

CONFLICT IN MICHELLE ZAUNER'S NOVEL *CRYING IN H MART: A MEMOIR*

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Abstract

This study analyzes a novel by Michelle Zauner entitled *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*. This research focuses on the conflicts that occur to the protagonist, Michelle Zauner. The purpose of this study is to reveal the external and internal conflicts that occur in the novel. The researchers applied descriptive qualitative approach to conduct this research. The descriptive approach means that the data collected is in the form of notes or memos, personal documents, or other official documents. Also, the researchers use the conflict theory described by several experts, such as Stanton, Sayuti, and Nurgiyantoro as a reference for discussion, so that the topic under study runs systematically. For the analysis, it is found that the protagonist in the novel experienced both external and internal conflicts. The external conflicts that occur to Michelle are the difficulty of being mixed-blood and disputes with her father. The internal conflicts occur in the novel due to sadness of her mother's illness and death, and pressure of future dreams.

Keywords: *conflict theory; external conflict; internal conflict; sadness*

1. Introduction

Every human being must have conflicts in his life, either conflicts from within himself, or with other people or environment. Without having conflict, human life will be flat and uninteresting. On the other hand, conflict can make humans develop and become better human beings. As with a story, conflict is the most important part of a literary work, especially novel works of fiction. Conflict can occur because of a problem. If there is no conflict in the novel, the storyline will not develop. Novels as a reflection of society illustrate the reality of the community in terms of social, economic and cultural activities that are developed in the community because literature is inseparable from the real life of society (Pardi, et al, 2020). Therefore, fiction must contain conflict and tension, especially the conflict experienced by the protagonist so that the story becomes more interesting. In line with the statement of Purnami, et al (2016: 134-139), they state that conflict is one of the most important elements in a story. We can say that the story's conflict is its heart; without it, the story lacks energy. Conflict is what makes stories interesting to read because it arises from divergent ideas or points of view.

The novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* is a story from the author's real life, Michelle Zauner. Michelle Chongmi Zauner was born in Seoul, South Korea on March

29, 1989. She is a Korean-American musician and author, best known as the lead vocalist of the alternative pop band Japanese Breakfast. Her 2021 memoir, *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*, is her debut novel. *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* tells how Zauner feels growing up as a Korean-American who lost her mother at an early age. She finds identity in a diverse environment, passion through her Korean heritage, and cooking Korean food as a way to treat grief. The protagonist, Zauner experiences various difficulties that turn into conflicts. Some of the conflicts she faced were difficulties in adapting to the American environment, especially American culture. She was more attached to Korean culture and she also gets bullied by her friends at school as a Korean-American girl. Zauner experienced various racist acts from white people. Another conflict he faces is depression due to the death of her mother and the pressure on his future dreams.

Based on the above statement, there are two statements of the problem that will be discussed:

1. What are the protagonist's external conflicts found in the novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner?
2. How are the protagonist's internal conflicts described in the novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner?

From the statement of the problems above, it is obvious that the researchers discuss the external and internal conflicts of the protagonist in the novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner. The researchers are interested in this topic because this novel is a memoir of Zauner's journey. It ranges from feeling racism in America because she was born as an American-Korean; then, the death of her mother made her depressed. She also got the pressure to fulfill her mother's dreams about her future. Moreover, the discussion of Korean culture is very few. As we know, Korean culture is very popular these days, from drama, music, food, and the Korean way of life.

2. Literature Review

Although literature is synonymous with beauty, the world of literature does not only talk about beauty, but also the meaning of life, love, and affection. Literary work contains critical ideas aimed at the government and social realities that are deemed incompatible with the hopes and interests of the community (Manugeran, et al, 2020). In a literary work, characterization is an important element because without it the story will not develop and will not be interesting. A character is an imaginary person who lives in a story. The characters in the story can be divided into three parts, namely the protagonist, antagonist, and tritagonist. The protagonist is a character who plays the main role in a novel. The antagonist is the most prominent of the characters who are opposite the protagonist or hero. Meanwhile, the tritagonist is a supporting or supporting character in a story. Thus, it can be concluded that the protagonist is the main character in a story. The protagonist is the center of attention that can represent the views and values of the reader.

