

DOI: doi.org/10.21009/ISLLAE.02106

Received: 10 August 2019
Revised: 13 August 2019
Accepted: 10 December 2019
Published: 31 January 2020

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as Bullying Consequence: Self-Identity Construction of a Survivor in Jennifer Niven's *Holding up the Universe*

Lina Yasmin^{1,a)}, Eka Nurcahyani^{1,b)}
State University of Jakarta¹⁾

linayasmin1998@gmail.com^{a)} and ekanurcahyani@unj.ac.id^{b)}

Abstract

Holding up the Universe written by Jennifer Niven depicted realistic experiences of bullying and its consequences. This study aims to analyze the self-identity construction of Libby Strout as a bullying victim who developed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Deploying Elizabeth Brett's concept of PTSD and Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis theories, this study applied a descriptive-analytical method to analyze the causes and symptoms of Libby's PTSD and the process of her self-identity construction. The result of this study showed that the main cause of her PTSD was the series of bullying events involving physical, verbal, social, and cyber types of bullying. Libby developed several PTSD symptoms including re-experiencing traumatic events through flashbacks, sleeping and concentrating difficulties, the use of violence as the escaping way, emotional numbness, and social withdrawal. Along her journey to recovery, Libby experienced anxiety and two types of defense mechanisms – resistance and regression. She was helped by Mr. Levine in a counseling class called Conversation Circle and once a week meeting with her former caregiver, Rachel. Both of them helped Libby to reveal her emotions and traumas. Therefore, she constructed her self-identity by accepting how the way she was and proud of what she was doing. Eventually, Libby got better physically and mentally, and she found meaning in what she loved.

Keywords: Self-Identity Construction, Bullying, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Psychoanalysis

Abstrak

Holding up the Universe karya dari Jennifer Niven menggambarkan pengalaman realistik dari bullying and akibatnya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa konstruksi identitas diri Libby Strout, seorang penyintas *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) akibat bullying. Menggunakan konsep PTSD oleh Elizabeth Brett dan teori-teori psikonalisis oleh Sigmund Freud, penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif analitikal untuk menganalisa penyebab dan gejala PTSD yang dialami Libby dan proses konstruksi identitas dirinya. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penyebab utama PTSD yang Libby derita diakibatkan oleh serangkaian perbuatan bullying mulai dari bullying fisik, verbal, sosial, dan cyber. Libby memiliki beberapa gejala PTSD diantaranya adalah mengalami kembali kejadian traumatik

melalui *flashback*, kesulitan tidur dan konsentrasi, penggunaan kekerasan sebagai pelampiasan, mati rasa secara emosional, dan penarikan diri secara sosial. Dalam perjalanannya menuju pemulihan, Libby mengalami kecemasan dan dua tipe mekanisme pertahanan – resistensi dan regresi. Ia dibantu oleh Pak Levine di dalam kelas konseling bernama Conversation Circle dan pertemuan seminggu sekali dengan mantan perawatnya, Rachel. Keduanya membantu Libby untuk mengeluarkan emosi dan traumanya. Akibatnya, Libby dapat membentuk identitas dirinya dengan menerima dirinya apa adanya dan bangga akan apa yang telah ia lakukan. Pada akhirnya, Libby menjadi lebih baik secara fisik dan mental, dan ia menemukan makna pada apa yang ia cintai.

Kata kunci: pembentukan identitas diri, bullying, *post-traumatic stress disorder*, psikoanalisis

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is defined as a long-lasting and systemic form of interpersonal aggression from the perpetrator/s to the victim/s. Bullying occurs when the victims are persistently exposed to negative or violent actions from the perpetrator/s over a period of time and struggle to defend themselves from these actions **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan..** In America, one out of every five (20, 8%) of 12-18 years old students reports being bullied. Based on the acts and behavior, bullying is divided into three types – verbal, physical, and social. Meanwhile, based on the setting, bullying is divided into in-person and online **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan..** Bullying experiences are associated with emotional difficulties, including loneliness, anxiety, depression, low academic performance, and low self-esteem **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan..**

A research by Mattiesen and Einarsen (2004) revealed 57% of bullying victims reported significant symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Developed based on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis by Elizabeth Brett, PTSD is a disorder that may develop after being exposed to a traumatic event, severe physical or mental harm, or terrifying and threatening event **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan..** A study at the University of Illinois revealed experiencing bullying affects long-term psychological trauma and be the strongest predictor for developing PTSD as severe as physical abuse, neglect, and exposure to the community of violence **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan..**

As a father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud created several types of therapy as a medication to help several mental disorders. The types of therapy including free association where the patients talk about everything that can release their repressed emotions and experiences. By examining the unconscious and conscious through id, ego, and superego, the therapist will make the patients released their unconscious mind to gain patient's insight – the awareness of the source of emotion and traumatic experience, and find solutions for the problem (Freud, 2003, p. 47).

