



The Unfolding of Kenan's Character in Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*

Amira Sava Lutfia¹✉, Ramadhina Ulfa Nuristama²
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya^{1,2}
✉ amirasava@gmail.com

Abstract:

Set in Homs during the Syrian revolution by a Canadian author of young adult fiction, Zoulfa Katouh. *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is a novel that introduces Kenan Al-Sayed, the main male character, who decided to stay in Syria despite facing struggles. In the state of war, he tries to take real action by documenting the Syrian war on video and sharing it online. His attitude was part of his fight to create a free country from the military. Furthermore, Kenan also appears to be a protective figure for his siblings and Salama, his wife. Therefore, the analysis aims to determine how Kenan is portrayed through his characterization and as a representative Syrian character. Applying Edgar V. Roberts' theory, this study examines Kenan's character through four aspects: his actions, words, thoughts, and perception. Using a descriptive qualitative method, this research closely reads the novel to collect relevant data. Ultimately, the analysis found that Kenan's characterization is loving and optimistic. Additionally, his portrayal as a Syrian is shown to be brave and idealistic. The researcher concludes that these characterizations help him overcome difficulties, protect others, and strengthen his hope for life in the novel.

Keywords: characterization; New Criticism; Intrinsic analysis

Abstrak:

Berlatar di Homs ketika revolusi Suriah karya penulis fiksi dewasa muda asal Kanada, Zoulfa Katouh. *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* adalah novel yang memperkenalkan Kenan Al-Sayed, seorang tokoh utama pria, yang memilih untuk tetap tinggal di Suriah meskipun menghadapi kesulitan. Dalam keadaan perang, ia mencoba mengambil tindakan nyata dengan mendokumentasikan perang Suriah dalam bentuk video dan membagikannya secara daring. Sikapnya tersebut merupakan bentuk perjuangannya untuk membebaskan negara dari militer. Lebih lanjut, Kenan juga menjadi sosok pelindung bagi saudara kandungnya dan Salama, istrinya. Oleh karena itu, analisis ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana Kenan digambarkan melalui karakterisasinya dan sebagai karakter representatif Suriah. Dengan menerapkan teori Edgar V. Roberts, penelitian ini mengkaji karakter Kenan melalui empat aspek: tindakannya, perkataannya, pikirannya, dan persepsi karakter lain. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini membaca novel secara saksama untuk mengumpulkan data yang relevan. Pada akhirnya, analisis menemukan bahwa penokohan Kenan bersifat penyanyang dan optimis. Selain itu, penggambarannya sebagai orang Suriah ditunjukkan sebagai sosok yang berani dan idealis. Peneliti menyimpulkan bahwa karakterisasi ini membantunya mengatasi kesulitan, melindungi orang lain, dan memperkuat harapan hidupnya dalam novel.

Kata kunci: Penokohan; New Criticism; Analisis intrinsik



INTRODUCTION

As a young adult novel, Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long As The Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) received attention and was listed as one of Amazon's Best Young Adult Books of the Year 2022. The novel follows Salama Kassab, a second-year pharmacy student whose life is drastically changed by the Syrian revolution. The tragedy of war takes almost her entire family, including her brother, who was arrested by the military. Then, Salama became a volunteer doctor helping to operate on patients at the hospital in Homs. Amidst the chaos, her responsibilities grow heavier when Salama must protect Layla, her pregnant sister-in-law. She strives with all her might to find a way for them to escape to Germany.

In this situation, Salama meets a young man named Kenan Al-Sayed, who was passionate about fighting for Syria. Like Salama, Kenan lost his parents due to the civil war, which resulted in both of them being shot by the military. From then on, indirectly, Kenan's responsibility for protecting his siblings, Yusuf and Lama, fell entirely on him. However, Kenan had one mission: to record the atrocities and upload the videos on his YouTube channel. With that action, he hopes the world will see the suffering of the Syrian people during the war. That's why Kenan wants to continue living in Syria even though the conflict has devastated his life. In this story, Kenan's character is depicted as willing to sacrifice his life for justice in his country.

Essentially, Characters are the story's soul, or even actors who bring the narrative stage to life, as demonstrated by the distinct characteristics of each individual, which can influence the atmosphere of the storyline. From the points of view of Bennett & Royle (2016) These characters sometimes reflect humans themselves, as depicted from various perspectives influenced by their social environment. This statement is similar to what is explained by Edward M. Forster (1974, p.54). Characters are likened to people created by authors in fictional stories to make readers feel like they are interacting with real people.

