

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Hardship is an inevitable situation for anyone to face in life. Therefore, stress is a common psychological phenomenon that arises afterwards. Precisely, stress is a response in physical or psychological terms to stressors, whether from internal or external (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 2018). Nevertheless, prolonged or extreme stress might contribute to psychological disturbances. One severe example of psychological stress is trauma, which refers to the psychological state after encountering extremely horrifying or distressing events that overwhelm individuals as well as interfere with their usual method of dealing with unpleasant events (Palmer, 2012:3).

Unresolved trauma possibly leads to numerous psychological disorders. According to American Psychiatric Association (2022:15), a psychological or mental disorder means “a syndrome” with significant disruption regarding an individual's thought process, emotional control, and behavioral responses. The turmoil indicates impairment in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes associated with mental functioning. One example of a psychological disorder is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It refers to a psychiatric disorder which is a result after someone has experienced or been exposed to traumatic or life-threatening moments (Iribarren et al., 2005:503).

PTSD is a destructive psychological disease that could occur to anyone regardless of gender or age. However, cases in children and adolescents considered relatively frequent since they are fragile groups who have higher chance of developing PTSD due to lack of coping skills and the ability to recover from traumatic events (Braun-Lewensohn, 2015:6). In U.S., there were reportedly 61.8% of adolescents who directly experienced or witnessed traumatic moments, and some of them developed PTSD, which data taken between February 2001 to January 2004 (McLaughlin et al., 2013:821).

In modern days, this matter has still not gained as much attention as it should. Levin & Liu's report discovered that children with lifetime PTSD (37%) left untreated (2024:5). Therefore, it is a concerning matter as unresolved childhood trauma become the prominent contributor of negative mental health in adulthood (McKay et al., 2021).

Previous reports find the role of gender in PTSD risk, which are also supported by the statement of American Psychiatric Association that women have higher risk (8-11%) than men in developing PTSD as sexual assault survivors (American Psychiatric Association, 2022:312). This fact aligns with the discovery that sexual violence gets the first rank for the highest percentage in causing PTSD (39.3%) (McLaughlin et al., 2013:821). Therefore, women are commonly the subjects of academic study, while cases that occurred to men remain unexplored. There are only a few papers discussing the matter, whereas the prevalence of men as sufferers is not zero. There was a report in Quebec high schools that there were

male students who experienced sexual abuse in their childhood, and some of them (14.9%) displayed significant symptoms of PTSD (Hébert et al., 2014:685).

PTSD is also reflected in many literary works. One of the profound examples would be what is experienced by Jude, the main character of the novel *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara. Jude St. Francis is an orphan boy who grew up in a monastery and experienced both physical and sexual abuse. In his teens, he is imprisoned while experiencing repeated abuse by Dr. Traylor (a psychiatrist) after being saved from child prostitution. Dr. Traylor eventually gets bored of him and crushes him with a moving car. The accident left Jude's spine broken, along with walking difficulty for his lifetime. The past keeps haunting him even in his adulthood, which also led him into an abusive relationship. After attempts at healing, losing his lover became the prominent reason underlying his decision to take his life at the end of the novel.

There are three reasons underlying the writer's decision to choose the topic and the object of the study. Firstly, the writer sees the connection between *A Little Life's* theme and society's progressive awareness of males as the victims of sexual abuse, along with the chance to contribute to it. Secondly, the research thesis aims to raise awareness of PTSD, especially those that occur in children and men. Thirdly, the research thesis attempts to address Jude's trauma as well as psychological disturbance and functional impairment it caused as PTSD. Therefore, the research thesis aims to examine the symptoms, traumatic events associated with PTSD, and the effect experienced by Jude (the main character) in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*.

1.2 Research Problems

There are three questions proposed to analyze the problem reflected in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* as follows:

1.2.1 What are the symptoms of PTSD reflected on Jude in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*?

1.2.2 What are traumatic events associated with PTSD experienced by Jude in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*?

1.2.3 How does PTSD that Jude experiences affect his life in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

In accordance with the research questions, the thesis attempts to fulfill several objectives as follows:

1.3.1 To investigate the symptoms of PTSD reflected on Jude in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*.

1.3.2 To identify traumatic events associated with PTSD experienced by Jude in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*.