Freud developed two levels of mental life, unconscious and conscious mind (Freud, 2003, p. 96). Located in the unconscious mind, there is a basic instinct called 'id' that divided into life instinct called 'eros' which sense basic needs to survive such as hunger, thirst, avoidance of pain, and sex (libido) and death instinct called 'thanatos' which reflects our desire for peace that can lead into cruelty and self-

destruction (Freud, 2003, pp. 97-98). In the conscious mind, there is 'ego' as the reality principle; ego becomes the decision making process of personality since its function to control the path in activity. Ego assesses and decided the most harmless option to deal with id's urges in a morally accepted way (Freud, 2003, p. 105). Ego can cause anxiety when it is placed between id and superego. To protect from anxiety, ego uses defense mechanism such as repression, regression, denial, displacement, and so on **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan.** Located between preconscious and unconscious, the last level of the psyche is superego – a control instrument that comes from the social, moral, and cultural norms (Freud, 2010, p. 3969-3971).

There are several previous related studies of this research. Gustavo Sánchez Canales (2011) aims to examine contributed factors and symptoms of PTSD experienced by the main character of Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, Rosa. It is found that Rosa who was a survivor of the Holocaust concentration camp suffered from the tragic loss of her baby daughter at concentration and developed PTSD symptoms including the reluctance of sleep, re-experience traumatic event, using violence as 'escape valve', and social withdrawal. Aimee Pozorski (2017) examined the main character of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* named Les Farley, a Vietnam War veteran who returned with PTSD that takes form of violent tendencies. By using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, the research revealed the importance of trauma stories to be told and duty for listening to the victim of PTSD which appears in term of 'ethical listening', so the traumatic individual can affirm and recognize the realness of their problem, thus annihilates the trauma. Last but not least, Bethan Jones (2008) depicts childhood bullying trauma and its consequences through two main characters of Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* by using Freud's psychoanalysis, Lacan's mirror theory, and Barthes' intertextuality theory. Being excluded from girlhood, Elaine's tomboy behavior came from play along with her brother, and Cordelia's aggressive action toward Elaine was interpreted as a consequence of her older sisters' patronizing behaviors.

Differing from the three previous related studies, this study aims to analyze the female main character of a young adult novel entitled *Holding up the Universe* (2016) written by Jennifer Niven, a well-known writer for her young adult novels such as *All Bright Places* (2015) that received 2015's Goodreads Awards. As the writer depicted realistic experiences of bullying and its consequences, *Holding up the Universe* tells about Libby Strout who suffered mental issues including PTSD due to traumatic events as a victim of physical, verbal, social, and cyber types of bullying due to her weight. She was also discriminated while pursuing her dream as a dancer. By using Elizabeth Brett's concept of PTSD, this study examines the causes and symptoms of PTSD which are experienced by Libby, and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis is used to reveal Libby's self-identity construction through her contestation of mind – id, ego, and superego.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive-analytical method to reveal the construction of self-identity within the main female character, Libby Strout. First, the study examines the causes and symptoms of PTSD by using Elizabeth Brett's concept of PTSD. Then, the data indicating the issue of Libby's contestation of mind are analyzed by using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. Therefore, this study uses Sigmund Freud's

psychoanalysis to analyze how Libby got better physically and psychologically and how she constructed her self-identity.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Libby is a 16 years old girl who persistent to construct her self-identity to become a healthier and happier version of herself. As Freud stated that hopeful expectation is the key focus on the healing process (Freud, 2010, p. 1571), Libby tried to remain strong and positive. Her condition was affected by several factors, but the most contributing factor is the bullying event by a group of bullies whom she called 'Moses Hunt' at the age of ten. They had been isolating her from the playground and verbally bullying her by name-calling and prying on her mother's sudden death. "Hey, if it isn't Flabby Stout. What's up Flabby?" "No one will ever love you. Because you're fat." "I don't think I am." "Well then, you're not only fat, you're dumb." ... You probably killed your mom by sitting on her." (Niven, 2016, p. 58)

