

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of The Study

Trauma is a physical medical term that is used to refer to a wound that comes from the Greek word, which means a puncture or rupture of the skin surface that harms the body tissue (Garland, 2018). Freud (1920) employs the term “trauma” metaphorically to illustrate how an individual mind, much like its body, is also prone to injury by traumatic events. Stressful or traumatic events then leave an impact on the individuals, which shatters their sense of security and feel helpless (Robinson et al., 2023). The stressful or traumatic events are typically associated with an event that posed a risk to life, serious injury, or sexual violence. Such experiences are considered trauma when the individual experiences the event either directly, by experiencing and witnessing the event, or indirectly, like through a close relative or close friend's experiences (Muldoon et al., 2019). In the psychoanalytic view, severe traumatic events can reactivate unresolved pain and conflict of childhood (Garland, 2018).

Psychoanalysts pay detailed attention to the childhood and developmental history, since it is the crucial stage in which the earliest relationships not only shape later mental (and thus character) structure but have a continuing and active influence in the internal world (Garland, 2018). An event can be considered as childhood trauma when it happens before a person reaches the age of eighteen which the common sources of childhood trauma are emotional abuse, emotional neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and physical neglect, the trauma can also

caused by a dysfunctional family events like parents divorce, growing up with mentally ill family members, parental drug abuse, or the death of a parent (Roche et al., 2019). These traumatic experiences build a foundation that can lead to problems in an individual's adult life. Victims of childhood trauma often display low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, sometimes denying their trauma or masking it with substance misuse (Downey & Crummy, 2022).

The victim of childhood trauma avoids the traumatic childhood memories through a defense mechanism. This defense activity aimed to avoid experiencing painful feelings and effects (Cramer & College, 2015). Defense is the process that keeps the content of an individual's unconscious hidden, which helps to prevent confronting feelings that we believe we can't manage (Tyson, 2006). An individual often develops these unconscious mechanisms to reduce internal conflict, particularly between the superego and id (Bailey & Pico, 2023).

The depiction of childhood trauma and defense mechanisms can be seen and analyzed through literary works like novels. In a novel, there is space for language to display the inner world of a person because there is space for memories, introspection, retrospection, foreshadowing, flashbacks, and awful remembrances that are colored by pain, wounds, and trauma (Heidarizadeh, 2015). Several contemporary novels, such as *Normal People* (2018) by Sally Rooney, *The Goldfinch* (2013) by Donna Tartt, and *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara, have dealt with the theme of trauma. In *Normal People*, trauma is presented as something that the characters can overcome with the help of each other, particularly through love and friendship. In *The Goldfinch*, the character who deals with trauma can find meaning and healing through time and personal development. While the

two novels build up the image that trauma is something that can be overcome as time goes on, and through relationships. *A Little Life* has a unique approach to trauma. It shows that the character's trauma is never truly overcome. His pain stays with him throughout his life, and he cannot fully escape it, no matter how much love or care he receives.

Hanya Yanagihara is an American novelist, editor, and travel writer who was born in California and now lives in New York City. As a novelist, she delves into heavy themes surrounding trauma, guilt, and suffering. Her second novel, which was published in 2015, *A Little Life*, has gained a lot of attention, especially on social media, and the novel has sold over 2.5 million copies (Smith, qtd. in The Booker Prizes, 2023).

A Little Life is Hanya Yanagihara's second novel that tells the story of four college friends who are Jude St. Francis, a New York-based lawyer, and his three friends, Willem, JB, and Malcolm, who move to New York and face the dynamics of life. This 800-page novel depicts the main character, Jude St. Francis's adult life struggles and his horrifying childhood experiences. Among his friends, Jude is known for being a mysterious man who never shares his background and childhood experiences. However, as the story went on, Jude's mental health is getting worse, and he fell into deep despair. Although Jude succeeds in his career, he still cannot escape the memories of his childhood. Through the story of Jude's experience of emotional, verbal, physical, and even sexual abuse as a child, this novel successfully plays with the reader's emotions as it forces them to see the shattered world Jude lives in and empathize with him. *Little Life* is an 'extreme' novel in every sense of the word, as it tells the story of Jude, who suffered years of sexual and physical

abuse as a child and remains severely emotionally and physically scarred from the experience as an adult (Kellermann, 2020).

