

Breaking the Silence: Analyzing Child Sexual Abuse and Its Psychological Effects in Eishes Chayil's *Hush*

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Abstract. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global issue with devastating psychological consequences for victims, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Extensive psychological research has documented the effects of CSA, focusing primarily on clinical outcomes, legal frameworks, and therapeutic interventions (Rahm et al., 2013; Mathews, 2019). However, less attention has been paid to how CSA is portrayed and understood through literature, particularly in communities where cultural and religious norms suppress disclosure. This study explores the psychological effects of child sexual abuse (CSA) on the victims and their families through a qualitative analysis of the novel *Hush* by Eishes Chayil. The novel tells the story of child sexual abuse within an insular Chassidic Jewish community in Brooklyn, highlighting the unique challenges faced by CSA victims in religious communities. The study focuses on the psychological effects of CSA on the main character, Gittel, who witnesses her best friend's sexual abuse by her brother and struggles with the trauma and shame that follows. The analysis examines the psychological impacts of CSA on Gittel, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and emotional distress. The study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the novel, using close reading techniques to identify sentences that reflect child sexual abuse and its effects. The data is collected through a detailed analysis of the novel's narrative, including conversations, descriptions, and thoughts of the main characters. The findings highlight the profound effects of CSA on mental health and emphasize the need for increased awareness, support, and intervention strategies tailored to insular communities. The study's findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological effects of CSA and inform efforts to promote healing, justice, and prevention. By shedding light on the hidden trauma depicted in "Hush", this research aims to raise awareness about the experiences of CSA victims in religious communities and advocate for greater understanding and support.

Keywords: *child sexual abuse, psychological effect, trauma*

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive and devastating issue that affects millions of children worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (2006), child sexual abuse occurs when a child is involved in sexual activity that they do not fully comprehend, are unable to give informed consent to, or are not developmentally prepared for, or when it

violates social norms or laws. In the past year, globally, it is estimated that over 1 billion children between the ages of 2-17 have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect (WHO, 2020). The effects of child sexual abuse can be severe and long-lasting, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and increased risk of suicide (Rahm et al., 2013). It is essential to recognize the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse and to provide support and resources to survivors to help them heal and recover (Mathews, 2019). There are different types of perpetrators: some of whom will have sexual attraction to children, some will not; some who will sexually abuse or assault a child and some who will not; some of those who have sexual attraction to children will not sexually abuse a child while some will (Petheric 2020: 164). Child sexual abuse is characterized by distinct social and cultural challenges. Social stigma interferes with victim disclosure, contributes to the shame victims feel, and it is tied to certain institutions' history of covering up child sexual abuse. According to McLean and Gallop, individuals who have a history of child sexual abuse are particularly at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (2003: 369), and specifically, report more symptoms of hyperarousal, avoidance, and intrusion than individuals without a history of child sexual abuse (Rahm, Renck, & Ringsberg, 2013: 272). Childhood sexual abuse has effects on adolescence and adulthood those are depression, anxiety, PTSD and emotional problems, poor self-esteem, and body image distortions and thoughts of suicide in common. Some of 30% of sexual child abusers are family members, such as parents, older brother and sisters, cousins, step-parents, aunts, uncles or grandparents (Foster 2007: 80-81).

The novel *Hush* by Eishes Chayil tells a powerful and disturbing story of child sexual abuse that takes place in a closed-off Chassidic Jewish community in Brooklyn. The story is narrated by Gittel, a young woman who witnessed her best friend Devory's sexual abuse by her brother at the age of 9. Devory's behavior changes, and she becomes increasingly withdrawn, but when Gittel tries to report the abuse to her parents, she is silenced and told to keep the secret. The abuse continues until Devory takes her own life in Gittel's family bathroom. Years later, Gittel is still haunted by the trauma and struggles with reporting the crime, fearing it will bring shame to herself and her family.

