

Journal with Jeannette Sharon

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The Single Path: A Novel Breaking the Shackle of Marital Pressure

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ABSTRACT

Marital pressure is one of many cultural problems still existing in Indonesia. Research has shown that Indonesians tend to push individuals to get married as an act of conforming to the cultural dominion. This happens because being unmarried is seen as problematic or uncommon. Worst of all, most Indonesians tend to use the existence of marriage as a standard for value and happiness. This negative belief against unmarried individuals is known as singlism. It includes the act of discriminating, stigmatising, and stereotyping singles. Acknowledging this problem, the writer used the theory of Singlism and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping to help create a creative thesis in the form of a satirical novel. This creative thesis aims to show that happiness and value cannot be based on marriage. In the end, this creative thesis managed to show that marriage does not always guarantee happiness and life fulfilment.

Keywords: marital pressure; singlism; marriage; stress; satire

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, there is an existence of harsh judgement and negative social stigma of being single which gives an undue pressure and stress on the unmarried individuals (Himawan et al., 2018a). The judgments and negative stigma come from how Indonesians define singlehood as being a sign of some deficiency and as being an undesirable state. Thus, the pressure itself is expressed as a form of goodwill, in which society wishes that unmarried individuals would be a part of it by forming a marital relationship. However, the truth is that not everyone can find happiness and fulfilment through marital relationships (Himawan et al., 2018a). Some individuals may find it through family, religion, friendships, works, passions, and/or hobbies. Acknowledging the existence of this problem, this thesis wants to convey that not everyone can find happiness through marriage and to point out the bias of evaluating and accepting others as a part of society based on their relationship status by using satirical elements to the readers.

This kind of negative belief against unmarried individuals is called singlism. It includes the action of discriminating, stigmatising, and stereotyping single adults (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). This happens because of the existence of a cultural worldview of glorifying marriage and family in most societies. This worldview believes that “marriage is culturally construed as an achievement that can be attained by just about anyone, and which should be attained by a certain point in adulthood” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 61). Unfortunately, this deeply ingrained worldview becomes a problem in modern society. For example, in Asian culture, it is considered a norm to deride, pity, stigmatise, discriminate, and blame single individuals for being too self-centred if they refuse to be married (Himawan et al., 2018b). The unmarried individuals in Asia, especially in Indonesia, are seen as to be less happy, less mature, lonely, shy, insecure, and inflexible (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). The unmarried individuals tend to spend time with themselves or among those who are still unmarried because of the lack of social interaction with others from subconscious and/or conscious isolation and prejudice from others. Because of this worldview about marriage and unmarried individuals, this leads to social and psychological pressure towards single individuals to be married, which can lead to the risk of individuals suffering from emotional and psychological pressures (Himawan et al., 2018a).

To explain how singlism can lead to stress, this creative thesis applied Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This theory suggests the existence of person-environment transactions, in which stress response is influenced by the individual appraisal process. To be able to deem a situation as stressful, individuals need to appraise it through their own perception, belief, expectation, and experience with the corresponding person-environment transaction. In the case of this theory, the person-environment transaction happens when individuals and their contextual circumstances or environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such as gender, age, culture, or personal interest, clash with each other and cause an emotional reaction from the individuals. Because of the transaction, the emotional reaction can differ from one person to another as each one has a different appraisal or perception of the situation s/he is dealing with (Krohne, 2001). However, stress, as an emotional reaction, happens because of not only the clashing of individuals and contextual circumstances but also the insufficiency of resources needed to deal with the situation. In this case, the resources can come in many different forms depending on the individual's need in dealing with stressful situations, such as time, money, space, emotional support, and physical help. From this explanation, it can be seen that "psychological stress refers to a relationship with the environment that the person appraises as significant for his or her well-being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986, p. 63). This means that psychological stress happens when individuals perceive a situation, condition, or environment as something stressful or harmful to their psyche depending on their own belief and capability in dealing with it. Thus, singlism or marital pressure can be stressful to some individuals as they find themselves not having enough or adequate support.