Authors make their characters feel real through characterization. This characterization is formed from the characters' dialogue, their daily behavior, and the way they interact with (Maurifa, 2023). Abrams & Harpham (2015) identify two types of characterization: direct characterization, in which the narrator explicitly describes the character, and indirect characterization, which reveals the character through speech, thoughts, actions, the reactions of others, and narrative commentary. In addition, Edgar V. Roberts (1995) mentioned in his book *Writing About Literature* that a character's characterization is shaped through their words, behavior, thoughts, and other characters'



opinions within the story. In *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, Kenan Al-Sayed seems to reflect on Roberts' ideas as his character is shown directly through his dialogue, which always overflows with empathy. On the other hand, the way different characters see Kenan as someone who does not give up easily suggests that his characterization is realistic.

Nevertheless, academic discussions of *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* have largely concentrated on Salama's perspective; however, Kenan's character and role are comparatively underexplored. Some previous studies are slightly related. First, the research by Elly Mahdiyyah Aliyya (2024) *Salama Kassab's Personality in As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* analyzes Salama's personality through Freud's theory. The result shows that Salama's ego development after meeting Kenan balance her id impulses with her superego moral values. The second study is *Nationalism in Zoulfa Katouh's As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, conducted by Yuni Sulistiawati (2022). The study investigates how Salama and Kenan respond to the Syrian conflict and their nationalist responses. The findings suggest that nationalism persists as a powerful force, even when individuals leave their homeland. The third study was conducted by Alya Rizkyane Machmuri, Yuyun Nurulaen, and Pepen Priyawan (2025). Their study, entitled *Romance Formula in Zoulfa Katouh's Novel As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, examines the romance narrative using Janice A. Radway's thirteen functions of romance.

While some previous studies have analyzed Salama's personality as well as the relationship between Salama and Kenan. Therefore, this study analyzes Kenan's characterization and his character as a Syrian in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* by using a characterization framework within the New Criticism approach. This formalist analysis is conducted using a close reading of the text, searching for meaning hidden in the choice of language, sentence structure, and representation of character (Nuristama et al., 2025). The researcher expects that the results of this study will provide new insights into how characterization helps readers understand the experiences of people living in conflict situations. In addition, this study will provide a reference for future studies focusing on characters in modern fiction, particularly those using characterization theory.



LITERATURE REVIEW

New Criticism

New Criticism became popular in the early to mid-twentieth century. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* explains that New Criticism first emerged in the United States through the method known as close reading, which focuses on the words and structure of the text itself. The New Critics believed that the best way to understand a literary work was by concentrating on what is inside the text, not the author's life, history, or social background. Then, to support the literary interpretations, New Criticism provides textual evidence (Tyson, 2006). The close reading technique is used in New Criticism to go deeper into the meaning of the story.

Character

A character is a person who exists in a story created by an author. The character refers to a figure or individual in the narrative who participates in the plot. As explained by Abrams & Harpham (2015) The author portrays the characters through their action, characteristics, and descriptions, which are interpreted by the reader and illustrated by the dialogue (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The central character in the story is referred to as the protagonist and antagonist. The central character in the story is referred to as the protagonist and antagonist. The main character, whose actions are at the center of the story and draw the reader's attention, is known as the protagonist. If the plot requires him/her to face a tough opponent, then the antagonist is the opposing character (Abrams & Harpham, 2015).

Characterization

Characterization is closely related to character; characterization evokes character in a story. Characterization is a technique employed by the author to reveal the character in a fictional work (Bennett & Royle, 2016). As described by Abrams & Harpham (2015) characterization can be done through showing, which readers can infer the character from their dialogue and actions, or through telling, when the writer directly conveys the character's traits. Similarly, Roberts (1995) characterization involves what characters say, do, think, and represent in a literary work. In addition, he suggests that characterization analysis is shaped through four methods: their words, behavior, thoughts, and other characters' opinions within the story.



RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design, as the analysis focuses on Kenan's dialogue and narration in the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* by Zoulfa Katouh. The descriptive qualitative method itself is an analysis of data with interpreted words, meanings, and literary elements rather than numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To conduct the analysis, the researcher read the novel closely to understand the story and collect the data. Thereafter, the researcher noted sentences with page numbers that explained Kenan's characterization, then analyzed them according to Edgar V. Roberts' theory. After collecting all the quotations, the researcher classified and interpreted the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Kenan's Characterization

Loving

Even if the light shines on your face, it may not be visible if you only focus on the darkness and sadness (Katouh, 2022). As the eldest brother of two younger siblings, Kenan bears a heavy burden after their father and mother passed away because the bombing by the military destroyed their home. Despite this, Kenan did not get bogged down in sorrow by continuing to show himself as someone capable of caring for and loving those closest to him. This behavior is directly seen when he takes his younger sister, Lama, to the hospital after shrapnel from a bomb detonated by the military hit her body. While the nurses handled Lama, *Kenan sinks to his knees beside her and asks if she's okay, whispering encouragements and love. The younger boy stands beside the doorway, fidgeting with his hands and throwing nervous glances to the little girl* (Katouh, 2022, p.64). Not only that, when Salama had just finished her work, she found Kenan by the hospital's front door, intending to take her home and ensure she reached home safely. *"Are you done with your shift?" "Yes?" "Good." He straightens and I have to tilt my head back a bit to look him in the eyes. "I'm taking you home."* (Katouh, 2022, p.116).

Additionally, Kenan showed his love by taking Salama to see the sunset from behind his house, because he likes exploring places with beautiful views. Through his attitude, Layla also believed that Kenan is affectionate, especially to Salama, because he gives happiness even though he is actually struggling to, *"Anything is better than nothing. I told you to find bits of happiness in Homs. Kenan is a happy moment."* (Katouh, 2022, p.177). One day, Kenan's caring characteristics were once again revealed when he brought Salama a drink

after she had been attacked with the metal part of a military rifle. *“Are you thirsty?” he asks. He stands and gingerly fetches a water bottle from Dr. Ziad's desk, then helps me drink.* (Katouh, 2022, p. 291). This happened shortly after they had taken a break from treating patients in the hospital. So, Kenan’s attitude is a form of concern as an effort to make Salama feel calmer.

Moreover, when Kenan was exhausted after carrying debris from the hospital building, he showed his affection by making little jokes, *“I’m okay,” Kenan says, closing his eyes and breathing in quick puffs. “I just need a minute.”* Here, Kenan remained calm so his brother would not worry about him. Through humor, Kenan shields his siblings from the harshness of war. *Kenan holds his brother’s hand in his, grinning. “Maybe I should get hurt more often.”* Kenan added, *“Or maybe I’ll let a whale snap me up!”* he says. (Katouh, 2022, p. 305). His siblings, Lama and Yusuf, held back his laughter, and a chuckle arose from his throat. Kenan’s dialogue above describes how he turned his sadness into humor to help his sibling not be scared by what had happened. Kenan’s loving and gentle characterization illustrates how kindness can survive even in the darkest places.

Optimistic

As a Bachelor’s in Computer Science, Kenan had ambitions of becoming an animator. In the midst of war, the dream still appeared. However, he wanted his dream to be about experiences during the war. He shares this dream with Salama, *“I finished my second year last year. Bachelor’s in computer science. I had dreams of becoming an animator. Everything was going perfectly,”* he muses, *nodding his chin toward the laptop. “Ironically, with all that’s happened, I have so many stories to tell. To be animated into movies.”* (Katouh, 2022, pp. 67-68). When Kenan said that, he straightened up, and his eyes were said to shine with excitement. This dialogue reflects Kenan’s optimism that even war cannot destroy his purpose in life. The sparkle in his eyes as he spoke showed that he still had hope for happiness. His optimism also appears in his vision of the future.



Kenan's optimistic characterization also appears when speaking to Salama about what they could have had if not for the war. He paints a vivid picture of a beautiful life, *"If things weren't like they are, we'd be long married. I would take you all over Syria on a road trip. We'd visit every city and village. See the history that lives in our country. I'd kiss you on the beaches of Latakia, pick flowers for you in Deir ez-Zour, take you to my family home in Hama, have a picnic under the ruins of Palmyra. People would look at us and they'd think how they've never seen two people more in love."* (Katouh, 2022, p. 282). Through that conversation, he expressed his hope for happiness to Salama and made her believe that happiness is possible. In difficult times, Kenan believed that his happiness would come true.

