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Melanie: A Novel Exploring How Trauma Affects a Teenager's Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

When a teenager accidentally commits a killing in self-defense, such an experience will have a tremendous effect on her psychological condition. From the accidental killing, she suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder, which negatively affects her mental health. She will then use a variety of defense mechanisms to cope. This work applies the theory of traumatic stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, and defense mechanisms. This creative thesis is written in the form of a novel to showcase the effects of a self-defense killing on a person's psyche, and how she uses defense mechanisms to deal with the effects. The novel shows how Melanie, the main character, suffers from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as strong emotions, overreaction, disturbed sleeping patterns, withdrawal from family and friends, depression, pessimistic outlook on life, and feelings of hopelessness, and she utilizes avoidance, acting out, repression and denial as defense mechanisms to deal with the stress.

Keywords: defense mechanisms; killing; self-defense; trauma

INTRODUCTION

Many teenagers around the world suffer from trauma of some sort. Whether it is physical, emotional, mental, or sexual, the trauma negatively affects their mental health and, as a result, their way of living. They suffer great stress in their life resulting from the traumatic event and are unable to thrive in life. They are haunted by traumatic memories, both awake and asleep. They lose interest in life, hobbies, and education. They also withdraw themselves and become isolated from their family and friends. Not to mention that trauma affects them more severely due to their less-developed minds, potentially leading to stunted mental development in their lives. However, many teenagers suffering from trauma do not receive help from their surroundings, either because they are afraid to ask for help or are ignored by adults in their lives or the authorities. As a result, they must continue enduring their trauma alone, turning to unhealthy defense mechanisms to cope.

The purpose in choosing the topic of trauma in this creative work is to bring awareness to teenagers suffering from traumatic stress. Through this work, we hope that people can read the story and understand the pain and struggles a teenager suffers resulting from trauma. We will accomplish this by writing about a teenager who commits an accidental self-defense killing, suffers from trauma resulting from it and copes with it using several defense mechanisms. The readers who read this story may find support in going through their struggles knowing that they are not alone in their experience. This creative work would be beneficial for everyone to understand how trauma affects teenagers. We hope that this creative work can raise awareness of the struggle teenagers face due to their trauma and work on offering them the help and compassion they need to heal from their trauma. For teenagers, hopefully they can learn how to identify signs of trauma and unhealthy coping mechanisms they may use so they can earnestly look for help appropriately. Additionally, this work could represent the teenagers' experience: that they suffer trauma from a danger they experienced and lived in stress and fear every day,

which they are unable to reveal to other people to get help and are driven to unhealthy coping mechanisms. Not only that, but teenagers may also be able to relate the story to their experience in dealing with trauma.

We chose the topic of trauma as the result of an accidental killing by self-defense. Self-defense is defined as a situation where a person uses physical force to fend off a threat posed by another person. Even when the would-be victim only intends to drive the attacker off, often the situation results in the would-be attacker getting killed as a result. In such an event, other than enduring trauma as the result of the attempted attack, the guilt from accidentally taking a person's life can also severely affect the victim's mental health (Gray, n.d).

The creative work will be about a Chinese Indonesian who undergoes trauma from an accidental killing. We will focus on the era of the 1990s, in which the discrimination could be felt strongly by Chinese Indonesians because of long-continued persecution since Dutch colonial times, which were intensified by perceived communist suspicions during the New Order (Irawan, 2006). In the novel, Melanie Chu is a Chinese Indonesian who lived in Indonesia in the 1990s and struggles alongside her mother managing their shop while facing discrimination. At school, she was bullied by a bully named Roni Budianto, but she remained strong in the face of the insults and mockery thrown at her. However, things became intense when Roni pulled out a knife at her, which she accidentally pushed into him in self-defense. She accidentally killed him, and realizing what she had done, pushed his body into a river to hide the evidence. For the following days, she was constantly haunted by the traumatic memories and guilt and tried her best to cope with them using defense mechanisms. Through the character of Melanie Chu in the novel, we would like to explore how the accidental killing of someone in self-defense can affect a teenager's psyche.

