

## Adolescent Developmental Psychology in the Novel *Ibu yang Kusayang*

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyse adolescent developmental psychology as portrayed in a novel. *Ibu Yang Kusayang* (IYK) is a novel that won the Children's Novel Writing Competition organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1978 and was published in conjunction with the International Year of the Child in 1979. This is significant due to confusion surrounding the novel's identity. Although IYK is presented as a children's novel, the study finds that it tends to depict its protagonist as an early teenager. The main question of this study is to identify the characteristics of adolescence portrayed in the novel. Therefore, content analysis and library research methods were used to determine the protagonist's identity. This study sets two objectives. First, to analyse the conflicts experienced by the protagonist. Second, to identify the psychological aspects influencing adolescent development based on Erik Erikson's theory. Erikson outlines human development in eight stages, each involving specific conflicts. This study focuses on the fifth stage "Identity vs. Role Confusion" which applies to adolescents aged 12 to 18. Thus, analysing IYK is appropriate, as although it won a children's novel competition, the protagonist fits within the adolescent stage. The study finds that both objectives were successfully achieved and concludes that the protagonist experiences emotional conflict and identity confusion. It is hoped that this research will assist future scholars in examining the identity elements in literary works.

**Keywords:** Developmental Psychology, Erik Erikson, Identity, Character, Adolescent

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## INTRODUCTION

Findings show that in the field of Malay literature, the issue of defining the identity of children's literature and adolescent literature continues to be debated to this day. This is despite the rapid growth in the production of children's and adolescent literary works, such as short stories and novels, in recent times. According to Abdul Ahmad (1997), the understanding of the concept and philosophy of adolescent literature remains vague, inaccurate, uncertain, or unclear. He further asserts that adolescent literature should be clearly emphasized by literary writers in their creative work. This statement highlights the need for careful observation and understanding by authors to distinguish between children's literature and adolescent literature.

Observations also reveal that prior to the 1980s, academic research mainly focused on children's literature. At that time, adolescent literature had not yet been studied independently and was often grouped together with children's literature.

Abdul Ahmad (1997) emphasizes that adolescent literature must be clearly prioritized by authors when writing. This implies the necessity for writers to understand human psychological development across different stages, in order to reflect clear distinctions between children's and YA literature in their works. Therefore, this study is expected to offer new and valuable insights, particularly in identifying character identity in literary texts.

Observations from this study reveal that numerous scholarly studies have been conducted by academicians and literary figures who have contributed their ideas and insights into the issues and challenges in literary production particularly in identifying the identity of children's and adolescent literature. The perspectives offered by these researchers through their findings have proven useful in helping writers enhance the quality of their works for the target audience.

Nurhamizah Hashim conducted a study on the *Psychological Needs of Adolescents in Award-Winning Youth Novels (HSKU)* in 2015. This study was conducted to fulfill the requirements for her Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Malaya. The study analyzed six youth novels using a modified *Hierarchy of Adolescent Needs Approach* adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, namely: (1) psychological needs, (2) safety needs, (3) love and belonging, (4) self-esteem, and (5) self-actualization. The findings revealed that adolescent characters portrayed in these novels reflect real-life adolescents. Therefore, the needs, desires, and wants expressed by the adolescent characters are aligned with the actual lives of adolescents at the time. Thus, Nurhamizah Hashim's perspective is significant to the current study.

Another relevant study is by Halis Azhan Mohd Hanafiah (2014) from Universiti Putra Malaysia, titled *Thematic Dynamics in Malaysian Youth Novels*. This study employed the *Sociology of Literature Approach* by incorporating four frameworks: Hippolyte Taine, Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldman, and Alan Swingewood. These frameworks were used to analyze external textual factors influencing the production of Malaysian youth novels. A total of 30 novels were analyzed. The findings affirmed that the thematic construction of youth novels is heavily influenced by socio-economic and political changes since the independence era. Therefore, this perspective is also significant to the current research.

Further observations contribute to a deeper understanding of youth literature in Malaysia. A scholarly study by Mhd. Shokkeri Hj Ismail (1997/1998), titled *Youth Imagery in Selected Novels (1990–1995): A Psychological Study*, analyzed the portrayal of adolescent characters in Malaysian youth novels from that period. The study applied Alfred Adler's Psychology Theory and Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy. It clarified how authors are influenced by various factors in producing youth novels—either to construct positive or negative adolescent images.

At the master's level, Halimatun Adawiah Ramli (2011) from Universiti Putra Malaysia examined adolescent characters facing various personal and behavioral conflicts in four selected novels. Her analysis focused on psychological disorders, behavioral issues, and learning difficulties. She concluded that the field of psychology must be examined more deeply, as unmet basic or social needs can lead to internal conflicts and identity confusion in adolescents.

