

Conference Paper

Character Strengths in E. Rokajat Asura's Novel *Air Mata Surga*

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with character strengths in E. Rokajat Asura's novel *Air Mata Surga*. The objectives of this study is to reveal the protagonist's character strengths in the novel and to analyze how the protagonist's character strengths reflected in the novel which cover *open mindedness, creativity, vitality, and gratitude*. The theory adopted in this study is based on Peterson and Seligman (2004). The result of this study shows that open mindedness, creativity, vitality and gratitude are vividly reflected in the novel. This study was done by using a qualitative research method by Holliday (2007). The result of this study is theoretically significant for the readers as they can learn about the theory of character strengths as adopted in this study. This is also practically significant as it will give a contribution to the readers that they can take lessons to practice about how important it is to lead life with character strengths in order to succeed in their life. The conclusion of this study is that the most important out of the four character strengths depicted in the novel is gratitude to Allah the Almighty.

Keywords: character strength, open mindedness, creativity, vitality, gratitude.

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1. Introduction

The condition of human life is much determined by destiny endowed by Allah the Almighty; however, one's destiny can be changed through his own prayers and character strengths. The Almighty has promised to consent everyone's prayers and He will never change one's fate except when he himself endeavours to change it. Problems of life may come to someone any time. Sometimes, they are easy to solve, but in some cases they are difficult to find the solution. He can solve various problems if he has character strengths to do his best to solve it. Basically, all human beings have character strengths. They will suffer in disappointment if they cannot solve their problems. However, by a strong will and hard works, they can transform it into a great power which can be used to solve their problems. However, everything must be accompanied

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by prayers and devotion to Allah the Almighty Who has unlimited power to determine what to happen in this life.

Based on the above description, it is really interesting to discuss the very unique matter about character strengths. In this study, the protagonist's character strengths are the problems that will be analyzed. This topic may yield very significant scientific findings if it is supported by some convincing arguments. It is important to see the world from another perspective that reflects human life, especially the protagonist's character strengths found in the novel

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 28) claim that character strengths can be classified into: creativity, curiosity, open mindedness, love of learning, perspective, bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, kindness, social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self regulation, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, and spirituality. However, in this study, the analysis will only focus on four of them: open mindedness, creativity, vitality, and gratitude.

Character strength has become a part of human life and will be a hot issue to be discussed and without having certain strength, human beings, especially a girl will not be able to face complicated problems and challenges that might come in her life. This study has used a theory proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) and was conducted by applying a descriptive qualitative method proposed by Halliday (2007).

2. Literature Review

Character, according to Peterson and Seligman (2004) is the state of one's soul that keeps doing things in a certain way. He also states that the character is a personality that is viewed from ethical and moral points of view that usually have a relatively fixed nature, such as one's honesty. The character will change due to the effects of certain circumstances such as age development and environment in which humans are located. Patty et al, (1982: 72) state further that character is an individual response to some kinds of incentive. The stimulus of the environment is as a result of the relationship between individuals.

2.1. Character strength

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define that character strengths are the psychological ingredients process or mechanism that define the virtues. Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophy and religious teachings. Someone who has religious faith will be strong to face any kinds of difficulty. Strength in faith determines

how an individual faces difficulties and problems in life. Strength in character can be manifested in the range of an individual's behaviour, thoughts and feelings which can be assessed in his life.

Character strengths are influenced by family, society and other contextual factors. Family is the main factor in the formation of one's character strengths as the fruit of attention and affection in the family. Those are the things that strongly influence the formation of character strengths. Being a positive role model for children, it is important to develop their character strengths. Vaillant (2000) says that character strengths are the mature defences which have been linked to both psychological and physical well being and when habitual. A person can be also said strong if he has a healthy body both psychological and physical to have character strengths. Kohlberg (1984: 71) says that character strength is a thoroughly cognitive approach to moral reasoning about the actions of other people, and he proposes that children pass through stages of reasoning constrained by their general cognitive ability. It means that children are able to digest actions they will do, good or right. They must be able to face all the actions that others do to them; good or bad.

2.2. Open mindedness

Open mindedness, according to Peterson and Seligman (2004: 13) is the willingness to search something actively for evidence against one's favoured beliefs, plans, or goals and to weigh such evidence fairly when it is available. It means that when talking, people always take into consideration evidence and beliefs. It can receive any response with the existing evidence. Stanovich (1999: 144) says that it is difficult for us to recognize open mindedness as general and persistent strength without knowing a person's thinking in detail. Because every person has different ways of thinking and different critical thinking abilities, the role of positive thinking is needed so that he can be trusted by someone else to be open to us.