Researchers will investigate the psychological impact of child sexual abuse on a prestigious family in the novel *Hush* by Eishes Chayil. The novel provides a unique insight into the lives of the Chassidic community, allowing researchers to understand how they live, learn, and interact with each other. Inspired by an anonymous author drawing from personal experiences, the novel explores the effects of child sexual abuse on a child and the silence that often surrounds it. The researcher chooses *Hush* because it provides a nuanced understanding of the consequences of child sexual abuse and its often hidden nature. After reading the novel, the researcher finds that it tells a disturbing story of sexual abuse within a Chassidic Jewish community, where a best friend is repeatedly raped by her own brother. The author's decision to remain anonymous serves to protect herself, as the novel is based on a true story. This research tries to answer the question of what are the psychological effects of child sexual abuse on individuals from a prestigious family in the Chassidic community, as depicted in the novel *Hush* by Eishes Chayil, and how do these effects relate to the broader social and cultural challenges surrounding child sexual abuse?"

The novelty of the study lies in its focus on the psychological effects of child sexual abuse on individuals from a prestigious family in the Chassidic community, as depicted in the novel *Hush* by Eishes Chayil. The study's unique aspect is that it explores the

representation of child sexual abuse in the novel and compares it to existing researches on child sexual abuse (Litaay, Adeline, Grace M, 2018; Wijaya, Bella Melvina, 2020), while also examining the social and cultural challenges surrounding child sexual abuse in the Chassidic community.

METHOD

Chamamah (2003: 19) stated that a researcher, in conducting a study on literary work, has its own scientific measure determined by its characteristics as a system (in Pramesti and Supsiadji, 2022). Based on this, the study adopts a qualitative method, using literary analysis to explore how the issue of child sexual abuse is portrayed in the novel *Hush* by Eishes Chayil. The article takes the data from *Hush*, a novel written by Eishes Chayil that is related to child sexual abuse of each story. This research employs an extrinsic psychological approach, as it focuses on external elements influencing the text—specifically, psychological trauma caused by child sexual abuse. This approach is particularly appropriate for *Hush*, a novel that centers on the emotional and psychological responses of characters, especially the main character and her best friend, who is the victim of abuse. The psychological approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the characters' mental states, guilt, fear, repression, and emotional conflicts, which are key to the novel's thematic development. The scope of this research is psychological effect and the main discussion is about child sexual abuse. This present research limits the discussion on the main characters life, Gittel, so as the discussion will not broad. The data source is the Novel *Hush* written by Eishes Chayil. The data are the sentences that reflect child sexual abuse and the effect of sexual abuse. The data are gained from the conversation among characters, description by author, and the thoughts of the main character by her letter to other characters. The researcher applies close reading techniques which take the text seriously enough to study it, to read and read it, search for details that might otherwise go unobserved, examine the text for special-words and terms, and refer to the dictionary to be sure of their meaning when necessary. In addition, the researcher follows some steps, first in collecting the data, the researcher reads and rereads the novel and analyzes the part of the story that shows child sexual abuse, the effect of sexual abuse on using psychological approach. Second, the researcher takes notes and highlights related data through the action of child characters, speech, thought, and dialogues with other characters. Third, the researcher classifies the data in the right classification. Fourth, the researcher processes the data based on the theories applied. There are three steps in analyzing the data: 1) reading/memorizing; 2) describing what is going on in the document; and 3) classifying research data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on a close reading of *Hush* by Eishes Chayil, this study identifies two main results regarding the psychological impact of child sexual abuse:

The severe trauma experienced by the direct victim, Devory, is represented through her descent into depression and eventual suicide.

The analysis reveals that the sexual abuse committed by Devory's older brother leads to her emotional isolation and deep psychological suffering. The novel uses inner monologue, behavior, and symbolic imagery to depict symptoms consistent with major depressive disorder, including hopelessness, withdrawal, and despair. Devory's suicide is a narrative culmination of unspoken trauma, illustrating how the absence of support or acknowledgment within her family and religious community compounds her suffering.

