

## VICTIMIZATION OF QUEER INDIVIDUAL AS PORTRAYED IN ADAM SILVERA'S *MORE HAPPY THAN NOT* NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the formation of homosexual identity in an individual, the types of victimization and abuse towards queer people, as well as the effects of victimization. The researcher used Foucault's queer theory as a main theory for this study. The data used in this research were paragraphs, sentences, dialogues and narrations. The novel entitled *More Happy Than Not*, which was written by Adam Silvera in 2015, was used as the source of data for this research. The results from this study showed that the character Aaron Soto went through a rather difficult progress of homosexual identity formation, which he went back and forth between identity confusion and identity assumption phases. Aaron experienced several kinds of victimization, which include physical abuse, verbal abuse, and victimization in family settings. The abuse caused Aaron to experience physical injury, self blame, as well as feelings of internalized homophobia. The homosexual identity formation, victimization and the effects of victimization are related in a sense that they work like a cycle, and the three of them worked as a cause and effect.

**Keywords:** *queer, sexual orientation, victimization, character*

### ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pembentukan identitas homoseksual pada individual, jenis-jenis viktimisasi dan kekerasan terhadap orang-orang queer, serta efek dari viktimisasi tersebut. Peneliti menggunakan teori queer oleh Foucault sebagai teori utama dalam penelitian ini. Data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah paragraf, kalimat, dialog, dan narasi. Novel *More Happy Than Not* yang ditulis oleh Adam Silvera pada tahun 2015 digunakan sebagai sumber data. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa karakter Aaron Soto mengalami proses pembentukan identitas homoseksual yang cukup sulit, sebab ia berulang kali berada dalam fase identity confusion dan identity assumption. Aaron mengalami beberapa jenis viktimisasi, yaitu kekerasan fisik, kekerasan verbal, serta viktimisasi dalam lingkungan keluarga. Perlakuan tersebut menyebabkan Aaron mengalami cedera fisik, menyalahkan diri sendiri dan mengalami homofobia. Pembentukan identitas homoseksual,*

viktimisasi, dan efek dari viktimisasi tersebut berhubungan satu sama lain karena ketiganya terjadi seperti siklus sebab-akibat.

**Kata kunci:** queer, orientasi seksual, viktimisasi, karakter

## A. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Western society has slowly become more accepting and inclusive towards queer people. In the recent years, there have been more queer characters shown in TV series, films, and books. Over the years, the rights of the community are also being fought for. One example of this is marriage equality. On social media, many queer youths are also becoming more and more open about their queer identity online.

Even though the Western society has become more accepting towards queer people over the years, it does not mean that they have gotten the same treatment as the majority of people in society. To this day, many queer people still experience victimization from the hetero-normative society and unfair treatment on a daily basis. Queer people are often frowned upon and discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, especially in areas that are more conservative and less accepting. A lot of the times the act of victimization is even done by their family and friends, which cause them to hide their true sexual orientation in order to avoid being victimized. This is especially difficult for queer youths, who are more vulnerable to be affected by the victimization. Often times they have to conceal their true identity because they are afraid of the consequences that will occur if they decide to come out to their family. Some of them even refuse to admit that they are in fact queer, because generally being queer is seen as a deviation from the norm and an unnatural behavior. Some writers have written stories inspired by the experiences of queer people, one of which can be found in the 2015 novel titled *More Happy Than Not*.

The researcher is interested in analyzing the novel *More Happy Than Not* to find out how Aaron's homosexual identity is formed, what kind of victimization that Aaron experiences in his life as a gay boy, and how it affects him as a character in the novel. The researcher hopes that by analyzing this topic, the reader will gain more knowledge and insight of how the homosexual identity is formed and developed in an individual, how queer people experience victimization and hopefully will grow empathy and be more aware of the struggles that queer people experience.

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Character and Characterization

E. M. Forster explained in his book *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) that characters are categorized into two different classifications, flat character and round character. Flat characters tend to be no more than the typical and the stereotypes. They do not experience change, possess a fixed set of traits, predictable, and often a catchphrase (Keen 68). Round

characters, on the other hand, are much more complex than flat characters. They usually go through a significant change, experience character development throughout the novel, possess more than one quality, which make them feel more human-like and dynamic.

The qualities and traits of a character are indicated through characterization. This characterization may be explicit or implicit. Joseph Ewen explained that there are two basic types of textual indicators of character; they are direct definition and indirect presentation such as action, speech, external appearance and environment (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan, 61).

