



THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN JENNIFER NIVEN'S NOVEL HOLDING UP THE UNIVERSE (2016)

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Abstract

This analysis reveals the causes of childhood trauma in the novel *Holding Up the Universe* by Jennifer Niven (2016). This analysis is text-based interpretation by applying Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis childhood trauma. This analysis aims to find out the causes of the character's childhood trauma in the novel. The result shows that there are two causes of the character's childhood trauma, namely the death of the character's mother and bullying.

Key words: Childhood Trauma, death of mother, bullying, Holding Up the Universe

A. INTRODUCTION

Trauma is an issue that often occurs in society. Not only adults, children also experience the traumatic events. Childhood is a momentous time for every person that will takes a big impact for the future. However, some people face an unfortunate event in their childhood. That unfortunate event gives the trauma and it will affect their future.

Childhood trauma is a one or more traumatic experiences that happens in childhood with short-term or long-term consequences (Maschi et al., 2012). Among children, traumatic experiences are relatively common with more than 65% experiencing at least one traumatic incident during childhood, with half of these experiencing multiple traumatic events before adulthood (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2007).

According to Sigmund Freud (Ryan, 2011), "all important experience since childhood is kept in mind and influences thought and behavior with adulthood." Children may experience trauma in many ways, some are like accidents, serious illnesses or injuries, grief, and natural disaster. So, that kind of experiences can lead them to have trauma.

A traumatic experience is an overwhelmed event or repeating events that happens as an attempt to cope with immediate circumstances and it may lead to a profound and long-term bad consequences (Singh and Dandona, 2018). Traumatic experience can be caused by an event that overwhelms an individual or repeated

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events as way to cope with sudden situations and it can result in significant and lasting effects. Traumatic experience also occurred to Libby Strout in her childhood in novel *Holding Up the Universe* (2016) by Jennifer Niven. Libby Strout experienced a big grief when her mother died and it gives some impacts for her life. Obesity as one of the impacts of childhood trauma that happened to Libby Strout.

Holding Up the Universe (2016) is a novel by Jennifer Niven about an obese girl. The character Libby Strout is the girls that called “American’s fattest teen”. She gained weight since her mom’s death when she was ten and she got bully by that. Loss, grief, and bullying gave a profound effect to her life. After her mother’s death, she must deal with her own grief because she has no one to rely on. She can’t rely on her father because she knows her father’s grief is much bigger than hers. That is why she was using food to comfort and accompany her.

Holding Up the Universe (2016) was written by Jennifer Niven based on her personal experience. It was based on her childhood when her father died and she couldn't leave house because she was too scary to go out. After that, her mother also died and she suffered a profound loss. Then, she also had to deal with her body weight and bullying by that. Through this book, she wants to talk openly about her loss, something that is actually common happen to us. How she coped from traumatic event and how she was dealing with it.

The novel *Holding Up the Universe* (2016) by Jennifer Niven portrays the impact of childhood trauma to the character Libby Strout. Childhood trauma of character Libby Strout gives effect to herself and causes obesity. This analysis is conducted the childhood trauma that experienced by Libby Strout in the novel *Holding Up the Universe* and obesity as the impact of that. How she used food as coping mechanism and what efforts she makes to dealing with that.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher used a childhood trauma theory and a psychological approach to conduct the research. This approach is deemed appropriate because the novel tells childhood trauma and its impact. In the novel *Holding Up the Universe*, the researcher focuses on the discussion of the causes and the impact of childhood trauma and how to dealing with childhood trauma in the novel *Holding Up the Universe* (2016) by Jennifer Niven.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This analysis used qualitative descriptive research for collecting the data. Bogdan and Taylor (1975:5) stated, “Qualitative method is a research procedure that descriptive data such as written word or verbal expression from the people and their behavior that have been observed”. Based on the data used in this analysis, it can be said this is qualitative descriptive research. According to Endrawara (2011:5), descriptive qualitative method is the method in research that is described in words form or picture, if necessary, not the numerals. Descriptive qualitative method applied to understand and interpret the meaning of human behavior according to researcher’s perspective. So, the method aims to show what the impact of the main character Libby’s childhood trauma in the novel *Holding Up the Universe*.

