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## Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites*

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Article Information	Abstract
Received : March 1, 2022 Revised : March 10, 2022 Accepted : March 24, 2022 Published: March 30, 2022	Many fields of study, including literary studies, pay a serious attention on the connection between violence and trauma. Responding to such an attention, this article aims to investigate some issues of violence and post-traumatic stress disorder represented in the novel <i>Burial Rites</i> by Hannah Kent. The writing is based on library research. This descriptive-qualitative study applies psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud to analyze the representation of violence and post-traumatic stress disorder in the novel. The findings show that Kent, through <i>Burial Rites</i> , illustrates that the impacts of violence on someone can be both physical and psychological. Kent demonstrates a relationship between violence and post-traumatic stress disorder in the story. It depicts that the violence a person has experienced in life, whether physical or psychological, can cause a mental disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder. The illness can make the sufferers regularly experience fear, nightmares, anxiety, and other things that disturb their mind and soul.
<b>Keywords</b>  Violence; Post-Traumatic; <i>Burial Rites</i> .	
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## INTRODUCTION

Violence has been an essential issue in academic investigations for the last few decades. It has been a critical topic of discussion in almost all aspects of human life, including literature. Violence is an evil action against someone in which the perpetrator aims to hurt that person. Violence means malignancy, ruthlessness, fierceness, ferocity, abuse, and even rape. Violence accounts for excluding behaviors like accidents and self-defense, including actions like maltreatment, sexual offenses, and manslaughter (Hamby, 2017). Hamby's arguments on violence comply with what Krug et al, have mentioned. They argue that violence is the intentional use of physical force or power against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, causing injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. What Hamby and Krug et al. say suggests that violence has become an essential issue at this time. The violence that someone undergoes often impacts his life, so it seems to have been embedded in a person to achieve his life goals. It is not surprising that the effect of violence continues to increase in various ways. The impact of violence can also disturb someone's mental health. One of the most well-known mental disorders today is post-traumatic stress disorder. Gerald C. Davidson, states that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. The traumatic event may be something life-threatening, such as combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault in the past (Davison, Neale, & Kring, 2000).

Violence has been one of the most critical themes in Australian literature. Some Australian writers have used works of literature to demonstrate the impacts of violence on

people. A novel that takes violence and post-traumatic as a theme in Australian literature is *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent, a novelist born in Adelaide, Australia, in 1985. She is a co-founder and deputy editor of the Australian Literary Journal *Kill Your Darlings*. *Burial Rites* is her first novel. This novel was published in 2013 and has won three awards in 2014, such as The ABIA Literary Fiction Book of The Year in 2014, The ABA Nielsen Book data Bookseller's Choice Award in 2014, and The Booktopia People Choice Awards in 2014. *Burial Rites* tells about physical and psychological violence (Kent, [2014](#)). It tells the story of the last execution in Iceland by executing Agnes Magnúsdóttir, a housemaid. Agnes was sentenced to death because she killed two men in a night at the farmhouse in Illugastadir, Iceland. Because of the violence that Agnes underwent, she experienced post-traumatic stress disorder. In short, the story shows us the issue of violence and mental disorders. This novel has attracted the attention of researchers such as Van Luyn who looks at women's criminality in the work (Van Luyn, [2019](#)), Petkovic on female body (Petković, 2016), Ayuningtyas on women violence (Ayuningtyas, [2015](#)), and May on the teaching of *Burial Rites* (May, [2014](#)).

Violence is an exertion of physical force to injure or destroy, always accompanied by emotion of anger or hostility, which may or may not be consciously perceived. Anger must reach certain intensity before resulting in violence. Violence can physically damage a person because the person usually performs anguish actions and behaviors uncontrollably. The threshold of violence varies from individual to individual based upon biological differences. In psychodynamic theory, a Freud point out that violence is a 'drive' that refers to a state of readiness for a particular behavior type. Violence can affect one's behavior to the point that he is no longer being able to control their thoughts. Meanwhile, we know that evil thoughts can affect our mental or mental health as well. Therefore, this type of violence is not only physical but also psychological violence.