## **2. Queer Theory**

According to Kirsch, the principle of queer theory is the disassembling of common beliefs about gender and sexuality, from their representation in film, literature, and music to their placement in the social and physical sciences (33). Queer theory believes that categories of sexuality cannot be defined by such simple and binary oppositions as homosexual/heterosexual. Instead, queer theory recognizes sexuality as a fluid, fragmented, dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities. In other words, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, are located among a continuum of sexual possibilities.

Moreover, queer theory also believes that sexuality is socially constructed rather than a natural and innate trait. This point of view is known as the social constructionist perspective, and it emerged as an opposition to the essentialist perspective. The constructionist view is heavily influenced by Michel Foucault's multivolume work titled *History of Sexuality*, in which Foucault argues that homosexuality is a modern formation, because even though there were previously same-sex sexual activity, there was no corresponding category of identification for such acts (10).

## **3. Homosexual Identity Formation**

Troiden (1989) presents a four-stage model of how homosexual identity is formed. This model explains four general patterns that are experienced by men and women that identify themselves as homosexual.

### **a. Sensitization**

The first stage of homosexual identity formation is called sensitization. It refers to the phase where an individual does not think of their sexuality as particularly relevant, but acquires social experiences during childhood that later may support the thoughts that they are possibly homosexual. This stage usually occurs before puberty, and is characterized by generalized feelings of marginality and perceptions of being different from same-sex peers (Troiden 50). For example, a boy might feel different than other boys because he is more feminine and does not enjoy boy activities like playing sports or games.

### **b. Identity confusion**

The next stage is identity confusion, which is the phase where one starts to become aware of the possibility of them being a homosexual, but they feel uncertain because the thought of possibly being a homosexual does not align with the previously held self-image. It is experienced during middle to late adolescence.

### **c. Identity assumption**

The third stage is called identity assumption, in which one “starts to define themselves as a homosexual and present themselves as such, at least to other homosexuals” (59). At this stage a person usually starts to tolerate and accept their homosexual identity, discloses their sexuality to others, associates themselves with other homosexuals, begins sexual experimentation, as well as explores the homosexual subculture.

### **d. Commitment**

The last stage is known as commitment, in which an individual accepts and adopts homosexuality as a way of life. It is characterized by self-acceptance and comfort with one’s homosexual identity and role. However, the commitment to the homosexual identity and role is a matter of degree. Therefore, this phase is always somewhat inconsistent, and may be strengthened or weakened at various points and contexts by personal, social, or professional factors.

## **4. Sexual Orientation Victimization**

In a study about anti-gay violence and victimization in the United States that was conducted in 1990, Berrill categorized the types of victimization into 14 forms:

- a. Verbal abuse:** Includes any type of verbal or emotional victimization. Some examples are yelling, criticism, gaslighting, insults, name-calling, etc.
- b. Threats of violence:** Any threat of violence toward the victim, which frightens the victim into compliance.
- c. Property vandalized:** Any type of property violence which the victim’s personal property being damaged or destroyed. This may include breaking a window, scratching a vehicle, etc.
- d. Targets of objects:** This victimization includes the victim being the target of any type of object, including stones, rotten food, and so forth.
- e. Followed or chased:** Any incidence of being followed, chased, or stalked.
- f. Spat on:** Being spat on.
- g. Physical attack or abuse:** All types of physical assault, including being punched, hit, kicked, beaten, and so on.
- h. Weapon assault:** This victimization includes threats of weapon assault and direct assault using a weapon.
- i. Victimization from police:** Any type of victimization from the police, including harassment, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and so forth.

- j. Sexual assault:** It is a victimization that revolves around sexual nature. It covers all levels of sexual assault, from unwanted touching to rape.
- k. Abuse from family:** This type of victimization includes verbal/emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and any other type of abuse that have been mentioned above that is specifically perpetrated by family members.
- l. Knowledge of others who have been victimized:** Knowledge of others who have been victimized on the basis of sexual orientation.
- m. Threats of being outed:** For this type of victimization, the perpetrator threatens the victim that he/she will disclose the victim's sexual identity to others.
- n. School victimization:** Any type victimization that took place in school environment. This may include bullying from classmates, harassment from teachers or school officers, etc.

## **5. Effects of Victimization on Queer People**

As a stigmatized community in society, queer individuals are more prone to experiencing victimization than the heterosexual majority. Several studies have shown that queer individuals are still being targeted for victimization due their sexual orientation (Bontempo & D'Augelli 2002; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger 2002).

In an article published in 1990, Garnets et al explain a few negative effects of victimizations to lesbians, gay men and others in the queer community, in terms of both physical and psychological impact.