Meanwhile, PTSD develops after an individual experiences a traumatic event that may contribute severe physical and mental harm, a person's death, and the threat of someone else harm **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan.** Thus, the bullying event becomes a snowball effect on Libby's physical and mental health. As a consequence of the bullying, she developed PTSD symptoms; one of the symptoms is re-experiencing traumatic events through flashbacks and repetitive images. "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!* And the faces of all the other fifth graders as they started to laugh" (Niven, 2016, p. 11). Another cause which contributed to Libby's condition is the involvement of bystander. Researchers emphasized bullying is not simply recognized as a group phenomenon between a bully and a victim, but also the involvement of bystanders **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan.** When she was in elementary school, Libby had a friend named Bailey who was expected to help her when she was bullied, but Bailey ignored and did not help her. "I wave but she doesn't see me. Doesn't she notice I'm missing? I wave again, but she's too busy running. I think, If I were Bailey Bishop, I'd run too" (Niven, 2016, p. 59). However, both of them befriended again when Libby came back to high school.

Therefore, she developed panic attacks whenever she had to leave the house and followed by anxiety. Libby refused to go to school and received education by homeschooling which means Libby isolated herself from society. To release her stress, she was involved in binge-eating in order to feel something. "It's the giant emptiness in my chest. It's touching my face or my skin and feeling nothing. This is the Why of me staying home in the first place. And the Why of me eating. And the Why of me ending up here. But that doesn't mean I want to die" (Niven, 2016, p. 124) In this case, Libby developed another symptom of PTSD called emotional numbness. She gained so much weight until she could not move from her bed and had to be rescued by professional help.

Symptoms of PTSD are categorized into three main symptoms. First, a person's exposure to a traumatic event and re-experiencing the event through repetitive images, thoughts, flashbacks, and nightmares. Second, a person's difficulty of sleeping and concentrating and the use of violence as 'the escaping way' to lessen his/her feelings of anger, sadness, or low self-esteem. Third, a person's emotional numbness and impairment at social, occupational, and personal levels that result in

social withdrawal **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan.** Besides isolating herself from society, emotional numbness, and re-experiencing traumatic events, Libby developed other symptoms of PTSD including sleeping and concentrating difficulties, self-blaming, and the use of violence as the-escaping way from anger and low self-esteem. For instance, the night before she came back to school, she felt anxious about her first day at high school. It was past midnight, and she tried to fall asleep. “I tell myself to sleep. I close my eyes and lie very still. For minutes. I make my mind lie there with me and tell it, *Sleep, sleep, sleep*” (Niven, 2016, p. 7). On the other hand, Libby was reprimanded in Driver Education class due to a lack of concentration. ‘In driver’s ed, Mr. Dominguez says, “Libby? Whenever you want to join us.” “Sorry.” I stop staring into pace’ (Niven, 2016, p. 182).

Meanwhile, Libby showed the use of violence as an escaping way when she was isolating herself inside of the girls’ bathroom and vandalizing the wall with words that she overheard while other girls talked about her in PE class.

I reach up one arm and write in thick letters as large as I can so that everyone will see. **Libby Strout is fat. Fat and ugly. She will never get laid. No one ever love her. Libby Strout is so fat they had to destroy her house to get her out.** Word for word, these are the things I overheard Caroline Lushamp and Kendra Wu saying about me in the gym, as the other girls stood around and listened. And laughed. ... Maybe one day I can be thinner than I am now and have a boyfriend who loves me, but I’ll be a liar. I’ll always be a liar. (Niven, 2016, p. 51).

This action also showed Libby’s low self-esteem and self-blaming. She vandalized the bathroom wall as the escape valve of her anger and frustration. In addition, Libby was angry with her friend, Iris while she was verbally bullied by a group of boys in the school’s hall.

I stop walking.

“Why do you want to be my friend anyway?” I talk right over her singing. “Is it because I stood up for you that day? Is it because I make you feel less freakish by comparison? Or is it because when you’re with me everyone leaves you alone for once and focuses on me?” (Niven, 2016, p. 181).

Libby became more irritated and angry easily after the physical bullying called Fat Girl Rodeo. She frequently reacted by snapping and passive negative reactions.

For about three years, Libby received medical treatments due to weight problems and mental health issues. After feeling better, Libby decided to come back to high school. However, her comeback to high school became a challenge for Libby. She experienced verbal, social, and even physical bullying called Fat Girl Rodeo by a boy named Jack. Fat Girl Rodeo is a joke that leads to physical bullying when the perpetrator grabs the victim and attached her/himself to the victim’s back then the perpetrator tries to hang on the victim’s back as long as possible **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan.** “And then he throws himself on me and holds on like his life depends on it. I’m so surprised, I can’t even move. I can’t do anything but stand there.” (Niven, 2016, p. 80). Even though Libby fought back by punching Jack

in his mouth, the bullying event led her to become the victim of other bullying events including cyberbullying after someone posted an image of her while she punched Jack. Libby had to attend a community service and a counseling class, and her condition worsened.