Greenwald (1980: 144) says that the opposite of open mindedness has been called bias which refers to pervasive tendency to think in ways that favour one's current views. Bias means that people's thoughts and judgments are compared to an ideal standard, a normative model. The normative standard is one of fairness to ideas, regardless of one's initial views. Many of our beliefs are more likely to be true than false, so we have good reason to think any given beliefs is likely to be true.

2.3. Creativity

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 110) state that creativity in individual is differentiated into two essential components. First, a creative person must produce original idea or behaviours. The individual must be capable to generate new ideas or behaviours, surprising or unusual. An idea and behaviours can appear as an original tenet in their activity and interest. The second, the behaviours or ideas must be not only original but also adaptive. In order to have the adaptive originality, one must make a positive contribution to their life or to the life of others. Creativity is morally valued; the creation of something beautiful is a good moral because it elevates others. Creativity is often seen as a sign of mental health and emotional well being.

2.4. Vitality

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 273) say that a vital person is someone whose aliveness and spirit are expressed in personal productivity. Based on physical and mental senses, vitality refers to a feeling of aliveness. The word "vitality" is derived from "vita" or "life". Psychologically vitality is aliveness which brings a sense that one's actions have meanings and purposes. It is important to note that vitality is more than just an enthusiasm. Vitality is strongly associated with general physical and mental health. Ryan and Frederick (1997: 273) suggest that the most things that have a negative effect on physical health or mood also have a negative effect on vitality. All negative effects are related to vitality in health like inactivity, stressful environment, and for adult like a poor diet and smoking.

2.5. Gratitude

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 554) define that gratitude is a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from specific moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty. The word gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning "grace", "graciousness", or "gratefulness", gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving or getting something for nothing. A distinction can be made between personal and transpersonal gratitude. Personal gratitude is thankfulness toward a specific other person for the benefit that person has provided (or just for their being); transpersonal gratitude is a gratefulness to God, to higher power.

3. Research Method

This study makes use of a method called qualitative method to analyze the data found in the novel as proposed by Holliday (2007). This study constitutes a library research because most of the data are obtained from various sources in the libraries [9]. The main source of data is derived from Asura's novel *Air Mata Surga*. The first step conveyed in this study was by identifying and understanding fully the concepts of character strengths from various sources to get supporting theories and comparing several theories from different experts. The steps to collect the data are reading the novel, identifying important lines related to the subject matter, jotting down some lines which support arguments in the analysis. The next step is analyzing the data with some considerations what might count as relevant or important data in answering the research questions which are all analytic processes. Data analysis is an explicit step in conceptually interpreting the data set as a whole, using specific analytic strategies to transform the raw data into a new and coherent depiction of the thing being studied. The data analysis in this respect concerns with the protagonist's character strengths in the novel which are conducted in such a way that all aspects related to them and why and how she is postulated as having such character strengths are revealed.

4. Discussion

With reference to the topic of this study, the discussion in this section focuses on the analysis of character strengths depicted in the novel *Air Mata Surga* written by Asura (2012) covering the aspects of *open mindedness, creativity, vitality, and gratitude*. The novel has been inspired by the real story of a little girl named Baraah who has instrumental motivation and determination as strong as steel so that she is able to overcome all transverse in realizing her desire to memorize al-Qur'an. She also has melodious voice which makes people amazed to hear her when she recites the Holy al-Quran and when she sings religious songs in an Islamic Musical Group known as *Nasyid*. The story of Baraah, an orphan girl who has to fight against her critical cancer will slap us into the enormous vitality of life and her willingness to know and share, gratitude, creativity, vitality and the many life stories into lessons in this life we must put into practice.

4.1. Open mindedness

Open mindedness is one of the elements of character strengths reflected by Baraah the protagonist of the novel. Her character strengths are indicated through her life when she has a strong will to search actively for the evidence against one's favour beliefs, plans, or goals and to weigh such evidence fairly when it is available. Baraah is an open-minded girl who is always close to all her friends and likes to tell everything she experiences to them. Despite her critical thinking especially to her parents, she also likes to tell her parents frankly what she has undergone outside. She feels free to tell her parents whatever she wants from them. She knows that her father is very busy but she always disturbs him when he is at home by holding his hand and hugs him particularly when she wants something from her father. She is also close to her mother who always tells her some stories and some religious teachings such as about the beneficence of the Almighty Allah, about the punishment and rewards in the day hereafter, about hell and heaven. Baraah is also close to her teachers at her school and her teacher at her informal school for memorizing the Holy al-Quran known as *Tahfizul Quran*. She is familiar with all of them even she sometimes considers them her own father and mother; she always tells all about her parents, her experience in *Tahfizul Qur'an*, and her friends.