1.3.3 To analyze the effects of PTSD to Jude's life in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research thesis will limit the discussion of the intrinsic elements to character and characterization, setting, and conflict. Meanwhile, the application of PTSD theory as the analytical framework in literary criticism within this thesis is limited to the identification and analysis of PTSD symptoms, traumatic events,

and effects rather than recommending medical or psychological treatments. Decisions regarding appropriate therapy and its compatibility with patients' psychological conditions should be made by professionals. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is solely to acknowledge Jude's neglected PTSD in the novel to raise awareness regarding mental health.

1.5 Previous Studies

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the research and to ensure it does not overlap with previous ones, the research thesis provides a review of studies that have discussed Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) as the object of study.

Trauma narrative is the most popular topic among research papers discussing the novel. A recent thesis by Vass & Kennedy (2025) argues that Caruthian approach is better than Freudian trauma model for explaining the novel's unresolved trauma narrative. Similarly, Kellermann (2021) examines the novel with trauma theories and concludes that its standpoint shifts, varied narration, and intense witnessing conform to a belated narrative framework.

Expanding the discussion beyond narrative structure, Schober (2024) reveals that imaginative engagement with the text could illustrate the therapeutic process of trauma. Meanwhile, Özmen (2023) applies the storytelling perspective and argues that the novel adapts to multiple genres, including bildungsroman, anti-bildungsroman, fairy tale, and anti-fairy tale, while being undeniably a trauma narrative. In a similar vein, Bădulescu (2022) argues that the novel should be categorized as hyperrealism due to its dark tale of Jude's life in New York, as

well as his mental state, disease, self-mutilation, and decay within the narrative. In addition, Thakar (2025) evaluates the novel using trauma theories and concludes that its trauma representation contributes to literary and cultural significance.

Alongside the trauma and its representation in narrative, the psychological aspect within the novel also sparks interest among scholars. For instance, Madika (2025) investigates Jude's childhood trauma using Jacques Lacan's three registers and Anna Freud's defense mechanism theory. The study later reveals that Jude's three registers are disrupted, and he implements eight defense mechanisms to compensate. Similarly, Mujani (2022) examines the long-term effect of childhood trauma on Jude. The study demonstrates that the trauma affects his adulthood in the form of anxiety and self-destructive behavior.

Aside from the popular topic, *A Little Life* (2015) also has countless aspects to discuss. One of the studies is an article written by Marx (2021) entitled '*But I'm not even in a wheelchair': Dis/ability, Im/mobility, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's A Little Life*'. This study discusses how the novel represents disability, trauma, and immobility, while also linking the narrative with American individualism as well as obliterating stories of disabled people and poverty. Additionally, there is a bachelor thesis by Čevelová (2024) entitled '*A Little Life*' by Hanya Yanagihara: *Translation and Analysis*. The study compares the writer's and the official translation of the novel using Dagmar Knittlová's lexical equivalence theory, which eventually reveals that the official is evidently better. Although the topic of these studies has the least correlation to the thesis, which

main concern is psychology, it is still relevant to take them into account to highlight how broad the discussion of the novel is.

In contrast, this research thesis greatly differs from others since the study particularly used *Diagnostic Statistic Manual Fifth Edition Text Revision (DSM-5-TR)* criteria by American Psychiatric Association (2022) to identify and analyze the representation of Jude's PTSD in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) regarding his position as a male survivor of sexual abuse.

1.6 Writing Organization

The research thesis is arranged in a certain way to offer a clear description of the research process and the topic addressed. The writing structure consisted of four chapters, which will be briefly described as outlined below:

CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION

The first chapter provides a concise introduction of the topic of the study, which covers Background of the Study, Research Problems, Purpose of the Study, Scope of the Study, Previous Studies, and Writing Organization.

CHAPTER II : THEORY AND METHOD

The second chapter describes theories used to analyze Hanya Yangihara's *A Little Life*. This chapter consists of Theoretical Framework, Research Approach, and Method of Data Collection. Theoretical framework explains Intrinsic and Extrinsic Elements, meanwhile Reasearch Approach gives description of Approach Method used. On the other hand, Method of Data Collection explains Data Analyzing Method and Data Sources.

CHAPTER III : RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The third chapter discusses findings of research regarding Intrinsic and Extrinsic Elements. Intrinsic Elements section discovers the Character and Characterization of Jude, Setting, as well as Conflict. Meanwhile, the Extrinsic Elements section demonstrates the Symptoms, Traumatic Events, and Effects of Jude's PTSD.

CHAPTER IV : CONCLUSION

The last chapter summarizes the main findings of the thesis in the previous chapters.

REFERENCES

The section compiles sources, which consist of books and journal articles, cited in the research thesis.