The term Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is new in the world of psychology. Previously the term used by Sigmund Freud to resemble PTSD was Traumatic Neuroses. In his book *A General Introduction of Psychoanalysis* (2012), some lectures share with the readers (Freud, [2012](#)). One of them is Fixation upon Trauma - The Unconscious, which clearly describes the broad clinical picture of PTSD in these lectures. In that chapter, Freud makes an analogy of Traumatic Neuroses as a condition of our neurotics furnished by sickness types. To clarify this definition of traumatic neuroses, Lazaro, states that Freud used psychoanalysis to treat Traumatic Neurosis (PTSD) and attempted through psychoanalysis to recover repressed traumatic memories through free association with introspection to the patients. Freud's method is the interpretative listening to a discourse on two planes. It is what people call talk therapy. This method helped patients with psychological trauma. According to Freud, "the traumatic neuroses show clear indications that they are grounded in a fixation upon the moment of the traumatic disaster" (Jayatunge, [2017](#)). In brief, post-traumatic stress disorder is a disorder that disturbs one's mental health that occurs because of the traumatic event that happened in their life.

Simply said, post-traumatic stress disorder is a disorder that disturbs one's mental health that occurs because of the traumatic events that happened in their life. Freud used psychoanalysis to recover repressed traumatic memories through free association with introspection to the patient. He used psychoanalysis to treat the traumatic neurosis of people nowadays, known as PTSD. Van der Kolk, gives his view about traumatic neurosis that Freud had ever observed. He states that Sigmund Freud observed that early memory traces could be activated by events that cause partial reliving of earlier traumas in the form of affect states, anxiety, or re-enactments (Kolk, [1995](#)). However, Freud did not explain how the symptoms of PTSD itself. Meanwhile, Davison et al, mention that PTSD symptoms almost resemble the Freud statement above (Davison et al., [2000](#)). He states that post-traumatic stress disorder

symptoms consist of three clusters: re-experiencing, avoidance, and arousal symptoms. The disorder's treatment emphasizes rapid intervention and talking through or reliving the event in a supportive atmosphere. The symptoms may not be the same for everyone because each person experiences symptoms in their ways. As a whole, the symptoms are as follows. The first is re-experiencing symptoms which remind us of the trauma that we fear. It is a flashback that causes us to feel bad experiences, nightmares, and frightening thoughts. The second is avoidance symptoms in which one tries to avoid situations or people who trigger memories of the traumatic events that cause him to stay away from places, occurrences, or objects that remind him of traumatic experiences. They avoid thoughts or feelings about traumatic events. For example, someone might try to stay very busy trying to avoid thinking about what has happened. The last is Arousal symptoms which may cause people to be jittery or be on the lookout for danger. The arousal and reactivity symptoms include being easily startled, feeling tense, being difficult to sleep, and having angry outbursts. Based on the discussion above, the purpose of this study is to look at how Hannah Kent portrays the connection between violence and trauma in human life in *Burial Rites* to uncover the effects of such happenings in human psyche.

The investigation of violence and PTSD as represented in *Burial Rites* is interesting because of some reasons. First, *Burial Rites* illustrates that violence is like a vicious circle. We can call it 'violence breeds violence.' This novel describes the term 'violence breeds violence' by showing that people who become the victims of violence from their childhood turn into perpetrators of violence in the future. It is impressive because the novel's writer indirectly warns us about violence's adverse impact. Second, this novel shows the readers that violence can cause someone to have a mental illness. Mental health is the standard-issue that happens around us today. Mental health has become an excellent topic to discuss because people quickly get mental disorders because of some factors. Mental disorder is a recent attack on teenager's lives because of some factors, usually bullying. Bullying is a kind of verbal violence. The mental disorder that teenagers commonly get nowadays might be anxiety disorder, personality disorder, and traumatic disorder. The novel tells of violence that results in post-traumatic stress disorder among its victims. This novel shows us that mental disorders also disturb a 32-year-old person. It is interesting because the mental disorder is not only experiencing by teenagers but also by adult people.

## METHOD

This study is library research which applies a stylistic investigation as its theoretical approach. Stylistics or style is a person's method of speaking or writing to state goals using language facilities. The methodological approach used in this research is a qualitative approach, which, according to Arikunto, is a descriptive study (Arikunto, [2006](#)). This study describes the data with words or sentences, according to each category, to obtain conclusions. This qualitative approach examines the data using words or sentences. It aims to ensure the depth of understanding and deals with non-numerical data.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through *Burial Rites*, Hannah Kent depicts how violence can negatively impact someone who has experienced violence. It illustrates that violence impacts not only the victim's physical health but also their mental one. It raises the issue of violence that causes its victim to have a mental disorder. Kent raises two types of violence in this novel: physical and psychological violence, each of which can also affect human physical and psychological states. Kent also

indicates that the consequences of violence could make a person experience a mental disorder. The mental disorder that Kent tries to reveal in this novel is post-traumatic stress disorder.

