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PTSD Portrait Due to Childhood Trauma to Ellice in the *All Her Little Secrets* Novel

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ABSTRACT

Almost everyone has experienced traumatic events that lead to trauma. Trauma is a form of psychological experience that has a serious impact on mental health. The impact of trauma itself can vary, such as anxiety, depression, dissociation, and PTSD. In the novel *All Her Little Secrets*, Ellice, the main character, is described as suffering from PTSD due to childhood trauma. This study aims to determine how the character Ellice is described as suffering from PTSD and what trauma she has experienced. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method referring to two types of data, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data were taken from the *All Her Little Secrets* novel in the form of narrative, dialogue and monologue. Meanwhile secondary data were taken from journals, books and articles related to the research topic. Several steps were taken to obtain data, namely reading the novel repeatedly and carefully, identifying data, classifying data, and reducing power. The results of this study concluded that Ellice as a PTSD sufferer was described through the symptoms she experienced. Ellice's PTSD symptoms include re-experiencing, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and hyperarousal. Meanwhile, the forms of childhood trauma that Ellice experienced included bullying, child maltreatment, and exposure to domestic and community violence.

Keywords: childhood trauma; PTSD; PTSD symptoms

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been defined many times throughout history. Literature is not a simple concept, but rather a set of competing and contradictory ideas (Eagleton, 2008). Further, he emphasizes the idea that literature is not easily reduced to a single definition or set of fixed principles. Thus, it can be concluded that diverse understandings can be produced by literature even though they are sometimes contradictory. Different readers, critics, and scholars may analyze literary works from different points of view.

One of the literary works that we often encounter is the novel. A novel is a literary work in the form of writing that makes a deep impression on the reader and at the same time provides valuable lessons. Every literary work based on a theme will contain psychological elements, because written literary works are products of the mind. Thus, each novel contains

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stories from the author's imagination, thoughts, emotions, experiences, and understanding of the human soul.

Literature and psychology correlate in exploring the complexity of human experience (Kidd & Castano, 2013). The correlation between literature and psychology is reflected in literary works. In a literary work, there is insight into how humans think. Therefore, every study on a literary work can increase our understanding of psychological concepts and theories and broaden our insight into the nature of human behavior. Moreover, humans are known as complex and complicated creatures. Every individual has a different character and personality.

One of the psychological experiences that is significant and has a big influence on a person's mental health and well-being is trauma. Traumatic events cause a variety of emotional and behavioral responses, including anxiety, depression, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress disorder (hereafter PTSD). The correlation between trauma and human psychology has always been the subject of research to discover the impact of trauma on a person.

Trauma is an extraordinary and frightening experience that can make us feel fear and anxiety (Van der Hart et al., 2006). Trauma cannot heal on its own, even after many years. Trauma comes from bad events they experience or witness. In addition, severe trauma followed by stress often triggers the development of psychiatric disorders such as PTSD because it can affect the structure and function of the brain (Bremner, 2002). Further, Zlotnick et al. (2008), stated that most people who experience traumatic events will develop PTSD.

Everyone who has experienced trauma has a high potential for experiencing PTSD, as children who have experienced trauma. As stated by Felitti et al. (1998), trauma that occurs in childhood has a significant impact on mental and physical health and can even increase the risk of developing various psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), PTSD is a mental disorder caused by exposure to traumatic events, such as combat, sexual violence, or natural disasters (2013). The symptoms experienced by someone with post-traumatic stress disorder may occur immediately after the traumatic event or may be delayed for some time. The length of time the symptoms are experienced depends on the severity and can fluctuate over time. According to the American Psychiatric Association, PTSD symptoms include re-experiencing, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and hyperarousal.

RE-EXPERIENCING

Re-experiencing is a term used when someone recalls a traumatic event they experienced (Brewin, 2015). For some people, experiencing it again surprises them or preoccupies them. Re-experiencing is usually accompanied by disturbing symptoms, such as recurrent thoughts, images, memories, or impulses related to the trauma that usually appear suddenly (Falsetti et al., 2002). Therefore, PTSD sufferers always feel anxious and have difficulty focusing or even have difficulty sleeping.

AVOIDANCE

Avoidance is one way a person evaluates negative tendencies toward unwanted feelings, thoughts, and sensations; in other words, proving his inability to tolerate personal memories and desire to control and come to terms with those memories (Kashdan et al., 2009). Thus, someone who has a psychological disorder tends to stay away from everything that reminds him of the trauma he experienced, whether in the form of the same person, place or activity. According to Foa et al. (2009), avoidance symptoms are an attempt to protect oneself from the distress associated with traumatic memories.