This theory suggests the existence of two processes of appraisal, which are primary and secondary appraisal. Both appraisals work in tandem to define the type, duration, intensity, and quality of stress responses. As its name suggests, the primary appraisal is the first process defining stress by analysing the relevance of the situation. An individual will determine if a situation falls into a benign-positive, stressful, or irrelevant situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) depending on their contextual circumstances, belief, expectation, experience, and perception. After categorising a situation as dangerous, an individual consciously or unconsciously has a stress response, such as harm, threat, or challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Just as the name explained, harm (p.32) refers to the outcome of a stressful situation where an individual is dealing with psychological damage or loss as a result of inevitable stressful situations. Threat (p.32), on the other hand, is the anticipation of the incoming harm from a stressful situation as a result of an understanding of the consequences or contingencies of a certain situation. Lastly, challenge (p.33) refers to the feeling of confidence in mastering and overcoming stressful situations as a result of the experience of dealing with a similar situation before. Unlike harm, threat and challenge are not mutually exclusive. In some stressful situations, it can be both a threat and challenge. On the other hand, the secondary appraisal is the second process of stress in defining the individual's capabilities in coping with stressful situations through the availability of resources. Individuals assess their capabilities of coping with stress through the sufficiency and insufficiency of resources (Kemper & Lazarus, 1992). If individuals have sufficient resources, they will have stronger ability to cope with stress compared to those who do not. Even with resources, an individual may still have strong emotional responses. Those emotional responses can be easily distinguished as blame or credit, coping potential, and future expectation (Lazarus, 2006). As the name suggests, blame and credit refer to individuals' perspectives on who is responsible for them dealing with a stressful situation. They may take the blame for themselves or point on others, situations, certain accidents, etc. While coping potential is believed as an individual's ability to generate positive behaviours or personal conviction and cognitive operation to influence the ability to eliminate or ameliorate stress (Lazarus, 2006). Human tenacity has a strong drive to help individuals in dealing with stressful situations and finding a lesson from them (Krohne, 2001). Lastly, the response of future expectations refers to the appraisal of further encounters concerning goal

congruence and incongruence or positive and negative (Lazarus, 2006). In other words, it is the ability of individuals to understand the situation as something that might happen for better or worse in the future as they work on their goal. An individual may believe that a similar situation may be encountered in the future if the situation has a parallelism with his/her final goal.

Finally, the concept of coping refers to the individual's cognitive and behavioural ability to overcome stressful situations. Individuals can master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal conflicts and demands of stressful situations. There are two approaches coping with stress any individual can take which are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As the name suggests, a problem-focused coping strategy is focused on the problem itself by identifying the problem or source of stress, finding solutions, weighing the pros and cons, and selecting the best solution to be applied. In other words, this coping strategy means an individual is actively attempting to influence the person-environment transaction and to maintain or increase its degrees of motivational congruence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which is the drive to achieve the goal, or the active attempt to solve the problem. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping strategies focus on trying to find ways to reduce negative emotions associated with stress, such as anxiety, anger, distress, and depression. These efforts may include avoiding, minimising, or avoiding encounters with the problems. To put it simply, this strategy focuses more on regulating and treating the emotional response than the actual problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To cope with stress, an individual can choose between the two and/or combination of the two coping strategies. It is dependent on the individual's personality, situation, social appropriateness, also the availability and effectiveness of the coping strategies (Kemper & Lazarus, 1992).

To portray these theories, this creative thesis used a satirical novel as the medium. A novel is a narrative work of prose fiction with a certain length and complexity that tells a story about the human experience through a connected sequence of events involving an individual or a group of people (Wamer, 2010). Unlike other literary works, novels are dedicated to narrating individual experiences of the characters along with creating a close and complex portrait of these characters and the world around them. In this case, novels can spend time and words to explore the inner workings of and conflicting ideas or values of the characters to portray a real-world experience. On the other hand, satire is a genre of literature in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to be ridiculed with the intent to inspire a social reform and/or improvement (Greenberg, 2018). Satire puts a target on an idea or belief, which the authors are against or go against the moral standard to implicitly urge a reform by suggesting a certainty of authorial meaning and promotion of social consensus (Greenberg, 2011). For this genre, the author uses Juvenalian satire as the most applicable type of satire for this topic. Juvenalian satire addresses the problem through contempt, scorn, outrage, criticism, and savage ridicule to force the readers to see the problem (Holbert et al., 2011). It often presents the world as worse than it is by relying on metaphor, irony, sarcasm, moral outrage, and pessimistic representation of the world (Fotis, 2020). Thus, it causes Juvenalian satire to be seen as savage and merciless. For this creative thesis, Juvenalian satire will focus on and exaggerate the pressure related to a marital relationship for individuals before their thirties in Indonesian society.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme for this creative thesis will be about breaking free from the marital pressure that can help someone to achieve happiness. As mentioned before, Indonesian society puts a huge emphasis on achieving happiness and being a part of society through a relationship. However, this creative work wishes to point out that not everyone can find happiness through it, which is ironic. It forgets that everyone does not have the same needs and wants. Some people may find

happiness by being on their own, while others may find it through a relationship. To apply this, the protagonist will go through various conflicts and processes of acknowledging society's shortcomings, confronting the issue, breaking free from it, and finding a new path to achieve happiness.

