
Children Sexual Abuse in Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (2004)

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Abstract

This study examines child sexual abuse happening to the life of the main characters in the movie *Mysterious Skin*. *Mysterious Skin* tells the story of two pre-adolescent boys who are sexually abused by their baseball coach, and how it contributes to their lives in different ways into their young adulthood. This research used qualitative approach and textual analysis to explore the experiences of two child sexual abuse victims. Using Freud's psychoanalysis, this study revealed that sexual abuse has a great long-term impact on child caused by the traumatic events in past. It will evoke some psychological disorder which later will reflects in destructive behavior of child. The main characters, Neil, became male prostitute with same sex sexual orientation, and Brian developed defense mechanisms (repression, projection, denial) and re-occurrence dreams by attaching himself with the fantasy of alien abduction. In addition, it is also revealed how the main characters attempt to detach their painful memories. The study is expected to give more understanding about the serious contribution of child sexual abuse seen from different side, which is through behavioral outcomes.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, defense mechanisms *Mysterious Skin*, sexual deviation

Introduction

Childhood is a part of individual life stages that must be passed through certain processes. Childhood period should be a period of delight and happiness for children, yet how if any unpleasant events such as traumatic event strike them? What happens during their adulthood development and what does the event consequences? Traumatic condition results from unpleasant event surely cause disturbance during the mental development because any painful memory experiences resulted from repressed emotional shock will produce a lasting harmful effect. One of the forms related to child trauma is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse on children has become a great concern of community in a sense that it causes great effects. Child sexual abuse can be categorized including sexual molestation. Yet, any act that involve sexually touching and non-touching and sexual exploitation on child are considered harmful for children wellbeing. According to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, touching behaviors may involve touching of the vagina, penis, breasts or buttocks, oral-genital contact, or sexual intercourse. Non-touching behaviors can include voyeurism (trying to look at a child's naked body), exhibitionism, or exposing the child to Pornography (Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet).

The effects of sexual abuse implicated far beyond childhood with many kinds of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Great long-term effects even influence their adulthood, which later becomes vital in risk factors. A research shows that a history of physical and sexual abuse doubles the chances that an adolescent will be sexually active (Bogenschneider). This is regardless their biological development. In United States of America itself, the issue of child abuse becomes the big concern considering 3.3 million reports of child abuse involving nearly 6 million children. United States has the worst record in the industrialized nation – losing five children every day due to abuse-related deaths. Child sexual abuse is rated in 9.2% of 100% child abuse in USA (National Child Abuse Statistics). Cossel (2010) in her journal shows the recent reports from child protective agencies indicate that 78,120 children were sexually abused in the United States in 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). This is a great number that must be taken seriously.

The case of child sexual abuse is well represented in movie *Mysterious Skin* which later will be explored in this article. *Mysterious Skin* is a 2004 drama film directed by American filmmaker Gregg Araki, based on the novel by Scott Heim. The movie has won several awards in 2004 Bergen International Film Festival, 2006 Polished Apple Awards as Best Movie and 2006 Icelandic Queer Film Festival as Best Fictional Work. *Mysterious Skin* tells the story of two growing up boys who are sexually abused by their baseball coach, and how they deal with the sexual abuse they suffered. Those two boys are connected by one traumatic childhood event; they were both molested at the age of eight by their little league coach. It affects their lives in different ways into their young adulthood. Brian (Brady Corbet) and Neil (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) have a different reception on the series of events, which later affected who they have become. Neil becomes a gay male prostitute, while Brian attaches himself with fantasy of alien abduction in his re-occurrence dreams.

The director itself, Gregg Araki, is best known for his works on Queer movies. Most of his films tell about the story of gay men and dysfunctional life. He was awarded with the Filmmaker on the Edge Award at the Provincetown International Film Festival in 2006 (Wikipedia). His personal life as a gay man likely to influence his works on queer and thus he is known as a great queer director. He has produced movies mostly carrying queer issues such as *The Living End* (1992), *Totally Fucked Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995), *Mysterious Skin* (2004) which received positive reaction and critical acclaim.

In the movie, sexual abuse has a great long-term impact on child. This is influenced by the traumatic event in past that will evoke some psychological disorder. The psychological disorder later will reflect in destructive behavior of child. Why this thing happens apparently explained in psychoanalytic lens,

That it is comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in the family and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behavior that are the direct result of that early experience. (Tyson, 2006)

Sigmund Freud argues that normal sexual attitude began not at puberty but at early childhood and he believes that personality is developed in childhood experience. The writer will break down this issue using the concepts from theory of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud since the case adequately talks about victim's experiences dealing with traumatic events and is suitable in understanding psychological condition during and post molestation. Moreover, this theory helps to understand the nature of problems and helps somehow in analysis due to the fact that Freudian psychoanalysis is useful in understanding human behavior by looking at past traumatic event. By looking at trauma, it is important to know what happen in the past so that what is being experienced in the present match with the event contribute in the past. On the other words, psychoanalysis attempts to trace back past event that leads to certain behavior in the present.