NEGATIVE ALTERATIONS IN COGNITION AND MOOD

Negative alterations in cognition and mood are common things experienced by PTSD sufferers. This includes negative changes in negative cognitions about oneself, the world, and self-blame (Kaczurkin et al., 2017). This tendency makes them difficult to socialize with and they prefer to be alone. They avoid social interactions because they are afraid that others will judge them or not be able to understand their experiences.

HYPERAROUSAL

PTSD sufferers who experience hyperarousal usually take the form of excessive startle response, excessive vigilance, and a feeling of always being alert in every situation. They also have difficulty concentrating or sleeping and are irritable or angry (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Hyperarousal is also usually seen in physiological responses (such as cold sweat, palpitations, fast and deep breathing, nausea, etc.) or is called autonomic arousal. As stated by Forneris et al. (2004). Autonomic arousal is one of the typical symptoms of PTSD in the form of a physiological response of excessive levels of alertness and sensitivity, as well as difficulty understanding social stimuli. Hyperarousal symptoms can disrupt and interfere with daily activities, such as work, school, and even socializing.

Moreover, the literature shows that traumatized children are at greater risk for experiencing long-term psychological stress than adults who experience similar events. (Kilpatrick et al., 2012). In other words, someone who experiences a traumatic event in adulthood is more easily healed than someone who experienced it in childhood, even though the recovery process must go through a complex process because many factors influence it. Childhood interpersonal traumatic experiences such as physical violence or neglect by caregivers will have an impact on mental health and the function of organ systems in the body (Lee & Hoaken, 2007). Thus, trauma has a major influence on the way children process and regulate emotions and the development of their cognitive skills. The potential for PTSD always arises in children who experience long-term trauma (Courtois and Ford, 2009).

Childhood trauma includes exposure to threatened or actual death, serious injury, or sexual violence either through direct exposure to the trauma, witnessing the trauma, or learning about the trauma experienced by a close friend or relative (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014). Various factors cause childhood trauma. Some of these factors include motor vehicle accidents, intimidation, terrorism, child abuse.

MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT

One form of traumatic event that everyone commonly experiences is a motor vehicle accident. People who experience motor vehicle accidents tend to experience hypervigilance and physiological reactivity compared to sudden loss (Kiley et al., 2009). In some cases, motor vehicle accidents can result in the loss of loved ones. The death of a family member, especially a parent or sibling, can have a big impact on a child emotionally, psychologically and physically, such as feelings of deep sadness, loneliness and emptiness.

BULLYING

Bullying refers to intentional and repeated aggression or harassment directed at an individual by one or more people. Bullying manifests in three distinct forms: physical, verbal, and social. Bullying, a common occurrence in society, including physical aggression, verbal taunting, and the dissemination of rumors with the intention of publicly humiliating someone. Bullying is a traumatic experience that always leads to other negative outcomes such as the inability to control emotions, self-harm, aggressive or violent behavior, sudden intrusive thoughts and/or

dissociative experiences, etc. (Cunningham et al., 2016). Therefore, bullying in children should not be taken lightly, because it can cause prolonged emotional and psychological trauma.

TERRORISM

Terrorism refers to instilling fear through violence aimed at coercing or threatening a country or region through the government and society to achieve certain goals (Fremont, 2004). Apart from causing extraordinary destruction, worry and anxiety also surround us at all times. Terrorist events that occur suddenly cause trauma to everyone who is exposed to them. In the case of terrorism, there is a lot of violence, destruction and chaos. Witnessing the loss of life, injuries and destruction resulting from these actions causes deep emotional and psychological trauma.

EXPOSURE TO WAR

War is a state of conflict and violence that often involves armed forces on a large scale. Widespread destruction and loss of life are the impacts that must be faced during war. Although physical damage can be reconstructed or replaced, the pain and sadness that accompanies it gradually diminishes the scars of psychological trauma and images of horrific memories cannot be easily healed (Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003). Children involved in war, both as active participants and as spectators, experience severe and long-lasting trauma. Children must be able to adjust well after death and those who experience difficulties will continue to disrupt their daily lives and even make it difficult for them to remember positive memories of their loved ones.

CHILD MALTREATMENT

Child maltreatment is a serious problem. According to Abbasi et al. (2015), child maltreatment is an action carried out by parents or other caregivers that causes harm, has the potential to harm, or threatens to harm the child. This causes long-term suffering. According to De Bellis and Thomas (2003), violence against children can occur in several forms; neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional or psychological abuse.

