Violence as a Response for Illness: Exploring Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Eka Kurniawan’s *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*

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ABSTRACT
Violence has always been a topic brimming with endless discussions and controversies. The notion of violence itself has always been considered as something irrational to the human mind and animalistic to the human behavior. However, this overgeneralization towards violence ignores the complexity of violence. There are many facets of human life that could be attributed to the use of violence, one of which is mental illness. Studies of mental illness and violence have already been done before, especially in works of literature. However, there has been little contribution to the comparative discourse of violence and mental illness between two different literary works. Two novels that have both aspects as a central issue of their stories are *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk and *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* by Eka Kurniawan. This article analyzes the link between violence and mental illness of the respective English and Indonesian novels. The frameworks that will be used are Freud's psychoanalytical concept of Ego-instinct and Erich Fromm's concept of “Being” and “Having”.

Keywords: Fight Club, Mental Illness, Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas, Trauma, Violence

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Malešević [1], while the concept of violence has been associated with human behavior ever since the days of classical antiquity, violence has always been seen as something one-dimensional in nature, which was generally deemed as an opposition to rational thinking ([1]. It is traditionally accepted to see violence as something inseparable from antagonism, always clashing with the logos, contradicting to the appeal of thinking logically [2]. This line of thinking towards the understanding of violence seems to have been imbedded in our culture, manifesting in works of literature and the establishments of various regulations and laws. Although in no way I am suggesting that this notion is wrong, I believe that the act of violence signifies much more than a mere hostility towards rationality.

One of the ways in which violence may occur is because of a person's psychological condition. Whether a person is in a state of panic or is channeling her/his anger and frustration, the uneasiness of the mind becomes one of the major catalysts of violent behavior. As such, it is easy for us to assume that mental disorders would cause major acts of violence. While in a sense this is not wrong, the link between mental illness and violence is not as direct as one might assume. In order to better understand the subtle yet complex link between mental illness and violence, other variables including environmental stressors, substance abuse, and the history of violence itself must be taken into consideration [3].

A literary work which springs to mind that touches upon such an issue is Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* [4], which tells the story of an unnamed narrator and his friend, Tyler Durden, and how they made an underground fight club in which people could join and fight freely. It is later revealed that Tyler is the narrator’s doppelgänger, and they were one person this whole time. The novel implies that the narrator is suffering from the Dissociative Identity Disorder. Another novel, which critics have hailed as the Indonesian version of *Fight Club*, is *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* by Eka Kurniawan [5]. The novel tells the story of young man turned a truck driver, Ajo Kawir, and his quest to find the cure for his erectile dysfunction in a society full of chaos and evil. Apparently, his erectile dysfunction is caused by a childhood trauma as he was forced to rape a woman by two policemen.

In this paper, I want to analyze how the link between violence, mental illness, and socio-cultural background is depicted in both novels. There has been numerous research concerning the socio-cultural background of the two novels, particularly in terms of gender representations. Permata, Priyatna, and Rahayu [6] argued that one of the characters in Eka Kurniawan’s work, Iteung, negotiates her tomboyish identity with the society around her. In the paper, they explained that
2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Sexual and Death Instincts in Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas

In order to better understand the relation between violence and mental illness, there must be a coherent definition of violence itself. While there are many definitions of violence, Glasser (as cited in Perelberg, [9]) has offered a psychoanalytical take on violence, in which he defines violence as ‘an intense longing for indissoluble union with the object (typically the mother), which leaves the individual, at the same time, with a fear of being merged and annihilated’. Interestingly enough, this definition of violence tries to link violence with the state of fear. Fear itself is a concept that Sigmund Freud has explored in his book Beyond The Pleasure Principle [10], in which he explains that fear is one’s lack of anticipation towards incoming danger, which requires ‘a definite object to which one is afraid’ (p.8). This lack of anticipation of danger is what causes people to develop trauma.

It is important to clarify these concepts first because fear, trauma, and violence are ever-present in Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas. The opening lines of the novel already introduce these concepts within the main character Ajo Kawir, in which his friend Iwan Angsa says.