## Types of Violence in *Burial Rites*

### *Physical Violence*

*Burial Rites* shows that physical violence can affect the victim's mental health, including that of adults. The story echoes many stories in many parts of the world, including those in Indonesia. The violence that Ferdinal addresses in Indonesian short stories is also represented in *Burial Rites* (Ferdinal, [2013](#); [2015](#); [2020](#); [2021](#)). The story suggests that physical violence occurs when someone uses part of their body or an object to control a person's actions. She uses force, be it the force in our body or the assistance of other things that aim to injure the victim (Ferdinal, [2015](#)). Kent shows us that the victim often undergoes violence that injures her during her life. One form of physical violence that Kent shows us is being flogged by a man when the victim was a child.

“They whipped me for that at this farm, Kornsó, once, when I was young and fostered out to watch over the home field. The farmer Björn did not like that I knew the sagas better than him.” (Kent, [2014](#), p. 67)

Besides, Kent also describes that there is violence in prison that happens to a woman who is 32 years old. Large men carried out the violence against fragile adult women. Kent tries to figure out that this might also happen in human life (Ferdinal, [2020](#)).

“I have come to expect harm now. Some of the watchmen at Stóra Borg compassed my body with small violence, chronicled their hatred towards me, a mark here, bruises, blossoming like star clusters under the skin, black and yellow smoke trapped under the membrane.” (Kent, [2014](#), p. 34)

Furthermore, Kent points out that a teenager experiences sexual violence. She portrays Agnes, a teenager who was sexually abused (Ferdinal, [2021](#)). She undergoes trauma all her life, either physical or psychological, because she, according to Jozef et al, is forced to take part in sexual activity unwillingly.

“Has Steina had to struggle under the weight of a servant man like that? Has Steina ever had to decide whether to let a farmer up under her skirts and face the wrath of his wife, who will force her to do the shit-work, or to deny him and find herself homeless in the snow and fog with all doors barred against her?” (Kent, [2014](#), p. 167)

Kent also addresses sexual violence against Agnes' children. It bothered her mind that she would never forget the person who had committed sexual violence against her.

### *Psychological Violence*

Unlike physical violence, Kent displays that psychological violence can hurt someone's feeling that is difficult to forget. Kent portrays that psychological violence can be one of the causes of mental disorders. Jozef et al, say that psychological violence occurs when someone uses threats and causes fear in an individual to gain control (Novak Marcincin, Gifu, & Teodorescu, [2014](#)). *Burial Rites* represents various kinds of psychological violence: humiliation, looking down, insulting, and others. In this novel, the victim of violence gets offended by others. Generally, psychological violence is in the form of words that can hurt someone's feelings and make the person uncomfortable, anxious, and lose confidence. Kent

depicts the psychological violence that happens to a woman. He shows that psychological violence can occur when two people argue about something. The story reveals that people arguing about trivial things may say harsh words that can constitute psychological violence in the form of insults. It may end in insults and hurt others' feelings to take revenge by doing more violent acts. The novel shows a plotline when Natan insults Agnes. Natan then insults Agnes back with a high voice, "Remember your place, Agnes!", and "You are a cheap sort of woman!" (Kent, 2014, p. 267).

Kent also shows us that there is a kind of psychological violence called humiliating, experienced by around 30 years old women who worked as servants in the place they work. The humiliation that Kent raises here can make the reader quite uncomfortable with what Agnes' colleagues have said to her as a woman. Here we can see that insults can affect a person's mental and attitude. Agnes was furious when she received such insults from her friend.

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *Burial Rites***

*Burial Rites* represents that violent act can produce post-traumatic stress disorder. Everyone can experience post-traumatic stress disorder. It depends on their past condition, whether they are wrong or not. If it is terrible, it can undoubtedly damage their hearts and minds as if they often experience stress, fear trauma, flashbacks, nightmares, and others. In this novel, Kent depicts how people with post-traumatic stress disorder have some symptoms of this illness and use talk therapy to treat. Let see how Kent describes post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and the treatment to heal this disorder.

