

# TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE RESULTING FROM SEXUAL ABUSE IN STEPHEN CHBOSKY' *THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER*

Fenita Austriani dan Christina Resnitriwati.  
English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang

---

Skripsi ini menganalisis tentang pengalaman traumatis dalam novel yang berjudul *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* oleh Stephen Chbosky. Novel ini mendeskripsikan tentang kehidupan Charlie sebagai remaja yang mengalami pengalaman traumatis. Tujuan dari skripsi ini adalah untuk menjelaskan kepribadian dan pengalaman traumatis Charlie akibat dari kekerasan seksual. Metode yang digunakan dalam skripsi ini adalah metode studi pustaka dan pendekatan psikologi. Penulis menggunakan novel sebagai data utama dan beberapa sumber buku, jurnal dan sumber-sumber online sebagai data pendukung. Dalam menganalisis unsure intrinsik, penulis menggunakan tema, karakter, latar, dan konflik. Selain itu, untuk menganalisis unsure ekstrinsik, penulis menggunakan teori gangguan stress pasca trauma yang berasal dari Asosiasi Psikiatris Amerika. Berdasarkan Asosiasi Psikiatris Amerika, ada lima gejala gangguan stress pasca trauma: terpapar oleh pemicu stress, mengalami kembali peristiwa trauma, penghindaran, kebangkitan dan durasi terjadinya gejala. Hasil analisis membuktikan bahwa Charlie menderita gangguan stress pasca trauma. Kepribadian Charlie juga dipengaruhi oleh gejala-gejala dari gangguan stress pasca trauma.

Kata kunci: *trauma, pengalaman, gangguan stress pasca trauma, seks, siksaan*

## 1. Introduction

Most people have an unforgettable series of event in their life. It can be good as it will always be memorized or it also can be bad as it can be hard to forget until it makes someone trauma about it. Trauma is a state of mind that causes injury. According to Heidarizadeh in his journal article *The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis*, trauma is an event which involves feelings and emotions. It sometimes causes negative effect to the sufferer. One of the most damage type causes of psychoanalysis trauma is child sexual abuse. According to the data from U.S. Department of Justice, during 1980s, the court has reported the

increasing number of child sexual abuse victims. Almost 7.7 million American adults suffer from trauma caused by child sexual abuse in childhood. Based on the data, In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association decides to add the traumatic disorder from child sexual abuse in their diagnostic of mental disorder. The disorder is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (2001: 3).

The Writer chooses Stephen Chbosky's novel entitled *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as the object of the study to discuss because it depicts about traumatic experience that gives an example to the reader as reflected in the main character. As it can be known from the novel, Charlie is a freshman in High School. He is an introvert, nerd, and shy person. He struggles alone as an abandoned student in his school until he meets Sam and Patrick who accept him and change his life. The novel also depicts about Charlie's psychology regarding to sexual abuse that he experienced in his childhood. The facts that Charlie's personality in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is different from other boys at his age makes the writer curious to analyze his past event. Those facts are the reason why the writer chooses "Traumatic Experience Resulting from Sexual Abuse in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*" as the title.

## **2. Traumatic Experience and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Traumatic Experience is an unbearable situation that forces our mind to rethink memory in the past. It is introduced by Sigmund Freud that a situation which happens in a short time, that "increase the strength of a given stimulus" which affects someone to create fear abnormally. Therefore, trauma is also called as wound or brain injury (1920:241-242). According to Freud, Traumatic experience

causes post traumatic syndrome called shell shock or war neurosis. The term of shell shock or war neurosis is inherited from his patient who was a victim of World War I. However, the post traumatic syndrome resulting from combat is similar to rape or violent crime. (2005:146-147) His concept is developed by The American Psychiatric Association (APA) with a new term called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

### **3. Characteristic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

#### **3.1 Exposure to Stressor**

The way, stressor is exposed are in the following:

1. Experiencing the traumatic event.
2. Witnessing the events as it experiences to other people.
3. Learning the traumatic event happened to a close family member.

#### **3.2 Re-experiencing of Event**

The following intrusion symptoms connected with the traumatic events such as:

1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive memories (images or thoughts,)
2. Recurrent, distressing dreams are related to traumatic events.
3. Dissociative reaction such as; experiencing illusions or hallucinations, having flashback episodes).

#### **3.3 Avoidance**

The avoidance occurred in the beginning after the traumatic events happened, as indicated by the following:

1. Making attempts to avoid images, feelings, or conversation that remembering one of the traumatic events.

2. Feeling fear, guilt, sadness, shame or confusion after the traumatic event occurred.
3. Shutting out the memories of painful periods and experiencing amnesia.

### **3.4 Arousal**

The symptoms of arousal occurred in the beginning or worsening after the traumatic events such as:

1. Reckless or self-destructive behavior.
2. Irritability or outburst of anger.
3. Blackout in specific case such as; depersonalization and derealization.
4. Exaggerated startle response.
5. Difficulty concentrating.

### **3.5 Duration**

The symptoms described above (Re-experiencing of Event, Avoidance, and Arousal) existed longer than one month.

