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Revealing Human Motivation in the 'Married Story' by Noah Baumbach

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the internal and external conflicts experienced by the married couple in Noah Baumbach's 2009 film Marriage Story. The research examines how these conflicts unfold within the narrative and how they affect the characters' relationship and family dynamics. Data for this study were obtained through library research and documentation methods, allowing for a comprehensive review of both primary and secondary sources related to the film. The analysis focuses on both intrinsic and extrinsic elements, employing textual, contextual, and qualitative approaches based on the theoretical frameworks of Kenney (1996) and Bernhardt (1953). These approaches are used to interpret the character development and the thematic portrayal of marital struggle. The findings reveal that the couple's conflicts are not merely circumstantial but are deeply rooted in the individual behaviours, personalities, and emotional responses of each character. Ultimately, the study highlights how personal flaws and miscommunication contribute significantly to the deterioration of their marriage and the emotional impact it has on their family unit.

Keywords: *internal conflicts, external conflicts, human motivation*

A literary work represents our everyday lives in one of its functions. Wellek and Warren (1963) stated that literature is an artistic creation of the human imagination. Moreover, literature is also a collection of real-world details compressed into a form that makes sense to read. By utilising the author's imaginative abilities, literature can also build its universe (Wellek and Warren, 1963). Because of the connection between literary works and the outside world, literature can be seen as one of the study's objectives in this context. According to Bright Hub Education (2010), there are five main literary genres such as poetry, prose, drama, non-fiction, and media.

Media is the newest literary genre. It covers television shows, radio programs, websites, movies, etc. Any type of media can be used to inform, amuse, advertise, or convince the audience. For instance, a movie has a conflict that is crucial to the overall plot. Conflict is a literary device used to depict a struggle between two opposing forces in literature. Kenney (1966) states that conflict in fiction has many kinds. External conflicts can happen between men, a conflict between

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man and society, and a conflict between man and nature.

Marriage Story by Noah Baumbach (2009) is a movie showing the conflicts of a married couple, Charlie Barber and Nicole Barber. Their inner and external conflicts lead to a serious impact on their relationship and their only son, Henry Barber. This study analyses the married couple's conflicts and how human motivation theory by Bernhardt (1953) is depicted throughout the movie. It is done to answer the three research problems: (1) What are the conflicts of the married couple in the *Marriage Story* movie? (2) What is the cause of the conflict in the movie? and (3) How does human motivation affect the married couple and their son in the movie?

METHOD

This research belongs to the textual and qualitative methods. The methods used primary data, that is, the *Marriage Story* movie with the movie script, and secondary data that supports the research, which are journals, e-books, theses, articles from the internet, and other sources related to the topic of research. The researcher uses library research to compile the information related to the research's subject (Walliman, 2021). Documentation method also used by downloading the *Marriage Story* movie with English subtitles and the movie script to understand the dialogue. The researcher is also using note-taking techniques to help analyse the movie. According to Barsam and Monahan (2013: 226), cinematography is the art involves recording moving images on film or a digital storage medium. Cinematographic elements have several parts from the framing of the shot, such as *proximity ti the camera, depth, camera angle and height, scale, camera movement,* and *framing and point of view*. To improve this research, the researcher uses human motivation theory to analyse the extrinsic aspects that help to make this research stronger, by analysing each conflict that is related to human motivation, as well as the impact of human motivation on the family.

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FINDINGS

Marriage Story (2019) is a raw, deeply human exploration of love, loss, and the painful unravelling of a marriage. Set against the contrast of New York and Los Angeles, the film follows Charlie Barber (Adam Driver), a successful avant-garde theatre director, and Nicole Barber (Scarlett Johansson), a former teen film actress seeking her voice and agency beyond the shadows of her husband's ambition. What begins as a seemingly civil separation quickly spirals into an emotionally taxing and legally complex divorce, exposing the often-contradictory nature of love and identity within long-term partnerships.

The narrative is an excavation of emotional truth. Nicole's move to Los Angeles with their son, Henry Barber, marks a decisive shift in power and geography, pulling their conflict across coasts. Though they promise to part amicably, the involvement of divorce lawyers, Nora Fanshaw, complicates their intentions. Charlie cannot do anything, but he can only accept it and is forced to find a lawyer, or he will lose everything he has, such as his apartment, money, or even Henry's custody. Through depositions, custody arguments, and bitter exchanges, Baumbach presents the legal system not only as a bureaucratic necessity but as a force that transforms personal pain into strategic warfare. As the legal proceedings intensify, so do the emotions. According to Ekman (2003), there are six basic emotions that are universally experienced and recognized through facial expressions. There are happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise. Charlie and Nicole both struggle to reconcile their love for Henry with the anger and sadness they feel toward each other. Despite the tension, the film never paints either character as a villain. Instead, it shows the complexity of two people who genuinely cared for each other but grew apart.