The main source of data in this research is the novel entitled *Holding Up the Universe* (2016) by Jennifer Niven, the author of the New York Times and

international bestseller *All the Bright Places*. The novel *Holding Up the Universe* was first published in 2016 by Ember Publishing and the second young adult novel written by Jennifer Niven. In collecting the data, the researcher cited quotes from the novel *Holding Up the Universe* (2016) that related to the topic of the problem. The data collection is quotations in the novel *Holding Up the Universe* in a form of sentences and paragraphs.

The researcher applied some steps in collecting the data. Firstly, the researcher did close reading of the novel *Holding Up the Universe* (2016) by Jennifer Niven. Secondly, sorting and collecting the data related to the issue of childhood trauma and obesity by the character in *Holding Up the Universe*. Then, identifying the data related to the issue of childhood trauma and obesity by the character in *Holding Up the Universe*. The researcher also searched some information from books and journals as the supporting references related to the issue of childhood trauma and obesity.

In analyzing data, the researcher focused on analysis of the impact of childhood trauma in the novel *Holding Up the Universe* by Jennifer Niven. In this study, the researcher applied the childhood trauma theory as the basic of the analysis. The researcher also elaborated obesity as an impact of childhood trauma caused by eating disorder as coping mechanism.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Causes of Libby Strout Childhood Trauma

Through Psychological approach, the researcher analyse the causes of childhood trauma on Libby Strout in the novel *Holding Up the Universe*. According to Sigmund Freud (Ryan, 2011), “all important experience since childhood is kept in mind and influences thought and behavior with adulthood.” In the novel *Holding Up the universe* (2016) by Jennifer Niven, Libby Strout is an obese girl who has been through bad experiences in her childhood, which makes her gain weight and became obese. Through psychological approach focuses on childhood trauma, the researcher was trying to reveal the causes of childhood trauma and its impacts on the character mental and emotional health. Libby Strout lost her mother when she was ten and got bully by that. She suffered the bereavement from her mother’s death and she had a hard time dealing with her grief. Bullies also make things worse for Libby and it give long effects for her life. Libby could not handle her grief and it makes her being terrified of life that caused she stayed at home and got her panicked when she went outside. The only way to cope with all of it is food. That is why she always eat and became obese.

4.1.1 Libby’s Mother Death

In the novel *Holding Up the Universe* by Jennifer Niven, Libby experienced a traumatic event during her childhood. It can be seen from the quotation below:

You see, my whole world changed when I was ten. My mom died, which was traumatic enough, but then the bullying started. (p.11)

The quotation above shows a significant life event that occurred when the character Libby Strout was ten years old when her mother died. Parental death is

considered as a significant event that can disastrous children's mental health (Luecken, 2008). The death of her mother is the pivotal causes of her trauma. The loss of her mother has a profound impact for Libby and it had a lasting effect on her life.

The loss of her mother affects Libby's life. After her mother passed away, she was struggling with her grief and could not handle it. She had difficulty to manage her feeling and emotion. It can be seen from this quotation "When my mom went away, I was empty too. Like all of me just flooded out and disappeared." (p.83) The quotation shows Libby's emotional state after her mother's departure. Experiencing the loss of a loved one can leads to grief and mental anguish. Characterized by an overwhelming sense of loss and strong longing for the person who has died. It is the feeling of a profound sense of emptiness (Pearlman et al., 2014). It expresses the feeling of a big loss and it shows how close Libby with her mother and how important her mother for Libby's life. Libby experienced a sense of loss and emptiness because she was unaccustomed to her mother's absence. Overwhelming emotions may lead her to a feeling of emptiness and loneliness. The absence of her mom had a big and overwhelming effect on her, making she feels like as if herself was gone with her mom and makes it hard for her to move on and continue her life. It conveys a strong emotional response of grief for someone who lost their loved one and the struggling to cope with their feeling of loss.