NEGLECT

Child neglect is associated with physical (inability to provide for the child's basic needs), medical (failure to provide necessary medical care), educational (failure to provide the child with an education), and emotional neglect (lack of attention, emotional support, or competence) (De Bellis & Thomas, 2003). Child neglect is considered a criminal offense. Child neglect can be caused by parental depression, child disability, family violence, or lack of community resources (Dubowitz & Bennett, 2007).

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Child abuse has a major impact on medical and mental health, and can even be a cause of death. Kellogg (2007) stated children who experience physical violence to the head or stomach are more likely to die or become disabled than children with head or stomach injuries resulting from accidents (2007). Children who are victims of physical violence usually experience anxiety and depression, even withdrawing from social environments and avoiding interactions with other people.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse is a form of social trauma. Sexual abuse does not only happen to teenagers or adults. This also has the potential to happen to children. Sexual abuse can range from inappropriate physical touching to sexual intercourse or rape. Various forms of adverse childhood experiences and negative impacts on adolescent well-being are always associated with child sexual abuse. Children who are victims of sexual abuse are likely to experience PTSD (De Bellis et al., 2011).

EMOTIONAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL

Loue (2005) said child abuse refers to any act that harms or threatens a child, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally; meanwhile, emotional or psychological violence is the result of these actions by assessing various factors, such as the child's age, history of child injuries, physical injuries to the child's body, whether there are multiple injuries and the nature of the trauma.

EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC AND COMMUNITY

Community violence is exposure to acts of interpersonal violence that are deliberately carried out in public spaces by individuals who do not have a close relationship with the victim, while domestic violence is carried out by members of their own family or people who have a close relationship. Exposure to domestic and community violence experienced by children has many negative emotional impacts, for example cognitive, psychological and emotional disorders that are above average in the form of lack of self-confidence, adversity, anxiety, sensitivity and school failure (Herenkohl, 2008).

Based on the explanation above, many traumatic events can cause trauma. The causes of childhood trauma are often interrelated and reinforcing, for example, an abused child may also live in a household with family dysfunction or experience violence in the community. The cumulative effect of this greatly affects children's well-being. Healing trauma from an early age is an important thing to do. Trauma that is not healed immediately has a very significant impact on the sufferer. As Van der Kolk (2014) points out, the effects of trauma can be profound and long-lasting, on a person's sense of security, trust, and self-esteem. This shows that trauma can influence the formation of personality in children.

This research uses the novel *All Her Little Secrets* by Wanda M. Morris as the research object to identify PTSD portraits due to childhood trauma. The novel has a storyline that explores the life of the protagonist, Ellice, who experienced childhood trauma which led to the development of PTSD. Besides that, this novel also provides a clear explanation of the causes of trauma in a person's life, the long-term effects of childhood trauma, and the challenges individuals face in overcoming it.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is the *All Her Little Secrets* novel which was analyzed using qualitative methods. The qualitative method was an observation method that provided a detailed and comprehensive description, allowing researchers to search deeper and understand the complexities of a phenomenon, event, or situation (Asturi, et.al., 2022; Mohajan, 2018). The data in this study was taken from basic data and supporting data. Basic data is the *All Her Little Secrets* novel. Meanwhile supporting data was taken from journals, books and articles related

to the research topic. In analyzing the novel, several steps are taken. First, read the novel repeatedly and carefully for some time to find the data needed in the analysis process. The second step is identification data from the novel by focusing on dialogues, monologues, and narratives that are appropriate to the topic being analyzed. Third is grouping data. The final step is to reduce the data to select the best data to support the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study shows that Ellice is a sufferer of PTSD which is indicated by symptoms in the form of re-experiencing, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and hyperarousal.

According to Ehlers et al. (2004), repeated disturbing experiences are a major symptom of PTSD. They further explained that re-experiencing takes many forms, including disturbing images, flashbacks, nightmares, and physiological distress reactions when presented with reminders. In addition, re-experiencing involves conscious memory of a traumatic event or re-experiencing strong emotions (fear, sadness, despair) or physical reactions (pain, shortness of breath, immobility) from the trauma without simultaneously remembering the event itself (Murray et al., 2020). The re-experiencing can be seen in the monologue below:

Rudy slumped into the chair in front of my desk "I'm just sayin' people don't usually commit suicide at their job, unless it's a workplace shooting in which case they try to take a few others out with them. It's a private act." I swiveled my chair and stared out at the fully blossomed winter sunrise now bathing the downtown skyline. Private acts. I thought about my own life. Decades pass and I think I've processed the horror, but somehow it still ebbs and flows. A few seconds later, memories from Chillicothe bubbled to the surface too-an old utility shed, a little boy's tears, and a cavern of fear. People around here didn't see the real me. (Morris 33)

This quote proves that Ellice's PTSD symptoms in the form of flashbacks occurred because Ellice was faced with Rudy's statement about Michael's case which reminded her of her time in Chillicothe. Apart from that, Ellice also felt the same fear when she was in Chillicothe because she was afraid of coming into contact with the police.