Kenan's Stance on Standing Up for Syria

Brave

As a man born in Syria, it is difficult for Kenan to leave his homeland. He felt this way when Salama asked him to leave Syria to take a boat to Germany. During their conversations, Kenan showed his courage in defending his reasons for staying in Syria, *"This is my country. If I run away—if I don't defend it, then who will?"* (Katouh, 2022, p. 79). Even though Salama imagined the terrible unrest that was happening in his country, Kenan was still bold because he wanted to be part of protecting his country. In fact, his fearlessness began when he watched his favorite Studio Ghibli movie, *Castle in the Sky*. Kenan was only ten years old when he first saw the film, which instilled a brave attitude within Kenan since there was a scene that fought for truth despite being shrouded in fear, *"This was a story about kids the same age I was, who were scared but still doing the right thing. It made me want to be brave too. Made me want to tell my own stories. Create my own worlds. And I thought maybe—one day—I'd have my own adventure and meet my Sheeta."* (Katouh, 2022, p. 119). His bravery peaked when half of his life had been taken away, and he had an intolerable situation with the military, causing him to lose his parents and his home, *"I'm talking about my country. About the freedom I'm so rightly owed. I'm talking about burying Mama and Baba and telling Lama they'll never come back home. How—"* His voice breaks. *"How do I leave that? When for the first time in my whole life I'm breathing free Syrian air?"* (Katouh, 2022, p. 79). Kenan remained brave enough to stay in Syria despite the rubble.

Idealistic

Idealists view the world not looking into a mirror that reflects harsh realities, but through a window that opens wide to possibilities. Just like the dream Kenan described about becoming an animator is not just a pipe dream. As an idealist, he wants the whole



world to see what is happening in his country by making videos on his YouTube Channel that document military attacks on their building, “*I record the protests,*” He added, “*It’s why I can’t leave. I’m showing the people—the world—what’s happening here.*” He nods to his laptop. “*I upload the videos on YouTube when the electricity is back.* (Katouh, 2022, p. 79). Kenan hopes his actions will attract the attention of people in other parts of the world to free Syria from civil war. His idealism appears again when he explains, “*This is my video. My channel,*” Kenan says. “*I’m making a difference. I’m adding English subtitles and explaining what’s going on so the world can know. Arabs know, but the rest of the world doesn’t. They don’t know it’s a revolution. They have no idea we’ve been living in a dictatorship for fifty years. The news shows the military killing people. They don’t know who the Free Syrian Army is. Who the military is. Syria is just a word to them. But to us, she’s our life. I can’t leave her.*” (Katouh, 2022, p. 158). These quotations reveal Kenan's characterization as a Syrian who believes awareness can change the world's perception of Syria.

CONCLUSION(S)

In *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, Kenan’s characterization can be understood through his behavior, utterance, ideas, and what others say about them, as stated in Edgar V. Roberts' theory of characterization. The analysis reveals that Kenan’s characterization is portrayed as an adoring and hopeful figure who shows great courage for himself, Salama, and his siblings, Yusuf and Lama. Moreover, it is found that Kenan has a strong determination to fight in their own way to overcome the challenges that weigh them down. Further research could explore Kenan’s Id, Ego, and Superego using Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that divides the human personality into those three parts, or other characters, such as Layla, from the perspective of the trauma she experienced after losing her husband in the novel.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. (2015). *Abrams & Harpham 2015 - A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning.
- Aliyya, E. (2024). *Salama Kassab’s Personality in As Long as The Lemon Trees Grow by Zoulfa Katouh*.
- Bennett, A., & Royle, N. (2016). An introduction to literature, criticism and theory. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 1–432. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315652450>



- Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. In *Sage Publications, Inc* (Vol. 4).
- Edgar V. Roberts. (1995). *Writing About Literature*. PRENTICE Hall.
- Forster, E. M. (1974). *Aspects of the Novel*. Hazell Watson & Viney Limited.
- Katouh, Z. (2022). *As Long as Lemon Trees Grow*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Maurifa, E. (2023). *Analysis of Characterization of Selected Characters in Finding Audrey Novel*. UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI SUNAN AMPEL SURABAYA.
- Nuristama, R. U., Ikrima, S., & Hikmawati, M. (2025). *Ada Lamarr's Character Development in Beth Revis's Full Speed to a Crash Landing*. May, 1359–1365. <https://proceedings.uinsa.ac.id/index.php/iconfahum/article/view/3348%0A>
- Rizkyane Machmuri, A., Nurulaen, Y., & Priyawan, P. (2025). Romance Formula in Zoulfa Katouh's Novel *As Long As The Lemon Trees Grow*. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8(1), 224–234. <https://doi.org/10.34050/els-jish.v8i1.43544>
- Sulistiawati, Y. (2022). *Nationalism in Zoulfa Katouh's As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow (2022)* (Issue 2022).
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. 2th Edition. Routledge.