The character Libby Strout also reveals the stage of grieving. Grief is defined as an emotional and mental suffering after a significant loss (Abi-Hashem, 1999). Libby shows the stage of denial where she cannot accept the fact that her mom already passed away. It is hard for Libby to adjust the reality that she lost her mother and she find herself cannot move forward without her mother. It can be seen from the quotation below:

I said, "I'm here. Please don't go. Please stay. Wake up. Please wake up. Please don't leave me. Please please please. If anyone can come back, it's you. Please come back. Please don't go. Please don't leave me alone." Because if she went away, that's what I would be. (p.118)

The quotation above conveys the desperation and the fear of the character Libby Strout for being left by her mother. Libby's hope for her mom to stay with her shows the despair about her situation at that moment and it also shows the phase denial of reality about the loss and the longing of her mother presence. It expresses Libby's emotion as a form of grief and loss.

Even years after her mother passed away, the character Libby Strout still have a hard time to dealing with that traumatic event and it shows long-lasting effects of trauma. Trauma symptoms can be seen in different ways, some people may not be able to remember significant parts of what happened, while the others may be plagued by memories or feel as if they are re-experiencing or reliving the event through painful flashbacks (Pearlman et al., 2014). It can be seen from the quotation below:

Suddenly I feel like I'm going to throw up because I've just gone reeling back in time to

the worst moment of my life. I was in fifth grade, in the middle of a school assembly, when the principal found me and led me out of the auditorium in front of everyone. She took me to the office, where my dad was waiting along with a school counselor. A big box of Kleenex sat on the corner of the principal's desk, and that was what I focused on. It was such a big box, as if they'd created it especially for that moment.

"Your mom in the hospital and we have to leave now." (p.72)

The quotation above tells the description of a traumatic memory that the character Libby Strout had when she was a kid and it still affects her. The memory that was overwhelming for her to remember that causes a physical symptom reaction. When Libby recalled her memory and she had the feeling of nausea shows a response of her body when she recalls traumatic events. This could be an indication of the effect of trauma and it established that the memory of a traumatic event evokes strong emotional reactions and physical sensations even years after the event occurred.

Nausea could be a physical symptom that results from the body's response which is triggered by the traumatic memory. The flashback and physical symptom revealed that Libby is experiencing a strong emotional response to her memory about her mom. The small details like the "big box of Kleenex sat on the corner" could be a coping mechanism that she chose to focus on to distract herself from something that she did not want to hear. It suggests that the character Libby Strout was unable to accept the reality about her mom and it still gives a big impact for her even just for recalling her memory at that time.

The character Libby Strout was having a hard time to cope with the loss of her mother. The mother's role in Libby's life cannot be replaced and it gave her the feeling of loss and loneliness. It can be seen from the quotation below:

In the hospital I held her hand until my grandmother came in, and my dad, and the rest of my family. All of them sweet and loving and brokenhearted, but none of them like my mom. Not even all together. They didn't begin to add up to her. (p.83)

The quotation above reveals that the character's mother was an irreplaceable figure in Libby's life. So, the presence of other family members did not provide the same level or fill up her mother's presence. Libby's attachment to her mother was not replicated with other family members and it leads her to feelings of grief, loss, and loneliness. Besides, Libby considers her mother as the only friend that she has. It makes her harder to accept the reality after her mother passed away. It can be seen from the quotation below:

Except for my mom, I've never had a best friend, unless you count the ones I made up

for myself—three brothers who lived across the street from my old house. The ones I called Dean, Sam, and Castiel, because they went to private school and I didn't know their names. The ones I pretended were my friends. (p.12)

