

Matter of Superiority Complex as Depicted on Leo Tolstoy's *The Three Hermits*

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Abstract: Literature is nothing but conception of attitude of human beings. Superior complex is a pompous attitude that relates to concept of holier-than-thou as stated by Alfred Adler. People, as individual or social, in this attitude think that their level is higher than others. *The Three Hermits* is Leo Tolstoy's short story published in 1886. This classic story tells a bishop who sees three holy men in a remote island then teaches them how to pray. He is so proud that he could spread the teaching of Christ, but then he is shocked by latter miracle done by those three men. Then, how is superiority complex depicted on Leo Tolstoy's *The Three Hermits*? Through qualitative method on cultural studies, this writing explains superiority complex as monolithic conception that solely thinks a side is totally better than the other. The bishop's attitude thinks that he is a legitimate bearer of truth from God. He is curious at first but then thinks that he is ordained to speak the only truth to others. He ignores plurality of otherness by only believing his deed is the truest one as also supported by Adler's theory. In conclusion, the story shows how being superior ignores matter of otherness. The bishop omits possibilities of other truth while otherness is more complex than he thinks.

Keywords: Alfred Adler, Leo Tolstoy, Superiority Complex, The Three Hermits.

Introduction

Psychology in literature plays dominant role in exposing personalities of characters. Stated in psychic understanding, psychology indicates perceptions of certain judgment of values (Adler, 2006; Ayim-Aboagye et al., 2018). Therefore, literature is not free-value at all but related to certain meanings in wide forms of realities. Characters are not invisible, but involved in objectives of discovered existences. In other word, psychology brings in matter of idiosyncratic matters of both its universal and particular values. Guised in fiction, the dense of personal experience is unique as how subjects could always be different in seeing the objects (Ayim-Aboagye et al., 2018; Leander & Lestari, 2021). It is stated through various complexes known in knowledge of psychology. One of them is superiority complex in which someone thinks he or she is always better than any other person.

Written in 1885 and firstly published in 1886, *The Three Hermits* is Leo Tolstoy's short story that shows relations between a bishop and three holy men. The bishop thinks that the holy men do not know how to pray (Tolstoy, 1988). Then, he teaches them to pray and to memorize Or Father. After the bishop finishes her teaching, he returns by ship. On his way home, the bishop is astonished by realities that the three hermits come to him again. They tell the bishop to teach them the praying again since they forgot its lines. The plot twist is that the three men come by walking on the water, making the bishop kneel down and admit his sin for teaching the holy men how to pray (Tolstoy, 1988).

Then, how is superiority complex depicted on Leo Tolstoy's *The Three Hermits*? This paper indicate the bishop's deed is related to superiority complex. He thinks he is ordained to speak religion to anyone he meets. However, he never thinks to whom he speaks with. Seeing the three men in a remote island, he insists to teach them how to pray. Somehow, his superiority is nothing in front of

those three holy men who could easily walk on water.

Materials and Methods

By using qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Written through description, online and offline scripts are used to explain correlations between Leo Tolstoy's *The Three Hermits* and superiority complex point of view by Alfred Adler alongside with literary concepts and psychological ideas. Online and offline scripts are derived from books and journals to understand shown matters. The data analysis includes attaining sources, reading sources carefully, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing down in references lists. The research data comes from both Tolstoy's short story and Adler's arguments. Each of them is read then broken down into its every particular element. The discourses of the short story are mainly included to pinpoint significance of superiority complex through the premises and logics used in Adler's ideas. The following analyses then include how the story illustrates domination of religious man towards common people in society. Here, Tolstoy's short story is the object while Adler's idea is a tool to analyze. More elaborations related to opposite analysis are also provided in addition furthermore.

Results and Discussion

Curiosity and Its Indication to Dominate

The Three Hermits is a short story by Leo Tolstoy about a bishop who is travelling by boat to a remote island to consecrate a new church. As the bishop is sailing, he becomes curious about the three hermits who live on the island and decides to pay them a visit (Tolstoy, 1988). The bishop learned that the three hermits are holy men. This is the first impression of the bishop towards the three men. Those are indicated in the following quotations;

"The Bishop looked carefully, but his unaccustomed eyes could make

out nothing but the water shimmering in the sun.