On the other hand, avoidance symptoms refer to the ongoing avoidance of stimuli related to memories, thoughts, or emotions, including external reminders such as persons, places, conversations, activities, items, and events that trigger these responses (distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings) about or closely related to traumatic events (Protocol, 2014). Van Vliet (2010) states that avoidance functions to protect self-esteem from the serious impact of trauma on a person's belief that he or she is worthy. Self-esteem threats can be mitigated through denial, minimizing distractions, and implementing other avoidance tactics.

Nate smiled. "Now, I'm sure there's more behind all that educational pedigree. Where'd you grow up?" "Here in Atlanta." I told the same lie I'd been telling since I left Chillicothe. It didn't matter anyway. Chillicothe, Georgia, was so small that most people hadn't heard of it or if they did, they usually confused it with the city of the same name in southern Ohio. Nate leaned forward on the sofa, his ocean-blue eyes anchored on me. "Married? Kids?" "No." God, just let this be over so I can get out of here. Willow was still planted on the sofa like a well-dressed mannequin, offering nothing to the conversation. "A beautiful woman like you?" Nate smiled. "Any other family?" "No. I'm an only child." Better not to mention my family, or what was left of it. "I see." "How about you? Are you from Atlanta?" I already knew the answer but asked anyway just to move things along. "Yep. Born and bred." (Morris 46-47)

From the dialogue snippets, it can be seen that Ellice is trying to avoid all information about her past, including about her family, by lying. This avoidance was carried out because of the stimulus in the form of questions asked by Nate to Ellice about her past life and in order to maintain her pride as the only black person in the company.

Apart from the two symptoms above, negative changes in cognition and mood are also

generally felt by PTSD sufferers. This includes negative changes in negative cognitions about oneself, the world, and self-blame (Kaczurkin et al., 2017). PTSD is correlated with an inability to accept negative emotions, experiential avoidance, and greater bullying (Ehring & Quack, 2010).

"I know I should have told you. I guess it was easier to not talk about him, to keep him under wraps, than to tell everyone how often I was bailing him out of jail or paying off his bookies to keep him alive. He had really poor judgment and made some stupid decisions." (Morris 384)

This quote shows that Ellice cannot accept negative emotions from her past. She felt embarrassed because she had a younger brother who liked to gamble and often went to prison, so she hid these memories by trying to keep her younger brother's existence a secret from the people around her.

Hyperarousal was the last symptom that Ellice experienced. It is a hallmark of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that includes physiological responses. Two common physiological responses associated with PTSD are increased blood pressure (BP) and heart rate (Paulus et al., 2013). This can be seen in the following quote:

My eyes darted between the two men. I could feel a small, slow throb nibble at my left temple, my chest rising and falling with the mounting anxiety that Jonathan's statement elicited. I wanted to bolt from this office, from this building, to run as fast and as far as I could anything having to do with Houghton Transportation.
"So, what exactly happened out there in... Chillicothe, is it?" Jonathan asked. I blinked a few times, willing myself not to cry in this office. (Morris 397)

Hyperarousal is always closely related to a person's physical response as explained in the quote. Ellice experienced symptoms of hyperarousal which were characterized by an increase in heart rate due to the anxiety she experienced after hearing Jonathan's statement about his past in Chillicothe.

In addition to physiological responses, hyperarousal also affects one's emotions. This is illustrated in the quote below:

When I was younger, I used to pretend that I was born in New York City or Chicago, like Chillicothe, Georgia, never existed. When Vera and Birdie packed me up and shipped me off to boarding school, I stepped into my new life. I stepped out of one little box in my life and into another. But my cardboard life of elite schools and professional success never really eased the haunting ache of growing up poor, Black, and female in rural Georgia. And all the rage and anger that I was fully entitled to was tamped down by a chorus of voices telling me to forgive, to turn the other cheek, to look the other way. So that rage and anger sat bottled up, simmering on the inside. All the while, I spent an entire lifetime calmly trying to explain to people why I needed to be in a certain classroom or worthy of a certain job. Even after my rise, I was still explaining why I needed to be in the room, with a seat at the table, and a voice in the decisions. (Morris 487-488)

According to Vasterling et al. (2009), symptoms of hyperarousal can also include excessive startle response, hypervigilance, and irritability which is often seen in PTSD and can cause significant functional impairment. Victims who experience trauma especially those diagnosed with PTSD experience difficulty in suppressing and containing anger, expressing anger appropriately, and managing angry feelings (Taft et al., 2012). Apart from that, other references also explain that when individuals have difficulty expressing their anger, they can suppress it, causing negative impacts such as increased stress, anxiety, and physical health problems. This can also have a negative impact on their relationship because harboring anger can lead to feelings of resentment and decreased intimacy. It is important for individuals to learn healthy ways to express their emotions, including anger, to improve their overall well-being (Campbell and Tennen, 2012). This is proven in the quote above, Ellice has difficulty expressing her anger so she can only hold it in and always tries to explain herself to everyone.