Conflict will occur if there is no agreement or regular arrangement between one desire and another. Conflict can also occur if there is no agreement between one ego and another. This usually happens in real life which most people often avoid. However, in the world of literature, conflict is needed and can even be said to be important in order to support the contents of the story. If there is no conflict in a story, then it is certain that the story will not live and attract readers to read it because there are no events that can

be felt. It's not even an exaggeration if writing literary works is building and developing conflicts because the more and more interesting the conflicts that occur, the more interesting the story will be to read. Nasution, et.al (2020) states that conflict can be defined as a clash between individuals arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirement and even sometimes perceptions. According to Stanton (1995: 31) conflict is a physical, moral, mental, emotional, and destiny resistance between people, animals, or even within ourselves. Stanton (1995: 16) also states that according to the form of events, conflict is divided into two parts, namely external conflict and internal conflict. External conflict is a conflict occurring between a character and something outside himself/herself. It could be the environment and also human beings or other characters. While internal conflict is a conflict that occurs in the heart or soul of characters. However, Stanton did not elaborate on the two types of conflict. Therefore, researchers collect explanations and understanding of external conflicts and internal conflicts through several experts.

According to Nurgiyantoro (2007: 124), external conflict is a conflict that occurs between a character and something outside himself, perhaps with the natural environment, perhaps with the human environment. He adds that external conflict is divided into two types: physical and social conflict.

1. Physical Conflict (elemental conflict)

Nurgiyantoro (2007: 124), states that physical conflict is a conflict caused by a collision between a character and the natural environment. For example, conflicts and or problems experienced by a character due to major floods, long droughts, volcanic eruptions, and so on.

2. Social Conflict

Social conflict is conflicts caused by the existence of social contact between humans, or problems that arise as a result of human relations. Examples include labor problems, bullying, disputes, wars, and other social relations cases (Nurgiyantoro, 2007: 124).

To clarify the understanding of social conflict, the researcher takes the meaning of social conflict from Sayuti and Kenny. Sayuti (2000: 42-43) says that conflicts like this usually occur between characters and their surroundings. Conflicts like this usually occur between characters and their surroundings. This conflict arises from individual attitudes toward the social environment regarding various problems that occur in society.

Moreover, Nurgiyantoro (2007: 124) also states that internal conflict is a conflict that occurs in the heart or soul of a character in a story. Conflicts like this are usually experienced by humans themselves. the type of conflict included in internal conflict is conflict within a character (psychological conflict). It is also known as psychological conflict. This conflict occurs in the heart and soul of a character in the story. So, this is a conflict that humans experience with themselves, more of an internal human problem. For example, things that happen as a result of conflicts between two desires, beliefs, different choices, hopes, or other problems.

To clarify the understanding of psychological conflict, the researcher uses explanations from various experts such as Sayuti, Soraya, Krauss, and, Morsella. According to Sayuti (2000: 42-43), internal conflict (psychological conflict) occurs within a person (character). This type of conflict usually occurs in the form of a

character's struggle against himself, so that he can overcome and determine what he will do.

3. Research Method

In conducting research, a research design is needed. A research design is a way of working to research so that the research process can be completed by the objectives of the study being raised. According to Silaen (2018: 23), a research design is a design regarding the entire process needed in planning and also conducting research. The researchers used descriptive approach to conduct this research. The descriptive approach means that the data collected is in the form of notes or memos, personal documents, or other official documents. The researchers used this method so that the presented data can describe the reality and phenomena that occur in the novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner, namely the protagonist's conflict. Data of this research are the quotations obtained from the novel, which relate to the external and internal conflicts of the protagonist.

In conducting this research, the researchers took several steps to collect data. Data collection shows how the procedures for data collection and analysis are structured (Mitsla & Hariani, 2021). In collecting data, the researchers used library research. Data collection procedures in this research were taking the data from the novel in the form of words, phrases, and sentences; highlighting the data; taking notes to help identify them; and, classifying the data according to the theory. There were several procedures used to analyze the data. They are analyzing the data based on the theory, finding and describing the protagonist's conflict in the novel, and presenting and interpreting data.

4. Discussion

Conflict can happen to anyone and in all circles. We cannot know the conflict that happened to someone without paying attention to or analyzing it first. Therefore, the researchers would analyze the conflicts that occur to the protagonist, namely Michelle Zauner. Based on the obtained data, Michelle experienced both external and internal conflicts.

4.1 External Conflict

Referring to the explanation regarding external conflict presented by several experts, it is found that there are two external conflicts in the novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner. These include difficulties of being mixed-blood and disputes with her father.