'I cannot see it,' he said. 'But who are the hermits that live there?'

'They are holy men,' answered the fisherman. 'I had long heard tell of them, but never chanced to see them myself till the year before last.'

...'I should like to land on the island and see these men,' said the bishop."(Tolstoy, 1988)

After landed on the island, the bishop talked to the three hermits and said that he is God's chosen servant. The bishop's curiosity indicated his need to dominate the three hermits' spiritual practices they follow. This curiosity leads the bishop to ultimately bring them under his control (Tolstoy, 1988). He is determined to spread the teachings of the Christian faith and is not afraid to use his power and influence to do so. He saw the hermits' devotion to prayer and thought that they do not pray correctly and do not know how to serve the God. The bishop offered himself to teach the three hermits and wanted to ensure that they were praying according to the regulations of the Church. Those are shown in the following ideas;

"'I have heard,' he said, 'that you, godly men, live here saving your own souls, and praying to our Lord Christ for your fellow men. I, an unworthy servant of Christ, am called, by God's mercy, to keep and teach His flock. I wished to see you, servants of God, and to do what I can to teach you, also.'

'Tell me,' said the Bishop, 'what you are doing to save your souls, and how you serve God on this island.'

The second hermit sighed, and looked at the oldest, the very ancient one. The latter smiled, and said:

'We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves, servant of God.'

'But how do you pray to God?' asked the Bishop.

...‘You have evidently heard something about the Holy Trinity,’ said he. ‘But you do not pray aright. You have won my affection, godly men. I see you wish to please the Lord, but you do not know how to serve Him. That is not the way to pray; but listen to me, and I will teach you. I will teach you, not a way of my own, but the way in which God in the Holy Scriptures has commanded all men to pray to Him.’

And the Bishop began explaining to the hermits how God had revealed Himself to men; telling them of God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.” (Tolstoy, 1988)

The bishop finally dominated the three hermits’ way of praying then he left the island. The bishop felt that he was the most able to forbid the way of praying. Not a long time after, he saw something white and shining catching up to the boat (Tolstoy, 1988). He was shocked after knowing that it was the three hermits who were running and moving closer to the boat. Those are indicated in the following;

“He thought how pleased they had been to learn the Lord’s prayer; and he thanked God for having sent him to teach and help such godly men... Suddenly he saw something white and shining, on the bright path which the moon cast across the sea. Was it a seagull, or the little gleaming sail of some small boat? The Bishop fixed his eyes on it, wondering.

‘Look there, what is that, my friend? What is it?’ the Bishop repeated, though he could now see plainly what it was – the three hermits running upon the water, all gleaming white, their grey beards shining, and approaching the ship as

quickly as though it were not morning.

The steersman looked and let go the helm in terror.

‘Oh Lord! The hermits are running after us on the water as though it were dry land!’

He saw the hermits coming along hand in hand, and the two outer ones beckoning the ship to stop. All three were gliding along upon the water without moving their feet.” (Tolstoy, 1988)

Unexpectedly, the three hermits who were walking on the water, asked the bishop to teach them how to pray because they had forgotten his teaching. The bishop told the three hermits to do their own prayer then he deeply bowed to them. The ideas are involved in the following quotations;

“Before the ship could be stopped, the hermits had reached it, and raising their heads, all three as with one voice, began to say:

‘We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. As long as we kept repeating it we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a time, a word dropped out, and now it has all gone to pieces. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again.’

The Bishop crossed himself, and leaning over the ship’s side, said:

‘Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners.

And the Bishop bowed low before the old men; and they turned and went back across the sea. And a light shone until daybreak on the spot where they were lost to sight.” (Tolstoy, 1988)

The above ideas show that the bishop’ curiosity is not pure at all. Indeed, his first urge to have more knowledge about the three hermits are necessary, but he has another intention besides

knowing. He intended to change the way they pray by saying that the praying is incorrect (Tolstoy, 1988). He defines himself as the truth barrier that could affect anyone with his power. He even feels justified when the three holy men could recite the prayer nicely. This is proof that his main intention is fulfilled. He does not really care anymore about the truth of the holy men since he only thinks his teachings are the best for all beings. He does not want to hear other's opinion since what he holds tightly as values are said to be appropriate to any kind. He is not only a bishop, but he is someone who wants to be recognized as the most legitimate and also the most powerful one.