Therefore, in this creative work, we would like to find out how an accidental self-defense killing can severely affect a teenager's mental health. To be specific, in this creative work, we would like to find out how trauma from a self-defense killing severely affects Melanie's state of mind, and how Melanie deals with trauma as the effect of a self-defense killing that she committed. We want to show that the trauma from an accidental killing, coupled with prejudice received from someone's surroundings can drive a person towards desperate measures out of fear and mental stress. To be specific, through this creative work, we would like to show that Melanie suffers from low self-worth and depression as the result of trauma, and that Melanie deals with her trauma by acting out against herself and other people, repressing her memories, avoiding certain things, and denying reality to run away from her mistakes.

To explore how trauma affects a teenager's mental health, this creative thesis applied the theory of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and defense mechanisms. The theory we are using for the creative work falls into the category of psychology, more specifically the social psychology branch. Adolescence is commonly described as the stage of development in a person that begins with puberty and ends with the transition to young adulthood. Adolescence mostly begins between ages ten and twelve and ends in the late teens to early 20s. People who are in the adolescent stage are commonly called teenagers (Raypole, 2021). The physical, hormonal, and emotional changes occurring in such a stage, and their impact on peer and family interactions and relationships, may be stressful and difficult to navigate. Additional stressors can increase distress and, in some instances, lead to long-term trauma.

⁴ The term "traumatic stress" refers to the physical and emotional response of an individual to events that threaten the life or physical/psychological integrity of that person or of someone important to them. Traumatic stress produces several intense physical and emotional reactions, including an overwhelming sense of terror, helplessness, and horror, and a range of physical sensations like a pounding heart, trembling, dizziness, nausea, dry mouth and throat,

and loss of bladder or bowel control. Traumatic stress can be triggered by a wide range of events, like abuse, violence, natural disasters, accidents, medical trauma, or traumatic loss or grief (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). Trauma may get in the way of healthy physical and emotional growth and identity formation. For younger people, however, these effects could impact their still-developing minds and bodies and affect their future experiences (Raypole, 2021).

According to Better Health Channel (2022), common symptoms of distress from traumatic stress include strong emotions such as sadness, anger, anxiety, and guilt, overreacting to minor irritations, repetitively thinking about the traumatic event, and talking about it often, disturbed sleeping patterns, withdrawing from family and friends, wanting to spend more time alone, being very protective of family and friends. The other symptoms that a person who experiences traumatic stress may show are loss of interest in school, friends, hobbies, and life in general, pessimistic outlook on life, being cynical and distrusting of others, depression, and feelings of hopelessness, and difficulties with short-term memory, concentration and problem solving.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. It is natural to feel afraid during and after a traumatic situation. Fear triggers many split-second changes in the body to help defend against danger or to avoid it. This "fight-or-flight" response is a typical reaction meant to protect a person from harm. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, yet most people recover from initial symptoms naturally. Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened, even when they are not in danger (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). To be diagnosed with PTSD, a person must have at least one re-experiencing symptoms, one avoidance symptom, two arousal and reactivity symptoms and two cognition and mood symptoms for at least one month. Re-experiencing symptoms include flashbacks, where one relives the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweating, nightmares, and frightening thoughts. One's everyday routine can be disrupted by these symptoms. The symptoms can start from the person's own thoughts and feelings. Words, objects, or situations that are reminders of the event can also trigger re-experiencing symptoms.

Avoidance symptoms include staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the traumatic experience, and avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event. Things that remind a person of a traumatic event can trigger avoidance symptoms, which can change a person's routine. For example, after a bad car accident, a person who usually drives may avoid driving or riding in a car. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (n.d.), arousal and reactivity symptoms include being easily startled, feeling tense or "on edge", having difficulty sleeping and having angry outbursts. Arousal symptoms are usually constant, instead of being triggered by things that remind one of the traumatic events. These symptoms can make the person feel stressed and angry. They may make it hard to do daily tasks, such as sleeping, eating, or concentrating. Cognition and mood symptoms include trouble remembering key features of a traumatic event, negative thoughts about oneself or the world, distorted feelings like guilt or blame, and loss of interest in enjoyable activities. Cognition and mood symptoms can begin or worsen after a traumatic event. These symptoms can make the person feel alienated or detached from friends or family members.