The psychological consequences of witnessing abuse are demonstrated through the character of Gittel, who experiences long-term guilt, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Gittel, although not abused herself, internalizes her failure to intervene or speak out. The findings show that her symptoms align with PTSD and anxiety disorders, evident in her intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, feelings of shame, and low self-esteem. These effects are explored through Gittel's reflections, especially in her written letter to the deceased Devory, which functions as a therapeutic and confessional act.

A. The Victim of Sexual Abuse in The Chayil's Hush

The victim of sexual abuse in *Hush* is Devory Goldblatt. Devory has a blue-eyed girl who was born from a poor family. She has siblings, they are Miriam, Shmuli, Leah'la, Tzvi, twin sister and Chana'la. Her father is a *maggid shiur* (a Torah scholar, who taught boys in the *yeshiva*) and her mother is a *chumash* (the five books of the old Testament) teacher of high school in the *Yushive* school (a traditional Jewish educational institution that focus on Talmud and Jewish law). Her family is a prestigious family because Goldblatt family is related to all sorts of important *Rebbes* (teacher of boys in elementary school or Chassidic school) or other to the *Yushive Rebbe*'s family. Her father is along with every descendant of the front place in line of the past seven generations to the *Rebbe* for a blessing. Devory is close with Shmuli. Shmuli has the patience of a real father, he is a big helper. Shmuli is fifteen-year-old but his parents have sent him to *yeshiva* (high school for boys), that makes Shmuli stay in *yeshiva* dorm. When he is at home, he always helps his mother and Devory. When Devory sets the table for *Shabbos*, Shmuli helps her. He buys book for her and offers to read the book he has bought to her. He also gives piggyback rides around the dining room table, plays hide-and-seek and teaches Torah songs to Devory.

In the year of 2000, Devory Goldblatt, a nine-year-old child has experienced the sexual abuse done by her brother, she is raped by Shmuli. The reason that makes Devory is raped by her brother, is because she is a beautiful sister. She has straight blond hair scattered in every direction on her head. The event of the abuse is presents through another character that is Gittel. Gittel is the witness of the event. She suddenly see what Shmuli doing. She is frightened by what Shmuli doing to Devory even she does not know what it is but she can feel what Devory's feel. She thinks that there is something wrong happens in that time. All she can do is pretend to sleep. After the event, Gittel knows why Devory always run away when Shmuli comes home. She tends to dodge Shmuli. The event of the abuse is presents through another character that is Gittel. It can be read as follows :

“Devory was sleeping and he should come back tomorrow, when I saw him lift up the edge of her blanket. I wanted to tell him not to wake her up now, she had finally fallen asleep, when I saw how she jumped, as if he had touched her with fire. I wanted to tell her that it was only a dream, it was her brother Shmuli, when I saw how he sat on the mattress and pushed her head down. I wanted to ask him what he was doing, why he was pulling the blanket over them, why his breathing was so loud and heavy, why he disappeared inside with her, but something froze inside of me, and fear—the kind I had never known—rushed over my body and I dared not move.” (Eishes Chayil 2010: 118)

B. The Effects of Sexual Abuse in The Chayil's Hush

There are some psychological effects of child sexual abuse happen. In this novel, the psychological effects happen toward Devory and her best friend, Gittel. Gittel and Devory

are best friend because their house is close and their mother is close since in high school. Gittel lives three and half blocks away from Devory's house, they both are almost neighbour. The psychological effect happen in Gittel is because Gittel stays at Devory's house for a week when Gittel's mother goes to Israel. The psychological effects discovered on the novel are depression that lead to suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and anxiety. They both have different psychological effect because the sexual abuse happens in different way. The effects of sexual abuse towards Devory manifest in depression and committing suicide and the effects of sexual abuse towards Gittel are post-traumatic stress disorders, low self-esteem and anxiety.

B.1 Devory's Depression

Devory's depression can be read from several scenes in the novel. Devory tries to hide that she has been abused from her family and her best friend. She tends to be silent and stays away from her brother who has raped her. Before she is raped, Devory is cheerful, agile and smart person, she usually playing with her friends, her neighbors. "Devory was running around wildly" (Chayil 2010: 121). Besides being a silent person, Devory also is withdrawing herself from other. According to Stephen S. Illardi withdrawing is the most common sign of depression, individual who has depression they usually seek out alone time (2009: 100). Depression has a significant risk factor for withdrawal (McDale-Montez, et al. 2006: 198). Withdrawal is one of the characteristics of a person who is in depression. Devory's withdrawing can be seen in the way she limits her socialize with people around her and spend her time alone.