Interestingly, the bishop's intention is reversed by a shocking event for the whole people in the ship. The three holy men could walk on the water as a proof that they have reached such beyond-this-world level. They are beyond any entity in this profane realm. Consequently, how they pray is more than what the bishop taught them (Tolstoy, 1988). They have surpassed any prayer that they are blessed. Moreover, the three holy men still be humble by coming to the bishop to ask for the prayer again since they forgot it. They do not punish the bishop for teaching them the prayer, but they are so open that could accept any kind of thing even out of their own league. This is really defeating the selfishness of the bishop. By asking the bishop again, the three holy men show further intention to curiosity out of any idea to dominate (Tolstoy, 1988). This is indeed the total opposite of the bishop's attitude who arbitrarily came and ask others to nod to anything he taught them.

Superiority Complex and Its Continuance

The fields of psychology and literature are closely intertwined, with literature providing a platform to explore and express human emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, while psychological concepts and theories can be used to analyze and interpret literature, allowing us to gain insight into the characters' mental states and experiences (Adler & Brett, 1997; Ayim-Aboagye et al., 2018). The interplay between the two disciplines can offer a greater understanding of the motivations, conflicts, and inner lives of literary characters.

Understanding psychology aims at understanding how a psychological process follows from a preceding psychological process. Thus it, too, looks for a casual explanation, with the important difference that the cause is presumed to lie within the individual (Mosak, & Maniacci, 1999)(McCord et al., 1956).

For example, a psychological approach to literature might involve analyzing a character's personality traits, their relationships with other characters, and their coping mechanisms in the face of adversity (Mosak, & Maniacci, 1999). Literature can also serve as a way to illustrate psychological concepts and theories. Psychology and literature are closely connected and can be used to complement and enhance each other's understanding of the human experience. Individual psychology tries to see individual lives as a whole and regard each single reaction, each movement and impulse as an articulated part of an individual attitude towards life (Adler, 2013).

The striving for superiority never ceases. It is essential to the mind, to the psyche of the individual (Adler & Brett, 1997; Mosak, & Maniacci, 1999). Superiority complex is an attitude of feeling superior to others in some way. It can manifest in thoughts, emotions, and behavior, and is often accompanied by a sense of entitlement, arrogance, grandiosity, and a tendency to look down on others. The superiority complex is a relatively common personality trait, and it can be seen in people from all lifestyles (Adler, 2013). It can be caused by an inflated ego, a need to feel special, or a desire to be seen as the best. It can lead to feelings of superiority over others, which can then manifest into oppressive behaviors, such as dominating conversations or belittling others. Feelings always agree with the goal of superiority, and should not be regarded as arguments (Adler, 2013). The superiority complex can be quite damaging, as it can lead to alienation, social isolation, and a lack of meaningful relationships. It is important to recognize and address the superiority complex in order to maintain healthy relationships and to foster a sense of belonging and acceptance (Ayim-Aboagye et al., 2018).

First developed by Alfred Adler in the 1920s, the concept played an important role in Adler's

theory of individual psychology (Adeka, 2019; Adler, 2013). According to Adler's concept, who has superiority complex are those who fail to conquer their inferiority feelings. Instead of conquer their inferiority feelings, they tend to cover, hide, or compensate the feelings with superiority feelings. In order to compensate these feelings, the individual would deny the existence of the inferiority feelings by behaving aggressively to show off their superiority (Adler, 2013; Dharma et al., 2022). This complex is often characterized by a person's need to be superior to those around them, feeling that they are more intelligent, attractive, or successful than other people. It can lead to a person becoming arrogant and boastful, and to them believing that they are entitled to special treatment. People with this complex may also feel a need to compete with others in order to prove their superiority and to stabilize the self (Adler, 2013; Leander & Lestari, 2021). This complex can lead an individual to exhibit controlling behaviors, become overly competitive, or attempt to manipulate others in order to gain an advantage. It can also manifest as arrogance and an inability to take criticism. This complex can have a negative effect on an individual's relationships and hinder their ability to function in society (Dharma et al., 2022; Leander & Lestari, 2021). In extreme cases, it can even lead to mental health issues like depression or anxiety. The superiority complex is a psychological concept that still has relevance today and can potentially lead to serious psychological issues if not addressed.

