

DEPRESSION IN DANIELLE STEEL'S NOVEL *BIG GIRL*

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Abstract

This study explores the protagonist's struggle with depression as portrayed in Danielle Steel's novel, *Big Girl*. Depression, a prevalent and debilitating mental health condition, profoundly impacts one's emotions, cognition, behavior, and perception of the world. It is not uncommon for individuals to experience multiple episodes of depression throughout their lives, highlighting its chronic and recurrent nature. Given its severity, depression demands serious attention and intervention. Regrettably, many older adults grapple with undiagnosed and untreated depression, often hesitating to seek professional assistance. The analysis presented herein focuses on discerning the root causes and consequential effects of the protagonist's depression. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks proposed by Munthe and Dewi, this study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology. The findings illuminate that the protagonist's depression stems from various sources, including internal struggles, familial dynamics, and societal pressures. Specifically, she grapples with the weight of paternal expectations, a diminished sense of self-worth, unfair comparisons, and societal rejection. Moreover, the novel vividly portrays the adverse impacts of depression, encompassing weight loss, disrupted sleep patterns, feelings of profound emptiness, and even suicidal ideation.

Keywords: causes of depression; depression; impacts of depression; protagonist

1. Introduction

Big Girl is a novel by Danielle Steel, published by Delacorte Press in February 23, 2010. It was written by Danielle Steel, a novelist who is famous in America. Danielle Fernandes Dominique Schuelein was born in New York in 1947, United States, better known by the name *Danielle Steel*. She is an active person in writing. She has written many novels. *Big Girl* tells about a girl who has a big body and is ridiculed by her own family.

Big Girl is Steel's eightieth novel, talking about Victoria Dawson, a chubby little girl with blond hair, blue eyes, and ordinary looks and she has always felt out of place in her family, especially in body-conscious L.A. Her father, Jim, is tall and slender, and her mother, Christina, is a fine-boned, dark-haired beauty. Both are self-centered, outspoken, and disappointed by their daughter's looks. But regardless of her accomplishments, Victoria's parents know just what to say to bring her down. She will always be her father's "big girl," and her mother's constant disapproval is equally

unkind. Time goes on while Victoria still gets bullied by her family especially her father and mother who are ashamed to have a child like her; then she decides to leave home to find her true self. After that, Victoria is quite successful with many achievements but still does not mean in the eyes of her parents, they still do not like her because she is big. There are some causes of her depression such as: getting pressure from the father, lacking of self-esteem, getting unfair comparisons and rejected from the society because of the depression, she gets some impacts such as: weighting loss, sleeping disturbances, feeling of emptiness and trying to commit suicide.

2. Literature Review

According Atkinson (2010) depression is a feeling or mood disorder that is accompanied by the psychological components such as sadness, distress, hopelessness and despair along with biological or somatic components such as anorexia, constipation and cold sweats. Depression is said to be normal if it occurs in certain situations, mild and in a short time period of time. If the depression occurs out of the ordinary and continues then the depression is considered abnormal.

Alford & Beck (2009) state that depression is a psychological disorder characterized by deviations in individual feelings, cognition, and behavior. Individuals who experience depressive disorders can feel sadness, loneliness, decreased self-concept, and show withdrawal behavior from their environment. Meanwhile, Santrock (2003) explains that there is a term depressed mood in which a person experiences sadness and several other negative affections in a not too long period of time because of his failure to carry out certain tasks. Depression shows symptoms such as the emergence of behaviors and emotions that reflect negative affection.

Depression is a common problem that occurs due to several causes, such as changes in physical condition, loss of work, loss of friends, isolation from the environment and loneliness. Depression is also associated with excessive mental activity. Besides that, the causes of depression are quite diverse. Munthe (2007) mentions several causes of depression as follows:

- a) Disappointment that comes from pressure, physical exhaustion, or other reasons. Depression can be caused by stress, and the amount of conflict that is a stimulus psychological or physiological stress on an organism; physical and psychological pressures on the body's organs and or the self; a state of psychological tension due to the presence of perceived fear or anxiety so that it will have an impact on physics. Beside that, internal and external pressures and other problematic conditions in life can lead to excessive depression.
- b) Lack of self-esteem which tends to be exaggerated to the extreme. It does not only make a person feel a loss of confidence, but also makes them lose trust in others. If a person retaliates against the person who has hurt him, he will lose the close relationship that links people together. In addition, a person who commits wrong doing sometimes does not feel or think that his actions are wrongful and cause others to lose confidence.
- c) Unfair comparisons. Comparing oneself to others socially is a form of measurement and self assessment to identify where an individual stands according to their own set of standards and emotions about themselves. But comparing two things unfairly can affect our self-esteem and mood.
- d) Two conflicting feelings. Conflict means having or showing confusing and mutually inconsistent feelings. Some people currently have conflicts with family

and others. They show conflicting feelings about their own problems. People have conflicting feelings about parents, children, work, and family. Constant misunderstandings will result in a person being depressed to judge who is right among them.

- e) Rejection or limited relationships with peers. Peer rejection in elementary school and greater involvement with antisocial peers in early adolescence are correlated to adolescent externalizing behavior problems. Experiences of peer rejection can lead to antisocial behavior, as well as depression from being alone. Externalizing problems are most common when rejection is experienced repeatedly.
- f) Unstable goals. Deep sadness and lack of interest in life due to not being able to achieve what one wants is one of the causes of depression that results in mental disorders involving mood. Although everyone can feel sad, people who experience symptoms of depression will experience intense and persistent sadness that will trigger a sense of helplessness. If this condition is left without care or treatment, suicidal thoughts will arise and increase.

Meanwhile, according Santrock (2003), there are several factors that cause depression, they are :

- a) the bond between mother and child that does not provide a sense of safe.
- b) the absence of love and affection in childcare

Based on the above opinions, it can be concluded that depression occurs because individuals attribute various negative life events such as disappointment, lack of self-esteem, unfair comparisons, two conflicting feelings, illness, excessive mental activity, rejection and unattainable goals. In addition, depression can be caused by several factors such as communication between mother and child, school problems, social rejection, mother's parenting style, having a parent who suffers from depression, lack of optimism, having no pessimism and limited peer relationships.

Depression has an impact on physical function, psychosocial function and thought of suicide (Dewi, 2014).

a. Physical function

The health status of people with depression can decline if the person who experiences depression has an association with somatic complaints compared to those who do not experience depression. The impact of somatic complaints that will appear in depression are symptoms of loss of appetite, weight loss, digestive system disorders, and sleep disturbances.

Additional impact of depressive symptoms are chronic fatigue and severe depression can cause disruption of psychomotor activities such as slow body movements, verbal responses, and unwillingness to speak. Other impacts that arise are pain, discomfort and impaired sexual function.

b. Psychosocial function

Mood changes due to feelings of sadness are not realized. However they often say they are lonely. Impacts that often appear are feelings of wanting to cry but not being able to cry, feelings of emptiness, unhappiness, uselessness, and low self-esteem.

c. Suicide

For people who have been depressed for a long time, suicide is the solution. Prevention of these events can be done by studying risk factors and symptoms that appear. Thoughts of despair and feelings of uselessness due to depression can lead to suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, indirect suicidal behavior will occur such as hunger strikes and not taking medication. After that comes the behavior of hurting behavior such as hanging oneself or drinking poison.

3. Research Method

To do the analysis, qualitative research method can clarify every point identified. Moleong (2007: 4) mentions that qualitative method produces descriptive data in written forms. In this research, some procedures or steps are done to gather the data holistically such as collecting the data obtained from Danielle Steel's Novel *Big Girl*, taking important note based on the words, phrases, and sentences related to the focus of this study, classifying the data based on the research objective. Data analysis is used to analyze the valid data. Therefore, the researchers analyze the data referring to words, phrases, and sentences tending to matters of depression and the sub-topics. in Danielle Steel's Novel *Big Girl*.

4. Discussion

This study discusses the causes and impacts of depression in Danielle Steel's Novel *Big Girl* by using the theory of Munthe (2007) and Dewi (2014).