### **3.6 Life Disrupted**

The disturbance causes distress or impairment in society. Schiraldi defines life disrupted as a PTSD symptom that can disturb life and relationship. It could be avoiding people, social situation and hostility or anger. (2009:12)

## **4. Intrinsic Elements**

### **4.1 Theme**

In the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the main theme is about friendship. When Charlie enters high school for the first time, he has no friend. He is even bullied by some of popular student. That is why he tends to be passive

student until he meets Patrick and Sam. Patrick joins his class for a remedial but they never talk to each other. Then, both of them meet in a football match, this time Patrick brought his step sister named Sam. Patrick and Sam are senior in Charlie's school. In the novel, it is shown the journey of their friendship between Charlie, Patrick, and Sam. Since their meeting in the football match, they always spend time together. Patrick and Sam often invite him to a party, such as homecoming party. They also introduce him to their friends; Alice, Mary Elizabeth, and Bob even though they are all seniors. Since then, Charlie knows the new side of teenage life with a lot of things in it, such as partying, smoking pot, and using drugs

## **4.2 Character**

### **4.2.1 Charlie**

Charlie is 15 year-old-boy who has just entered high school. He is described as a bookworm and nerd student. He always reads a book whenever he has free time. Charlie is also the main character as well as the narrator. From the beginning of the story, Charlie starts to write a letter to anonymous person. In this novel, He tells us all of his experiences, his friends, and his problems at home through the letters that he writes. After meeting Sam and Patrick, Charlie has changed significantly. Sam influences him to be confident and participate to other people.

### **4.2.2 Aunt Helen**

In the novel, Aunt Helen is a minor character. She passed away when Charlie was a little boy. Aunt Helen is described as a smart fat woman who loves to read books. It is shown when Charlie says "*The nice thing was my Aunt Helen was*

*never on a diet. And my Aunt Helen was “corpulent”. Hey, I did it!”(1999:12).*

Aunt Helen is described as a corpulent who is never on diet. It means that aunt Helen is fat and she is keen on eating.

## **5. Extrinsic Aspects**

According to DSM fourth edition, there are five diagnostic symptoms of PTSD; exposure to stressor, re-experiencing event, avoidance, arousal, duration of the symptoms and life disrupted. The writer analyzes Charlie, the major character of The Perks of Being Wallflower novel, who shows PTSD criteria.

### **5.1 Charlie is Directly Experiencing Traumatic Event**

In The Perks of Being Wallflower, there are only two types of the way stressor is exposed, one of them is directly experiencing the traumatic events. It is happened when aunt Helen lives with Charlie’s family. She molested Charlie every weekend alone at his home when he was six years old.

I don’t really want to talk about the questions and the answers. But I kind of figured out that everything I dreamt about my Aunt Helen was true. And after a while, I realized that it happened every Saturday when we would watch television (1999:208-209).

Charlie is the victim of sexual molested. It can be seen when Charlie has a dream of his aunt. He is dreaming about aunt Helen who molested him in a couch every Saturday. From the quotation above, Charlie does not remember the event yet he can dream about it. When aunt Helen molested him, that is the criteria where Charlie is exposed to stressor. It makes him unable to adapt to early sexual behavior.

### **5.2 Charlie is Experiencing Recurrent Memories**

The night before Sam leaves the town and moves to college, she holds a farewell party in her home. Charlie is invited in the party even he is not graduated yet. After the party ends, she asks Charlie to help her pack up for tomorrow. They enter Sam's room and start to pack. Sam talks about a lot of things to Charlie. She talks about what a college life would be like and what a long trip she will have tomorrow. Then, she gives advice to him to do what he wanted to do and be honest with himself. Suddenly, Charlie confesses that he loves Sam. He never tells Sam because he thought Sam would not like it. Without hesitation, he kisses Sam right after he confesses everything.

So I kissed her. And she kissed me back. And we lay down on the floor and kept kissing. And it was soft. And we made quiet noises. And kept silent. And still...

...

She took my hand and slid it under her pants. And I touched her. And I just couldn't believe it. It was like everything made sense. Until she moved her hand under my pants and she touched me.

That's when I stopped her (1999:202)

From the dialog, it can be seen that the re-experiencing event is happening. He starts to remember the day when aunt Helen does the same thing like what Sam does to him that day. They almost have a sexual intercourse in Sam's room. Meanwhile, when Sam is almost touching Charlie's genital, Charlie feels uncomfortable and is not ready for that. That is why he suddenly stops her. Charlie remembers the time when aunt Helen molested him by rubbing his genital. When he stopped Sam, He says that he cannot do that any further but in his mind he is talking to someone else instead of talking to Sam.

### **5.3 Charlie is Experiencing Amnesia**

Before knowing that Charlie is molested by aunt Helen, he suffers from amnesia. After taking Sam and Patrick off to college, Charlie drives back home and feels so crazy. Arrived at home, he cannot talk and communicate with anyone. He feels so confused and depressed. Then, his parents find him having blackout in a couch. Soon after that, his parents take him to the hospital. He does not remember anything about the incident when aunt Helen is rubbing his genital every Saturday. Charlie does not remember anything after his parents find him blackout. He states “*All I remember is putting the letter in the mailbox. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in a doctor’s office. And I remembered my aunt Helen.*” (1999:208). The quotation above indicates that he is memory is lost when he re-experiences traumatic event.