In the novel, Ajo Kawir is a man notorious for engaging in acts of violence. His friend, Iwan Angsa, states that Ajo Kawir is a man unafraid of death because he has erectile dysfunction. In this sense, Ajo Kawir is introduced as a character who is violent yet unable to fulfill his sexual desires. The relation between death and sexual desire is also a concept that is explored in Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In the book, Freud explains how there are two types of basic instinct—which he defines as an innate tendency of organic life to return to its previous state—in humans. The first instinct is the “Ego-instinct”. Ego-instinct refers to human’s innate tendency to return to its original form. Freud believes that organic life all stems from inanimate objects. As such, he concludes that humans have the compulsion to self-destruct. The end goal of death in human life and how humans strive towards it is what Freud refers to Death Drive. On the other hand, humans also have what Freud calls “Sexual Instinct”. The nature of this instinct is in opposition to ego-instinct because sexual instinct is an innate human tendency to procreate and reproduce life.

These two concepts of instincts are important because already in the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to a fact that Ajo Kawir is unable to engage in sexual activity. Thus, his sexual instincts are presumably dead. In this case, the absence of his sexual instinct does not mean that he is void of any kind of sexual desires, but he is unable to functionally express his sexual desires due to his erectile dysfunction. This inability to express his sexual desires properly is expressed further in the novel, in which at one point, he almost refuses to be with his lover, Iteung, because he was unable to erect. While he manages to marry Iteung later on, he was still unable to engage in sexual intercourse and procreate life. As a result, the only instinct that is left in Ajo Kawir’s character is the ego-instinct, and his act of violence that is depicted throughout the novel shows the dominance of the ego-instinct.

For Freud and many of his followers, the concepts of ego instinct and death drive become an inborn aggression among humans [11]. The state of balance between the desires of life and death is sexual desires. Ajo Kawir’s inability to manifest his sexual desires pulls him into a state of death drive, always wanting to revert to aggression and, in the end, a state of death. However, his inability to manifest his sexual desires is not as simple as it might seem to be because his erectile dysfunction was due to a traumatic event in Ajo Kawir’s life, where he was forced to rape an old woman called Rona Merah by two policemen who were also raping her. This
catastrophic event led to a condition called “traumatic neurosis”. According to Freud [10], this condition arises after a person experiences a severe shock that endangers his or her life.

However, in the last chapters of the novel, we can see Ajo Kawir showing signs of recovery from his erectile dysfunction. The signs of recovery shown in the novel happens in a series of events, with dreams being a prominent factor. The use of dreams as a way of exploring the roots of trauma and mental conditions is a very important aspect in psychoanalytical theory as Freud [10] suggests that the study of dreams is maybe the single most trustworthy approach in analyzing the unconscious. Ajo Kawir experiences a series of dreams involving a girl named Jelita. The dreams about Jelita that Ajo Kawir experiences predominantly portrays acts of sexual intercourse which he has not even done in his life. It is interesting to note because Ajo Kawir has spent most of his life trying to recover from his erectile dysfunction by doing many different things, even going out as far as having sexual activities with his real lover, Iteung. However, the only way out that manages to help Ajo Kawir’s recovery are dreams about Jelita.

In the last chapter of the novel, Ajo Kawir speculates on why he thinks that Jelita can help him recover from his erectile dysfunction and, particularly, from his traumatic neurosis. In the last part of the novel, he talks with his own penis, saying first, this may seem like a trivial thing, but these sequences of dreams are actually an imagery of him facing his traumatic neurosis. In The Interpretation of Dreams [12], Freud, quoting Hildebrandt’s arguments about the relation between dreams and the waking life, argued that whatever strange results dreams may convey, it is always based on the internal or external experience of that person. Ajo Kawir’s dream about Jelita is based on his past experience when encountering Rona Merah. Furthermore, this is one of the effects of traumatic neuroses according to Freud [10] as through dreams the sufferer is always taken back to the situation of the primal scene. In this case, Ajo Kawir is taken back to his traumatic experience. Even though the person and the situation in the dream are entirely different from his own real experience, as morbid as it might seem, there is a parallelism between his traumatic experience and his dreams. Thus, dreams do not act as a direct moment-to-moment re-enactment of trauma, but a reflection of the nature of the trauma that is unavailable to recall through explicit memory [13].

In The Interpretation of Dreams [12], Freud gives a case study of how symbols are formed in dreams as an indirect representation of our trauma. He explained that in one of his patients’ dream of walking with two little girls that she was not familiar with, the only fact that she could recall was the difference of age between those two girls, which was fifteen months. Freud told that, in addition to the interval of their age, she herself argued that the two girls that she found in her dream symbolizes two traumatic events that occurred during her childhood. Similarly, the occurrence of Jelita in Ajo Kawir’s dreams serves as an indirect representation of his past trauma.