Baraah has a friend named Dinia who tells her about her dream going to the heaven. From Dinia's story she becomes curious to know more about the heaven, what it is and how it is and how she can go there. When she arrives at home she asks her mother about her curiosity. She keeps on asking a number of people about heaven until she finds an answer that makes her very sure of it and her mind can accept it. Her curiosity about Islam is also so strong that she always asks her mother about many things related to the religion.

4.2. Creativity

Creativity is another aspect of character strength of Baraah, the protagonist of the novel. It is depicted when she is in the Elementary School or *Ibtidaiyah*. Since her young age she has endowed high intelligence. Her ability to memorize verses of the Holy al-Qur'an has led her to follow the competition of memorizing al-Qur'an called *Musabaqah Hifzil Qur'an* which is organized by Ministry of Wakaf of Saudi Arabia. Besides memorizing verses of the Holy al-Qur'an she has a creativity to write them on a piece of paper in beautiful styles and share it to her friends in order that her friends can also

memorize the verses that she has written. Indeed after sometime it spreads to many of them and her ambition is to share it further to many parts of the world.

Baraah is extremely happy when she is registered to participate in the competition of memorizing al-Qur'an in higher level abroad. She is so enthusiastic to go around the world. In her mind she wants to encourage children all over the world to memorize the Holy al-Qur'an. She tells his ideals to her teacher Mrs. Fateema that she wants to encourage all Muslim children to recite and memorize al-Qur'an. She wants the number of the memorizers of the Holy al-Qur'an will increase significantly.

Despite her suffering from osteosarcoma cancer which causes her brain's ability to memorize al-Quran to be weak, her ideals to encourage the spirit of all children in the world to memorize al-Qur'an will never stop. Such a creative idea makes many people around her feel surprised at her intelligence. The brilliant idea really comes directly from her thought which is rarely owned children in her age.

Another creativity of Barrah's character strength is in her talent to be a good singer. She always sings in an Islamic music performance called *Nasyid*. When she has to struggle to resist to her disease that she has to go abroad to get medical treatment which requires a large amount of money, she can succeed to attract the attention of a philanthropist who voluntarily finance her treatment abroad. Her creativity is due to her intelligence and education that has been given by her parents, which affects her to grow up into a smart and creative child.

4.3. Vitality

Vitality is also a part of character strength indicated by the protagonist of the novel. It is reflected throughout her life. Her condition as an orphan since her childhood has shaped her spirit to survive to be very strong. In her limitation as a paralyzed little girl, she has to struggle for her life against her disease of osteosarcoma cancer, which has caused her legs to be amputated; she remains enthusiastic to do all of her activities. She remains having strong spirit to memorize verses of the Holy al-Quran and to travel to all over the world to share her memorabilia papers to the children around the world. Her vitality constitutes an impulse that makes her courageous to live longer.

The factor of her perseverance to embrace Islamic religion is a factor that makes her have strong spirit to survive. Her strong faith to the Almighty Allah makes her strong enough to face sufferings in her life. In the midst of her spirit and her happiness to memorize verses of al-Qur'an, she must accept the fact that her father passes away when a truck hits him on the road. In addition her mother must be hospitalized as she suffers from a stomach cancer which causes her to leave her as an orphan. Her vitality

of her character strength is indicated from her spirit to continue to memorize the Holy al-Qur'an in her condition without father and mother.

Her vitality remains unchanged even when her disease has come to the highest stadium as the cancer has spread to her brain. Her uncle and aunt feel worried about her latest condition. In the middle of the doctor's examination, her aunt with all her strength keeps on supporting her in order that Baraah never loses her patience and spirit but she just smiles. The smile makes her uncle and her aunt stunned and it also makes the team of doctors feel like they are dealing with a little angel who descends from heaven. For such a small child as Baraah, her vitality is so strong that she can bear all the sufferings in her life with a smile.

4.4. Gratitude

The protagonist's character strength depicted in the novel is in the form of gratitude. It is portrayed through Baraah who leads a life full of sufferings as an orphan and as a paralyzed girl. She never complains to realize her condition as if she forgot all the misery of her life. She always feels grateful to Allah the Almighty for the days she passes in her life. When her uncle and aunt feels very sad to see her condition in the hospital when the cancer disease she suffers has spread to the brain, she still can smile and feel grateful to the Almighty because she thinks that if she dies she can meet her mother in the heaven.