Defense mechanisms are defined by a psychological theoretical framework invented by Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna as unconscious actions taken by people to protect themselves from anxious thoughts and feelings (Bailey & Pico, 2022). People use these methods to decrease conflict within themselves. Defense mechanisms are not inherently bad, as they can allow people to navigate painful experiences or channel their energy more productively.

However, when done too frequently in an uncontrolled capacity, then it can become unhealthy. It is necessary for people to be able to identify these defense mechanisms to then be able to work on the problems causing them to adopt these defense mechanisms in the first place (Bailey & Pico, 2022). Anna Freud listed ten main defense mechanisms: acting out, avoidance, conversion, denial, identification, projection, regression, repression, schizoid fantasy, and splitting. Out of these four, we have decided to utilize four of these defense mechanisms in the novel. To cope with the trauma after a self-defense killing that she has committed, the main character in the story, Melanie Chu, employs acting out, avoidance, denial, and repression as defense mechanisms.

Acting out is a defense mechanism where the user utilizes detrimental behaviors that distract attention and energy away from other stressors. The user does this instead of directly acknowledging her own feelings regarding a certain matter. To distract herself, the user directs her stress through various activities instead of handling the matter directly. The user often directs her negative impulses (usually aggression) onto a powerless target (Cherry, 2022). Examples include someone having a bad day at work and later taking out her frustrations onto close family, friends, or inanimate objects. Self-harming can also be the result of acting out.

Avoidance is a defense mechanism where the user dismisses thoughts or feelings that are uncomfortable or keeping away from people, places, or situations associated with uncomfortable thoughts or feelings (Cherry, 2022). After suffering a detrimental event, she might try to avoid certain things, people, or locations associated with said event so they will not be reminded of the event, rather than seeking to deal with the consequences. Examples include someone avoiding a place associated with a traumatic event or avoiding doing an activity associated with a traumatic event.

Denial is a defense mechanism where the user dismisses external reality and instead focuses on internal explanations or fallacies, thereby avoiding the uncomfortable reality of a situation (Bailey & Pico, 2022). For example, when someone suffers a traumatic event, then she may deny that such an event has ever happened. Even when someone else confronts her and outright informs her of the truth, she may continue to deny it rather than facing the reality that is uncomfortable to her.

Repression is a defense mechanism where the user subconsciously blocks ideas or impulses that are undesirable (Bailey & Pico, 2022). When someone experiences an undesirable or traumatic event, her subconscious mind may choose to block it out from her conscious mind, resulting in not being able to remember the traumatic event that has occurred to her.

To portray these theories, this creative thesis used a psychological novel as the medium. Novel is defined as a relatively long work of narrative fiction, typically written in prose, and published as a book exceeding forty thousand words ("How many words", 2023). Psychological fiction or novel "is a form of fiction involving a deep exploration into the character or characters' mental state to explain who they are and what their motivations and reasons are for how they behave" (Nnyagu, Adunchezor, & Ngozi, 2017, p. 5). Psychological novels are interested in not just showing what happens in a story but why it happens. The characters deal with events which often greatly affect their mental states, affecting their mindset, behavior, and perceptions of reality as they struggle through these events. The interior workings of the mind, even madness, frame the story, and leave readers on edge, straddling the line between sanity and unreason (Wyatt & Saricks, 2019). Throughout this novel, we will depict how the main character's suffering takes a mental toll on her and further twists her perceptions of reality and her behavior in her day-to-day lives.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of this creative thesis is how trauma resulting from an accidental self-defense killing can severely impact the mental state and life of a teenager. To apply the theme, the main character in the creative work goes through such a traumatic event where she accidentally kills someone out of self-defense and undergoes mental stress because of it, and she uses defense mechanisms like avoidance, acting out, repression, and denial.

Characters

Main characters:

- **Melanie Chu**

Melanie is a 13-year-old Chinese Indonesian living in the 1990s. She struggles both financially with her widowed mother and mentally with the racist bullying she goes through every day in school. She used to be a cheery, lively child but becomes insecure and depressed from the racist bullying she receives from Roni. After she snaps back at Roni, one of her bullies, he follows her home to kill her with a knife. Melanie fights back, and accidentally stabs Roni with the knife instead. She struggles both with the extreme trauma and guilt from the incident and tries to hide her crime in the following days.