Freud argues that dreams are there to serve as the fulfillment of the forbidden wish for patients suffering trauma. The notion of dreams as a wish-fulfillment is an idea that has been thoroughly explored in Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams [12]. In the chapter “Dream as Wish-Fulfillments”, he states,

Dreams are not to be likened to the unregulated sounds that rise from a musical instrument struck by the blow of some external force instead of by a player’s hand [cf. p. 104 f.;]—they are not meaningless, they are not absurd; they do not imply that one portion of our store of ideas is asleep while another portion is beginning to wake. On the contrary, they are psychical phenomena of complete validity—fulfillments of wishes; they can be inserted into the chain of intelligible waking mental acts; they are constructed by a highly complicated activity of the mind. (p.147)

From this quote, we can infer that dreams hold a significant amount of value on someone psychological condition. Rather than dismissing it completely, Freud believes that dreams are connected to our innate, real-life desires. In the case of Ajo Kawir, dreams of the girl Jelita serves as a fulfillment of his wish—his wish to overcome his own past trauma, and in particular, his own erectile dysfunction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original (Indonesian)</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burung, ia berkata, “Tidakkah kau menyadari sesuatu?”</td>
<td>“Bird,” he said, “Do you realize something?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suara mesin truknya berdengung, dipermainkan angin yang datang. “Perempuan jelle itu, Jelita. Tidakkah kau merasa mengenalnya?”</td>
<td>The hum of the idling engine was carried by the wind. “That ugly woman, Jelita. Don’t you feel like you recognized her?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Di pucuk pohon jati, daun-daun bergesekan satu sama lain. “Ia memang jelle. Super jelle. Tapi tidakkah melihatnya kau merasa pernah bertemu dengannya? Kurasai mengingatkankau kepada perempuan itu.”</td>
<td>“She was ugly. Super ugly. But when you looked at her, didn’t you feel like you’d seen her before? I think she reminded me of that woman.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terdengar ricik air di satu tempat, mungkin di satu selokan kecil. “Si perempuan gila, Rona Merah. Entahlah. Tapi aku merasa mereka perempuan yang sama.” (pp.239-240).</td>
<td>The sound of rushing water came from somewhere, maybe a nearby brook. “That crazy woman. Scarlet Blush. I don’t know why, but I think they’re the same woman.” (p.206)</td>
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The absence of the sexual instinct is depicted quite thoroughly in Eka Kurniawan’s novel. However, while the novel manages to portray the repercussions of sexual trauma and its relation towards violence in a very detailed fashion, there are still other writings that try to connect other aspects, such as external problems and socio-economic background, to their portrayal of violence and mental illness. One such novel is Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club. While it might seem like Eka’s novel contains lots of similarities with Fight Club, there are some glaring differences that could be analyzed, especially in terms of Fight Club’s commentary of American consumerism and class relations.

2.2. Violence as the Process of ‘Being’ in Fight Club

With Fight Club being a novel with such a salient portrayal of violence, it is hard not to look at it the same way as we look at Eka Kurniawan’s Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas. Its portrayal of overt aggression and brutal fistfights can only provoke readers into comparing these two novels. Furthermore, the main characters of both novels, suffer from some form of mental illness. While that might be the case, I have to argue that Chuck Palahniuk’s novel contains a social commentary larger in scale than Eka Kurniawan’s work. In this case, I am particularly referring to Fight Club’s commentary on American culture, while we can see that Eka’s work and the conflict in the novel seems to be more personal to Ajo Kawir himself.

Before we go into an in-depth discussion of the details within the novel, it is important to take a look at how Erich Fromm and his theory of human nature and human condition. In his book To Have or To Be? ([14]), Fromm conceptualizes the theory of “Having” and “Being”. According to him, in this age of “post-industrialist capitalist world”, people are obsessed with the concept of “Having”, in which their main purpose in this world is to acquire material gains. This is due to what Fromm calls “The Great Promise of Unlimited Progress”. This “Great Promise” contains the potential of humans in achieving the ultimate happiness in a capitalist world. While this “promise” might seem like a universally beneficial thing for humans, Fromm believes otherwise. He argues that this mode of “Having” that is currently plaguing the society is destructive for our sense of fulfillment and accomplishment [15]. This current mode of “Having” is dangerous as it creates a society obsessed with possession and thus feelings of selfishness. While in the mode of “Being”, Fromm argues that a person abandons the seeking of such possessions as absence of such greed can generate feelings of caring and selflessness.