Despite various sufferings she undergoes in her life, she is always grateful because she thinks that Allah loves her very much for Allah has endowed her a lot of lucks. A number of successes that she dreams of can be achieved. In the world competition of Memorizing al-Qur'an in Saudi Arabia she gets an award. In addition she is also endowed with a melodious voice so that when she recites the Holy al-Qur'an in the competition, the quality becomes the jury's consideration to grant her better marks so that she can win in the competition

At the time when she is hospitalized due to her cancer disease which has spread to the brain, the news quickly spreads and a journalist comes to interview her because of her achievement as the world champion of al-Quran memorization for the level of children. Baraah who is lying in the hospital remains excited and grateful with her condition. She even cheerfully answers every question from the media.

In her illness she does not feel worried about whatever might happen to her life as she thinks that if she can recover from her illness she feels thankful as she can continue to memorize the whole contents of the Holy al-Quran and if she has to pass away she also feels thankful as she can soon meet her father and mother in the heaven. The

critical condition of her illness comes to its climax and she has to be sent to the ICU division but she is grateful because a benefactor from Saudi Arabia voluntarily pays her for all the expense in the hospital and even she is finally sent to a famous cancer hospital in London, England. She keeps on being relaxed and having no burden. Baraah accepts whatever happens to her patiently. Everyone around her watches her condition hopeless and not possible to save her. On the other hand she feels grateful because in the end she can go around the world. Her strength to resist from the disease makes the doctors in the cancer hospital in London surprised. Her body endurance from the sense of gratitude to accept her condition sincerely makes her stronger to survive.

5. Conclusion

No one can choose what is supposed to happen in his life because there is a supernatural power which has been designed what to happen to everyone. It is determined by Allah the Almighty Who has designed every one's destiny. No one can reject such God's wills but they can still be possible to be changed through prayers humbly to the Divine Allah and one's strong endeavour. Thus, character strengths constitute important capitals to survive and to change fate. Through the study of the novel *Air Mata Surga* written by E. Rokajat Asura, the character strengths are reflected through the protagonist named Baraah. The character strengths cover the aspects of *open mindedness, creativity, vitality, and gratitude*.

Baraah, the protagonist of the novel, is an open-minded girl who is always close to everyone. She likes to share ideas not only with her friends but also her parents and teachers. Although she always criticizes her parents, she likes to tell them frankly what she has undergone outside. She is very close to her mother who always tells her some stories and some religious teachings. She is also close to her teachers at her school and her teacher at her informal school for memorizing the Holy al-Quran. Baraah is considered as a creative child in her age. Her ability to memorize verses of the Holy al-Quran has led her to follow the competition of memorizing al-Qur'an of international level in Saudi Arabia. She is creative to write verses of the Holy al-Quran on a piece of paper to be shared to her friends in order that they can also memorize the verses. Vitality is another character strength which is worth imitating as reflected in the protagonist's life in which her condition as an orphan since her childhood gives her strong spirit to survive. In her limitation as a paralyzed little girl, she has to struggle for her life against her disease which has caused her legs to be amputated, she remains having vitality to do all of her activities. Her perseverance to embrace Islamic religion

and her strong faith to the Almighty Allah are factors that make her have strong vitality to survive and quite strong to face sufferings in her life.

Baraah's feeling of gratitude to the Almighty is regarded as the most significant character strength. It is reflected through her life which is full of sufferings as an orphan and as a paralyzed girl. She always feels grateful to Allah the Almighty on the days she passes in her life. She thinks that Allah loves her very much for Allah has endowed a lot of luck to her. A number of successes that she dreams of can be achieved. She succeeds to get an award in the international competition of memorizing al-Qur'an in Saudi Arabia. She is also endowed with a melodious voice so that when she recites the Holy al-Qur'an in the competition, the quality of her voice becomes the jury's consideration to grant her better marks so that she can win in the competition. Baraah's feeling of gratitude that may make the readers amazed is her wise idea when her illness comes to its critical condition. She does not feel worried at all about whatever will happen to her life as she thinks that if she can recover from her illness she feels thankful as she can continue to memorize the whole contents of the Holy al-Quran and if she has to pass away she also feels thankful as she can soon meet her father and mother in the heaven.

It is recommended that the readers read Asura's novel entitled *Air Mata Surga* because it contains some invaluable moral lessons. The story will really stir the embellishment of the reader's heart and bring him into beautiful woe. The reader can also learn that physical and material weaknesses should be compensated by character strengths. It is illustrated in the novel how an orphan little girl who is paralyzed has strong motivation and determination so that she can pass all the transverse in realizing her desire to memorize the Holy al-Quran. The story of the novel also slaps the readers how a girl with unfortunate calamities can lead a successful life with her character strengths of open mindedness, vitality, creativity and gratefulness.

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