Moreover, matter of superiority complex only focuses on the matter of a total subject. In this case, a subject would always like to be recognized by others. He or she, or people in a community, wants to have spotlight for all the time (Bella & Harjani, 2020; Dharma et al., 2022). The person with this complex will do anything to become more superior to others. Somehow, he or she will also make himself or herself as a victim only to be paid attention by others. Any power must be embraced to show how powerful he or she is (Adler, 2006; Agnes, 2022). However, the power is only to the surface. People will obey him or her only to make him or her happy or as a total make-up in society. In other words, this is also dual face of being

superior; he or she has feeling of being inferior and would want more attention than normal people usually get.

In deeper level, this complex supports sameness rather than otherness. The meaning of sameness is the objectification in which the person thinks that all entities are the same. They must bow before him or her as one common voice (Agnes, 2022; Bella & Harjani, 2020). If there is any deviation of meaning, he or she will punish others who fight back. The person with this complex will say that all people are the same, but only he or she is the different or the unique one. Anyone must appreciate his or her uniqueness without further question. This is eventually brings in side impact to otherness (Adler, 2006; Agnes, 2022). As each person is unique in himself or herself, the bearer of this complex denies the reality. He or she never looks at other's details besides his or her own identities.

Superiority complex also rejects inter-subjectivity that points to appreciation on dependence to otherness. Actually, the one who feels superior needs others to recognize him or her as so, but he or she will rebuff that (Anwarzai, 2011; Wijayanti & Meyrasyawati, 2015). The one with this complex would not want any further dialogue as he or she thinks that they are already truthful without any consent. Others do not need to deliberate about his or her superiority since he or she is born as so. This situation indeed destroys inter-subjectivity in which people should take care each other. One should see another as another subject either. Others must not be seen as merely objects for one self (Anwarzai, 2011; Wijayanti & Meyrasyawati, 2015). In other idea, others must not also be forced to obey to both unknown and known superiority. Everyone should have choices to whom the respect is given to. Here, the respect must be seen not as unequivocal but reciprocal. If someone would like to be respected, he or she must give respect to others as well. This is the heart of inter-subjectivity in which equality be cultivated in everyday life (Adler & Brett, 1997).

The Bishop and The Three Hermits: Matter of Sameness and Otherness

The Three Hermits is a Russian folktale about a bishop who visits three holy men living on an

island. The bishop asks each of the hermits a question, and each one gives a different answer. The bishop is surprised by the different answers, but is also impressed by the hermits' wisdom (Tolstoy, 1988). The story is about the matter of sameness and otherness, as the bishop is unable to comprehend how the hermits can have such different opinions. On the other hand, the hermits have learned to appreciate and accept their differences. The story tells the readers that those differences between people should be respected and embraced and that people should not be so quick to judge and to dominate others.

This theme highlights the importance of recognizing the inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of their differences. According to the theory of the superiority complex developed by Alfred Adler, individuals with a superiority complex often feel a strong sense of superiority over others and may view themselves as being superior in intelligence, abilities, or status (Adeka, 2019; Anwarzai, 2011). In the story, the character of the bishop could be seen as exhibiting this type of superiority complex. The bishop could be seen as having a sense of superiority over the hermits due to his position as a bishop and his education and societal status. As a bishop, he holds a position of authority and status within the church, and he may have initially viewed the hermits as being inferior to him due to their simple, humble way of life and their lack of formal education. Someone or group who wants to be superior ones, frequently judge the other persons from their covers, their social class, position, even their gender (Narasati, 2019; Wijayanti & Meyrasyawati, 2015).