In her effort to withdraw from other she spends her time alone, reading book and stops playing with her friends. Devory's peak of depression seems to be expressed through her topic of conversation on committing suicide. Devory always spends her time by reading a book. She keeps staying silence. "Devory placed a book on her lap and read straight through the Shabbos meal" (Chayil 2010: 120). Also, she reads the book during class time. Even when break time at school, she keeps reading, sits at her desk and she does not want to play with her friends. After what has happened with her, she becomes nerd, reading book for the entire week. The teacher in the class comes over to Devory when break time, asking her why she stops playing with her friend but she ignores her. Even she does not stop reading when lunchtime. She reads books all the time.

B.2. Devory's Committing Suicide

Devory's committing suicide can be seen from the conversation about how to hang up. Devory has thought that she will suicide herself by hanging after reading book. She practices the way she will end up her life to Gittel. It describes that she has committed suicide since the sexual abuse has happened to her because she feels shame if she has to tell people about what has happened between her and her brother. After reading about how to suicide and trying to suicide herself, then she has suicided herself in best friend house. Devory commits suicide in Gittel's house. The way she ends up her life is same with what she demonstrates to Gittel. She reads the books she has ever read then she follows the step. That makes Gittel disbelieve what Devory has done in her house. In one occasion, Devory and Gittel have the following conversation:

"Does it hurt to hang?" she asked me.

"I don't know."

"It doesn't hurt to hang," she said firmly.

"How do you know?"

“Cause I read about it.”

“You did?”

“Uh-huh, if you twist around the rope like this”—she stood on the bed demonstrating—“and you hang it onto something high, then it just takes a second ‘cause it breaks your neck over here.” She bent her neck forward so I could see. “And then you’re dead just like that.” (Eishes Chayil 2010: 115)

B.3. Gittel’s Low Self-esteem

Gittel always has low self-esteem as psychological effect after her best friend suicide. Gittel disbelieves in herself that there will be someone who will marry her after what has happened with Devory. The event happen in Gittel’s house and Devory is her best friend. People will think that Gittel has done something wrong to Devory and she feels that she is useless best friend because let Devory suppressed her fears alone. She does not understand Devory’s feeling well. Gittel is afraid to come to the police office. She is afraid of her parents if she speaks up about what has happened with Devory. She needs to look at her parents afterward. She needs to look into their eyes and tell them why she destroys her family because of something they do not do because she will destroy her reputation, her shidduchim, and everything and she will be a moser or traitor (Eishes Chayil 2010: 96). Gittel actually does not want to speak up about what has happened with Devory. She thinks about the Jews community she lives with. She also think about her parents which they are the religious Jews. She does not want to expose the disgrace that has happened in the Jewish community to public. She feels she becomes low-person when she is speaking about what has happened to Devory. Gittel feels that her parents hate her since the day Devory hang up herself in the bathroom. Her parents feel that the friendship between Gittel and Devory bring problems to Gittel’s future as she grows up in the religious community in town. Gittel disbelieves on herself can be seen in the following quotation:

“You want to get married?”

“I don’t know,” I said, because it was a funny question to ask.

“It’s nice to get married,” Kathy said to me. “Marriage is for love.”

“No it ain’t—isn’t,” I said. “It’s for children.”

“Children come from love.” (Eishes Chayil 2010: 45)

B.4. Gittel’s Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Psychological effects of child sexual abuse happen on Gittel and manifest in her post-traumatic stress disorder and low self-esteem. The post-traumatic Gittel includes nightmares, flashbacks and reminders of the abuse. Gittel always starts writing a letter when she thinks and feels about Devory. I don’t know why I am speaking with you now, why I suddenly began thinking of you (Eishes Chayil 2010: 6).