Difficulty of Being Mixed-Blood

According to the term, mixed-blood means a person who is born or comes from two or more races. Being a mixed-blood certainly has advantages and disadvantages. An example of an advantage is the increase in genetics, namely the possibility of increasing stature and intelligence and being able to easily adapt to their environment. However, someone with mixed blood will find it difficult to recognize their identity, feel isolated, and will face questioning or discrimination based on their appearance. This statement is in line with the data below.

I didn't have the tools then to question the beginnings of my complicated desire for whiteness. In Eugene, I was one of just a few mixed-race kids at my school and most people thought of me as

Asian. I felt awkward and undesirable, and no one ever complimented my appearance. In Seoul, most Koreans assumed I was Caucasian, until my mother stood beside me and they could see the half of her fused to me, and I made sense. Suddenly, my “exotic” look was something to be celebrated (Zauner, 2021: 34-35).

The data above shows the difficulties experienced by Michelle in adapting. Michelle is of a mixed-blood, where her mother is Korean and her father is white American. She took half-bloods from her mother and father. Michelle has skin like an Asian but she gets her body posture from her father, which has double eyelids and a sharp nose. Therefore, she became a little different from the other children of a single blood, that is, Whites. Indirectly, Michelle feels rejected by monoracial groups. As a result, she feels unwanted and awkward to mingle with her friends. So, it can be concluded that Michelle's difficulty being mixed-blood is due to skin color problems.

Michelle's difficulty with being mixed-blood can also be seen in the data below.

After gym class and when I was still reeling from the shame of my fall from athletic grace, a girl from my class confronted me in the bathroom with what would become a familiar line of questioning.

“Are you Chinese?” “No.”

“Are you Japanese?” I shook my head.

“Well, what are you, then?”

(Zauner, 2021: 89-90).

The data above shows the confusion of Michelle's friends in identifying where she comes from. China and Japan are the two countries that Americans are most familiar with partly because the Chinese always build settlements wherever they live, which are called Chinatown. Michelle's friends cannot know Michelle's origin. At first, Michelle is proud to be half Korean, but because the environment she lived in is not supportive, she starts eliminating it. As a result, Michelle experienced an identity crisis, where she tries to eliminate some of her own race to be more inclined to another race.

Disputes with Her Father

Many cases occur in families about disputes between parents and children. In line with the discussion above, the researcher found that there is a dispute between Michelle and her father. This statement will be discussed in more detail through the quotation below.

Per usual, my dad drove aggressively, weaving in and out of traffic at odds with the naturally slow pace of the small college town. It felt strange to be together without my mother. The two of us never spent much time alone. My father was happy as a provider. His mere existence in our lives was testament enough to how he'd transcended his upbringing and overcome his addictions, and that counted for something (Zauner, 2021: 69).

In fact, fathers are a source of inspiration for daughters and are very pleasant person with lots of love. However, from the quotation above, it is clear that the dispute between Michelle and her father is due to differences in character and temperament. Her father often took aggressive actions that made Michelle uncomfortable. This

discomfort eventually distanced them and made them rarely spend time together. This happened because her father is too busy as a provider so he never made time for Michelle. As a result, the inner bond between parents and children is not formed.

Another dispute between Michelle and her father can be seen below.

"You have to promise you're going to be there for me," he said.

"Promise me, okay?". He reached out for me and held on to my wrist, searching for my reassurance with his eyes half-open. In his other hand, he was holding a half-eaten slice of Jarlsberg that folded limply over as he leaned toward me. I fought the urge to rip my arm away from him. I knew I should be feeling sympathy or empathy, camaraderie or compassion, but I only burned with resentment. He was an undesirable partner in a game with the highest of stakes and insurmountable odds. He was my father and I wanted him to soberly reassure me, not try to goad me into navigating this disheartening path alone. I could not even cry in his presence for fear he would take the moment over, pit his grief against mine in a competition of who loved her more, and who had more to lose. Moreover, it shook me to my core that he had said aloud what I considered to be unspeakable. The possibility that she couldn't make it, that there could even be an us without her (Zauner, 2021: 84-85).

The data above illustrates Michelle's dislike of her father. The dialogue above occurred when they learned that Michelle's mother will not be able to survive her colon cancer. In fact, a father is a protector and an encouragement for his child, but it's different from Michelle's father who seeks protection for his child. Michelle, who has rarely been loved by her father, does not know whether to feel sympathy or affection. In these critical times, Michelle wanted her father to be able to comfort her, not to go through this sadness alone. Therefore, she hates his father's attitude.