The novel's popularity among social media users contributes to the novel's popularity in the online communities as the readers use social media platforms to express how deeply the novel has affected them. Even now, nine years after publication, the novel's popularity still gained a lot of attention on social media. The hashtag #ALittleLife has now been viewed on TikTok 93 million times, and it has 62.9K followers on the dedicated Instagram account @alittlelifebook (Smith, qtd. in The Booker Prizes, 2023). Under the hashtag #booktok in the TikTok community, this novel is still popularized up until now, and many book reviewer share their thoughts on reading the story on the internet.

Besides its popularity among social media users, *A Little Life* also achieved several prestigious awards, which are given to recognize outstanding storytelling and writing quality. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2015 and was a National Book Award Finalist in 2015 under the category of fiction.

Because of the novel's content, *A Little Life* has been reviewed in several media outlets, such as global news outlets and magazines. Jon Michaud in The New Yorker article describes Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* as something that can drive you mad, consume you, and take over your life, it is like the axiom of equality, it feels elemental, irreducible, and dark and disturbing, yet there is beauty in it (Michaud, qtd. in The New Yorker, 2015). Alex Preston in The Guardian Article said that there is something chillingly relentless about the way that Yanagihara subjects the reader to Jude's suffering (Preston, qtd. in The Guardian, 2015). The famous, award-winning singer-songwriter Dua Lipa also shares her thoughts about

the novel. Through The Booker Prizes website, she writes an article in which she shares her thoughts about the book, “I will happily admit, as a devoted and lifelong reader, that there are more than a few books that have made me cry. But Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* is different: it was one of the first books that I openly sobbed after reading. By the end of it, I felt profoundly changed. I’m not exaggerating when I say this novel challenged everything I thought I knew about love and friendship. It’s one of those books that stays with you forever.” (Lipa, qtd. in The Booker Prizes, 2023).

The novel *A Little Life* has also been discussed in several journal articles. For example, Jonas Kellermann (2020) explores the controversial reception of the *A Little Life* novel using trauma theory. This study focuses on how the novel’s intense portrayal of trauma affects both characters and readers. The analysis highlights that the novel portrays trauma with intense emotional weight that often overwhelms readers. Another study is the paper by Natalija Stevanović (2024) that analyzes the traumatic experiences of Jude St. Francis, focusing on how the traumatic events in his childhood continue to affect his adult life. The study uses trauma theory by scholars such as Judith L. Herman, Cathy Caruth, Ruth Leys, Laurie Vickroy, and Michelle Balaev. It examines both the psychological impact of trauma and how it is represented through the novel’s narrative techniques and shifting perspectives.

Another example is from Cansu Özge Özmen (2021), which examines how Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* employs contrasting elements from multiple literary genres, such as Bildungsroman, Antibildungsroman, fairy tale, and anti-fairy tale, to narrate trauma and the limits of recovery. The study uses genre theory

to analyze how the novel draws on and subverts conventional motifs to reflect its complex thematic content.

Lastly, Julia Karlsson (2017) explores the tension between personal agency and psychological trauma in the novel, specifically on why Jude St. Francis remains dominated by his past despite having control of certain aspects of his life. By applying Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of transcendent freedom from Being and Nothingness, the study compared Jude's experiences with Sartre's existential philosophy.

Although several journal articles have examined Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, there remains a gap in scholarly analysis applying the psychoanalytic theory, specifically by Jacques Lacan and Anna Freud, to explore the psychological impact of childhood trauma on the main character, Jude St. Francis, and his defense mechanisms. While in the previous studies, two studies have discussed Jude's trauma in *A Little Life*, for instance, Stevanović (2024) has analyzed *A Little Life* through trauma studies, the study has focused on literary trauma theory to examine Jude's experiences. Stevanović's analysis emphasizes how Jude's psychological suffering is represented through narrative and how it affects his later life. Meanwhile, Karlsson's (2017) which applied Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism to question whether Jude can still make meaningful choices and rise above his traumatic past. And another study is by Özmen (2021), which isn't related to Jude's trauma, explores the genres that are used by Hanya Yanagihara in *A Little Life*. In contrast, this study, through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and Anna Freud's defense mechanisms, will shift the focus from Stevanović's (2024) and Karlsson's (2017) analysis to how the childhood trauma constructs Jude's psychic,

identity, and behaviour and how it affect and carried throughout his life. By integrating Lacan's three register theory (Imaginary Order (mirror stage), Symbolic Order, The Real) and Anna Freud's 11 defense mechanisms theory, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of Jude's psychological state and his inability to heal from his trauma.