#### *The Symptoms*

Kent shows us the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): re-experiencing signs, avoidance symptoms, and arousal symptoms. These three symptoms are different from one person to another, depending how they feel the symptoms in their way. Kent shows us three symptoms that appear in the dialogue and monologue in the story.

#### 1) Re-Experiencing Symptoms

The first symptom that Kent shows us is re-experiencing. It is a symptom where something reminds us of trauma to feel the fear or incident again. It brings back the trauma. As if the trauma happens again. The victims' feelings, thoughts, and unconscious minds get them back to the past, so they cannot forget the trauma. It affects their mental health and causes more stress, anxiety, fear, and even a feeling of committing suicide. Kent, in this novel, shows us that the symptoms of PTSD are terrible. In re-experiencing symptoms, Kent provides them in three cases: flashbacks, nightmares, and frightening thoughts.

- Flashback

Kent depicts some flashbacks that happen in one's life. This flashback disturbed one's thoughts and feelings and made them uncomfortable. People living with PTSD, in general, experience flashbacks of their traumatic past. Kent begins the story by showing the flashback that happens to Agnes. This flashback experienced by Agnes relates to the violence she committed about a year ago.

“Sometimes I think I see it again, the farm, burning in the dark. Sometimes I can feel the ache of winter in my lungs, and I think I see the flames mirrored in the ocean, the water so strange, so flickered with light. There was a moment during that night when I looked back. I looked back to watch the fire, and if I lick my skin, I can still taste the salt. The smoke.” (Kent, [2014](#), p. 9)

- Nightmares

In *Burial Rites*, Kent depicts that patient with post-traumatic stress disorder often experience nightmares. Kent conveys to readers that the most common symptom that PTSD sufferers experience is nightmares. People's sufferings had a profound effect on their mental health. They became scared, restless, sorry, and guilty for the crimes they had committed. Even after the nightmare disappeared, they still felt trembling, were fearful, and even lost their mind. They cannot distinguish whether their dreams were real or not; they were trapped between a conscious and an unconscious mind situation.

“Are my eyes open or shut? They are like flames peeling off a wall, and Natan's face is before me, his mouth broad in screaming, and his teeth bloody and shining, and his burning body dropping flakes of charred skin on my blankets. Everything smells of whale fat, and Fredrik's knife is deep in Natan's belly, and a scream jerks from my chest as if it had been pulled from my gut by a rope.” (Kent, [2014](#), p. 146)

Kent shows that the impact of violence experienced by Agnes is burdensome. She is always shrouded by trauma, fear, and even unable to distinguish whether she is conscious or not; she is dreaming. The nightmares continued to haunt Agnes every night. Agnes dreamt about dying and being executed. The nights of waiting in Kornsa made her dream that she would die. The dreams come many times. She was nervous and did not want to be executed. Her eyes were closed; her breath was wheezing.

- Frightening Thoughts

Kent represents the impacts of the trauma on the people living with PTSD. They live with frightening thoughts. The thought is something about the trauma. It comes to mind suddenly. The victims can be more stressed to handle it because they sometimes do not know whether it comes from their conscious minds. Kent shows us that Agnes had some frightening thoughts when she was in prison at Stora-Borg. Strange thoughts often haunt her. The murder she committed has eaten away her mind and caused her to experience a traumatic disorder. While living in Kornsa, Agnes often shared frightening thoughts.

“I thought someone was bent low to my ear and whispering, Agnes, Agnes. The whisper severed me from my dreams, but there is no one here, and a cold dread suddenly drips through my heart. I could have sworn someone was calling me.” (Kent, [2014](#), p. 146)

Kent shows that evil thoughts or excessive fears surrounding a person with a mental disorder negatively affect their lives. They can no longer live in peace. The distraction does not come from outside, but from themselves, from the mind itself.

## 2) Avoidance Symptoms

The next symptom that Kent shows the reader is avoidance symptoms. There are several avoidance symptoms that Kent shows in this novel, such as avoid some things or places that will remind the victims of the trauma they experience. Kent depicts it through Agnes when she flashbacks to the place that reminded her of Natan. When she imagined Natan, he immediately refused and said: *"don't think about him."* It shows that Agnes tries to avoid her thoughts about

the trauma she experienced with Natan. Agnes has to stay away from the objects or things that remind her of the traumatic experience. For instance, when Agnes and Margaret's children are near the stove which burned the fleece, the wool exposed to the fire did not get burnt but somewhat wrinkled because the flames licked it; Agnes smelled the scent of burning hair. It reminded her of the Illugastadir murder case. Agnes quickly avoided the place and went outside. She panicked and rushed with the gasping breath and chaotic thoughts.