4.1 The Causes of The Protagonist's Depression

The protagonist's depression in the novel is seen since her father and mother begin to recognize that victoria is not their daughter because she does not look like them, they love Victoria's younger sibling more.

4.1.1 Getting Pressure from Her Father

Victoria has big body, blue eyes and blonde hair. She looks like Queen Victoria from Great Britain. She is very different from her father and mother who tend to have thinner and taller bodies. She does not even look like her sibling. Actually, Jim Dawson as her father wants a son but it does not matter to have a daughter because Jim is grateful because he is able to have offspring. The problems for Victoria arises when her younger sister is born with a beautiful and perfect physique, her parents often compare her, especially her father, Jim Dawson.

The first pressure from her father can be seen on her first sister's birthday. Jim names his second child Grace. She has a similar face with him and she is very beautiful and has white skin. Her sister even has the same colour with her father. He says that Grace is the most beautiful baby he has ever seen; he even compares Grace to Victoria. It is seen in the following quotations:

"I guess you were our little tester cake," he said, ruffling her hair affectionately. "This time we got the recipe just right," he commented happily, as Grandmother Dawson explained that a tester cake was what you made to check the combination of ingredients and the heat of the oven. It never came out right the first time, she said, so you threw the tester cake away and tried again. It made Victoria suddenly

terrified that because Grace had come out so perfectly, maybe they would throw her away.
(Steel. 2010: 23).

From the quotations above, it can be explained that Jim would rather recognize Grace as his child than Victoria. He tells Victoria that she is a failed experiment and Grace is a successful experiment. Her father's statement haunts Victoria that they would throw her away. These words and pressure from her father are the beginning of Victoria's depression.

The next pressure, when Victoria wants to find a lover, of course she has difficulties in this matter. This is because of her physique so that she is less attractive to men. However, the interesting thing about this moment is the pressure that is thrown by her father. Instead of supporting his daughter, her father drops his daughter's self-esteem. It is seen in the following quotations:

And Victoria was proving her parents right at every turn. She wasn't pretty enough to find a man, according to her father, and much too fat to attract one. And according to her mother, she was too intelligent to keep one. Either way, she had no one.
(Steel. 2010: 23).

The quotations above clearly show that Victoria's father does not support his daughter. According to him, his daughter is much too fat and big. Her father's actions often made Victoria moody and lacking in self-confidence. A father should support his child in any condition instead of pressuring the child to be perfect. This is what causes Victoria to become depressed.

4.1.2 Lacking of Self-Esteem

Since Jim says that Victoria's sister Grace is more beautiful and perfect than she, Victoria becomes insecure even though at first she never feels jealous of her sister because she sincerely loves her and intends to keep her forever. But because Jim is very often proud of Grace rather than she, Victoria often lacks confidence. It is seen in the following quotations:

She thought of what her father had said then about her being the tester cake, and wondered if it was true. Maybe they had only had her to make sure they got it right with Grace. And if that was true, they certainly had. She was the sweetest thing Victoria had ever seen, and her parents and grandmother said so too.
(Steel, 2010: 24).

From the quotations above, it is seen that Victoria feels lack of confidence as a result of her father's jokes. Although it is just a joke for her father, the fact that he keeps repeating the words as he looks at Grace and this makes Victoria feel insecure and depressed.

The next quotations show that Jim Dawson always gives bad comments about Victoria. They are having vacation moment at a beach. Due to her big body, her breasts are quite large for her age. Her father comments that only her legs are good. It makes Victoria sad. It is seen in the following quotations:

Her father's comments about her looks always made her sad. And her mother pretended not to hear, never reassured her, and never came to her defense. Victoria knew instinctively that her mother was disappointed by her looks too.
(Steel, 2010: 37).

The above quotations show that both of her parents are actually disappointed with her body. Although her mother never says anything bad about her but she has an instinct that her mother does not like her physique either. How poor Victoria is. Moreover, her father always drops her daughter's self-esteem in front of his family and even in front of the other people.