Baumbach presents Charlie and Nicole as fully realised individuals, who are flawed, vulnerable, loving, and selfish in different ways. Their journey is punctuated by moments of

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tenderness, miscommunication, and explosive confrontation, most memorably in a gut-wrenching argument that lays bare years of resentment and emotional neglect. Yet, beneath the anger and grief is a quiet, it is also enduring affection.

The researcher finds the conflict between the married couple, the internal conflict faced by each character, as well as the external conflict, which is also analysed using human motivation theory by Karl S. Bernhardt. Based on Bernhardt's book entitled "Practical Psychology" (1953: 44-54), the psychology of the character is observed through human motives, while human motivation is defined as the reason for a person's desire to achieve something. The human motivation is described as the factors that influence someone to do something, that has four classifications, which are appetite, emotion, feeling and attitude, and social motives.

DISCUSSION

For both Nicole and Charlie, try to stay in their marriage for reasons tied to love, fear, hope, denial, and societal pressures. Besides that, they are also thinking about Henry. They both hold because of deep emotional attachments, fears about the unknown, and a belief that their relationship could be repaired. Unfortunately, love is not enough to hold a relationship together when fundamental needs for self-actualisation, mutual respect, and emotional fulfilment are no longer met. As painful as the process of separation is, both characters ultimately come to understand that moving on is the only way to heal.

Meanwhile, there are too many reasons why they ended up getting a divorce. They have both reached the point where staying together no longer serves in their personal growth, emotional well-being, or sense of identity. Their relationship has become defined by imbalance, emotional exhaustion, unmet needs, and a lack of true connection. While they both struggle with the pain of separation, they realise that continuing the marriage would only deepen their dissatisfaction and

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prevent them from becoming the people they need to be. For Nicole, it is about rediscovering herself and pursuing her dreams. For Charlie, it is about confronting his limitations and acknowledging the emotional toll his neglect has taken on their relationship.

In the Marriage Story movie, the human motivational factors shape how Charlie, Nicole, and Henry navigate the emotional aspects of divorce. It reveals how unmet needs, personal desires, and emotional struggles lead to their behaviours and decisions during the divorce process. There are appetites, social motives that consist of desires and goals, and feelings and emotional responses.

There are motives or directing factors because they start, maintain, and guide activity until it results in the fulfilment of the perceived need, called appetite. Appetites are also divided into several parts; for this research, those are the appetite for sex and the appetite for comfort and safety. As a human trait, people would have sensuality within themselves. Sometimes, they cannot control it and do something wrong, for those who are already married.

Based on the movie, the married couple cannot control their lust, especially Charlie. One time, he had an affair with his stage manager, Mary Ann, until they had sex. Ann was suspected of being truly in love with Charlie. "[Ann]: But we did it when you were married and we should not have done it. And now that you are not married, should not we be doing it?" (Marriage Story (2019), 00:50:40 – 00:50:45). They are talking about the night when they were sleeping together and she asked for the certainty of their relationship. Based on Ann's statement, she considers as someone who is asking for a long-lasting relationship with Charlie, meanwhile Charlie is still married to Nicole.

On the other hand, Charlie said that Nicole had stopped their sexual activities since last year. That is why Nicole decided to have a foreplay with a man she just met at the Halloween party, but not until having sex. Even though what Nicole has done has never been found by

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anyone, it is still considered cheating. From the two examples of cheating that have been done by the married couple, it can be concluded that both of them are trying to feed their appetite for sex, which causes conflict in their marriage and is one of the reasons why they should get a divorce.

As a kid, of course, Henry needs affection from his parents. Unfortunately, in his growth period, he cannot find it well for himself. He needs a stable and secure environment, a safe and comfortable home like the other kids at his age. He is shuffled between his mother's home in Los Angeles and his father's apartment in New York. "[Henry]: I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to keep moving." (Marriage Story (2019), 01:08:30). From the statement of Henry, it shows that he does not want to moving between his father's house but one day he needs to be with his mother. It underscores his yearning for the pre-divorce family structure, highlighting his internal conflict and desires for normalcy. His expression of tiredness suggests that the divorce takes a toll on his basic need for rest, stability, and comfort.

Bernhardt says that emotion comes from nowhere, and sometimes people would not recognise it, so it is necessary at this time merely to indicate how emotional experiences direct activity. Meanwhile, he also explained that every experience can be positioned anywhere along a scale of feeling tones that run from pleasantness to unpleasantness. When an encounter is considered enjoyable, the person approaches it with an approachable attitude, which means they tend to prolong and continue the activity. People will evaluate their unpleasant experience, which causes they to discontinue that experience and adopt an avoidance attitude. So, their feeling of pleasantness or unpleasantness with their attitudes will connect and influence their actions. That is why the researcher decided to combine the point of emotions with feelings and attitudes. The emotion can be described as the real action that comes from a person's feelings. Feelings are caused by emotions because it is one a component of emotion. Both emotion and feeling can create their attitude to a reaction or to do something.

