

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Background of the Research

The conception that successful literature is written with the ability to invoke reader's emotional reaction is neither new nor controversial. According to Anders Westlie, many authors know that a fashionable way in which to do this is to unsettle the reader and shake their foundation on particular things (*The Disturbing Victims of Chuck Palahniuk*, 2012: 11). On this subject, Chuck Palahniuk, through his writings, attempts to unsettle his readers in order to show them the concept of reality and 'who we are', do we create ourselves autonomously or do we let others decide who we are. Most of his characters are wandering through life searching desperately for meaning and purpose. Palahniuk alternates hopelessness and hopefulness through his character's complex situation. Palahniuk wants the reader to reflect and take some actions about their life.

Chuck Palahniuk is an American author who widely becomes known to the world after the movie adaptation of his debut novel *Fight Club* (1996) was a big hit at the box office in 1999. Afterwards, Palahniuk has produced more fictions such as *Survivor* (1999), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001), *Lullaby* (2002), and so forth. Some critics have hailed Palahniuk's work as a "wild, orgiastic pop masterpiece that rages against the hypocrisy of a society that continually promises us

the impossible” (Ellis 15, Bennet 66), and Amy Taubin applauded Palahniuk “swiftian attack on our consumerist, designer-label-worshipping society” (*21st Century Boys: David Fincher Stages a Theater of War in Fight Club*, 1999: 16). At the same time, however, many critics have denounced his work for its brutal truth. For example, Henry A. Giroux has criticized Palahniuk’s work as “intensely misogynistic representation of women,” its intensification of violent and hyper masculine “warrior culture” (*Private Satisfaction and Public Disorders: Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence*, 2001: 17).

Palahniuk’s work often associated with transgressive fiction regarding his style of writing and the taboos he represents throughout the story, for instances: sex, violence, drug abuse, nihilism, consumerism, crimes, and another human complexity. The term transgressive fiction is coined by *Los Angeles Times* columnist Michael Silverblatt¹ in 1993. Silverblatt recognized it as a new and essentially baneful inclination in literature, “transgressive writing has violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body.” Moley Hoey in a journal entitled *The Lacuna of Usefulness: The Compulsion to ‘Understand’ Transgressive Fiction* states that the (transgressive) author intentionally frustrates readers by refusing to provide an objective meaning or structure. This refusal forces the reader to engage in the text personally and offer the reader an alternative perspective on life (2014: 26).

¹ Michael Silverblatt. “SHOCK APPEAL / Who Are These Writers, and Why DO They Want to Hurt Us?: The New Fiction of Transgression,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 1st, 1993, accessed August 12, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-08-01/books/bk-21466_1_young-writers

Palahniuk himself has acknowledged his work as transgressive fiction in his documentary², he revealed that the characters misbehave and act badly, commit crimes or pranks as a way of either feeling alive or as political acts of civil disobedience.

Palahniuk creates a character whose repeatedly mocks social stance and have tendencies to self-destruction. *Fight Club* is a story about a man living an insignificant life in his 'IKEA lovely nest', and then projects his hidden desire to break free from his daily routine. In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk integrates violent, psychological problems as the nameless narrator rage against political, economic, and social systems. The nameless narrator and Tyler Durden³ form an underground boxing organization which soon turns into bombing attempt, the abolition of all buildings in the town. In a journal entitled *Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club*, Andrew Hack Soon Ng highlights the relationship between postmodernism, existentialism and masculinity in the text. Ng examines Tyler Durden as an appropriation of Sartre's concept of transcendence, the narrator's desire to surpass his existential limitation and to transform himself into his ideal being (*The International Journal of Existential Literature*, 2005: 116-117).

² *Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary* is an academic conference held in Edinboro to discuss and present Palahniuk's work, 2003.

³ Tyler Durden is the split personality of the nameless narrator. The nameless narrator admires Tyler for his aggression, individualistic and charismatic persona, specifically his capability to do whatever he wants. But in the end of the story, the nameless narrator denies his connection with Tyler and kills him.