All of this is important to explain as the notion of “Having” is already established early on in Fight Club. The novel starts with an unnamed protagonist (which I will be referring to as ‘The Narrator’ hereafter) currently participating in a support group full of people diagnosed with testicular cancer. The irony becomes apparent as it is revealed that The Narrator is actually not suffering from testicular cancer himself, yet he is there because, when he was consulting to a doctor about his insomnia, his doctor told him to go see these kinds of support groups to see what “real pain” feels like. It turns out that the Narrator becomes increasingly comfortable participating in this support group to such an extent that he is able to sleep after three weeks of insomnia. The very first bits of the character’s action already exemplify Fromm’s perspective on the current society. In his book To Have or To Be? [14], he states,

The act of faking an illness just to find company goes to show just how far Fight Club establishes a bleak world that is in accordance with Erich Fromm’s perspective. This painting of such a grim setting is amplified through the introduction of Marla Singer, who also participates in a support group just to find company. At this point, The Narrator becomes envious of Marla as he thinks he should be the only one who performs this act of fakery.

However, The Narrator’s perspective slowly when he encounters Tyler Durden. Tyler Durden’s perspective towards the world is slowly implemented into the mind of The Narrator, and Chuck Palahniuk’s makes it very clear that these two characters’ ideals are drastically different. Tyler’s worldview is very different as he is at odds with the capitalistic nature of the world. This worldview slowly creeps into The Narrator’s mind not long after they meet. In chapter three, The Narrator says,

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you. (p.44)

From this quote, we can begin to see the transformation of The Narrator’s worldview. He gradually realizes the danger of being obsessed with material possession. He also realizes that this materialistic worldview is contaminating the society. In this section, we can see how The Narrator comments on the lack of reasoning that has been plaguing the American culture as people do not realize that buying things obsessively will not fulfill their lives. One of the abilities that one must have in order to acquire the state of “Being” is the capacity to reason and to love, which is scarcer than ever in modern American culture [16]. This line of thinking towards the American culture that manifests in the perspectives of The Narrator and Tyler Durden becomes the basis of the formation of the fight club itself. In essence, the formation of the fight club is not only a
space for people to freely engage in acts of violence, but it is also a step towards “Being”.

In order to fully understand how the formation of fight club is considered a step towards “Being”, we need to understand first the concept of “being active”. In his book, To Have or To Be, Erich Fromm states.

To be active means to give expression to one's faculties, talents, to the wealth of human gifts with which—though in varying degrees—every human being is endowed. It means to renew oneself, to grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one's isolated ego, to be interested, to “list,” to give. (p.72)

Here, Fromm explains that being active is to renew oneself. The formation of fight club is a part of “being active” because in fight club, those who enter it have the means to renew themselves. Furthermore, the notion of fight club pushes people to transcend their egos. It might seem contradicting for people to transcend their egos through fighting, however, fight club itself has established a set of rules that mirrors this lack of ego. The set of rules established in fight club, particularly its most famous one—"the first rule of fight club is you don’t talk about fight club"—signifies that the members of fight club are not only not allowed to talk about fight club outside of the club itself, but also as an exercise to hold their egos for the well-being of the community and to not partake in an act of revenge. Furthermore, in the third rule of fight club, Tyler establishes that when one of the fighters says stop, then the fight stops. Again, this is to show that fight club put forward the well-being of the community rather than their own egos.

In the later part of the novel, however, things get more complicated as it is revealed that Tyler Durden and The Narrator are the same person. This revelation signifies that the main character suffers from the Dissociative Identity Disorder—a characterized by the presence of two or more distinct personalities or an experience of possession and recurrent episode of amnesia [17]. The characteristics of “Having” that once dominated the narrator, and his entrance towards the state of “Being”, turn out to be a process that occurs all within one person. This sort of process proves of the accounts made by Erich Fromm on human nature. As he speculates on the multiple accounts about the basis of human nature, Fromm states that humans have both the tendency “to have” and “to be” [15].

One important thing to note is that this dissociative disorder is a symptom of a personal trauma that is experienced by The Narrator, particularly on his personal experiences being neglected by his own father [18]. This little detail is often overlooked as it is not stated very clearly in the novel. However, in chapter 6, The Narrator describes his past relationship with his own father in which he says,

Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don’t remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn’t so much like a family as it’s like he sets up a franchise. (p.50)

The childhood trauma that The Narrator has to endure gives a better context on his dissociative identity disorder because the personality of Tyler Durden is not only a product of his DID, but it is a form of The Narrator’s wish-fulfillment [18]. In this case, the wish-fulfillment is the separation of The Narrator’s identity as someone who is subdued by consumerist culture into someone that is fully aware towards the perils of a capitalist society. Violence and the formation of the fight club, which is initiated by The Narrator under the influence of Tyler Durden, thus helps The Narrator to fulfill his wish by fully dissociating himself with the state of “Having” and to become a state of “Being”.