In her journey to recovery, Libby's mind contestation was detected. After she came back to school, Libby encountered several obstacles such as the Fat Girl Rodeo bullying event, and her binge eating also came back even though she got professional help to manage her eating habit. The survival instincts such as hunger, thirst, sex, and avoiding danger categorized in *eros* – the life instincts, but Libby's instinct of hunger had developed into binge-eating disorder as self-destruction which Freud called *thanatos* – the death instincts. On the other hand, Libby developed a relationship with Jack as they spent more time together and grew trust to reveal each other secrets and deepest emotions. This relationship was detected as Libby's *eros* which takes form in love. "It's as if I've suddenly discovered he's a male. My face is hot and my back is damp and I'm thinking about Pauline Potter, sexing off all that weight, and I'm staring at his hands and I'm like, *Stop staring at his hands.*" (Niven, 2016, p. 173) Her *eros* was also expressed in her love for dancing. "Dancing is what I love most and dancing is what I plan to do with my life." (Niven, 2016, p. 12) Her love for dancing made her wanted to be a member of Damsel – a drill team of her school.

Meanwhile, Libby who had to attend a counseling class called Conversation Circle experienced anxiety when she had to answer a question from Mr. Levine who was the supervisor of the class. Mr. Levine asked the reason why she punched Jack. Libby who had identified the reason did not answer it honestly because she thought her answer was complicated to understand except her, so she lied as she thought lying was the easier and safer solution. "I want to say Why wouldn't I punch him? But I don't really have an answer other than "I was mad"" (Niven, 2016, p. 143). In this case, Libby's ego as the reality principle detected the possibility of danger. This phenomenon is what Freud called anxiety. Anxiety is defined as a felt, affective, unpleasant state followed by physical sensations that warn the individual against danger (Feist & Feist, 2009, p. 33). As the ego assesses the best possibility and the safest way to fulfill the id's urges (Freud, 2003, p. 105), Libby's ego assessed that lying is the easier and safest option than revealing her deepest emotion and trauma.

Whenever Libby felt overwhelmed and stress, her ego uses two types of defense mechanisms to protect her from anxiety. The first type of defense mechanism is regression. Regression is a type of defense mechanism when a person regresses to the past period of time that more pleasant and less traumatic (Freud, 2019, p. 785). Mostly, Libby was regressed to the time when her mother was alive. For instance, Libby regressed when she was doing body acceptance; in the swimming pool, Libby could imagine her mother was swimming in the next lane. "As I cut through the water now, I forget where I am. It's me and the water. And my mom, just out of reach. I close my eyes, and I can see her in the lane next to mine" (Niven, 2016, p. 310). The second type of defense mechanism is resistance. Resistance is the practice of blocking out certain feelings or memories (Freud, 2001, pp. 1947). Libby blocked her genuine feelings about her past and recent traumas, and she did not show her sadness toward other people. She reacted as if she was okay and strong when she was actually upset. Libby's defense mechanism of resistance had been constructed since the day she was being banned from the playground by Moses Hunt. "Bailey passes me a note. **Are you**

okay? Instead of answering. I sit there and pretend I'm paying attention" (Niven, 2016, p. 182). Libby did a similar reaction after horrible things at school that she had been through – being banned from the playground, got a pile of hate letters, rejected by Damsel, and when Jack decided not to hang out with her anymore.

While ego controls the id, there is a control device that comes from social, moral, cultural values called superego. Located in the preconscious and unconscious mind, superego is the component that assesses which one is morally accepted side along with ego. The superego appears from the influences of parents, authority, religious teaching, and education (Freud, 2010, p. 3969-3971). In Libby's case, the superego manifests in her father as the parent and male figure. Her father controlled her eating habits. "My dad finds me in the kitchen, eating standing up, and this is something we don't do anymore. It's one of the food rules we follow, along with don't eat in front of the TV, don't eat too fast, and stop eating when you're sixty percent full. When I see him, I set the plate down" (Niven, 2016, p. 98). After Libby was caught eating standing up which means violating the rules, she felt shame and guilt as she set the plate down.

While pursuing her dream as a dancer, Libby decided to join an audition for Damsel. However, the captain of the team named Caroline discriminated Libby by humiliating her in front of other contestants. "Would you be willing to lose weight if you were wanted? The words echoes across the court. "You know. If you were to make the team?" (Niven, 2016, p. 274) Meanwhile, Jack suddenly decided that he cannot hang out with Libby anymore. Libby was devastated and felt overwhelmed by the rejections, but she was helped by several methods. First, Conversation Circle used a complementary method as Mr. Levine asked each student to give another student five compliments.