Gittel usually gets nightmares in the night when she is sleeping after her best friend suicide in her house. Every night and sometimes in the day, she will scream a lot after that.

“Devory came to me that night. She came to me and everything was white. I was blind and I couldn’t see anything except for her face twisting sideways over her shoulder, dead. But then she was alive. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe because she was choking me. She was choking me with my jump rope. Her icy dead eyes were staring out of her face and she never smiled never

smiled never smiled—her mouth like a red-painted line silent and dead dead dead. I couldn't close my eyes, couldn't breathe, had to see the blue glass eyes falling from her face all over in front of me. She was choking me choking me choking me—dead eyes cutting me into a million pieces." (Eishes Chayil 2010: 180)

From the quotation above, Gittel feels that Devory shows her up but she has passed away. Gittel feels that Devory gets mad at her because she has not spoken up to people about what has happened with her even she knows everything has happened between Devory and Shmuli. The feelings that Gittel gets take her to have nightmare since the day Devory hang up herself in the bathroom.

B.5. Gittel's Anxiety Disorder

Gittel always feels anxiety. She does not want to go to the police office. Then finally she encourage herself to go. Once she is crying when she is going to tell Miranda, a social worker for the Department of Special Investigation in Brooklyn (Eishes Chayil 2010: 56). When Miranda asks her is she scared they will hurt her, she does not answer she just bite her lip until it hurt. Gittel is not really sure that she is able to tell the police about what has happened. She is frightened because the reality of Devory and also the fact that she has to close the information to maintain the Jews community name. Gittel has new habit, biting her nails. She bits her pinkie nail hard while she is thinking how to explain from all the beginning and looking down at her shoes. After she tries to tell Miranda about what has happened, she twists the ring on her finger, bits her nail again and chews on a nail. This means that she has anxiety because she feels nervous, restless and tense of the questions she gives. Gittel also does not want to accept the fact that types of sexual abuse that has happened to Devory is rape.

Gittel cannot accept the reality that Devory is raped by her brother. She is in anger when she knows the truth. That is describes that she has anxiety that lead her cannot refuse the fact of the event that has happened. She always thinks that Devory is mad at her. She thinks that she should tell the police the truth long time ago, in 2000 before Devory hang up. There is kind of suspicion that Gittel has toward Devory. In Gittel's mind, Devory seems to be angry on her. Gittel feels that Devory does not pay attention on her problem. Even Gittel feels that no one pays attention to what has happen to her as she says "I should have done more, screamed louder, told other people, but they wouldn't listen. They are too scared of the truth.". Furthermore, Gittel asks Devory to give away her madness.

CONCLUSION

To sum up the discussion, the researcher now will present the conclusion of the research. The novel portrays a practice of sexual abuse that results in some negative effects on two characters. Child sexual abuse happens in this novel happens between family members, older brother and sister. The victim of the sexual abuse happens in *Hush* novel is nine-year-old children, namely Devory. The abuser and the victim is of a prestigious Jewish family.

There are some psychological effects portrayed in this novel that are suffered by Devory and Gittel, those are depression, committing suicide, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorders and low self-esteem. Mood disorder that affects the feeling, thought, and behaviour that lead to emotional and physical problems is depression. Anxiety disorder is a feeling of strong of worry, anxiety and fear that interfere with daily activities. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is happen because the survivor has

experienced or witnessed a terrifying event that affect to survivor's mental health condition. Low self-esteem is dissatisfaction with oneself to society in life. Devory is the victim that experiences the rape conducted by Shmuli because she is a beautiful sister. Because of the event, Devory becomes depressed. For Devory, the event is really a hard thing that she cannot bear. As the result the depression leads Devory committing suicide. Another character, Gittel, the witness of the sexual abuse also has been affected psychologically in the forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and low self-esteem. The psychological effect towards Gittel happens because she continues her life while she regrets that she has not spoken up about what happen with her best friend, Devory. There are many great lines and passages in *Hush* (including Gittel's letter to Devory that she sends into community paper).

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