At the end of this analysis, the picture becomes clearer as to how and why Fight Club and Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas have so many things in common, such as their bleak and gruesome portrayals of the world, the glaring use of violence, and the character’s traumatic background. The main similarity that we can find from these two novels seems very visible: the fact that the characters use violence to cope with their personal mental issues. The dynamics between trauma and a sense of wish-fulfillment is another similarity that The Narrator of Fight Club has in common with Ajo Kawir in Eka Kurniawan’s Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas.

However, it is also clear that the novels depict these issues differently. The sexual trauma that pulls Ajo Kawir into engaging acts of violence is then cured with a realization of his own need to face his trauma by a series of dreams he experienced about the girl Jelita. Thus, the dreams Ajo Kawir experience is a fulfillment of the wish—his wish to finally recover from his sexual trauma and be able to properly express his sexual desires. Conversely, The Narrator’s realization of his own mental disorders, and his eventual control over his other personality is manifested through the use of violence as a means of reaching the state of “Being” in a world driven by consumerism. The Narrator’s DID is caused by his own childhood trauma, which in turn produces a split-personality of someone The Narrator wants to become, which is Tyler Durden.

3. CONCLUSION

The influence of Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club towards the discourse of violence, mental illness, and social class in American literature has been quite substantial, and so is Eka Kurniawan’s Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas on the landscape of Indonesian literature. The interplay between violence and mental illness is pictured in such unique ways by both writers that it is hard not to discuss the intricacies within. The difference lies in what each novel emphasizes. While Fight Club leans more towards the relation between
violence and mental illness through the issues of class and American consumerism, the essence of *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tunan* lies in the relation of sexual trauma and violence.

*Fight Club*’s commentary on American consumerism is not just a catalyst for violence, but also the root of hopelessness. The state in which The Narrator comes at hand is a state of “Having”, in which the character’s selfishness and overt egotism run through him. Later on, the character initiates violence through the realization that violence and the formation of the fight club are ways of cleansing people from materialistic and hedonistic views of the world. His mental illness becomes a condition in which he initiates such violence acts, as such violence can be seen as a fulfilling coping mechanism in a world full of desperation. On the other hand, sexual trauma becomes the bedrock of the initiation of violence in *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tunan*.

The death of sexual instinct due to Ajo Kawir’s erectile dysfunction becomes the main motivation of his act of violence. Freud [10] has stated that sexual instinct is not only man’s desire to engage in sexual activity but also a motivation to preserve and procreate life itself. The absence of such a motivation to preserve life prompts acts of violence and aggression as man’s tendency towards death overpowers the mind. Interestingly enough, reoccurring dreams that recall the nature of Ajo Kawir’s traumatic experience serves as a formula for his cure. Repetitive dreams symbolize his ability to control his own traumatic neurosis. His ability to do so breaks the dualistic nature of life according to Sigmund Freud, which is the balancing of sexual instinct and death instinct. In this case, violence is looked upon as more of an escapism, rather than a response for mental illness.

The brilliance of both of these novels is that they contribute to a bigger discourse of violence and mental illness. In addition, neither simplifies or generalizes the subtle link between mental illness and aggression. However, that are many other factors that could be analyzed further regarding these novels and their portrayals of violence. Further exploration on the depiction of social class in *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tunan* will also be worth taking. While it is certainly not explicitly stated, elements of social class in the Indonesian society is painted subtly in Eka Kurniawan’s novel. Surprisingly enough, there is a lack of research conducted about masculinity in *Seperti Dendam Rindu Harus Dibayar Tunan*, contrary to the numerous amounts of research that has been done about the same issue in *Fight Club*. It is surprising because the dynamics of gender identity is quite prominent in Eka’s novel, especially when you take into account other dynamics of gender identity is quite prominent in Eka’s novel. Surprisingly enough, there is a lack of research conducted for characters like Iteung and Jelita in Eka’s novel, and while a lot of researchers have stated the significance of Marla’s character in *Fight Club*, I think there is still room left to analyze such a complex character.

**AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS**

Both Authors contributed to the study conception and analysis. Material preparation and data collection were performed by the Author, and the analysis was performed by the Author and the Corresponding Author. The first draft of the manuscript was written by the Author, and the Corresponding Author commented on the previous versions of the manuscript. Both Authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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