On the other hand, *Choke* tells a story about Victor Mancini and his struggle against his addiction to sex, social desperation, and identity crisis. In order to support his mother's health care, he works at Colonial theme park Dunsboro at daytime and risks his life to choke near death to gain money at night. The dysfunctional relationship with the mother and his childhood experience are the source of Victor's suffering. He chooses to escape in casual sex instead of confronting his problems, "for the next I don't know how long, I've got no problems in the world" (19). His incapability to cope with the situation stray him to live an inauthentic life.

Many critics have criticized Palahniuk's work for promoting violence and another transgression as if he advocate and normalize the barbarism of masculinity through his character. In *Choke*, the story is narrated by Victor Mancini, a highly alienated person who suffers from a wide range of existential crisis and severe childhood trauma. *Choke* notably raises issues central to the existentialist paradigm such as angst, absurdity, alienation, nothingness, and anxiety. This is the writer's key points for approaching *Choke*, looking at the bigger issues hidden behind the stories. Since existentialism has always involved an ongoing exploration of unresolved issues, the writer personally thinks that existentialism is possibly more relevant for broader contexts and wider discussion. The writer also believes that existential crisis can help foster a more authentic sense of individual freedom.

In a journal entitled *The Fiction of Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist* Jesse Kavadlo suggests Palahniuk has pioneered a new genre, the fiction of

self-destruction. Kavadlo proposes Palahniuk intention is simply to improve the character's life and their surroundings regardless of unusual moral force. The text falls within an understanding of entropy as a force for renewal and meaning (2005: 20). To achieve the reconciliation Victor must recreates his own values because he takes full responsibility for his life. He must be capable to determine his own values to living an authentic life. The writer believes that the issue of subjectivity plays an important role in *Choke* because it helps to improve Victor's life and reshaping his identity, the writer selects the book as the object of analysis in this research and entitled this thesis **“Inauthenticity and Subjectivity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke*: An Existential Reading”**.

1.2. The Identification of the Problem

After reading the text completely and carefully, the writer assumes that Victor struggles with his addiction to sex, social desperation, and another psychological problem are actually the clues to his existential crisis which leads him to lives an inauthentic life. He lives inauthentically because his entire life is determined by outside forces and circumstances. Victor, in the writer's understanding, is in certain state of existential crisis as a result of growing up in the absence of a father figure, dysfunctional relationship with the mother, and being terrorized and traumatized by his childhood experience.

Victor thinks that sexual addiction is the only way to treat his problems. The struggles to break his addiction and restore his lives are extremely challenging for

him. The initial study argues that the struggles of the main character with the crisis of identity should overcome with his consciousness as a being. Since subjectivity plays an important role to live an authentic life, the writer focuses the research on how the main character deals with his problems and what effort he takes to reshape his own meaning and values to live a better life.

1.3. Scope of the Research

The scopes are based on the information offered in the book and what is implied there. The main discussion focuses on the relationship between the main character, Victor Mancini, with other characters as well as his surroundings. Since the aim of this research is to prove authenticity and subjectivity can improve Victor's understanding on life, the writer also focuses on Victor's inauthenticity which relate to existentialist realm and how he deals with the problems.

1.4. Research Questions

As the problem has been identified, the writer formulates two research questions. First, how does Victor's childhood experience distress his adult life and lead him to inauthenticity? Second, how does Victor's subjectivity shape his attitude toward life and improve his relationship with his surroundings?

1.5. The Objective of the Research

In general, this research is conducted to prove how the concepts of authenticity and subjectivity become a key role in re-shaping Victor's identity. The center of the study is in Victor's vantage point to confront his existential crisis while his identity being constructed by external forces. This objective can be reached by investigating his odd relationship with the mother from his early childhood. The writer provides both of his psychological problem and existential crisis as the impact of his failure to cope with the situation. Furthermore, this research is aimed to prove that Victor's awareness as a being strongly influenced his acceptance or rejection of his reality.

1.6. The Review of Previous Studies

The writer had done some review of related studies in order to limit the area of her research as well as to determine the worth of the study. Research has shown that the analysis of authenticity and existentialist realm exists in several literary studies yet the analysis on *Choke* has never been done before. Therefore, the writer believes that this research is worth studying.

