

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Childhood is often understood as a time when identity is being shaped, but it is also considered one of the most vulnerable periods for experiencing trauma. Psychological wounds that occur during childhood are not always temporary. They can continue into adulthood and influence fear, self-awareness, and the way a person sees the world. Trauma is an emotional response to a deeply upsetting event, such as an accident, a violent crime, or a natural disaster. However, trauma that does not include physical violence, such as verbal abuse, intimidation, or vague and frightening experiences, is often harder to recognize, even though it may cause serious emotional harm. These early experiences are especially important in the lives of girls, who grow up facing specific social pressures and are more often exposed to threats such as sexual harassment, coercion, and unwanted attention. Compared to boys, girls are more likely to be judged based on appearance, limited in how they express themselves, or ignored when they express fear. These patterns increase their emotional vulnerability. As girls grow into adolescence and later become adults, the emotional effects of early trauma often become stronger, especially if they continue to face real dangers or ongoing pressure that damages their sense of safety and independence. From the past until today, there is still public concern about kidnapping, sexual violence, and threats to personal safety. Many

young women continue to live with the emotional impact of these dangers far into adulthood.

In Kristen Roupenian's short story "Look at Your Game, Girl", Jessica, a twelve-year-old girl, has recently moved from San Jose to Santa Rosa with her family. This move takes her away from a familiar environment where she is known as the most popular girl in her class and places her in a school where she feels lost and disconnected. She drifts between friend groups, including popular girls who ignore her, kind ones who bore her, and mean ones who intrigue her. As a result, Jessica begins spending time alone in a nearby park after school, bringing music, books, and snacks. One afternoon, she notices a man watching her from across the playground. Although she first assumes he is a teenager, she soon realizes that he is much older. He approaches her, compliments her music, asks unsettling personal questions, and gives her a cassette of songs by Charles Manson. Jessica then associates him with the name Charlie. When he later brings her a battered Walkman so that she has no excuse not to listen, the interaction becomes more disturbing. In one unsettling moment, he strokes her mouth, slides his dirty thumb between her lips, and presses down on her tongue, leaving her shocked, confused, and disgusted. Jessica feels both drawn in and disturbed. He offers the kind of attention she does not receive from her peers, yet his behavior makes her feel unsafe. After he tells her to meet him at midnight, she refuses. However, she lies to her friends about a sleepover, stays awake past midnight, and remains trapped in fear and confusion.

The next night, the news reports that a girl Jessica's age, with the same freckles and hair, has been kidnapped during a sleepover. The police sketch of the suspect looks disturbingly familiar. Terrified and overwhelmed by guilt, Jessica tells her parents everything. Although it takes time for them to understand her panicked and tearful account, the police are eventually contacted, and the cassette is collected as evidence. A few days later, it is confirmed that the man she met is not the kidnapper. As Jessica grows older, she convinces herself that she overreacted, that what happened to her is minor compared to the tragedy that struck Polly. Still, the memory stays with her. Even as an adult, a wife and a mother of twins, she cannot fall asleep before midnight.

A disorder is a condition that disrupts the normal physical, mental, or emotional functioning of a person. The parameters of a disordered person are determined by specific diagnostic criteria that assess the nature, severity, and duration of symptoms, as well as their impact on the individual's ability to function in daily life. Experiences such as being followed, watched, or manipulated, especially during childhood, can lead to deep psychological effects. Traumatic events that occur early in life often create feelings of fear, confusion, and helplessness, and these emotions do not always fade over time. Instead, they may resurface as repeated behaviors, constant anxiety, or an intense awareness of possible danger. This lasting emotional disturbance is often identified as Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder, in which the body and mind continue to react as though the original threat is still present.

This research thesis focuses on the causes, symptoms, and impacts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced by Jessica, the main character in Kristen Roupenian's short story "Look at Your Game, Girl" (2019). Using psychological literary criticism as the primary approach, this research applies the framework of *DSM-5* to examine how PTSD is portrayed through Jessica's experiences, behaviors, and emotional responses. The analysis centers on the narrative elements. This research thesis is significant for several reasons. First, it raises awareness of PTSD, a mental health disorder that is often misunderstood and underrepresented in literary studies. Second, it offers insight into how fiction can reflect real psychological phenomena, allowing literature to serve as a mirror for understanding trauma and its lasting effects. Third, it shows how combining literary analysis and psychology can give a deeper understanding of the characters and themes. Based on these points, this thesis argues that "Look at Your Game, Girl" offers a realistic and meaningful portrayal of PTSD when viewed through psychological literary criticism and *DSM-5* criteria.

1.2 Research Questions

Kristen Roupenian's "Look at Your Game, Girl", portrays the psychological trauma Jessica experiences after a disturbing encounter with an adult man.

1. What are the causes of Jessica's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in “Look at Your Game, Girl”?
2. What are the symptoms of Jessica's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in “Look at Your Game, Girl”?
3. What are the impacts of Jessica's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in “Look at Your Game, Girl”?