4.2 Internal Conflict

From the analysis, it is found that there are two internal conflicts in the novel. These include sadness of her mother's illness and death, and pressure of future dreams.

Sadness of her Mother's Illness and Death

Apart from fathers, mothers are the most valuable figures for their children. This is what Michelle also experiences when she learns that her mother is diagnosed with bowel cancer and then died. She experiences deep sorrow. The sadness is discussed through the data below.

"Gwaenchanh-a, gwaenchanh-a," she said. It's okay, it's okay. Koreanno's longer words so familiar, the gentle coo I'd heard my whole life that assured me whatever ache was at hand would pass. Even as she was dying, my mother offered me solace, her instinct to nurture overwhelming any personal fear she might have felt but kept expertly hidden. She was the only person in the world who could tell me that things would all work out somehow. The eye of the storm, a calm witness to the wreckage spinning out into its end (Zauner, 2021: 111).

The quotation above shows the sadness that Michelle feels when she learns that her mother had bowel cancer. Even though Michelle and her mother often clashed because they opposed her dream of becoming a musician, she still loved her. Therefore, her mother calms and comforts her so that the sadness would pass. Michelle vents her sadness by crying profusely, and this was a very reasonable response. Crying is an emotion caused by shock and panic.

Another sadness shown by Michelle is when her mother died, and this is illustrated through the quotation below.

Rigor mortis made it extremely difficult to dress her. Her arms were so stiff I was afraid of breaking them as I pushed them through the sleeves. Her body was heavy and when I set down her weight, her head plopped onto the pillow and her eyes bounced open. I let out a wail so full of anguish, neither Peter nor my father dared to enter. I kept at it, pushing at her dead limbs, my own body collapsing beside her every other moment to writhe and cry and scream into the mattress. Overwhelmed by wretchedness, I had to pause to let it settle. I was not prepared for this. No one had prepared me for this. Why must I feel it? Why must I have this memory? They were just going to put her in a bag, like trash to be removed. They were just going to burn her (Zauner, 2021: 145).

From the data above, it is illustrated that Michelle is feeling sad. This response is reflected in Michelle's behavior when her mother died, she is devastated and unable to control herself. She could not bear to see his mother lying lifeless and unprepared for this situation.

The latest data to show Michelle's sadness after her mother died can be proven through the quotation below.

I could feel my heart hardening—crusting over, growing a husk, a callus. I deleted the photographs from the hospital of my mother and me in her bed wearing matching pajamas. I deleted the photo she sent me the day she got her hair cut like Mia Farrow, shyly posing as if the hardest part was over. As I organized the cupboards by the kitchen phone, consolidating loose batteries, tossing old photographs of blurry landscapes, setting aside old undeveloped rolls of film, I came across the green spiral notebook where I had logged all her medications and calorie counts. Those desperate sums, that hopeful inventory, recording every coaxed sip and peck in some sad effort to keep pushing through. I ripped the pages and pulled the metal spiral apart, screaming as I shredded my stupid, useless calculations into innumerable pieces (Zauner, 2021: 174).

Everyone has a different reaction when they lose someone they love. There is no right way to grieve, and no set amount of time can cure the pain. Grief is a difficult and painful process. Emotional numbness, disbelief, hopelessness, or denial are some of the reactions that occur in those left behind. From the data above, it can be seen that the despair caused by the death of her mother made Michelle harden her heart. She even deletes the photos when her mother is sick so as not to remember the misfortune again. This response is a denial of the sadness she is feeling.

Pressure of Future Dreams

Mental pressure is a person's emotional state when experiencing pressure from various things, and when someone experiences difficult things, someone tends to experience a deadlock in the mind. There will be things that hinder or conflict between desires and beliefs. In line with this statement, Michelle Zauner feels the pressure of her future dreams. Therefore, this will be discussed through the data below.

When I found out my mother was sick, I'd been out of college for four years and I was well aware I didn't have much to show for it. I had a degree in creative writing and film I wasn't really using. I worked three part-time jobs and played guitar and sang in a rock band called Little Big League that no one had ever heard of. I rented a room for three hundred dollars in North Philly, the same city where my father grew up and from which he eventually fled to Korea when he was around my age (Zauner, 2021: 38).