Characters

Protagonist:

• Alex Tanjaya

Age: 27 years old

Alex is the eldest of two children of a Chinese descent family. He has tanned skin, russet brown eyes, and dark brown hair. Like his mother, Diana, he believes in the absoluteness of marriage. He believes that people can only be truly happy and fulfilled in life through marriage. That is the reason he tries to find a romantic partner and pushes people around him to do the same. Unfortunately, he always fails to maintain a long and stable relationship. This leads to undue stress to him, which leads him to agreeing to an arranged matchmaking. Alex also enjoys travelling and camping with his two best friends, which lets him have lightly tanned skin. At the same time, he has a skill and hobby of making realistic models or dioramas, from aeroplanes, character figurines, houses, to nature. Because of this, he has a side business selling his skills and products as decorations, souvenirs, and immortalising specific moments. When nervous, stressed, or feeling strong negative emotions, Alex has a bad habit of scratching his hands, especially around his wrists and fingers. Sometimes, this leads to injuries and scarring. He is a stubborn and quiet person. He rarely talks about his problems and stress, which leads to the accumulation of his suffering, because he never understands how to. His inability to put words to his feelings makes him look for a way, which is flower language. It pleases his nature-loving side. Unfortunately, not many know or understand flower language. Thus, it causes more injuries on his hands. However, he can be a contemplative person when he is away from the source of his problem. It usually happens while he is travelling or hiking.

Deuteragonists:

• Regina Chandra

Age: 27 years old

She is the eldest of the twins. She is a woman of Chinese descent. She has dark brown eyes, red-dyed hair, and tanned skin. She is a free-spirited woman who enjoys hiking and travelling but hates camping in the wilds as she is scared of bugs. When forced to camp on one of her trips, she will have too many bug repellents. She has no qualms biting someone's head for taking her repellents without permission or dissing her for her looks and choices. Because of her free-spirited nature, she got into a horrible hiking accident that left her with ugly scars along her left leg and a permanent limp. However, she never lets it bother her. She has a strong and demanding personality. She tends to bully Alex and her twin, Evan, to do her wishes. Yet, she is very protective of them. Even though she refuses to admit it, it annoys her when people judge her based on her scars, looks, disability, or personality. Because of the constant reminders and what happened to her brother, it is hard for her to accept love outside of her close circle of friends and family. She has a habit of twirling her hair between her fingers when nervous, bored, or deep in thought.

• Evan Chandra

Age: 27 years old

He is the youngest of twins. He is a man of Chinese descent. He has dark brown eyes, black hair, and fair skin. Unlike his twin sister, Evan does not like any outdoor activities. The only thing he is willing to do is travel as he finds it more enjoyable than any of his sister's choice of activities. He loves spending time with Alex because he can talk for hours about his collection of character figurines. Evan has a soft, gentle, and snarky personality. It is hard for him to say no to anyone without a strong reason and is very easy for him to empathise with anyone.

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Unfortunately, this caused him to accept an unhappy marriage with his wife because she claimed to be pregnant with his child. The truth is they already broke up before his wife became pregnant because Evan found out that she was cheating on him. However, she came to his family and told everyone she was carrying his child. To save his and his family's face, he was forced to marry her. At the same time, he is still in love with her and tries to protect her from scrutiny, even though it means letting his family's and society's critics destroy his confidence. He believes and hopes, like others, that marriage can bring him happiness and fix his problems. He tends to let out his snarky side when tired, pissed with someone, feeling defensive, or with his sister. Even though he loves the child, he is no longer capable of loving his wife.

Antagonist:

- Diana Tanjaya

Age: 52 years old

She is a woman of Chinese descent and Alex's mother. She has fair skin, blond-dyed hair, and russet-coloured eyes. She is a demanding, prideful, and highly critical woman. She always worries about her family's face and status. Thus, she demands and expects her husband and children to behave and act according to their social standing. She believes that it will protect them from scrutiny and give them more chances to achieve their goals. However, her need to protect her family, especially Alex, from scrutiny blinds her from her actions and what is truly important. Unknown to Alex, he was her favourite and miracle baby. Diana almost lost him when he was a baby from an accident, she believes is her fault. She vowed to protect and give Alex the best of everything. Unfortunately, Alex's introspective personality and her demanding personality clash with each other. Therefore, she tends to manipulate him to do what is best according to her.