- **Marta Chu**

Marta is the 37-year-old mother of Melanie. She is the child of two Chinese immigrants who came to Indonesia. Since her husband's death, she has been struggling to support her daughter by managing a small shop, not helped by the racism they face daily. Since Melanie's accidental murder of Roni, Marta becomes increasingly concerned with her daughter's mental condition.

- **Putri Diah**

An 11-year-old sixth grader who occasionally buys from Marta's shop, who Melanie talks to and slowly becomes acquainted with. She is a friendly girl who often comes to the shop after school due to feeling lonely and neglected at home. She likes drawing and showing off her drawings to other people. Things become awry when Melanie accidentally kills Roni and finds out that Putri is his sister.

Supporting characters:

- **Roni Budianto**

Roni is a particularly notorious bully in Melanie's middle school, who not only always belittles other students he perceives as weaker but also constantly tries to pick fights with other students. Not only that, but he also gets involved with dangerous gangs. His parents' distant upbringing caused him to become wild and attempt to bring attention to himself by whatever means necessary.

- **Jono and Melati Budianto**

Roni's parents, a well-off family who will not hesitate to use all the wealth and power in their disposal to find their son's killer. They especially tend to look down on the poor lower classes and racial minorities, having no problem endangering children to get what they want.

- “Totong”

The leader of a gang Roni used to associate with. While initially dismissive of Roni's death, he still pursues his lost profits by stalking both Putri and Melanie, while getting involved in the mystery of Roni's death.

Plot

Melanie Chu is a Chinese Indonesian who lives in mid-90s Indonesia. Since her father's death, Melanie and her mother Marta have been struggling to make ends meet by managing their little shop, surviving both economic problems and racism from people around them. Melanie is shunned and bullied in her school, especially from a notorious bully named Roni Budianto. One day, she stands up against Roni by refusing to give him money after he hits her. Enraged, he follows her after school and attempts to stab her with a knife. Melanie fights back and, as a result, accidentally kills Roni with his knife, throwing his body into the river. Matters become worse when she meets and becomes friends with a Javanese girl named Putri, who turns out to be Roni's sister, and attracts the attention of a gang Roni was associated with. In the climax, Melanie tries to protect her mother and in the following chaos kills Totong. When she wakes up in the hospital, she confesses to having killed Totong to the policemen and gathers enough determination to confess about killing Roni.

Conflict

There are two types of conflict that happen in my creative work. The first one is Man vs. Self where a character confronts the darker part of their nature in either a conflict between head and heart, or good and evil (Lamb, 2008). The second one is Man vs. Man where the main character comes into conflict with other characters due to the difference in their actions and motivations (Lamb, 2008). The first conflict between Man and Self happens within Melanie's inner mental turmoil after her accidental killing of Roni, the guilt that she feels compelling her to confess the crime and her fear for her and her mother's safety pushing her to keep lying and hiding her crime. The second conflict between Man vs. Man happens between Melanie and Roni due to the latter's bullying which ended with the Melanie's accidental killing of Roni in self-defense, leading to the conflict between her Roni's family, who seek justice for their son and intend to punish his killer, and between Melanie and “Totong”, the leader of the gang Roni is associated with.

CONCLUSION

The creative work shows how teenagers are affected by traumatic stress and how they may employ defense mechanisms to cope with it by showing Melanie's deteriorating mental state and how she deals with the trauma resulting from the self-defense killing she has committed. After killing Roni, Melanie becomes very anxious, isolated, and paranoid. She is haunted by the memories of her crime, and always fears that her crime will be found out and she will be in danger. This fear manifests in her having nightmares and flashbacks. Every time she is reminded of her crime, she starts having a panic attack. She becomes very depressed and doesn't care anymore about the course of her life and education, neglecting to eat and doing her homework, and even wants to kill herself at one point.

To deal with the stress that she feels, she employs several defense mechanisms, such as acting out, avoidance, denial, and repression. She acts out by acting more hostile and aggressive towards her mother and turns to harming herself. She avoids the road leading to her house where she murdered Roni. She denies that she has committed the crime and uses multiple

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self-justifications to ease her conscience, and she also represses the memories of what has happened.

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