4.1.3 Getting Unfair Comparisons

Jim likes to make jokes to Victoria even in front of the people. It is like comparing the perfect Grace to the Big Victoria. It is an unbalanced comparison. Victoria tolerates it at first, but over time this makes her depressed because for her it is a kind of insult for her to compare her and her younger sister in front of many people. It is seen in the following quotations:

And by then, her father still regularly teased her about being their "tester cake." Victoria knew exactly what that meant, that Grace was beautiful and she wasn't, and they had gotten it right the second time around. She had explained that to a friend once, who had looked horrified by the explanation, much more so than Victoria, who was used to the term by now. Her father didn't hesitate to use it. Christine had objected to it once or twice, and Jim assured her that Victoria knew he was just teasing. But in fact Victoria believed him. She was convinced by then that she was the mistake, and Grace their ultimate achievement. That impression was reinforced by each person who admired Grace. Victoria's sense of being invisible became deeply entrenched. Once people had commented on how adorable and beautiful Gracie was, they had no idea what to say about Victoria, so they said nothing and ignored her.
(Steel, 2010: 28)

From the quotations above, it is clear that her father is comparing Victoria with Grace and this hurts Victoria's heart deeply. It makes her depressed and felt ostracized. The unfair comparison between Grace and Victoria becomes more apparent throughout the day. Her father always praises Grace. It is like night and day even. This makes Victoria even more depressed. It is seen in the following quotations:

But Gracie had had a very different set of parents than Victoria did. Gracie had parents who worshipped and adored her, and supported her every move and decision. That was heady stuff. And she had no reason to rebel against them, or even separate from them. She did everything their father thought she should. He was her idol. And Victoria had had parents who ignored her, ridiculed her, and never approved of a single move she made.
(Steel, 2010: 249)

From the quotations above, it can be seen that Victoria's father totally loves Grace than her. He always supports Grace's move, and decision; however, Victoria is never supported by her parents and even ignored and sneered at with harsh words. These things obviously make her depressed for the rest of the day.

4.1.4 Being Rejected by the Society

On the other hand, some people around Victoria seem to avoid her causing her to get more depressed as she realized that these people truly do not like her. It is seen in the following quotations:

What Victoria was more than anything was different from the rest of them. Enough so for everyone to notice. And more than once, people had asked her parents within her hearing if she was adopted. She felt like one of those picture cards they held up at school that showed an apple, an orange, a banana, and a pair of galoshes, while the teacher asked which one was different. In her family, Victoria was always the galoshes. It was a strange feeling she'd had all her life, of being different, and not fitting in. At least if one of her parents had looked like her, she would have felt as though she belonged. But as it was, she didn't, she was the one person out of sync, and no one had ever called her a beauty, as they did Gracie. Gracie was picture perfect and Victoria was the unattractive older sister, who didn't match the rest of them. (Steel, 2010: 30)

The quotation above clearly shows that Victoria is not recognized by the society as Jim Dawson's child, it is also reinforced by jokes from her own father which makes Victoria very embarrassed and even becomes depressed. The Society is more happy to recognize Grace as Jim's child. In the next chapter there are some plots of the story tell how depressed victoria was due it.

4.2 The Impacts of the Protagonist's Depression

The impact is visible since Victoria is already feeling alienated from her family and could not take all the slurs about her anymore. The depression she has been experiencing has had many adverse effects, such as: weighting loss, sleeping disturbances, feeling of emptiness, and trying to commit suicide.

4.2.1 Weighting loss

One of the impacts of depression is weighting loss as stress makes the body's condition unstable forcing the body to lose weight. In this case, Victoria as the protagonist likes eating too much but the pressure from her parents to have an ideal body makes her doing anything for having it. It is seen in the following quotations:

Her parents did not know what was wrong with her, because she did not tell them what she had done. Victoria was very depressed by their demands. She did everything she could to be thin. The evil drink had made her very sick with dysentery, and she had not left the house for several weeks, saying she had the flu. Her mother told her father that it was typical pre-middle school jitters. But in the end, just by making her so sick, the herbal tea caused him to lose eight pounds. (Steel, 2010: 41)

From the quotations above, it can be explained that because of the depression Victoria loses weight at all costs, so she would not have to listen to her parents' ravings about her body making her depressed. Victoria has her got weight in a few pounds. It happens because she should sleep much to recover her energy lost due to the accident. Because of it, she does not eat much and must have enough sleep. The accident happens because she loses her focus caused by depression. It is seen in the following quotations:

She had lost a few pounds from not eating much while she was sleeping her way through her recovery, and the pain pills had killed her appetite.