### **a. Physical injury**

Physical victimization that is experienced by queer people may leave an impact on the victim's health. The effect can be varied from cuts, bruises, burns and more. The injury can be inflicted by the perpetrator and in some cases the victims themselves, which is considered self-harm. The impact of physical victimization will build up over time as the victim experiences more and more victimization from others.

### **b. Behavioral and somatic reactions**

The psychological distress that someone experience from being victimized may cause them to have certain behavioral reactions as a response to stress. These responses may include sleep disturbances and nightmares, headaches, diarrhea, uncontrollable crying, agitation and restlessness, increased use of drugs, and deterioration in personal relationships. (367)

### **c. Self blame**

When someone experiences victimization from others based on their orientation, the victim's sexuality will be directly linked to their heightened sense of vulnerability. This can cause the victim to associate their sexuality to the source

of pain, rather than intimacy and love. The victim will resort to self blame in attempts to make sense of the attacks, which may lead to thinking that they are justifiably punished for being queer. (370)

#### **d. Diminished feelings of trust, security, and self worth**

The constant experience of victimization gives the victim a challenge to their routine sense of security and invulnerability. Therefore, it causes them to see the world as more malevolent and less predictable (373). The victim of sexual orientation victimization will question their sense of trust and security with other people and will cause them to have difficulties in trusting others, as they have a fear of the occurrence of victimization that can potentially happen if they choose to trust them.

#### **e. Heightened internalized homophobia**

Victimization towards queer people can also cause someone to have a heightened internalized homophobia. Individuals who have internalized homophobia usually have a negative attitude and view regarding their sexual orientation because of the social perception that views heterosexuality as the healthy and normal in comparison to the other sexualities. The experience of victimization will help the feeling of internalized phobia manifests even more, which causes them to feel even more inferior than others.

#### **f. Disruptions of the coming out process**

Individuals who experience victimization in the early stages of coming out may have difficulties coming out and disclosing their sexuality to others. Because they lack a more positive interpretation and feeling especially vulnerable to others' influence, the closeted survivor may experience feelings of depression, low self-esteem, and helplessness, which cause them to refrain from coming out.

## **C. RESEARCH METHOD**

### **1. Research Design**

This research used queer criticism as an approach to analyze the novel *More Happy Than Not*. It was used as a tool to inspect the construction of sexual identity in an individual. As previously explained in the previous chapter, queer criticism focuses on the destabilization of the homo/hetero binary opposition. It seeks the proof that sexuality is fluid and able to change. In addition, queer criticism also works to examine the society's reaction towards queer people and the homophobia towards them.

The researcher used descriptive qualitative research as the research design. Qualitative research is commonly used in the study of social sciences. It is characterized with several features. The features of qualitative research include the usage of text as empirical material (instead of numbers), starts from the notion of the social construction of realities under study, the interest in the perspectives of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the issue under study (Flick 2). This research fits to the descriptive qualitative research because the purpose of this study is to identify the types of victimization received by the queer character and its effects to the character. The research was analyzed using the theory of character and characterization as well as queer theory, applied to the novel *More Happy Than Not* by Adam Silvera.

## **2. Data and Data Source**

Adam Silvera's novel titled *More Happy Than Not* was used as the main source of data for this research. This novel was published by Soho Teen in 2015. The data that were analyzed consisted of words, sentences, paragraphs, dialogues and narrations taken from the novel that show how Aaron's homosexual identity is formed, the forms of victimization that he gets, and the impact of victimization.

## **3. Data Collection**

In order to collect the data for the research, the researcher went through some process needed for data collection. Firstly, the researcher read the novel closely in order to understand the general idea and plot of the story. Then, the researcher read the novel again, however this time she focused on the character that would be analyzed in this research, which was Aaron Soto. Next, the researcher gathered and selected the data that were relevant to the research by searching for words, sentences, paragraphs, dialogues and narrations that are related to the research questions. These data then were analyzed in order to answer the questions about homosexual identity formation and victimization towards queer individual.

## **4. Data Analysis**

After the data had been collected, the researcher analyzed the data by following the process of data analysis as explained by Yin (2015). The process of data analysis was divided into five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding.

- a. The researcher reviewed and compiled the data that had been collected into an organized database for analysis.
- b. The researcher broke down the data to smaller pieces and assigned labels to the data.
- c. The researcher reassembled the data into different groupings in order to find out any emerging pattern.

