

Exploring Power Dynamics in Sally Rooney's 'Normal People'

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Abstract

This study entitled “The Portrayal of Power Relations in Sally Rooney’s Normal People”. This study discussed the depiction of power relations and protagonist resists towards the power relations which occurs in novel Normal People (2018). The novel is about a loner girl named Marianne Sheridan who lived with her mother and older brother in Carricklea. She has a bad relationship with her family because her mother and older brother treat her badly and constantly abuse her verbally and physically. Moreover, she also had a complicated relationship with Connell Waldron. In conducting this study, qualitative method was used. The writer used the theory of power by Michel Foucault (2001) to analyze the power relations in the novel. The result of this study shows that the abuse that the main character experienced is the cause of the power relation. There are two ways of relations, relationship between parents and daughter, relationship between older brother and younger sister. The main character experienced verbal and physical abuse. The resistance of the protagonist towards the power relations to avoid, remain silent, and ask for help from Connell.

Keywords: *Abuse, Michel Foucault, Power Relations, Resistance.*

A. Introduction

Literature is a work in the form of writing or pictures that aims to express important experiences in someone’s life. Hudson (2015, p. 2) states that literature is an important record of what humans have seen, experienced, and felt in their lives, including aspects of eternal interest. Literature is very influential in human life because someone can

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express what they feel or experience through literature. People can enjoy literature to entertain themselves, such as by reading novels, watching movies, and so on. Examples of literary works such as drama, prose, poetry, novel, film, short stories, and picture books.

Literature has many issues inside, one of them is power relations. Power is the ability of a person to control something or someone. Power can be used for good things but also bad things. If power is used for good things, it will be useful for many people but if it is used for bad things, it will have a negative impact on others. According to Foucault (1978, p. 92) "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere". It implies that power can come from anywhere and anyone can do it.

Power relations are the relationship between people who have power over something and have a desire to get something. Foucault (1982, p. 780) claims that a series of oppositions which have developed over the last few years: opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children. It can happen as in a family, group, or institution. In the family, parents have an important role in the harmony of the family. Usually, parents have great power in managing everything including children, fathers or mothers can use their power as parents to get what they want from their children or an older brother who can also do anything to his sister whether it's bad or good.

The power relations issue can be found in literary works, one of which is in the novel *Normal People* by Sally Rooney published in 2018. The novel tells a story about a girl named Marianne who is smart but unpopular and she lives with her mother and older brother in a white great mansion. She is in a relationship with a boy named Connell Waldron, but her brother, Alan doesn't like it. She has a big fight with Alan because he knows that Marianne still hanging out with Connell. After the big fight, she lives in Connell's house and celebrates the Christmas Eve together. When Connell gets the MFA offers in New York, Marianne chooses to stay and wait for him. *Normal People* novel by Sally Rooney is a novel that was published in 2018 and is still relatively new. There has not been much research that discusses this novel. There is one study that uses this novel as the object of research. The study is a thesis conducted by Karisa (2021) from Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta entitled "Irish Begrudgery as reflected in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*" conducted by Karisa (2021) from Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta. The aims of the study are to describe the character and the society in the novel and describe the Irish Begrudger depicted in the novel through the main character. The study used the theory of Gill (1996) and the theory of Taylor (1981) and used a qualitative approach to conduct the study. The result of this study shows that Carricklea is a city where people value people who like to mingle, while in Dublin, they are more

accepting of people who show their strengths. Begrudgery is portrayed in the characters, Marianne and Connell. Marianne can show her intelligence by arguing and also, she makes her self-esteem sink because she always thinks that she is not a good person. Whereas Connell was liked at Carriclea but in Dublin, he could not adapt because if he could fit in there, he was afraid that people at Carriclea would change their opinion of him.

