizes that s/he will die soon. They feel that this life is unfair and begin questioning why this all happened to him/her (Kubler-Ross: 1969).

1 “Be honest: are you surprised that I didn’t realize sooner? Are you surprise that it took me so long to even think the word – death? Dying? Dead?

Do you think I was being stupid and? Naive?

Try not to judge. Remember that we’re the same, you and me. I thought I would live forever, too. (Oliver, 2010: 96)

In the lines above, the author illustrates the main character as if talking to the reader about her conditions. It was the third day when Samantha relives her day. She tries to consider all of the possibilities that actually happened to her. Maybe the accident was real and maybe she did not make it at all. However, she could not find any answer and then she feels desperate and angry. Samantha stresses that she, you, we, they are the same; all humans are similar in terms of living life. We think that we will live longer or forever and death is the most unwanted thing.

c) Bargaining

It is an attempt to postpone death. People bargain with God or fate in order to gain more time. This phase comes after anger, believing that if they make things right it will change their fate.

“Maybe she is my ticket out.” (Oliver, 2010: 221)

She dreamed of Juliet Sykes, the girl who had always been bullied and isolated by her surrounding environment, including Samantha’s gang. In the story, Juliet was found committing suicide; she blew her brains out with her parents’ handgun during a party held at Kent’s house, one of their friends. She hopes Juliet was the one who connects her with the eternity. Hence, she wants to do a good thing to save Juliet’s life when she relives another day. She tries to bargain with God so that she can change her fate by doing a good thing, such as saving Juliet’s life.

d) Depression

It is the feeling of loss or usually when a dying person takes an unusual action. For a dying person, nothing even matters because at the end s/he cannot do anything.

“I don’t care. I’m in the mood to get locked at. I feel like I could do anything right now: punch somebody in the face, rob a bank, get drunk and do something stupid. That’s the only benefit to being dead. No consequences.”

Depression predisposed her to do all forms of crime. For her, all her action is useless including committing a crime because there will be no punishment. This time she really does not care about everything because she is depressed. Samantha is desperate about all of her condition.

e) Acceptance

When a dying person has worked through the preceding stages, then the time where the death is accepted will come. This is usually marked by doing things like writing a farewell letter and so on. This is the phase where the dying person starts to accept everything.

“I guess that’s what saying good-bye is always like – like jumping off an edge. The worst part is making the choice to do it. once you’re in the air, there’s nothing you can do but let go.” (Oliver, 2010: 340)

The quotation above describes Samantha’s last day. She tries to say the last words to everyone she loves. It shows how painful it was to say goodbye. It is like we are forced to jump into a deep ravine and we have no choice but to jump. The worst part is making the choice to do it; we have no alternative option but we have to choose to say goodbye. Once you’re in the air or when you finally do it (saying goodbye), there is nothing you can do but let go or we must accept and be sincere for what will happen. We just have to hold back our tears and feelings because it happened already. Acceptance is the final step that we have to take, and here, death is inevitable.

3) Personal Growth

According to Byock (2002: 281), actually, the idea of death, or when someone confronts death, can serve a stimulus for personal growth. The personal growth here is as self-transformation in positive terms. Thus, when someone once confronts death, there will be a change in his/her behavior.

“Everyone can be fixed; it has to be that way, it’s the only thing that makes sense.” (Oliver, 2010: 281)

This is the sixth day of Samantha trying to speak to Juliet and persuading her because she already knows what will happen next. Juliet will commit suicide so she has to stop her and tries to convince Juliet not to do so. But Juliet argued that Samantha, or anyone else, did not know anything about her and she cannot change her to be better. Then Samantha remembered what she said to Kent two days before that she cannot change her bad habit; there is no chance left for her to

be better. It is because of her dark past: bullying, ignorance, arrogance and all of the bad habits that make her feel guilty to everyone around her. But now she knows she is wrong.

She believes that everyone can be fixed. Everyone has a chance to be better, and this is what happened to her, too. She hoped Juliet would listen and change her mind because that is the only way to improve things.

3.2. The implication of the novel on human's daily life

What has happened to Samantha in the novel can be used as a reflection of our life, which are as follows

1) *We have to live our life like there is no tomorrow.*

The saying is one of life lessons that can be taken from this story. It is because we do not know exactly when our time is up.

“My point is: maybe you can afford to wait. Maybe for you there's a tomorrow. Maybe for you there's thousand tomorrows, or three thousand, or ten, so much time you can bathe in it, roll around in it, let it slide like coins through your fingers. So much time you can waste it. But for some of us there's only today. And the truth is, you never really know.” (Oliver, 2010: 195)

Samantha tries to speak up to the reader that in living this life we always think that we will live forever. While the novel shows how Samantha has to repeat the same day of her life for seven times in order to find the true meaning of life, in real life it is certainly different. In fact, we do not find such things; we will never be able to relive the days. Therefore, in living this life it is impossible to experience what has happened to Samantha. As we know we only live once, then we have to make sure that our time is worth-spending. Based on the verse in the quran, Q.S Al-ankabut: 57 which means that every soul will face death and after that we all will return to the God Allah swt. This confirms that whoever it is, whatever their position is, or even how rich they are, surely dead will come after. We have to always remember that death knows no age.

2) *We have to be nice and kind to others*

Humans are social creatures. They are interdependent with each other. Every human is supposed to be nice and kind to others, as well as to other living. Because in living the life humans need each other.

“It was never about saving my life. Not, at least, in the way I thought.” (Oliver, 2010: 303)

The quotation above shows the last day when Samantha woke up from her dream or relieved her last day. She, Samantha, finally realizes that all that happened to her is not about saving her life. Instead, it is about discovering the true meaning and lesson of life. Initially, she thought that good deeds will change her fate and save her life. At the end, it is all about making amends and making her realize the consequences of her actions in the past. Actually, since the beginning it will never change her fate. We have to live our life to the fullest and our actions on each day are all that matter.

4. Conclusion

Through the reliving day, Samantha Kingston as the main character experiences all the awareness of death. There are fear and death anxiety, it is when the idea of death presenting the uneasiness toward her. Second, she also experiences all five stages of dying. Denial is seen as Samantha's efforts to deny all the bad feelings; she gets angry therefore she asks whether she deserved all the fact that she is going to die soon. She bargains with God, or fate, believing that if she can make things right, she can save her own life, she enters the next stage, that is depression, in which she feels that nothing even matters to do a bad thing, and the final is acceptance. Eventually, Samantha accepts her death after all the grief in finding the true meaning of life. The last, the personal growth, makes her aware of her past mistakes and tries to be the best version of her. For the implication that we can take from the novel into our real life are: we have to live our life like there is no tomorrow and we have to be nice and kind to others.

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