1.3 Objective of the Research

The objectives of a study outline the particular aims or intended outcomes of the research. This study has three main goals, which are as follows:

1. To analyze the causes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder experienced by Jessica in “Look at Your Game, Girl”..
2. To analyze the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder experienced by Jessica in “Look at Your Game, Girl”.
3. To analyze the impacts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder experienced by Jessica in “Look at Your Game, Girl”.

1.4 Previous Studies

There are no previous scholarly publications specifically discussing Kristen Roupenian’s short story “Look at Your Game, Girl” as far as this thesis is made. However, several media reviews and articles have analyzed the story as part of Roupenian’s debut collection *You Know You Want This* (2019). The first is an article

by *The Michigan Daily* describes “Look at Your Game, Girl” as one of Roupenian’s most personal and anxiety-inducing works, highlighting how it captures the confusion and fear of a young girl facing a disturbing encounter with an older man. The piece emphasizes how the story conveys what Roupenian refers to as the “vague male threat” and illustrates the girl’s constant overthinking, her inability to trust her instincts, and her growing realization that the world around her may not be as safe as she once believed (Barlage).

The second is a review in *The Saturday Paper*, which emphasizes the real-world horror presented in the narrative, noting how the protagonist suspects the man she meets might be “the next Charles Manson,” and praises Roupenian’s skill in evoking a chilling sense of dread without relying on traditional horror elements. The review highlights how this fear feels grounded in everyday reality, showing how Roupenian blends psychological tension with subtle social danger to create a story that feels both unsettling and disturbingly believable (Gillespie).

The third is an analysis from *The Michigan Alumnus*, which discusses the theme of empathy, showing how its use and abuse, along with emotional misalignment and early trauma, shape the protagonist’s psychological development. The review highlights how Roupenian uses discomfort and vulnerability to explore the confusion of growing up (Firestone).

The fourth is a commentary from *The New Republic*, which notes the story’s unsettling shift in expectation and how psychological violence emerges in subtle

but powerful ways. The review emphasizes how Roupenian builds dread not through overt action, but through emotional manipulation, power imbalance, and sudden reversals that leave lasting psychological scars (Tulathimutte).

While these sources offer valuable perspectives on the story's atmosphere, tone, and emotional complexity, none provides a close analysis of the text through a clinical psychological lens. This thesis builds upon those discussions by applying a psychological framework to examine the cause, symptoms, and impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as reflected in the character of Jessica.

1.5 Research Method

This research employs the method of library research as the foundation for data collection and analysis. As George explains, library research “involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research question; [a] necessary component of every other research method at some point” (George, 2008:6). This method enables the study to be conducted in a systematic and structured manner. The data consist of both primary and secondary sources. George defines primary sources as “evidence produced as close as possible in time or place to an event, individual, or phenomenon” (George, 2008:198), which may include original written accounts, witness testimonies, or researcher-generated records. In this study, the short story “Look at Your Game, Girl” written by Kristen Roupenian serves as the primary source, while secondary

data are drawn from scholarly books, articles, and studies relevant to trauma and literary psychology.

The analytical framework used in this research is psychological literary criticism, an approach that examines literature through the lens of human psychology by focusing on the mental and emotional dimensions of characters, authors, and readers. According to Wellek and Warren, psychological criticism may include “the study of the psychological types and laws present within works of literature” (Wellek and Warren, 1948:81). It explores how literary texts reflect neuroses, archetypal patterns, or inner conflicts that mirror actual psychological phenomena. Through this lens, the study investigates how psychological trauma is portrayed in the narrative, particularly through the depiction of character behavior, memory, and emotional response.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on Kristen Roupenian’s short story “Look at Your Game, Girl”, by analyzing three key literary components: character and characterization, setting, and conflict. Although the story contains other noteworthy literary features, the analysis remains limited to these elements to maintain a clear and structured interpretation. In addition, by employing psychological theories of PTSD, the discussion explores the experiences of Jessica, particularly the traumatic events she endures, which lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The analysis

highlights the causes, symptoms, and impact of PTSD as reflected in the major character's life.

1.7 Writing Organization

The structure of the thesis is organized as follows,

In the writing of this thesis, the organization of the study will follow this outline:

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, it contains introductory information and explanations about the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the studies, previous studies, research method, scope of the study, and writing organization.

CHAPTER II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will explain the theory and methods that will be used to analyze the object of study. It contains discussions of narrative elements as character and characterization, setting, and conflict, as well as psychological theories of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

CHAPTER III RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter covers the discussion and the result of the analysis of the narrative elements and psychological theory of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) including Jessica's encounters with an adult man become traumatic experience that cause post-traumatic stress disorder, Symptoms of Jessica's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Impacts of Jessica's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Kristen Roupenian's short story titled "Look at Your Game, Girl".

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes all research results from the object under study.