- d. The researcher analyzed and interpreted the data that had been reorganized by using the related theories.
- e. The researcher drew a conclusion based on the analysis of the study.

## **D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Homosexual Identity Formation in Aaron's Character**

#### **a. Aaron's homosexuality formation before the Leteo procedure**

There is not much detailed information about Aaron's life as a young boy and the memories that he remembers are limited. However, there are a few instances that show the first stage of Aaron's sexuality formation, which is called sensitization. One of the instances occurred when ten year-old Aaron was playing a game with his brother Eric. In this scene, Eric picked a male character named Wolverine, who is one of the male characters in the game. Aaron, however, picked a female character named Jean Grey instead. He picked this character because a specific power that she has.

**I choose Jean Grey because she can transform into Dark Phoenix and becomes extra powerful.** She has this really cool flight-and-fire trick I saw in the video's game demo at the store. (Silvera 175)

From this passage, it can be observed the noticeable difference between Aaron and his brother when it comes to the characters they want to play. Usually, boys prefer to choose a male character to play as, because male characters are stronger, more powerful, and have really masculine qualities that boys can relate with. On the contrary, female characters are usually seen as weaker and having less power. They are also effeminate and typically only played by girls, therefore not popular among boys. Although Aaron did not have a problem with it, Eric told him to "be a boy" and stop playing with female characters. He thought that picking a female character is not something a typical boy will do. This experience generated the feeling of marginalization within Aaron, which pressured him to pick another character.

#### **b. Aaron's homosexuality formation after the Leteo procedure**

Even though Aaron underwent a memory repressing procedure, Aaron still experienced homosexual identity formation. It can be observed when the two of them talk about Aaron's father's suicide. Thomas visited Aaron's apartment to hang out together when he went to the bathroom. Thomas realized that it was a place where Aaron's father took his own life, and he sympathized with Aaron because his father was also absent from his life. This then led to the talk about Aaron's attempted suicide. Thomas looked at the scar on Aaron's wrist, held it and thanked him for still hanging on despite the unfortunate situation he went through. Aaron was surprised because no one in his friend group had given him the comfort as much as Thomas does. He noticed the feelings he had at this moment.

I smile in spite of myself. His arm is still around me. **None of my friends would ever comfort me this way. It's kind of, sort of, definitely different.** (Silvera 105)

Aaron experienced the identity confusion phase. Even though he was not aware of it at first, he began to have romantic feelings towards Thomas. The confusion he felt became more apparent as the story went.

## **2. Sexual Orientation Victimization towards Aaron**

### **a. Physical Abuse**

Aaron lived in an environment where violence was a common occurrence. Most of Aaron's friends were trouble makers who often engaged in fights, shoplifting, drug dealing, and other misconduct. They viewed the ability to fight as one of the most important skills, and Aaron had been taught to fight by his friends from an early age (Silvera 95). Therefore, violence was not an unusual thing for him or his environment.

Most of Aaron's friends were rather close minded, and they did not welcome the idea of homosexuality. They were quick to judge and ridicule people who are different than them. When Aaron was experiencing identity confusion, he experienced attacks from his friends, one of the instances can be seen below:

I move back into the complex and walk across the third court when **two big hands grab my shoulders**. I half expect it to be Thomas spinning me around to lead me somewhere private, but instead **I find myself falling forward and rolling into a pillar by my building**. (Silvera 168-169)

Aaron's friends are mad because they notice the way Aaron behaves around Thomas. They grow suspicious and eventually attack him. They claimed that they did this for Aaron's own good. Aaron then got punched and tackled by the rest of the gang. Aaron was outnumbered by them; therefore he was unable to escape. The gang strangled and stomped him multiple times (Silvera 170)

### **b. Victimization from family**

Aside from the abuse he experienced from his friends and strangers, the victimization also came from his own family. This abuse mainly came from his father, Mark. It can be observed when Aaron was trying to come out to his father. Instead of accepting his son for who he is, Mark instead attacked Aaron and his mother.

Before I can check on her, **my dad—the man who fucking played catch with me—punches me in the back of my head**, and I crash into a tower of Eric's used games. (Silvera 191)

Mark could not accept the fact that Aaron was gay. Just a day after the incident, Aaron came back to the apartment to find Mark dead in the bathtub in their bathroom (Silvera 193-194). Mark's suicide traumatized Aaron to the core, and it caused him

to feel guilty for causing the suicide of his father. This event then became one of the main catalysts for Aaron to go through the Leteo procedure.