The study of the depiction of childhood trauma and defense mechanisms in literary work has been done in the past by several researchers. For instance, Nasir et al. (2024) used the Freudian concept of id, ego, superego, repression, defense mechanisms, symbolism, and dream analysis to explore the hidden motivations, conflicts, and unconscious desires that influence the character and drive the story. The analysis reveals a significant presence of emotional trauma and child abuse within the narrative. The protagonist's experiences closely align with Freud's theories of the unconscious mind, defense mechanisms, and the lasting influence of early childhood experiences on adult personality (Nasir et al., 2024).

Another study was done by Hande İSAOĞLU (2015). The study reveals that the central character of Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* has a direct relationship with the Freudian concepts of id, ego, and superego. When the characters are analyzed, it is found that the id, ego, and superego do not work in harmony. They are not able to balance the three parts of the human psyche. This inconsistency causes inexplicable results for each character (İSAOĞLU, 2015).

Expanding from the topic of childhood trauma, Shahzad et al. (2024) aim to analyze the psychological complexities of the character Ganga in Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us*, particularly focusing on how traumatic experiences trigger PTSD. It uses Emotional Processing Theory (EPT), developed by Dr. Edna Foa and

M.J. Kozak, as a framework to examine how trauma is processed and how it leads to PTSD. The study finds that Ganga's experiences of abuse and trauma resulted in severe PTSD symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, and re-experiencing traumatic events.

Another example is from Giri (2020), which examines the impact of trauma on the child psychology of the twin protagonists, Rahel and Estha, in Arundhati Roy's novel. It highlights how their childhood experiences of violence, neglect, and enforced separation lead to long-lasting psychological effects that persist into adulthood. The author employs trauma theory, referencing Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as a "double wound," to analyze how traumatic memories manifest in nightmares and intrusive flashbacks. The article emphasizes that the twins' traumatic experiences create a cycle of emotional turmoil, leading to their struggles with identity and connection throughout their lives.

A further example is Lecheheb (2020), who examines the theme of fear of intimacy in Rabih Alameddine's novel *I, The Divine*, specifically on the protagonist, Sarah, who grapples with her traumatic experiences. This study uses Freudian psychoanalysis in approaching Sarah's behavior, suggesting that her fears of betrayal and abandonment and low self-esteem manifest as a defense mechanism against intimacy. The article argues that Sarah's emotional distance from others results from her unresolved traumas and her attempts to protect her individuality.

Lastly, Priya P R (2022) explores the psychological aspects of the main character of the novel *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides. The article explores the life of the main character, Alicia Berenson, who is a victim of childhood trauma.

The analysis emphasizes how Alicia's psychological struggles manifest in her actions, including her attempts at self-harm and aggression toward others.

The articles provided above show that the psychoanalytic theory can be used to analyze the impact of childhood trauma on a character's psychological state and behavior. Psychoanalytic theory offers a framework for in-depth exploration of a character's psychological state in a literary work. In a novel, characters are often shaped by their desires, fears, and traumas that may not be explicitly stated. Through psychoanalytic theory, the underlying factors that shape a character's psychological states, as well as the reasons behind their behaviour, can be examined and understood. The previous studies above show that using psychoanalytic theory to analyze the childhood trauma of the main character in a novel can offer researchers a deeper understanding of how childhood experiences impact the character's adult life. Thus, this study will also use the psychoanalytic approach by Jacques Lacan in analyzing the impact of childhood trauma and the defense mechanism of the main character, Jude St. Francis, in the novel *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. Through the three registers (imaginary order, symbolic order, and the real) that Lacan posits, we can have an in-depth exploration and a better understanding of Jude St. Francis' trauma and the affect in his adult life.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does childhood trauma affect the main character's adult life in *A Little Life*?
2. How does the main character in *A Little Life* demonstrate defense mechanisms?

1.3. Purpose of the study.

This study aims to analyze how childhood trauma affects the adult life of the main character, Jude St. Francis, and the defense mechanism shown by the main character.

1.4. Significance of the study

By exploring the topic of psychoanalysis in *A Little Life*, this study provides valuable insights into using the psychoanalysis approach in analyzing a novel. The findings of this study will be helpful for students, study programs, critics, and writers.