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In feelings attitudes response, Charlie's frustration and grief can be seen when he had an argument with Nicole and says, "Every day I wake up and hope you're dead!" (Marriage Story (2019), 01:20:00). Charlie's outburst reflects his profound frustration and sorrow over the disintegration of their relationship. Nicole breaks down after the argument with Charlie, which signifies her pain and the overwhelming nature of their separation. She said, "I can't believe I have to know you forever!" (Marriage Story (2019), 01:22:00). For Henry, he struggles with feelings of confusion, emotional disconnection, and quiet distress as he tries to navigate his new reality. He clings to Charlie for comfort as his emotional insecurity and need for safety by saying that he wants to stay with Charlie that night, after a tense encounter between his parents. Besides the emotion of anger, Charlie and Nicole still have some good times together. Joy and happiness also happen between them. When Charlie told Nicole that his theatre had won a MacArthur Grant after his achievement, his theatre went to Broadway. Spontaneously, Nicole congratulates Charlie, and they hug each other. Nicole also gives Charlie compliments for being a genius and winning the grant. The emotion of happiness followed by their reaction that can be seen from their laugh and the feeling of happiness mentioned when Nicole says "I am really happy for you." (Marriage Story (2019), 00:35:25 – 00:35:27). Meanwhile, her reaction creates her attitude is shown when she reflexively hugs her husband, even though they are in the process of getting a divorce.

The emotional struggles come to Nicole after a big fight moment in the divorce proceedings. Nicole is often distressed and visibly upset in the wake of the divorce, which means that Henry feels unstable, too. When Henry sees Nicole in emotional distress, he feels the need to comfort her. It shows the feeling of Henry that followed by his action of comforting her mother. Henry seems concerned and tries to ensure that she is okay, signalling his need for both emotional comfort and safety. It also hints at how he is worried about his mother, which compromises his

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own need for security. However, this dynamic is troubling because it reverses the typical parent-child relationship, in that he is trying to soothe his mother, which indicates that the protective roles are confused.

Social motives are separated into two parts, self-assertion and self-submission. Self-assertion is a general tendency to strive for excellence and success, to come out on top of others, or to get over an obstacle, whether this is due to inborn nature or something that has been taught by social custom and education. Meanwhile, self-submission is the tendency to submit, give in, and subordinate oneself to other authorities. (Bernhardt, 1953: 52).

Nicole's desires and goals are to rediscover herself and reclaim her individuality in her career in Los Angeles. She said that she became small and just lived Charlie's life until she could no longer feed her pursuit of independence. It makes her break their promise not to bring their relationship to court until her lawyer, Nora, calls Charlie in the morning. It gives Charlie no choice except to follow Nora's rules, either get a lawyer and respond to the file that has been sent immediately, or Nicole will get everything she wants, such as an apartment, money, and Henry's custody. It is showing Nicole's self-assertion by finding a lawyer because she wants to take control, and she needs to be heard, the thing that she never got along with in their marriage. Meanwhile, it is Charlie's self-submission because he can do nothing except accept the fact and follow the rules.

Meanwhile, Charlie's career and ambitions are expressed by his commitment to his theatre company in New York. "[Charlie]: The theatre is my home. It's where I can be most myself." (Marriage Story (2019), 00:40:00). His desire to maintain his artistic identity influences his resistance to relocating his career path. The self-assertion from Charlie, who is often seen asserting his identity in ways that are connected to his career, which is a source of pride and identity, his need for control, and his emotional detachment. He is a highly driven and successful

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theatre director who values his independence. For Nicole, her self-submission is when she has to subordinate to Charlie's career. She sacrifices her aspirations to follow him to New York, where she fades into the background as he becomes the prominent figure. "[Charlie]: She's brave. After that movie, All Over the Girl, she could have stayed in LA and been a movie star, but she gave that up to do theater with me in New York." (Marriage Story (2019), 00:02:52 – 00:02:58). Charlie also realizes that Nicole sacrifices her career for him. Her identity becomes wrapped up in her relationship to him, and she submits to his needs and desires, often at the cost of her own.

By the end of the movie, both characters have made the difficult decision to let go, not out of anger or resentment, but because they realise that separation is the healthiest option for them and Henry. In the final court, Henry's custody was finally for Nicole, but Charlie still can meet his son, Henry, more time than the decision that had been agreed.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Marriage Story tells a story about a married couple who are on the verge of divorce. Their characters belong to round characters as their behaviour changes daily, depending on their mood. The human motivation theory reveals the internal and external conflicts faced by the characters. Their conflict focuses on man versus man, which is what happens between Charlie and Nicole, and also man versus himself, which happens between themselves. The human motivation points in this movie are appetites, especially the appetite of sex, safety and comfort, emotion, feelings and attitudes, and social motives. Human motivation also shows the impact of parental divorce on themselves and their children. This study reveals what humans can do to achieve their goals, although it contradicts their morals and values or even distracts their happiness.

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