### **c. Verbal abuse**

Another victimization that can be found towards Aaron, aside from the physical nature, is verbal abuse. Although this type of abuse did not occur as often as the other types of victimization, but it can still be observed regardless. In several scenes in the novel, there were a few usage of the word “faggot” that were mainly directed towards Aaron. The word was mentioned by his father (Silvera 191), his friend Me-Crazy (Silvera 169), and a random stranger (Silvera 192).

The word “faggot” is a derogatory term for referring to gay and queer people. In the 1990s, this word was repurposed by the queer people as a form of liberation of the LGBT community. Nowadays, this term is considered offensive and its use is commonly frowned upon by the public. However, there are still usages of the word in a negative way to intimidate and ridicule queer people. This type of verbal abuse falls into name calling, which the perpetrator calls the victim with a demeaning term in order to belittle them.

## **3. The Effects of Victimization in Aaron’s Character**

### **a. Physical injury**

One of the more direct effects of the abuse that Aaron experienced was physical injury. The most extreme case of physical injury occurred when Aaron was abused by his friends.

**I have one black eye.** My other eye is swollen and purple, like a bruised plum. There are stitched-up gashes on my forehead with some dried blood the nurses didn’t wipe clean.

**My lip is cut open.** (Silvera 215)

Aaron experienced injuries after being attacked by some of his friends. He also severe distress from the abuse, which made him to fall into depression and be suicidal. Fortunately for Aaron, his suicide attempt did not lead to death, as he was saved by someone and quickly got taken to the hospital.

### **b. Self blame**

The sexual orientation victimizations that he experienced created a sense of guilt in Aaron’s mind, which made him to blame himself.

Even having forgotten all the things that led to Aaron 2.0, I was still aching for a Leteo procedure because of fear and disappointment in someone who couldn’t love me back. And I was despicable enough to try and play my suicide card to forget

heartbreak. “There were a lot of reasons. **But trying to live when my father refused to stay alive – because of who I am – broke me in a way I don’t think will ever be fixed.**” (Silvera 240)

He believed that the main cause of the victimization was because he was not what everyone expected him to be. He also believed that he was the one who needed changing, rather than the people who abused him. If he changed who he is, then he would not have to experience painful abuse from others. It is one of the reasons why Aaron really wanted to go with a Leteo procedure.

### **c. Internalized homophobia**

Another effect that is caused from sexual orientation victimization is the heightened feeling of internalized homophobia. Throughout the novel, Aaron showed some signs of dislike and hatred towards his sexuality.

Living in a homophobic environment caused Aaron to worry about his life. From the way everyone left him, he knew that people around him were not going to accept his sexuality. He did not want to see what would happen to him if the people around him did not accept who he really was.

#### **I don’t want to be me.**

I don’t want to second-guess if my friends are going to be okay with me being me, and more importantly, I don’t want to see what happens if they’re not. (Silvera 156)

He realized that changing himself meant that he would be lying to himself, but he believed that it would be better for him in the long run as opposed to living his true identity.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study display three points. Firstly, it illustrates how Aaron as a main character struggles with the formation of his homosexual identity throughout the novel. Secondly, it displays the many types of victimization that Aaron faces as a queer character. Third, it also presents the results that come from the abuse and marginalization and how they affect Aaron.

The findings showed that Aaron’s sexuality formation was not a smooth progress. Throughout the story, Aaron went back and forth between the identity confusion phase and the identity assumption phase multiple times. The memory alteration process that he goes through greatly affects the development of homosexual identity. It supports Troiden’s statement that homosexual identity formation does not always follow a linear pattern.

Secondly, Aaron experienced several types of victimization, ranging from verbal abuse, physical abuse, to victimization from family. The abuse and harassment were perpetrated by the people around him, from family to strangers. Most of the occurrence of victimization takes place when Aaron was going through identity confusion and identity assumption phases.

Lastly, the victimization had some effects on Aaron. The findings showed that the victimization results in physical injury, heightened feelings of internalized homophobia, and self blaming. Homosexual identity formation, sexual orientation victimization and effects of victimization are related as a cycle of cause and effect.

This research has some limitations. The researcher suggests for the future researchers to delve further in other intrinsic aspects of literature, and how they relate to queer theory. In addition, this research is quite limited in theory, and the researcher hopes that future researchers will be able to expand the theory in their literary analyses. Another suggestion for the future researchers is to explore more on the realm of queer studies. Queer theory investigates the sexual activities in deviant gender and sexual identities. In this study, the researcher focuses on the main character who is gay. The researcher hopes that other researchers will be able to investigate formation of sexual identity and the victimization that occur to people with other sexual identities.

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