Additionally, in a seminar paper by Tan Sri Dato' Awang Had Salleh (1989) presented at the Children's Literature Convention (26–27 June 1989 at the DBP Seminar Hall), he argued that authors should understand the specific forms of children's literature. He emphasized that children's literature includes wordless picture books with implied stories and outlined its genres—short stories, novels, folktales, drama, poetry, rhymes, and more. Awang Had Salleh further stressed the importance of categorizing children's literature based on age groups—

from preschool to lower and upper primary, and lower secondary. His view holds relevance in framing the current study as well.

Goldmann (1973: 115–117) asserted that individual and societal tendencies toward change are driven by three motivations: first, the pursuit of significant and rational goals in life; second, the desire to fulfill societal aspirations; and third, the aim to achieve excellence. Collectively, these motivations propel individuals and societies to realize their envisioned worldview. Hence, such tendencies are relevant in literary works that reflect individual and societal identities during a particular era. The collective findings from past studies conducted by scholars across various academic levels and institutions using different analytical approaches to examine character development—especially adolescent characters—have helped to enhance the quality and identity of literary works.

### **Research Objectives**

This study outlines two main objectives:

1. To analyze the conflicts experienced by the protagonist in the novel under study.
2. To identify and summarize the aspects that influence adolescent developmental psychology based on Erik Erikson's theory as reflected in the novel.

### **Conceptual Definitions**

Several key terms in this study require clarification, namely *psychology*, *development*, *developmental psychology*, and *adolescents*.

#### **a) Psychology**

The word "psychology" originates from two Greek terms: *psyche* meaning soul, spirit, or mind, and *logos* meaning study. Thus, psychology is defined as the study of the human mind and behavior. William James (1890) described psychology as a scientific field focused on mental life.

#### **b) Developmental Psychology**

Developmental psychology is a branch that studies human growth and development. It considers how genetics and environment influence human development. Knowledge in this area helps us understand the types and nature of conflicts that occur at various life stages. Arnold Gesell (1949) argued that human development follows a pattern, asserting that normal individuals tend to experience growth in a universal, natural sequence.

#### **c) Adolescents**

According to Steinberg (1987), the word *adolescence* is derived from the Latin *adolescere*, meaning "to grow and mature." Steinberg stated that adolescence marks a transition from immaturity to maturity. *Webster's Dictionary* (1971:4) similarly defines adolescence as "growing toward maturity." Various interpretations of adolescence exist—from age-based definitions to biological changes such as puberty. Adolescents are typically identified by reproductive maturity and the ability to produce offspring. Most researchers define adolescence by integrating physical growth and emotional development. Key considerations include physical changes, gender, mental ability, thinking capacity, attitude, emotions, interests, personality, psychology, social behavior, and moral reasoning.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study is explained in greater detail with regard to its implementation process and the methods employed. The justification of the methodology points towards a qualitative study using a library-based approach, with the application of Erik H. Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development as the main analytical framework. The selection of this psychosocial theory is based on five key principles.

The study also utilizes a literary text “*Ibu Yang Kusayang*” (IYK) a novel that won the Children’s Novel Writing Competition organized by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1978 and was published in conjunction with the International Year of the Child in 1979. The implementation of this research aims to examine the extent to which adolescent developmental psychology can be identified through the main character depicted in the novel. Guided by the principles of Erikson’s psychosocial theory, the study seeks to determine whether the novel reflects the characteristics of adolescent identity or otherwise.

### Erik H. Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

To clarify the textual analysis in this study, Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is used to achieve the research objectives. This theory asserts that an individual’s personality develops through specific stages—from infancy to old age. Erikson emphasized that individual development is influenced by personal, emotional, and social factors and is grounded in five core principles:

1. All humans share common basic needs.
2. Individual development depends on responses to these needs.
3. Human development occurs in distinct stages.
4. Each stage presents a conflict that must be resolved before progression.
5. Failure to resolve a stage's conflict can hinder personal development.

Erikson expanded the five basic stages to eight comprehensive stages spanning from infancy to late adulthood. Each stage includes both positive and negative behaviours depending on how the psychological conflicts are resolved. This study focuses on stages four and five.