Michelle dreams of becoming a musician. She has been struggling for years to make her dream come true. Even she does not pay attention to the opposition of her parents. However, when she found out that her mother is sick, her dreams seemed to hit and turn against her. Michelle thinks that in order to pursue her dream of becoming a musician, she has abandoned her education. As a result, she has no titles and cannot boast of any accomplishments. There is nothing her parents can be proud of more than her. In fact, her band, Little Big League, is not well known and has minimal income. Therefore, Michelle works three part-time jobs to still be able to make ends meet. From the data above it can be said that there is conflict whether she will continue to be a musician or follow her mother's wishes so that she can continue her education.

Michelle believes that one day her band will be successful and famous. But she still cannot be denied that the path she has chosen is getting harder. This is illustrated by the quotation below.

I decided to stick around Philadelphia because it was easy and cheap and because I was convinced Little Big League might someday make it. But it had been four years now and the band had neither made it nor shown any real sign of spurning anonymity. A few months back I'd been fired from the Mexican fusion restaurant where I'd waitressed for a little over a year, the longest I'd managed to hold on to a job. I worked there with my boyfriend, Peter, whom I'd originally lured there in a long-game play to woo myself out of the friend zone, where I'd been exiled seemingly in perpetuity, but shortly after I finally won him over, I was fired and he was promoted. When I called my mom for a little sympathy, incredulous that the restaurant would fire such an industrious and charming worker as myself, she replied, "Well, Michelle, anyone can carry a tray." (Zauner, 2021: 39).

The data above shows the difficulties that Michelle faced. After going against her parents' wishes, she decides to live in Philadelphia, apart from the cheaper cost of living, she is also sure the band would be successful there. Success in career and work is the hope that always surrounds her. However, it has been four years since the band has shown no success. In fact, she is fired from her job at a Mexican fusion restaurant. When she complained, her mother instead answers with sarcasm. The pressures that she

continues to experience, increasingly distance her from her dream of becoming a successful musician. Her hopes were clouded by the problems that keeps coming.

The pressure Michelle feels isn't just from other people and her job. But it also came from the person closest to him, namely his mother. This statement will be proven from the data below.

“What’d you think of my show yesterday?” I said, squirting gochujang into my bibimbap.

“I’m just waiting for you to give this up,” she said. My eyes fell into my rice. I broke my yolk with my spoon and pushed it around the stone bowl over the vegetables. My mother leaned in and began spooning some bean sprout soup into my bibimbap. The liquid sizzled against the sides.

“I should have never let you take guitar class,” she said. “You should be thinking about the colleges, not doing this weird thing.”

“What if I don’t want to go to college?” I said brazenly, wrenching away from her grasp. I shoveled a spoonful of the scalding mixed rice into my mouth, lobbing it around with my tongue, creating an air pocket that let out the steam. My mother looked around the restaurant nervously, as if I had just pledged faith to a satanic commune. I watched her try to collect herself.

“I don’t care if you don’t want to go to college. You have to go to college.”

“You don’t know me at all,” I said. “This weird thing—is the thing that I love.” (Zauner, 2021: 59-60).

From the quotation above, the fight between Michelle and her mother is illustrated. Previously, Michelle invites the parents to watch her band perform. So now, she wants to know what her mother thought of the show. However, instead of complimenting her, her mother replies sarcastically that Michelle is just wasting her time and she is just waiting for Michelle to give up on her dream. She adds that she should not have let her learn guitar. Her mother wants her daughter to go to college even though Michelle does not want to and thinks her dream is something strange. Receiving opposition from her mother certainly makes Michelle depressed so that she releases her anger. It can be concluded that there is a conflict between her mother’s wishes and Michelle's dreams. Her mother wants her daughter to stay in school while Michelle wanted to be a musician, which her mother thought is odd.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the novel *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner, the researchers came to several conclusions. Michelle experiences both external and internal conflicts. External conflict is illustrated when Michelle has a) difficulties of being mixed-blood, b) Being not compatible with her father; and then, internal conflict is illustrated with a) sadness of her mother's illness and death, and pressure of future dreams. The external conflict that happened to Michelle is a social conflict. Social conflict is a conflict that occurs between characters and their environment, or among human relations because of strife, conflict, or oppression. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that Michelle experiences conflict with the American environment,

namely difficulty of being mixed-blood and experiencing conflict with their father i.e., incompatibility with their father.

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