In order to differ the study, the writer provides some researches about *Choke* that can be compared to her research. The first research is a thesis written by Petra Mašínová entitled *The Element of Violence in Chuck Palahniuk's Works*. Mašínová offers a closer look on the topic of violence in three Palahniuk's novels; *Fight Club*,

Choke, and *Pygmy*. Foremost, Mašínová explores the prevalence of the violence in current popular culture and the reasons why theme of violence is appealing for the reader. In a deeper analysis, Mašínová outlines the issues of violence and discovers three types of violence amid the three texts; violence against humans and society, violence against oneself, and sexual violence. Mašínová proves the three novels contain various kinds of violence by providing the examples from the texts. Mašínová deduces Palahniuk's characters are essentially tries to break away from the social normality and one of the possible ways is using the violence (2012).

Another thesis entitled *Rebellion as the Essence of Existentialism in To Kill a Mockingbird and Matilda* by Yoan Nurbuadhiati. The main characters Scout Finch and Matilda, in the two novels that Nurbuadhiati discusses were facing the same difficulties to adapt to their surroundings. Scout Finch had been challenged by the South-American values which she finds dehumanizing the minority and being force to take a serious account of her image as the proper-middle class-young lady. Matilda on the other sides, take a stand for her own values as a being in the middle of mediocrity she's mingle in. Nurbuadhiati concludes both heroines are similar in their acts to strive for their own subjectivity, to follow their conscience and rebel to the limitations they have confronted (2015).

The third review is a research written by Amirhossein Vafa entitled *Manhood Crisis in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club and Choke*. Vafa explicates the struggle of the anonymous narrator in *Fight Club* and Victor Mancini in *Choke* with a certain

crisis of manhood as a result of the “contradictory experiences of power under the impositions of hegemonic masculinity in addition to a sense of ‘silence’ or disparity between their lived experiences and their inherited language of masculinity caused by the new ideologies of parenting” (87). Vafa’s analysis on *Choke* led to the discovery of Victor’s manhood crisis is manifestation of the absence father and the exclusive presence of the mother. In a deeper analysis, Vafa argues Victor’s compulsive behavior is a way to redefine his gender identity towards his mother (2010).

From the reviews above, it can be seen that these previous thesis present different topics with this research. Mašínová discusses the elements of violence in Palahniuk’s works, Nurbuadhiati’s thesis discusses about freedom and responsibility to create meaning through rebellion acts committed by both child heroines in *Matilda* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* towards mediocrity. Vafa’s thesis discusses about manhood crisis in *Fight Club* and *Choke*. Meanwhile, the writer’s research will explore how subjectivity improves the main character’s life and how inauthenticity influenced his acceptance or rejection of reality.

1.7. Theoretical Framework

The germs of existentialism may be traced back to an earlier period of the history of philosophy in the west. Philosophy as the pursuit of basic truths about human and the universe was also popular among the Ancient Greeks. As Thomas R. Flynn has stated in *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*, the philosophy at that

time was more theoretical approach and the concept of philosophy was focused on ethical questions and “discerning the proper way to live one’s life” (2006: 1).

On the other hand, existentialism is a form of movement against western traditional system. This movement was blooming in the late twentieth-century. David Cogswell in *Existentialism For Beginners* argues the easiest way to understand existentialism is by thinking of it not as a widespread system of philosophy but as a rebellion against traditional philosophies such as rationalism, absolutism, and empiricism, “which sought to discover an ultimate order in metaphysical principles or in the structure of the observed world, and therefore universal meaning” (2008: 2). The set of this resistance fairly started when many people felt out of touch with real life. Principally, existentialism presents a concept of individuality which resists the superficiality of absolute systems. Absolute system is a given-narratives that ‘they’ try to bring in the world into “one coherent story, or set of stories that explains everything which become the final truth of reality,” (Panza and Gale, 2008: 28). Therefore, the existentialists have claimed those absolute systems treat people as an object.

The widespread of theoretical approach by the Ancient Greeks in the pursuit of basic truths about human nature and universe had channeled to the rise of science which dominates the teaching of philosophy in the medieval and modern periods. This period marked when Galileo wrote the book of nature and it was written in mathematical characters, “it appeared that whatever could be weighed and measured

(quantified) could give us reliable knowledge, whereas the non-measurable was left to the realm of mere opinion” (Flynn, 2006: 3). As a result, science became the new God in western civilization. Science on the other hand, distant the sensitive issue of human feelings and its complexities that people need a reason for living and for choosing the value for their live.