#### **5.4 Charlie is Having Blackouts**

In *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder*, Someone with PTSD criteria is experiencing blackout when he is triggered by overwhelming trauma. It can be depersonalization or derealization. Depersonalization is a condition where someone feels separated from his body. He feels like an outside observer of himself. While derealization is a condition where someone feels like the event is not really happening. He thinks that world is like a dream. Both of them are the characteristic of post traumatic stress disorder. However, in Charlie’s cases, he shows depersonalization symptoms. It happens in the next morning after he had sexual intercourse with Sam.

Finally, Sam climbed into her pickup, and Patrick started it up. And a great song was playing. And everyone smiled. Including me. But I wasn’t there anymore. It wasn’t until I couldn’t see the cars that I came back and things started feeling bad again..(1999:204-205)



According to the quotation above, Charlie and his friends come to Sam's house to say goodbye and see her off to college. He feels bad to see his beloved friend leaving. Moreover, he had sexual intercourse the day before which makes him rethink the traumatic event. It makes him feel worse. When he says he was not there, it indicates that he experienced depersonalization. The way he portrays his condition concludes that he is having blackouts

### **5.5 Duration and The Effect of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

According to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder IV*, the duration of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder criteria lasts longer than two months. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie encounters his PTSD for 7 months. It can be seen when he has a recurrent memory at Christmas Eve party in December, 1991. The symptoms always continue until June, 1992 when he is taken to the mental hospital. The disturbance of the symptoms affects someone's life and relationship. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, it also happens when Charlie is in the mental hospital. "They told me I didn't speak or acknowledge anyone for a week." (1999:208) It means that he is avoiding people around him even Patrick, his best friend. The disturbance is also affecting Charlie's behavior. It makes him an antisocial and emotional person.

## **6. Conclusion**

Traumatic experience is a short event that forces our mind to rethink memory in the past. Most of the people who have traumatic experience tend to show a post-traumatic stress disorder. The characteristics are exposure to stressor, re-experiencing of event, avoidance, and arousal. Those characteristics last longer

than one month and cause life disruption. The writer found that Charlie, the main character of the novel, is suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Furthermore, the symptoms of PTSD affect Charlie' personality. By avoiding people or memory related to traumatic experience, it makes Charlie as an antisocial person. Also Charlie' self-destructive behaviors make him an emotional person. As the conclusion, Charlie suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of traumatic experience from sexual abuse.

## **7. Bibliography**

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. USA: Heinle&Heinle, a Division of Thomson Learning, Inc,

Association, A. P. (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th edition*. Washington DC: The American Psychiatric Association.

Bagley, C., & King, K. (1990). *Child Sexual Abuse: the search for healing*. London: Routledge.

Chbosky, S. (1999). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Pocket Book, Simon and Schuster, Inc.

Clancy, S. A. (2009). *The Trauma Myth : the truth about the sexual abuse of children*. New York: Basic Books, The Perseus Books Group.

Eder, J. Fotis J., and Ralf S.(2010). *Characters in fictional worlds : understanding imaginary beings in literature*. Germany: Hubert & Co.

Freud, S. (1920) *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Retrieved from <<https://eduardolbm.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/a-general-introduction-to-psychoanalysis-sigmund-freud.pdf>>

Heidarizadeh, N. (2014) The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis.*Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*vol: 192. 27 Jun 2016 <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042815035648>>

Heller, S. (2005). *Freud A to Z*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Holman, C. H. (1972). *A Handbook to Literature*. Indiana: The Bobbs - Merrill Company.

- Krystal, H. (1978). *The Psychoanalytic Study of The Child*. New York: Vail - Ballou Press.
- Marshall, G. N. (2000). *A Review of the Scientific Literature As It Pertains to Gulf War Illnesses: Volume 4: Stress*. Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1018z4-1/MR1018.4.chap2.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1018z4-1/MR1018.4.chap2.pdf)
- Minderop, A. (2010). *Psikologi Sastra*. Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia.
- Potter, J. L. (1967). *Elements of Literature*. New York: The Odyssey Press.
- Schiraldi, G. R. (2009). *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: A guide to healing, recovery, and growth*. USA: McGraw-Hill.
- U.S Department of Justice. (2001). *Juvenile Justice Bulletin; The Decline in Child Sexual Abuse Cases*. Retrieved from <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV39.pdf>
- CBS Pittsburgh. (2016). *Parkway West & Fort Pitt Tunnel Weekend Closures Announced as Works Continues*. 17 October 2016. < HYPERLINK "<http://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2016/06/10/parkway-west-fort-pitt-tunnel-weekend-closures-announced-as-work-continues/>" <http://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2016/06/10/parkway-west-fort-pitt-tunnel-weekend-closures-announced-as-work-continues/> >