As part from describing the PTSD experienced by Ellice, this study also shows various forms of childhood trauma experienced by Ellice. In the *All Her Little Secrets* novel, Ellice is

described as having experienced three of the six causes; bullying, child maltreatment, and exposure to domestic and community violence.

Bullying is classified into three categories- Shaming, harassment, and racism (Akhter et al., 2019). Experiences of racism can result in PTSD symptoms, particularly among individuals from marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Mouzon & McLean, 2017).

Juice was right. I hadn't been happy, truly happy, in a very long time. It was because I was so tired, too weary from juggling all the cardboard pieces of my life, fighting all the -isms of being Black and female in America. Now, all I wanted to do was take off my boxing gloves and rest. (Morris 239)

This quote proves that Ellice often experienced bullying in the form of racism from childhood to adulthood. So, Ellice has a high potential for experiencing PTSD due to the traumatic bullying she experienced.

In the *All Her Little Secrets* novel, Ellice experiences child maltreatment in the form of physical violence and sexual abuse.

Before I could utter a word, Martha leapt across the small room and slapped me so hard it made my ears ring "Answer me, you lil' bitch!" Then she started to cry. Why would you do this to me!!!!
Martha raised her hand and brought it down in another burning sting across my face. I didn't flinch. She yanked my hair in a tight wad and dragged me out of the body. The book flew in one direction and Martha dragged me in another. "Why would you do this to me?!" (Morris 150)

Children and adolescents who are victims of abuse experience high levels of PTSD symptoms, depression, suicidal thoughts and behavior, aggression, antisocial behavior, and cognitive deficits (De Bellis & Thomas, 2003). In the quote above, Ellice is a victim of violence from someone closest to her, her own mother, so she has the potential to experience PTSD.

Trauma can cause PTSD in a susceptible individual including experiences of severe trauma stemming from interpersonal relationships (e.g., child abuse or neglect, rape, war) (De Bellis et al., 2011). Sexual harassment and assault can affect survivors' mental and physical health over a long period of time. Research shows that survivors of sexual violence, including sexual harassment, have a high risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other forms of psychological distress (Wood et al., 2017).

This small miserable town was suffocating me, pulling its blanket of poverty over me, leaving me to wallow in its dust and beat. Being fourteen and pregnant was like a death sentence for a Black girl in a town like Chillicothe. I ran to the rugged edge of the riverbank that backed up against the house and fell to my knees in tears. What would I do now? What would I do with a baby? (Morris 74)

The quote explains that when Ellice was fourteen years old she experienced sexual abuse which resulted in the development of PTSD which she suffered as an adult.

Witnessing violence can have a major impact on children and adolescents, causing negative impacts in the form of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and other childhood trauma (Osofsky, 2003).

Willie Jay threw the teenager in the back of the patrol car with such brutal force, Mario's head hit the top of the door opening, causing him to wail in pain. His scream sent an electric spark of fear through me. A hard knot rose up in my chest at the sight of Mario being manhandled and tossed into the patrol car like a child's discarded toy. (Morris 62-63)

The quote explains that Ellice witnessed violence committed by Willie Jay when she was a child, which caused feelings of fear that led to trauma and PTSD.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study analyzes and interprets PTSD symptoms and childhood trauma experienced by Ellice in the *All Her Little Secrets* novel by Wanda M. Morris. The results show that Ellice is a PTSD sufferer as evidenced by the four PTSD symptoms experienced by Ellice; re-experiencing, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and hyperarousal. Apart from these four symptoms, the *All Her Little Secrets* novel also finds that the PTSD experienced by Ellice is the result of childhood trauma. Several forms of childhood trauma experienced by Ellice include; bullying, child abuse, and exposure to domestic and community violence.

This study provides several suggestions, especially for the next researchers who analyze this novel. The next studies can also analyze psychology in the literature from other psychological aspects such as anxiety and provide a different analysis. In addition, this study shows that the next researchers can explore other social issues contained in the novel; one of which is discrimination or racism.

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