One example of the bishop exhibiting this type of superiority complex can be seen in his initial attitude towards the hermits. When he first meets the hermits, he is struck by their simple, humble way of life and their deep spiritual faith, and he is inspired to adopt a more selfless and humbler attitude in his own life (Tolstoy, 1988). However, he also initially views the hermits as being inferior to him in terms of their understanding of prayer and spirituality. For example, when the bishop asks the hermits how they pray, they respond, "We pray to God as we have been taught by our fathers, and as our fathers were taught by their fathers." (Tolstoy,

1988) The bishop is initially taken aback by this simple answer and thinks to himself, "I must explain to them how one ought to pray, and teach them the Lord's Prayer." This quotation shows that the bishop initially views himself as being more superior to the hermits in terms of his understanding of prayer, and he believes that he must teach them the correct way to pray.

This belief in his own superiority is in line with the characteristics of the superiority complex as described by Adler. The bishop views himself as being more intelligent or spiritually enlightened than the hermits due to his education and position, and he believes that he must instruct them on the correct way to pray (Tolstoy, 1988). However, as the story progresses, the bishop saw the three hermits were walking on the water and even asked the bishop to teach them how to pray. The bishop comes to realize that the hermits are actually wiser and more spiritually enlightened than he is, and he learns to see them as equals rather than as inferior beings (Tolstoy, 1988). This realization helps to undermine his superiority complex and helps him to see the hermits as equals, rather than as inferior beings. The theme of sameness and otherness is evident in this transformation, as the bishop comes to see the hermits as being similar to him in many ways, rather than as being fundamentally different.

The theme of sameness and otherness in *The Three Hermits* highlights the importance of recognizing the inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of their differences. It suggests that, despite our apparent differences, people are all connected and share many commonalities (Narasati, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). In many aspects, otherness is not well respected because of the enormous shadow regarding identities. Those could be indicated through politics, economics, and even religions. People are not measured by his or her own identities but then being dictated by the powerful one. Those who could identify his or her power than the others, then are known to be the one who could define others (Adeka, 2019; Mustaqimah & Yuniawan, 2021). In other words, the powerful one has definition for others to be included in such sameness. Gradually, it could erode uniqueness as matter of otherness.

In addition, superiority complex is an idea of psychological symptom that actually is the opposite of the condition of society. While society remains diverse, this complex would like to make a value to be universal at all (Mustaqimah & Yuniawan, 2021; Narasati, 2019). The bearer of this complex feels that all people should be seen as homogeneous while society is actually heterogeneous in its nature. The main perception to go beyond this complex is to see into heterology; an idea that underlines everydayness that every people embraces through each own inventiveness. The point of view should be shifted from being monolithic into being plural (Mustaqimah & Yuniawan, 2021; Zarkasy, 2020). Identity should not be understood as a value to dictate, but to explore diversity of otherness. Besides, identity is actually identities since realities are never exclusive, but inclusive that remains openness to all matters (Wolfe, 2006; Zarkasy, 2020). While superiority complex indicates exaggerated feeling of self-importance, the reality of society is actually showing how each individual is meaningful especially in its particularity of condition towards otherness.

Conclusions

The superiority complex is a psychological concept that refers to a person's feelings of superiority over others and their tendency to behave in an arrogant or entitled manner. It can manifest in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and is often characterized by a need to compete, dominate, or control others. The bishop's curiosity and desire to dominate ultimately leads him to attempt to bring the hermits under his control and ensure that they are praying according to the regulations of the Church, despite their already deep spiritual faith. This story is a powerful tale that highlights the dangers of the superiority complex and the importance of embracing differences and seeing the inherent worth of all individuals. The character of the bishop initially views himself as being superior to the hermits due to his position and education, but he eventually comes to see them as equals and learns valuable lessons from them. The story serves as a reminder that we should not be so quick to

judge others based on their perceived differences, and that we can learn and grow from those who may be different from us. Overall, *The Three Hermits* highlights the importance of humility and the dangers of a superiority complex. It suggests that by letting go of our ego and embracing humility, people can find true contentment and purpose in life.

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