Furthermore, Flynn explicates the existentialists conceived the issue between two forms of philosophy—the different use of truth: the moral and the scientific. The existentialists implicate that “the former is more cognitive and theoretical” (2006: 2). Then the existentialists began with more self-formative and practical approach, ‘if the world is a set of rational system, what about our private anguish and despair? Could it be explained in terms of rational categories?’ For the existentialists, no human being could create a system that made sense out of everything or resolved all the conflict and chaos of the self. The existentialists have coincided rational clarity is not enough to resolve the problem of life as a human being.

Existentialism⁴ has gained its popularity after the public lecture given by French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre in 1946. According to Mary deBessonnet, the term existentialism cannot be rigidly define, “it is commonly used in academic circles to refer to a specific movement in philosophy and art that has a unique and particular concern with human existence” (2012: 6). The existentialists have discord in their

⁴ The original idea of existentialism came from critical thoughts of Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche. Whereas the modern roots of existentialism are presented by Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone deBeauvoire.

evaluations of the human condition, which is why it is a bit hard to define the word existentialism. On the other hand, their common interest located in addressing the human condition and its complexities. They reject systems which propose to have definitive answers to the questions of meaning and purpose in life.

Existentialism has a strong emphasis on the individual. It relates to the way of thinking that human as subject matter is responsible for its own individual pursuit of values and meaning. It is much more personal than any other form of philosophies (Marino, 10). As Sartre proposes existence precedes essence, “at first man is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be” (2007: 9). Furthermore, Flynn examines that;

We are born biological beings but we must become existential individuals by accepting responsibility for our actions. This is an application of Nietzsche’s advice to ‘become what you are’. Many people never do acknowledge such responsibility but rather flee their existential individuality into the comfort of faceless crowd (2006: ii)

For the existentialist, being an individual in mass society is an achievement because the force in modern society pulls us away from individualism and towards conformity. Although the highest value of existentialist thought is commonly conceded to be freedom, its primary virtue is authenticity (Flynn, 2006: 2).

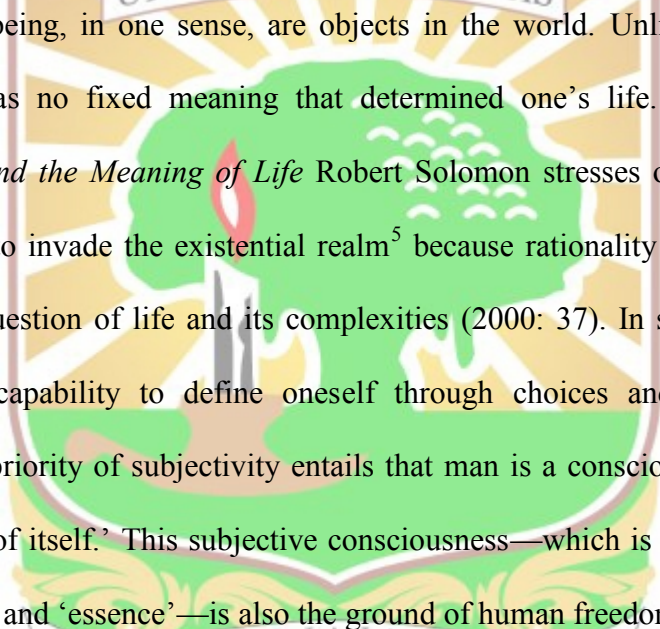
According to Flynn, the existentialists use emotion as a tool to disclose important insights to the nature of life. The existentialists suggest that the most basic way of being connected to the world come from a kind of emotional (mood-based) attachment, not through reason or intellect. Moods provide an important way of sensing or feeling one's own existence. Moods reveal that people always actively involved in life and the world in which they live is always significant (2006: 51-59). Anxiety is one of the most important moods for the existentialists. They assume that anxiety plays an important role in disclosing insight about existence because it discloses one's insight as an existing being.

Since the existentialists shared the belief that philosophical thinking begin with our subjectivity—not only the thinking subject but also the realization through our actions and choices, existentialism is, in the writer view, one of the most important philosophical movement in twentieth century. Existentialism promotes revolutionary message about freedom yet it has a strong emphasis on the individual. Unlike the previous philosophical movement in the west, existentialism is more practical and self-formative.