### 3) Arousal and reactivity symptoms

In *Burial Rites*, Kent represents the arousal and reactivity symptoms over the traumatic event. Agnes has some difficulty sleeping and occasionally expresses uncontrollable emotions. Kent emphasizes PTSD symptoms more on reactivity symptoms in which PTSD patients can sometimes explode. Their feelings are unstable or out of control. The novel describes Agnes whose dangerous emotion has hurt many people around her.

“Oh, she had a fit. Fought off Jon and me, scratching and clawing, screaming all the while, soaked like lying in the mud like a madwoman. See this?” He pointed to a bruise on his temple.”  
(Kent, [2014](#), p. 122)

Kent describes a situation in which a person with PTSD often experiences reactivity symptoms caused by something that reminds them of past trauma. People who have PTSD experience this reactivity symptom many times.

## The Treatment

Kent shows that people with PTSD can be cured by talk therapy. Although Kent is not a psychologist, her reading on Freud shows how talk therapy works in someone. This talk therapy is a treatment for people with PTSD to reduce mental health problems they experience. With the patient's openness to talk about the trauma, the stress and trauma slowly began to disappear. Because basically, people who are PTSD patients find it difficult to speak, especially if they want to tell what happened in the past to make deep trauma. Kent represents Pastors Toti and Margret as a doctor or psychologist who is useful for reducing Agnes's stress and trauma from her past.

The method used by Kent is also similar to the talk therapy used by psychologists. Kent describes how Pastor Toti reduces Agnes's mental illness by always accompanying her and hearing what she tells about her past. In this part, Kent suggests that it is not easy to communicate face to face with PTSD patients. They have a symptom where their anger tends to explode from time to time. Even though the novel does not describe that talk therapy cannot completely cure the PTSD patient, it shows that talk therapy slowly opens up and reduces the victim's burden.

## The Connection Between Violence and PTSD

In *Burial Rites*, Kent depicts that violence and post-traumatic stress disorder have a relationship with each other. Post-traumatic stress disorder happens when someone has trauma in their past. The trauma experienced arises from the violence experienced and then leaves an impression on the victim's hearts and memories. The physical and psychological violence Kent portrays in the story is terrible for one's mental health. Here, Kent tells us that even a little violence influences one's life. That Kent provides post-traumatic stress disorder in the story indicates that the case is prevalent today. Because today we are surrounded by complicated problems that will disturb our minds. Violence is one of the most significant issues in this world

because we heard about violence every day, even physical or psychological violence. Kent tells us that violence can hurt us, but the marks will always remain in our memory.

Hannah Kent depicts the relationship between those two issues by highlighting the mental disorder case that she creates at the beginning of the story. From the topic of mental disorder, she describes how this mental disorder occurs. Uniquely, Kent suggests that trauma resulted from the violence one has experienced and the violence he committed. People who commit violence can experience deep trauma. It can be a deep sense of remorse, which then eats away one's mind and soul.

The findings of this research will contribute to the existing knowledge on violence and PTSD, especially from the perspectives of psychoanalysis in human life. From a literary point of view, this study is concerned with how Kent represents the issues in the novel *Burial Rites* and the treatments and imaginative solutions the story offers to its readers

## CONCLUSION

In *Burial Rites*, Kent addresses the issues of violence and mental disorder. From psychoanalysis theory by Sigmund Freud, Kent introduces violence and post-traumatic stress disorder neatly. Even though violence and mental disorder are two different things, Kent can show a relationship between them. It is a cause-and-effect relationship. If we examine this novel, we can see that mental disorder occurs in a person due to his/her experience of violence, which causes deep stress and trauma. Violence experienced by someone, be it physical or psychological violence, can lead to a mental disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder. Kent displays physical violence and psychological violence. These two types of violence differ in their actions and consequences. They can result in physical and mental harm. However, the research shows that violence can harm a person's mental health regardless of the sort. The physical or psychological violence experienced by a woman, whether since childhood, adolescence, and adulthood violence, will have a destructive impact on her soul and mind. The violence will traumatize and instill a wrong impression on her memory and soul. So, a mental illness called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder will arise. By presenting a post-traumatic stress disorder, Kent attracts readers.

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