There are several studies that discuss the same issue. The first study is a thesis conducted by Jauhari (2017) from Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang entitled “Power Relation among Factions in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*”. The aim of the study is to contract the power relations among factions and describe the resistance of divergent and factionless as the result of power relations in the novel. This study used the theory of power by Michel Foucault (1997) and used a qualitative approach to conduct the study. The result of the study shows that knowledge plays an important role in the formation of power because both are interconnected. In the novel, there are 5 factions, Abnegation, Erudite, Dauntless, Candor, and Amity. Factions are formed from the abilities and knowledge that each person has. Each faction has different abilities and powers. The resistance appears because of the authority of the power relations. Divergent and factionless trying to uncover what really happened between the factions. Because the Divergent feels that there is a faction that has a mission that the other factions do not know about.

The second study is an article from the journal of literary and culture studies Universitas Negeri Surabaya conducted by Febriyanti (2013) entitled “Power Relations in Tahmima Anam’s *The Good Muslim*”. The aim of the study describes the resistance of the main character, Maya, and Zaid against the domination of power in the novel. This study used the theory concept of power by Michel Foucault and used a qualitative approach to conduct the study. The result of this study shows that there are 5 points related to power. First, rules can occur in parallel. Second, the discipline strategy is internalized by the institution. Third, religion is a panopticon. Fourth, evidence of power is resistance. Fifth, power cannot be separated from the regime.

According to Mays (2018, p. 26) “a novel is a work of prose fiction of about forty thousand words or more”. Novel itself has many elements. Those are character, plot, theme, setting, and point of view. The first narrative element is character. Character is a person who plays a role in a story. Character is one of the most important narrative elements in literary works. Abrams & Harpam (2015, p. 48) state that Character is the people in a narrative work who have particular moral, intellectual, and emotional through their dialogue and act. Through their act and dialogue, the readers will know and understand the role and characterization of the character in a literary work whether they are protagonists or antagonists. The protagonist is a character who has a very important

role in a story. Sosiowati & Malini (2017, p. 46) state that the protagonist is the main character in a story that has conflicts with other characters that must be resolved while the antagonist is a rival or main opponent of the protagonist and can also be called the obstacle that the protagonist must face in a story. The protagonist in the story does not always have good or positive characters, it can also have an evil character. If there are no characters, then a story in a literary work will be meaningless because it is the characters that make and bring the story to life in a literary work. In fiction literary works, characters can be played by humans, animals, or objects such as books, glass, cupboards, teapots, and so forth that can talk and move like a human. Murfin & Ray (2018, p. 105) state that characters in the story can be animals or inanimate objects, as long as the author gives them human attributes. There are 2 types of character, flat character, and round character. Johnson & Arp (2017, p. 144) state that flat characters have one or two predominant traits, while round characters are complex and have many sides. As long as the story goes on, the flat character will not change in character, while the round character can change as the story progresses.

This theory was put forward by Michel Foucault (2001). Power is also used as a means to achieve goals by supporting each other reciprocally and taking advantage of each other. Foucault (2001, p. 337) states that the term "power" has a relationship between partners who have actions to encourage others and follow each other. To get what one wants, one must need other people and work together. Power can modify, use, consume or destroy the power that comes from the talent inherent in one's body directly. On the other hand, strength has the characteristic of being able to bring about relationships between individuals and groups. (Foucault, 2001, p. 337)

O'Farrell (2007) concludes several points about Foucault's theory about power:

- Power is not a thing but a relation
- Power is productive
- Power is not owned and run by the state and government but is exercised throughout the social body.
- Power operates at the micro level of social relations and is ubiquitous.
- The exercise of power is strategic and war-like

Power resistance is actions intended to oppose the power system carried out by disapproving or disapproving parties. Foucault (1978, p. 95) states that where there is power, there is resistance, but this resistance does not always have a beneficial or

detrimental effect in relation to power. Resistance acts as an enemy, target, support or handle in power relations, and it is everywhere because it is difficult to find places of great resistance or sources of rebellion. (Foucault, 1978, p. 95)

The points of resistance produce divisions in society, break unity, stir individuals up, and so on. The network of power relations can end by forming a dense net without being properly located in it, so it is these points of resistance that can make a revolution happen, just like how the state depends on the institution of power relations. (Foucault, 1978, p. 95)

This study uses the novel *Normal People* (2018) by Sally Rooney to identify and analyze the power relation depicted in the novel. In his theory of subject and power (2001) he assumes that the power that a person has is not used for bad things such as oppression but through individual creation. It describes the power possessed by the subject to turn into an object. Foucault (2001, p. 331) states that "subject" has two meanings, the first is subject to others by their control and the second is tied to their identity. The two meanings mean the form of power is to make other people submit and submit to their orders or controls.