Authenticity and Subjectivity

The interrelation between the individual and the others threatens the individual with loss of identity since there is a conflict between the strong demands of conformity and the demands of individual desires (Laing, 1990: 44). This indicator however, put the existentialists in accord that an individual has a tendency to

surrender their own subjectivity and follow social conformity. Unsurprisingly, the contradiction between ‘the self’ and ‘the others’ induce people to feel separated from their own body and feel alienated from the world. According to Thomas Wartenberg, an alienated individual is someone who feels out of touch with the important features of their own experience as a human being. They live a life according to set of values that had been given to them (*Existentialism: A Beginner’s Guide*, 2008: 51).



Human being, in one sense, are objects in the world. Unlike other objects, human being has no fixed meaning that determined one’s life. In *No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life* Robert Solomon stresses objectivity should not be allowed to invade the existential realm⁵ because rationality does not give an answer to the question of life and its complexities (2000: 37). In substance, human being has the capability to define oneself through choices and actions. Sartre signifies, “The priority of subjectivity entails that man is a conscious being, ‘a plan which is aware of itself.’ This subjective consciousness—which is the foundation of choices, actions, and ‘essence’—is also the ground of human freedom” (2007: 170).

To put in perspective, our consciousness or subjectivity itself is nothing. It becomes something only as it makes choices. According to Kierkegaard, subjectivity is the realm where we find that very special sense of existence. It means living inwardly in the depth and richness of one’s feelings. For Kierkegaard, feelings are

⁵ Existential realm is the realm of personal meaning and significance. This is a major focus of Kierkegaard’s existentialism. Kierkegaard puts great stress on what he calls “the ethically existing individual”

profound insights into the beings we really are and personal choice is the key to subjectivity, to take control of one's life (Solomon, 2000: 37). Subjectivity can be describes as the process which we become autonomous, how we constituted ourselves as subjects and come to experience ourselves (Barker, 194).

Commonly, the term authenticity is used to describe something that is real or genuine and “always true to its own nature” (Panza and Gale, 2008: 87). The authenticity of a person depends on how that person represents himself through living. If one's nature is an individual but one lives merely by the opinions of others, one's misrepresenting what one truly is and fail to be authentic. As Kierkegaard states that we are responsible to define ourselves, to make our own choices and be authentic in order to acknowledging what we are (Flynn, 2006: 64). Essentially, an authentic life can be achieve when one lived in full recognition of one's freedom as a human being to choose how to conduct one's life (Wartenberg, 2008: 52). As Sartre examines in his concept of existence precedes essence, “what you are (your essence) is the result of your choices (your existence) rather than the reverse. You are what you make yourself to be” (Flynn, 2006: 8).

1.8. Methods of the Research

The writer conducts three steps in constructing this research. Those steps consist of collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting data.

Collecting Data

In collecting the data of this research, the writer conducts the library research method. There are two types of data in this research, primary and secondary data. The primary data comes from the novel by Chuck Palahniuk entitled *Choke*. The secondary data are collected from several sources such as articles, books, and journals related to the topic and theory used by the writer to enrich her knowledge in order to have better understanding in analyzing the novel.

Analyzing Data

In analyzing the data, the writer uses descriptive analysis method in analyzing Palahniuk's *Choke* by applying existentialism, focusing on the concept of subjectivity and authenticity. In analyzing this research, firstly, the writer focuses on the main character's relationship with the mother in his childhood. Secondly, the writer explicates the main character inauthenticity—the crisis, the burden, and the denial—as the result of his dysfunctional relationship with the mother. The last, the analysis examines about the importance of subjectivity and authenticity as reflected through the story, how the main character deals with his problems and reevaluates his life.

Presenting Data

The analysis is presented in descriptive method. The first chapter contains the introduction and background information of the research. The second chapter contains the preliminary analysis of *Choke*. The third chapter contains the analysis of

the roots of Victor's existential crisis and how it affects his life and surroundings, and his attempts to improve his life by embracing subjectivity. The last chapter contains the conclusion of all analysis. The writer also provides another opinion from other researchers in order to support this research by adding some quotation from the selected data.