Today we're going to take turns saying five positive things about each person here. So if I'll say five great things about, let's say, Maddy." He tosses ball to Maddy. "You're kind, punctual, polite, get along well with others, and you're a lot more confident than you were when started this Circle. Then Maddy says five great things about me. (Niven, 2016, p. 325).

This method helps bullying victims like Libby to improve their confidence and self-esteem (Arzt, 2019). Therefore, Libby did a body acceptance movement by using a bikini in front of the main hall with "I AM WANTED" was written on her stomach. She shared her experiences and emotions as the bullying victim in a treatise. Therefore, Libby's id of eros as life and survival instincts are exceeded than her thanatos. Libby determined to accept how the way she was and spread positivity regardless of the hate and bullying that she experienced. As quoted in her treatise, "**As for the rest of you, remember this: YOU ARE WANTED. Big, small, tall, short, pretty, plain, friendly, shy. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, not even yourself.**" (Niven, 2016, p. 316) She repressed her self-destruction by focusing on what she loved especially dancing.

"I'm starting my own dance club. I'll take anyone who can't be a Damsel or anyone who don't want be a Damsel. We won't dance in formation and we won't dance with flags. We'll just get out there and do

whatever we want, but we'll do it together." (Niven, 2016, p. 324)

For reacting to her Damsel audition rejection, she decided to form a dance club with her friends, and anyone can join the club.

Freud emphasized that individuals with repressed emotions and traumas have to bring it to consciousness by revealing it voluntarily. Freud called this type of process 'free association. To succeed, sincerity is important, so the process has to come naturally and comfortably as a sign of the client is progressing and healing instead of something that force to do **Kesalahan! Sumber referensi tidak ditemukan.** Libby used this method to share her emotions and traumas by revealing it to her father, her former caregiver named Rachel, and Bailey. She kept secrets from her father because she did not want him worried about her anymore. However, she realized that her father is the only family that she had, and she could not hold her feelings anymore. "I tell him because I'm too tired to pretend everything's fine. Honestly, he does need to worry about me. I can't protect him forever. So I tell him everything" (Niven, 2016, p. 369) Libby told him about the Fat Girl Rodeo, Jack, Moses Hunt, and the body acceptance that she had done. Libby told the same thing with her former caregiver, Rachel. Rachel told that what she had done is 'come out' from the old version of herself and became the better version of herself. "You know, that's what you've been doing in a way – coming out. Coming out of your room. Coming out of your house. Coming out of your shell" (Niven, 2016, p. 378) Libby asked Bailey the question that she wanted to ask. Libby asked her why Bailey befriended with her now, not back then when they were ten years old. Then, Bailey answered that Libby's reaction like she was okay that made Bailey did not help her. "I don't know Libbs. I think I told myself we were friends, but not best friends, and that you seemed like you were okay. You're still like that" (Niven, 2016, p. 340). On the other hand, Libby and Jack were reconciling their relationship, and they became together again.

Libby was determent and persistent to get better physically and mentally. As Freud stated that remarkable factor for patients' recovery is their determination (Freud, 2010, pp. 1567), Libby showed symptoms of recovery. Her PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and panic attacks were decreasing and had not been noticed at the end of the story. Her counseling class with Mr. Levine and her once a week meeting with Rachel were continued, and these counseling sections definitely would improve her conditions. Besides, Libby was fixing her relationship with her father, her friends including Bailey, Rachel, and also Jack. Therefore, Libby constructed her self-identity. She accepted and proud of how the way she was and what she was doing.

CONCLUSION

Several contributing factors became the causes of Libby's condition. However, the most significant factors are the two bullying events. First, Moses Hunt bullying when she was ten years old, and Fat Girl Rodeo when she just came back to high school followed by other series of bullying events. She developed several mental health issues including anxiety, panic attacks, and PTSD symptoms such as re-experiencing traumatic events through repetitive images and flashbacks, sleeping and concentrating difficulties, the use of violence as the escaping way, emotional numbness, and social withdrawal. In her journey to recovery, rejections and the involvement of bystanders are also contributed to Libby's condition. However, Libby

was persistent to get better. Through counseling and self-acceptance, Libby could reveal her deepest traumas and emotions to her closest people including her father, Rachel, Bailey, and Jack. Her PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and panic attacks were decreasing, so she showed the sign of healing. She maintained to pursue her dream to become a dancer by forming her dance club. Therefore, Libby had constructed her self-identity to become a healthier and happier version of herself.

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