B. Method

In conducting the study, the writer chose the right approach. The approach used in this study is qualitative research. Qualitative research is a research that is using words to describe events, phenomenon, and so forth. According to Braun & Clarke (2019, p. 3) "qualitative research is that it uses words as data, collected and analysed in all sorts of ways". In this approach, the researcher itself is the instrument or it can be called the human instrument. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) state that one of the characteristics of this form of qualitative research is that the researcher is the main instrument for data collection and analysis. Humans have an understanding that is quick to respond to obtain, collect and analyze research data. Qualitative research was chosen because the data were taken from a novel, and it must describe in words. Creswell (2015, p. 18) states that in qualitative research, the data collected was in the form of text and divided it into groups of sentences and determined the meaning of each sentence. The methods used in the qualitative approach are observation, case study research, and record keeping.

C. Findings and Discussion

Synopsis of *Normal People*

Marianne is a smart girl but always aloof and has no friends at school. He lives in Carricklea with his mother and older brother. she has a bad relationship with her family. Her mother who is always busy at work and never cares for her, her older brother who hates her and always abuses her verbally and physically. She has a housekeeper named Lorraine, she is the mother of her school friend, Connell Waldron. Marianne and Connell met often because he always picked up his mother at her house. Then they like each other, fall in love and date. However, no one knew that not even Connell's friends. They agreed to keep their relationship a secret because if Connell's friends found out, it would make it weird and awkward. At school Marianne was called strange because she was always alone and did everything alone. When Alan, Marianne's brother found out, he was very much against it and disliked Connell.

Power Relations Portrayed in *Normal People* Novel

This part discusses about the power relation portrayed in the novel. It focuses on the power relations as the cause of abuse that experienced by the main character, Marianne Sheridan and the relationship among characters in the novel such as relationship of parents and daughter and relationship between older brother and younger sister.

Relationship of Parents and Daughter

This part explains the power relations issue in the relationship of parents and daughter. Family relationship is the warmest relationship because it is filled with love and affection in every member, such as parents who always protect their children, children who are devoted to their parents, and so forth. But not all families have such a relationship. There are also families that have a bad relationship, such as not caring about their children, treating them badly or abusing them either verbally or physically.

In the novel, Marianne lives with her mother and older brother. Her father died when she was thirteen. Her mother named Denise and she is a solicitor. She and her mother have a bad relationship as mother and daughter, even her mother is rarely home because she is busy working. Usually in the family, parents privilege their children whether it is a

girl or a boy because according to them children are a gift given by God to them. But not all parents think like that, and it does not apply to Denise, Marianne's mother. She had never considered Marianne special. Denise has a cold nature and it goes down to Marianne. As in the quotation below,

At this, Denise struck the kitchen table with her open palm. Marianne flinched, but didn't look up, didn't let go of the envelope. You think you're special, do you? said Denise. Marianne let her eyes close. No, she said. I don't. (Rooney, 2018, p. 108) Based on the quotation above, it is clear that her mother, Denise did not privilege Marianne as a child. As a mother, she does not act like a mother to her children. She only met their material needs and did not take good care of their children, thus causing the two to often have disagreements. Denise thinks that she is not sure if Marianne will be able to face her life in the future considering she has a different nature and personality. She has a quiet and aloof nature. Denise has a lot of power in her family as a parent, and she uses it to do whatever she wants with her children. Even, she let her children compete on anything, "If you can't handle a little sibling rivalry, I don't know how you're going to manage adult life, darling, she said" (Rooney, 2018, p. 108). It implies that she does not know mind her kids competing, they have to be able to handle it and fend for themselves. Alan is tough and Marianne is soft, it is hard for Marianne to compete against her older brother. That is why she is not sure if Marianne will be able to live a life in the future, because she will enter a college life that will be different from her high school life. Considering Marianne's cold personality and not easy to socialize with other people.