**Table 1.** Erik Erikson’s Eight Stages of Psychosocial Conflict

No	Individual Age	Conflict Level
1	0 – 1½ years (Infant)	Trust vs. Mistrust
2	1½ – 3 years (Early Childhood)	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt
3	3 – 6 years (Preschool)	Initiative vs. Guilt
<b>4</b>	<b>6 – 11 years (Childhood)</b>	<b>Industry vs. Inferiority</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>12 – 20 years (Adolescence)</b>	<b>Identity vs. Role Confusion</b>
6	21 – 25 years (Young Adulthood)	Intimacy vs. Isolation
7	26 – 60 years (Adulthood)	Generativity vs. Stagnation
8	61+ years (Old Age)	Integrity vs. Despair

In this study, particular attention is given to Stage 5, covering ages 12 to 20, where adolescents face identity crises, are sensitive to bodily image changes, and begin to form both positive and negative self-concepts. The analysis also considers Stage 4 where relevant. Robert Havighurst (1953), an American psychologist, proposed a developmental theory based on sociocultural and anthropological concepts, highlighting how environmental and cultural factors influence an individual’s development. Behavior must align with societal expectations, and developmental tasks vary by age.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) of Austria advocated the psychoanalytic approach. He believed that unmet basic needs during early childhood interactions could lead to long-term negative effects. Freud proposed a sequential stage-based development model emphasizing the importance of basic drives in shaping personality. Erikson's theory remains influential due to its realistic and comprehensive explanation of human development from birth to death.

### Stage Four: Industry vs. Inferiority

Referring to table 2, Erik Erikson explains that the fourth stage of conflict occurs during childhood, specifically between the ages of 6 to 11 years. At this stage of psychological development, the conflict experienced by children is *Industry vs. Inferiority*. During this stage, children are introduced to new skill-based learning activities. Children who can master these newly learned skills to thrive. However, if they fail to acquire these new skills due to physical or mental limitations it may lead to negative outcomes and feelings of inferiority.

**Table 2.** Stage Four Characteristics: Industry vs. Inferiority

Age (6–11 years)	Characteristics	Description
6 to 11 years (children)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Desire to master tasks</li> <li>2. Experience identity crises</li> <li>3. Form both positive and negative self-concepts.</li> <li>4. Emotionally driven development Adolescents try to form identities in aspects such as career, gender roles, and social life. Failure may lead to confusion. Adolescents try to form identities in aspects such as career, gender roles, and social life. Failure may lead to confusion</li> </ol>	During adolescence, teens experience emotional instability, seek autonomy, and often mimic others. Physical maturity may already resemble that of adults, which intensifies their identity struggles.

### Stage Five: Identity vs. Role Confusion

Once again, Erik Erikson explains that the fifth stage corresponds to adolescence, which includes individuals aged between 12 to 20 years. At this stage of psychological development, adolescents experience emotional conflict and are in the process of searching for their identity. During this developmental phase, they begin to form their identity in various aspects such as career interests, hobbies, gender roles, social interactions, and more, as shown in Table 3. Typically, at this age, adolescents are in secondary school, colleges, or universities. Their physical size also begins to resemble that of adults. This situation contributes to adolescents facing identity crises, emotional conflicts, a desire for autonomy, and other challenges. If this stage is not supported with positive influences, negative emotional development may occur, such as feelings of inferiority, social withdrawal, insecurity, self-doubt, and a range of problems that may persist into later stages of life.

**Table 3.** Stage Five Characteristics: Identity vs. Role Confusion

Age (12–20 years)	Characteristics	Description
12 to 20 years (Adolescents)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Seek self-understanding</li> <li>2. Attempts to understand oneself</li> <li>3. Develops both positive and negative self-concepts</li> <li>4. Emotional development is influenced by emotions.</li> </ol>	Adolescents strive to form their identity in various aspects such as career, gender roles, social roles, and so on. They may imitate others' identities, and if unsuccessful, will experience identity confusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following discussion shifts to the analysis of the study. Based on Erik Erikson's theory of psychological development, the study examines the development of the protagonist in the selected novel. The novel *Ibu Yang Kusayang* (IYK) was written by Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah and was first published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in 1979. It won first prize in the DBP Children's Novel Writing Competition held in conjunction with the 1978 International Year of the Child celebration. Although IYK is recognized as a prize-winning children's literary work, its protagonist, Azlan, is portrayed as a secondary school student in his teenage years.

### Physical Aspect

The findings indicate that Azlan's physical characteristics meet the definition of a young adult character, making the novel suitable for analysis from the perspective of adolescent developmental psychology. Azlan is described as part of the adolescent group based on his age, he is in Form One (equivalent to the first year of secondary school). He is portrayed as a thirteen-year-old orphan, the only child living with his mother. When his father was alive, he worked as a clerk in a government department. After his father's death, Azlan and his mother lived a modest life supported by the father's pension.