Supporting Characters:

- Gemma Lim

Age: 24 years old

She is a woman of Chinese descent and Alex's girlfriend. She has black hair and warm ivory skin. She always wears green contact lenses wherever she goes. She is working as a nurse at a hospital. She and Alex met through one of Diana's matchmakings. She likes Alex for his quiet and caring personality. However, she hates Alex's hiking hobby. She finds it to be dangerous because she thinks of any possible injuries from doing it. At the same time, she expects him to give her his full attention and do what she considers as fun and safe activities together.

- Michael Tanjaya

Age: 53 years old

He is Alex's father. As a man of Chinese descent, he is a laid-back and old-fashioned man. He tends to let his wife take the disciplinarian role in the family. However, he can be strict on traditional and cultural values. He makes sure his family knows about the values and can do them. Fortunately, he understands those values can be very constricting. Thus, he is willing to give leeway to his children to do what they want to do and make their decisions in life. He understands the reason behind Diana's action and acknowledges Alex's unhappiness with it. Thus, he gives more freedom to Alex and protects him from Diana's anger.

- Joel Tanjaya

Age: 22 years old

He is a man of Chinese descent and Alex's younger brother. He has a girlfriend and wants to marry her. He takes pride in his actions, behaviours, and social standing. Similar to his father, he is quite conservative, especially regarding gender roles and the importance of filial piety. Because of his stubbornness and unwillingness to see his faults, it is hard for him to acknowledge the consequences of his actions to his brother's mental health. He tends to mock

and throw insults at his brother for his lack of stable romantic relationship because of his inferiority complex. He feels inadequate compared to his more successful and capable brother.

- Isaac Pangestu

Age: 49 years old

He is a man of Chinese descent and Diana's older brother. He has russet-coloured eyes and dark brown hair. Unlike his sister, he is not in a relationship with anyone. He is a narcissistic, judgemental, and demanding man. He always judges others for their actions, decisions, looks, and behaviours. However, he refused to be blamed for anything. He has no problem asking someone to do something or giving something to him. Yet, he refused to do the same thing to others. If he does anyone a favour, he will hold it over their head.

- Callista Chandra

Age: 26 years old

She is a woman of Chinese descent and Evan's wife. She has brown coloured-eyes and blonde-dyed hair. She is forgetful and careless. She tends to act like she knows what is best for everyone. In the past, she made a mistake, which resulted in her pregnancy of her first child. Unfortunately, she forgot who the child belonged to. So, she decided to choose Evan as the father. She made everyone think that Evan was a scoundrel for 'impregnating' her and refusing to be responsible for the child. This resulted in Evan being scrutinised and isolated from his family and community until he married her and became a perfect husband. Because of this, she has a tight control over Evan's life and actions.

Plot

Alex believes in the absoluteness of marriage like his mother. This belief influences his actions and attitude towards life and people. He believes that everyone should get married before their thirties. Like everyone else, he also treats unmarried individuals and the idea of being unmarried like a sickness that needs to be avoided. Because of this, he works hard to change his lack of marital status and pushes people around him, especially Regina, to do the same thing. His actions and beliefs are enforced by his mother, Diana who shared the same belief as him. One day, after a night out with his best friends, Alex meets Jack to help him propose to his girlfriend. Unfortunately, his lack of a romantic partner and the fact that he is almost thirty years old makes Jack uncomfortable and scandalised. This, combined with the pressure from Diana, makes him agree to try his mother's matchmaking.

However, the matchmaking makes him feel more stressed and pressured. Because of this, he starts to notice the same pressure given to Regina, one of his best friends. After a few failed attempts at matchmaking, which lead to some lectures and reminders of the consequences of being single from Diana, he finally finds a suitable partner in Gemma. He starts to go out on a few dates with her before they become official. As their relationship continues, Alex feels more uncomfortable, pressured, and stressed as everyone around him expects him to marry Gemma soon. He tries his best to appease everyone and maintain his growing relationship. To have support, he turns to his best friends. Unfortunately, they are dealing with their own problems. Unable to deal with the stress, Alex takes his best friends with him to a trip as a form of distraction and escape. Not long into the trip, he finds himself to feel much better than before. The more time he spends away from home, the more he feels better about himself. At one point, he dreads coming home as the trip comes to an end.