Relationship Between Older Brother and Younger Sister

This part discusses about the power relations issue in the relationship of older brother and younger sister. Usually, an older brother will always take care of his younger sister in various ways and will do anything to make his younger sister happy. But not all older brothers behave like that towards their younger sisters, there are also those who have bad relationships, such as older brothers who feel has more power than younger sisters, and he becomes arbitrary and does whatever he wants to younger sisters, to do physical and verbal abuse to make her obey what he said.

In the novel, Marianne has an older brother named Alan. Marianne is always treated badly by him. Alan has a tough nature and is the opposite of Marianne. His personality is very bad as an older brother, he likes to be rude from his words to his attitude. He often abuses her younger sister, Marianne whether it is physically or verbally, and he also does not like being belittled or beaten by Marianne.

One day, when their uncle and aunt arrived, they praised Marianne who was smart,

Alan was also there and did not like hearing that, so he annoy at Marianne because he feels that she is smarter than him and then he spat on her. It narrated follows,

Enraged now, Alan wrenched her back from the sink by her upper arm and, seemingly spontaneously, spat at her. Then he released her arm. A visible drop of spit had landed on the cloth of her skirt. (Rooney, 2018, p. 128)

From the quotation above, it shows that Marianne gets bad treatment from him. Alan feels intimidated that Marianne is praised by their uncle and aunt because she is smart, then he talks to her and badmouths her. He easily spat at her and he did it on purpose. In addition, Alan often vents his anger on Marianne. Whatever Marianne does, it is always wrong in Alan's eyes. Besides, Alan thought that Marianne could not be smarter than him, because he thinks that a younger sister cannot be smarter than an older brother. as narrated follows,

Do you think you're smarter than me? he said. She ran the wet sponge around the inside of the teacup ... fair enough, he repeated in a cringing, girlish voice. No wonder you have no friends, you can't even have a normal conversation. Right. (Rooney, 2018, p. 128)

As stated above, it is clear that he does not accept that Marianne is smarter than him. Because it would be a shame for him if he lost smarter than his younger sister, and he would think that he is a bad boy to lose to a girl. when Marianne answered with a vague answer, Alan annoyed at her then imitated her in a childish voice and taunted her by calling her not like a normal person. He spit on Marianne because of that. Spitting on someone happens because someone is trying to put another person down and he feels she is not better or stronger than him. It was clear that if he was angry with her, he would continue to mock or bad-mouth her. It was Alan who always thought that an older brother could do anything to a younger sister, and she had to obey what an older brother said the worst thing is that he can hurt her physically.

The Protagonist's Resistance towards the Power Relations in *Normal People*

This part discusses about the protagonist in the novel, Marianne that reacts towards the power relations in her family by doing resistance to them especially her older brother, Alan. As Foucault (1978, p. 95) described that where there is power, there is resistance. Resistance is carried out by people who oppose or disagree with the power. Resistance itself is the act to defend or fight to something that refers to a clear understanding. There are several oppositions that have developed in recent years, oppositions to the power of

men over women, of parents over children (Foucault, 2014, p. 780). Marianne has an abusive family. Her mother and older brother always use their power on her, and it gets resistance from her. Her older brother always hated never seemed right to Alan. Marianne who cannot stand her family's bad treatment anymore tries to put up a resistance despite being helped by other people.

D. Conclusion

Based on the discussion in the previous chapters, it can be concluded that abuse that occurs in the novel is caused by power relations. Power relations are the relationship between people who have power over something and have a desire to get something. Power relations that presented in *Normal People* novel include the power relations between Marianne and her mother, Marianne and her older brother. Then the reactions of the protagonist towards the power relations is also presented in the novel.

Power relations in the novel is divided into two-way relations. First relationship of parents and daughter. In the story Marianne's mother verbally abuses Marianne, namely the neglect of parents for their children. Second, relationship between older brothers and younger sisters. Alan uses his power as an older brother by verbally and physically abusing Marianne. The resistance of the protagonist towards the power relation are to avoid and remain silent when abused by her mother and older brother, then the next reaction is to ask Connell for help to get out of the house and get protection from him.

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