In terms of psychological conflict, children at this stage typically begin to understand themselves. However, the study finds that Azlan experiences very few situations of conflict typically associated with childhood identity. Instead, his character clearly shows signs of adolescent identity development, as seen in the following excerpt:

*"...I had just entered Form One. I was afraid of him."*

*(Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah, 1979: 2)*

### Emotional Aspect

Nevertheless, Azlan is also portrayed as experiencing feelings of inferiority when facing conflict at this stage. Adolescents who struggle to understand their self-development may feel inferior and unable to perform well academically. This also affects their social relationships. This situation is described in the following excerpt:

*"...That morning during recess, I didn't eat. I kept thinking about what Karim said. I hoped what he said wasn't true. 'Maybe he just wanted to hurt my feelings,' I told myself to feel better..."*

*(Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah, 1979: 3)*

In this case, the protagonist experiences emotional distress upon learning, through Karim's questions, that his mother is planning to remarry. This emotional risk affects Azlan's behaviour. This is evident through his refusal to eat during recess and his desire to be alone, as he reflects on Karim's words. His isolation is a result of identity confusion, shame, and emotional pressure upon discovering his mother's intention to remarry.

Further findings indicate that Azlan's emotional changes are part of the typical emotional development during adolescence. Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah's compelling narrative successfully illustrates the protagonist's transition from childhood to adolescence. At this stage, adolescents who are searching for their identity tend to be very sensitive to changes within themselves. These changes are even more difficult to accept when they are forced upon them. This contributes to emotional conflict.

Azlan, upon learning that his mother is getting married, experiences emotional stress, especially because the marriage would significantly affect his life. This is portrayed in the following excerpt:

*"...Ugh! I don't want to change my name. My name will always be Azlan bin Bidin, and Faizah is not my sister! I have no siblings!" I clenched my teeth in anger.*



*Nizam was still thinking. Then he asked again: "So, Faizah will become your stepsister, right? Can you marry your stepsister?"*

*"I don't know, how would I know? Even if I could, I wouldn't want to!"*

*(Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah, 1979: 23)*

Being sensitive to personal change is a key characteristic of adolescent development. Through *IYK*, the author successfully presents a story based on the psychology of adolescence. Azlan is distressed by the many questions from his peers regarding his mother's remarriage. However, he cannot accept the truth and is unable to cope with the changes occurring in his life. In the narrative, Azlan refuses to accept Mr. Bahaman as a father figure or Faizah as a stepsister. As an only child, Azlan finds it difficult to accept these new changes in his family dynamic.

This emotional rejection leads to Azlan's rebellion against his mother's plans. His frustration is expressed through rude behaviour towards his aunt (Mak Long), throwing stones at Bedah, kicking a trash bin at Tina's house, playing until his clothes are dirty, and speaking harshly to his mother. These behavioral changes in Azlan are triggered by confusion over his mother's intentions to remarry. This situation firmly establishes Azlan as an adolescent character who is in the process of shaping his identity.

### **Identity**

Failure to resolve identity conflicts during adolescence may lead to a state of identity confusion. Individuals who are able to understand themselves will be better equipped to strengthen their sense of self in a more positive direction. In the novel *IYK*, the root cause of the protagonist's feelings of inferiority begins when he discovers that his mother plans to remarry. This is further compounded by the support of those around her who encourage the remarriage. This situation is depicted in the following excerpt.

*"...Look at that! Your clothes are filthy! Where have you been?" Mother's harsh voice greeted me as I came home. I felt hurt by her attitude. She still treated me like a child, which is why she had the nerve to scold me in front of others, I thought to myself.*

*(Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah, 1979: 12)*

It is clear that the root cause of the protagonist's shift toward an inferiority conflict stems from his mother's actions in scolding him publicly specifically, in front of Mak Long and Zaleha. As a result, Azlan begins to feel unloved. This conflict creates a sense of confusion within Azlan, leading him to oppose his mother's intention to remarry. The stage of conflict experienced by adolescents is known as "Identity vs. Role Confusion," during which they undergo emotional development. This includes attempting to understand themselves, facing an identity crisis, becoming sensitive to bodily changes and self-image, and forming both positive and negative self-concepts.