(Steel, 2010: 349)

From the above quotations, it is clear that the depression of Victoria makes her unable to sleep well. To recover her energy, she should sleep much but it makes her lose her appetite. Her depression has many bad impacts for her health. It is so terrible and horrible.

4.2.2 Sleeping Disturbances

Victoria is recently abandoned by her boyfriend and she goes into a deep depression because the boy only takes pleasure from her for a moment, then leaves her. The boy always makes fun of her big nose and body. She suffers from depression because of that and could not sleep for several nights resulting in her falling among the snowdrifts during the Christmas season. It is seen in the following quotations:

“Will it hurt a lot?” Gracie sounded worried for her, which touched Victoria. Gracie was the only one who ever cared about her, no matter what. “I don’t know,” Victoria said honestly. “I’ll be asleep.” “I mean after.”

“They’ll give me pain pills to take home, and she said I’ll be pretty bruised for several weeks. And slightly swollen for many months, although most people won’t see it. But I have nothing planned anyway, so this is a good time. I’m doing it the day after Christmas.”

(Steel, 2010: 325).

The quotations above clearly show that Victoria is so depressed for her big body. It makes her unable to sleep well and she loses focus in her activities. She gets accident for it. She has pain and must sleep well to recover her body in good condition.

4.2.3 Feeling of Emptiness

Victoria is often with her sister and parents but because she feels unfairly loved by them, she often feels empty and even wants to be alone. Her depression caused by her parents makes her prefer loneliness. It is seen in the following quotations:

She sat in the backseat watching New York slide by and people swarm around like ants in the streets. All she could hope was that she would be part of it one day. She expected to hear back from Madison in a few weeks. And she realized that if she didn’t get the job, she would have to start interviewing at other schools, in Chicago, and maybe even L.A., although the last thing she wanted to do was go home. But if nothing else turned up, she might not have any

other choice. She dreaded the thought of living in L.A. again, and even worse, the possibility of living at home, and facing all the same problems she'd always had there. Living with her parents would be too depressing.
(Steel, 2010: 102).

The statements above clearly show that Victoria begins to feel uncomfortable with her family and she prefers to live alone. This happens because of the depression she experiences from the words and actions of her parents who do not recognize her as their child.

4.2.4 Trying to Commit Suicide

Victoria's mother rarely says anything bad about her big body, but sometimes she also does not fully accept her daughter's physical condition. She often gives her advice that forces her to make her body better; this makes Victoria become depressed and prefer to die. At that time her mother tells her to take ballet classes to make her body thinner but she is very embarrassed to meet girls who have good bodies and have to wear tight clothes. It is seen in the following quotations:

Her mother thought she should cut her hair and start an exercise program in the fall. She wanted her to do gymnastics or ballet, without realizing how uncomfortable Victoria was about appearing in front of other girls in a leotard. Victoria would have died first. She'd rather keep the figure she had than lose it that way.
(Steel, 2010: 51).

The statements above are very clear that Victoria is not willing to do all of her mother's advice. She is not unwilling to listen to her mother but she has her own way of losing weight but her mother does not understand what she feels, so she thinks it is better for her never to exist in this world, rather than to have to endure all types of shamefulness.

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the causes and repercussions of the protagonist's depression in Danielle Steel's *Big Girl*, several conclusive points can be taken. Firstly, the protagonist's depression predominantly emanates from her familial environment, particularly her father's relentless criticism and societal stigmatization due to her physique. Secondly, the underlying factors fueling the protagonist's depression encompass a combination of external pressures, a profound lack of self-esteem, enduring unfair comparisons, and pervasive societal rejection. Lastly, the protagonist's struggle with depression manifests in a myriad of debilitating effects, including significant weight loss, disrupted sleep patterns, an overwhelming sense of emptiness, and even contemplation of suicide.

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