After returning home, he finds himself unable to continue his relationship with Gemma. He tries to break up with her. However, this leads to a massive fight with Diana. The more he fights, the more his relationship with his mother deteriorates. This continues until he snaps at his mother, abandons his belief, and leaves the house. With Evan's help, he refurbishes an apartment and

settles there. He still believes in marriage, but he no longer sees it as the only way to be fulfilled.

Conflict and Resolution

This creative work uses three different types of conflict, which are Man vs Society, Man vs Man, and Man vs Self. Man vs Society is the conflict between the character and society or certain cultural acts (Folarin, 2015). However, this creative work will not focus on society as a whole. Instead, it will focus on a particular cultural dominion and act prevailing in the society as the opposition. This will be seen through the struggle between the protagonist and antagonist as the protagonist tries to break free from the cultural dominion. The antagonist and some of the supporting characters will put pressure on the protagonist to stay in the cultural dominion. In addition, Man vs Man, which is also called an inter-personal conflict by Folarin (2015), is a conflict between the protagonist and another character in the story. This type of conflict does not always involve violence or physical exchange of blows. Sometimes, it consists of implicit hostility between the characters which can be seen as discontent between them as seen through the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist. On the other hand, Man vs Himself, which is also called an intra-personal conflict by Folarin (2015), is a conflict between the character and his/her own mind. This usually arises because of a dilemma of deciding the rightness of an action or the need of making an action. In this case, the protagonist is struggling to make a decision to follow his path of happiness or not or to get married or not. The struggle comes from the dilemma between the wants and needs of the protagonist, also between the learned cultural dominion and finding of the real world. At the end of the story, the protagonist will be able to make his own choice over his life. This means he managed to win the conflicts.

Conclusion

To conclude this creative thesis, being married or not plays no role in guaranteeing individuals' happiness and cannot be a standard for individuals' value as people have different views and perceptions on happiness and what value is. Singleness or being unmarried is still not fully accepted by society. Instead, society tends to put marital pressure on the individuals to conform and accept the cultural dominion. This pressure, which is called singlism, can come in many forms, such as nagging, stereotyping, lecturing, isolating, and many more. As this is a risky topic in Indonesia, the creative work is told from the perspective of a third person limited point of view. This way, the readers will be the ones who decide whether or not they agree with the authors' view regarding the cultural dominion. Other than this, there are a few strategies to show that happiness and an individual's value are not based on marital status through satirical elements as seen through Alex's journey to complete rejection of the cultural dominion. First of all, the creative work portrays the hardship of marital pressure the characters had to go through. The choice to portray the cultural dominion through the character, who experiences extreme sense of deprivation and debasement, can make the readers sympathise or see themselves portrayed as the character. Through the struggle of Alex, the readers can see the hardship of marital pressure as Alex pressures and is being pressured to stay under the cultural dominion, while ignoring the growing distress inside him. For this creative work, the negative perception or singlism is exaggerated as a part of satirical elements in which the shortcomings are ridiculed to put them to the reader's attention. This exaggeration makes the work not have the same sense of verisimilitude like other genres. In other words, the characters treated singleness or the state of being unmarried as a sickness or a plague, a crime, and a fate worse than death. They believed that being unmarried would end their life and make them have a miserable life. Thus, they treated unmarried people as broken and infectious people who can infect them with singleness. However, the characters in the story did not see anything wrong with singlism. In other words, they do want to get married for the sake of fulfilling the expectation. Even though some of the characters were suffering from the cultural dominion, they did not do anything to stand up or fully go against it. Instead, they accepted the treatment as something they deserved, and the natural consequences of their failure. Unfortunately, Alex

appraises the situation as stressful. Thus, he shows the primary appraisal of stress. As the story continues, he finds that he does not have enough and adequate support for dealing with singlism. This falls under the secondary appraisal of stress.

Second, the story points out that happiness and an individual's value do not always come from marital status. Instead, it can come from many things as individuals have their own perception of happiness and values. This is seen through the lives of Alex and Evan. As a married man, Evan was unhappy and suffering with his life. This is worsened with the fact that he had inadequate support from the people around him. Unfortunately, most people saw him as a happy and fulfilled man. This shows the ironical element in the creative work. The case is very different from Alex, who was not treated well by people around for his lack of marital relationship. As he tried to change this, he found that he was neither ready nor happy living under the cultural dominion. Thus, he decided to break away from it. These two characters show that marriage does not always guarantee happiness. In other words, everyone should have the freedom and the respect from others to decide whether or not marriage is for them.

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