Azlan's character is also portrayed as attempting to understand himself an emotional conflict that plays a key role in shaping personal development. The emotional pressure causes Azlan to form a negative identity, hoping to signal his disapproval of his mother's decision to remarry. Azlan's opposition becomes more apparent as he is described deliberately befriending Mail, Aziz, and Rahim teenagers whom his mother considers delinquent. His purpose in befriending them is to provoke his mother's anger and concern, hoping she might abandon her plans to remarry. Additionally, it is revealed that Azlan begins to secretly smoke in a hidden place, imitating the way adults cope with their problems. This change reflects the development of a negative self-concept through imitation of others in his environment. This is further illustrated in the following excerpt:

*“...Now I often distance myself from my friends. I no longer go to school and compete with Nizam, Liza, and Tina. In the evenings, I also no longer play with them. I find myself more frequently going to the illegal housing area and spending time with Mail, Rahim, and Aziz...”*  
(Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah, 1979: 33)

The element of identity imitation is also depicted in *IYK*. This emotional development successfully highlights the issue of identity crisis and self-concept among adolescents from various perspectives through the protagonist's character. The imitation of identity is further depicted in a situation where Encik Bahaman helps resolve the issue involving Azlan's friends who were detained on drug abuse allegations. In reality, they were merely smoking, imitating how adults use cigarettes to cope with their problems. Encik Bahaman explained this to the neighbourhoods watch members who were planning to bring them to the police station for questioning. His approach to resolving the matter changed the perspectives of both Azlan and his friends. Through his diplomatic manner, Encik Bahaman took the boys to eat and drink at Taman Selera while offering them valuable advice.

*“...We were just sitting around, Uncle,” said Mail. “Uncle advises you not to idle like that. Nothing good comes from it,” said Encik Bahaman.*  
(Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah, 1979: 85)

The analysis shows that the character of Encik Bahaman is designed to support adolescent development, helping them feel more secure and less doubtful. This in turn strengthens the psychological development of teenagers in forming a positive identity.

### **Expressing Opinions**

Azlan begins to voice strong opposition to his mother's decisions, notably regarding her acceptance of Mr. Bahaman's proposal. He fears losing his mother's attention and reacts with hostility toward relatives and neighbors, reflecting identity struggle through emotional rebellion (Mota et al., 2021; Anggraini et al., 2022).

### **Identity Confusion**

To express his disapproval, Azlan associates with delinquent peers, smokes secretly, and deliberately behaves inappropriately. These acts serve as a means to form a negative self-concept—mimicking adult behaviors as coping mechanisms (Banseng et al., 2021; Maheux et al., 2025).

### **Peer Influence**

Azlan finds solace in peers who face similar familial issues. His friendships with Mail, Aziz, and Rahim, who also lack parental affection, deepen his negative identity. Peer support provides emotional refuge, reinforcing his defiance and disobedience (Lloyd et al., 2021; Matt et al., 2022).

### **Sensitivity to Change**

Azlan becomes highly sensitive to the changes in his family dynamics, particularly the prospect of having a stepfather and stepsister. This results in aggressive behaviour, emotional withdrawal, and resentment—indicative of an adolescent's struggle to adapt (Rudolph & Dodson, 2022; Hazizah et al., 2024).

### **Identity Imitation**

Azlan and his friends imitate adults, notably by smoking. However, a turning point occurs when Mr. Bahaman handles a misunderstanding involving Azlan's peers with compassion and



wisdom. This mature response helps redirect Azlan's perspective, encouraging more positive identity formation (Handrianto et al., 2020; Kievit et al., 2022).

## CONCLUSION

Based on Erik Erikson's theory of psychological development, this study examines the development of the protagonist in the selected novel. The novel *Ibu Yang Kusayang* (IYK) by Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah was first published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in 1979. This novel won first prize in the DBP Children's Novel Writing Competition held in conjunction with the 1978 International Year of the Child celebration. Although IYK was awarded as a children's novel, its protagonist, Azlan, is portrayed as a secondary school student in his adolescence years. Therefore, IYK can be considered to meet the definition of a young adult novel and is thus suitable for analysis in the context of adolescent psychological development. The overall findings of this study highlight the success of Sharifah Hasnah Abdullah in crafting a protagonist who is at the early stage of adolescence. From the physical, emotional, and identity aspects, to self-confidence and peer influence, the portrayal of Azlan aligns well with the characteristics of adolescent psychological development as outlined in Erik Erikson's theory, complemented by engaging storytelling. This study also suggests that new researchers should assess literary genres as having distinct identities. This is because many published literary works often do not focus sufficiently on the true depiction of characters. This issue may confuse readers when selecting appropriate works. Therefore, efforts to classify literary works systematically can help ensure that only truly suitable works are presented to the appropriate target audience, whether children or adolescence. Attention to this aspect is expected to provide a clearer perspective on the future of creative writing.

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