The quotation above shows that Libby Strout has difficulty forming a relationship with others and she consider her mother was her only friend suggests that her mother plays a significant role in her life to provide companionship and she had a strong attachment to her mother. It shows how much she depends on her mother. When her mother passed away, it is like she lost everything in her life. because of that, it gave her shocks and disbelief of her mother death and absence. It can be seen from the quotation below:

I went to bed that night thinking, last night she was here. This morning she was here. Now she's gone, and not for a few days, but forever. How can something so final happen in an instant? No preparation. No warning. No chance to do all the things you planned to do. No chance to say goodbye. (p.148)

The quotation above shows how the sudden and unexpected loss have a profound impact on Libby's emotions and thought. When a loved one dies, it can be emotionally devastating, but unexpected deaths can provoke even stronger responses because there is less time to prepare for and adapt to the death (Keyes et al., 2014). The suddenness of her mother death caused a big sense of loss for Libby. The character Libby Strout expresses frustration and sadness of her mother's sudden death because did not get the opportunity to do or to say the things that she had planned with her mom because her mom was already gone reflects the feeling of regrets and unfinished business because there is no preparation and closure.

4.1.2 Bullying

After losing her mom, Libby Strout was having a hard time to dealing with her grief. Then, she was being bullied. Bullying is a form of oppression as a deliberate act to harm another where they cannot defend themselves (Smokowski, 2013). Libby Strout experienced a verbal bullying of teasing and mocking. Verbal bullying is a form of bullying where an individual uses hate words to hurt another individual. It includes teasing, mocking, name-calling, verbal humiliation/intimidation, threats cruelty, extortion, racist, sexist, and homophobic taunts (Shireen et al., 2014). It can be seen from the quotation below:

“Go home flabby Stout. The sun can't shine when come out...” He's singing it to the tone of “Lullaby and Goodnight.” (p.47)

The quotation above shows the verbal bullying which they intentionally inflict Libby through words. Libby was insulted by pronouncing her name with the wrong way and they say bad thing to hurt Libby emotionally. The fact that they used the tone of "Lullaby and goodnight" to mocking Libby, it adds the cruelty because they were using a comforting melody into a tool for hating people. This event had a profound impact on Libby. It can be seen from the quotation below:

There was a time, a little over two years ago, when I couldn't, wouldn't look at myself. All I saw was the bunched-up face of Moses Hunt, yelling at me across the playground: no one will ever love you because you're fat! (p.5)

The quotation above shows Libby Strout was getting mocked because she is fat. It also shows the impact of bullying on Libby Strout. It reveals that the character Libby Strout experienced a traumatic event that has lasting impact on her self-worth. Libby's negative self-image is connected to the bullying she experienced. The fact that the character Libby Strout is still haunted by the memory of the bullying she experienced when she was a kid reveals that traumatic event for her had a lasting impact on her life. Bullying will have an impact on the victim's emotional and mental well-being (Mohan et al., 2021). Being called fat is something that was offensive and hurtful for Libby. The bullying caused Libby to see herself as 'Flabby Stout' and made her dislike her own body. Libby found her body was fine before but their bad words made Libby doubt herself and ended her hate for herself and her body.

This research shows there are two causes of a traumatic event that happened to the character Libby Strout. The first cause is the character's mother's death, which made Libby Strout suffer a great loss. The second cause is bullying. The character Libby Strout was bullied after her mother passed away and it had some impact on her mental.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This chapter presents a conclusion of this research. This research reveals the causes of childhood trauma on the character Libby Strout and what its impact is on the character Libby Strout. This research also reveals how the character Libby Strout was dealing with her trauma.

In this research, there are two causes of a traumatic event that happened to the character Libby Strout. The first cause is the character's mother's death, which made Libby Strout suffer a great loss. The second cause is bullying. The character Libby Strout was bullied after her mother passed away and it had some impact on her mental.

This research is far from perfect and there are lots of mistakes. Thus, the researcher hopes that this paper can help and serve as a guide for several literary studies that are interested in childhood trauma or similar research and involves it.

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