This study is an attempt to discover child sexual abuse and its influence toward the life of the main characters, exploring how they experience the abuse and how they deal with traumatic events that lead to certain self-destructive behavior. The writer intends to see how child sexual abuse is reflected in victims' life with early assumption that the victims' disorder comes up from traumatic memories and repression and denial of sexual abuse are manifested through the dreams of Brian until he finally find the truth of what happen in his childhood since he experiencing such 'amnesia'. The amnesia and fantasies developed is a form of repressed feeling. While Neil experiencing sexual deviation that has to be dealt with during his young adulthood.

Related to this study, there are several studies discussing similar issue of traumatic condition and reviewed with Freudian psychoanalysis First is entitled *Analysis of Sy Parrish's Adulthood Behaviors as a Victim of Child Abuse in One Hour Photo: A Psychoanalysis Approach* by Lidya Yulianti, a former student of Faculty of Humanities Universitas Airlangga. In her thesis, she examined main character's behavior in the movie *One Hour Photo*. She identified the abusive incident then she estimated the stages in which the incident possibly occurs. Yulianti determines the abusive act, which is according to her, is useful in explaining the behavior. She also identified main character's behavior as possible long-term impact then it is take place at anal, phallic and latency stage, it appears repetitively and can be seen through character's behavior who develops seven types of defense mechanism (2008).

The second thesis is written by Al Fawzia N, a former student of Faculty of Humanities Universitas Airlangga as well namely *The Influence of Traumatic Past Events on Gilbert Grape's Personality in Peter Hedges' What's Eating Gilbert Grape (2007)*. The analysis finds that the negative side of Gilbert Grape's personality is not only caused by his compounding problems at the present moment, but also influenced by his childhood experience. The past events have brought Gilbert in such traumatic condition and resulted in the development of several defense mechanisms.

The theses mentioned above share similarities with this study in a way the characters deal with their childhood trauma. Both conduct an analysis on the main characters' behavior and employ Freud's defense mechanism concept in the analysis. However, those previous researches do not emphasize more on destructive behavior from what happen in childhood that resulted in developing defense mechanism. The first thesis mentioned earlier, though the writer examined character's behavior, yet the analysis is lack of the explanation in assuming the occurrence of abusive events, her assumption about the occurrence is lack of evidence from the movie. Moreover, since she analyzed the issue using psychoanalytic, she did not focus more on how destructive behavior may appear in deviation form. In addition, the non-narrative aspect is not completely discussed, whereas it is actually very important in understanding the story. In the second thesis mentioned, the study is done using written literary works as the main subject of the research. While in this study, the issue is more serious since it carries sexual abuse on child, besides using certain defense mechanism concepts, the writer will also break down the dreams experienced by the one of the main characters that later useful in understanding how traumatic past events contribute to determine self-identity as well.

The discussion in this article will primarily focus on child sexual abuse and its influences experienced in adulthood that reflect in traumatic memories. The phenomenon of child sexual abuse experience in Araki's *Mysterious Skin*, I contend, is initiating the self and psychologically destructive behavior that is manifested through sexual deviation and repression.

Method

This study used qualitative method. Qualitative inquiry employs different philosophical assumptions; strategies of inquiry; and methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Although the processes are similar, qualitative procedures rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse strategies of inquiry (Creswell, 2008). Thus, in the process of analysis the writer deeply analyzed the experiences of two children sexual abuse victims who have different reception toward the sexual harassment. The descriptive analysis was done through the complete explanation of events and actions in the movie. Qualitative approach is applied to understand the phenomenon involving child sexual abuse. This approach is appropriate in answering the questions since the approach is aimed to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study, in identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges in establishing holistic picture (Creswell, 2008). The researcher chose '*Mysterious Skin*' as the study subject or primary data because it best describes the reality among the victims of sexual harassment. More importantly, this movie has provided a clear picture about traumatic experiences in different reception, of how sexually abused children make sense of their sexual feeling and experiences. The movie also won several awards in 2004 Bergen International Film Festival, 2006 Polished Apple Awards as Best Movie and 2006 Icelandic Queer Film Festival as Best Fictional Work. Data and information were collected primarily from the movie through narrative and non-narrative aspect. In relation to the topic, secondary data such books, reviews and critics from the internet, related studies from journals and articles are used in order to support and strengthen the explanation.

Data were analysed by choosing and focusing on several scenes in the movie, which involve the portrayal of traumatic events experienced by two main characters. For the non-narrative aspect, the writer focused on how the technical elements support the main point of the whole story. It included on how the technical elements of the movie scenes in line with the story and play role in explaining the story such as title, color that support the narrative aspect was carefully studied as well to strengthen the analysis using Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Movies* book.

Discussion

Destructive Behavior of Neil: Gay-Male Prostitute

When the film opens, we are told that Neil shows homosexual tendency at an early age, he was fascinated with male models on his mother's Playgirl magazine. He was a handsome boy who quickly becomes the star of the team. Neil's continuous interaction with his coach (Bill Sage) triggers coach's abusive acts. He begins to abuse Neil with seductive and playful treatment. Yet Neil enjoyed it, here we know that Neil is likely to be gay and that he was a willing participant in a sexual act with his coach. Ten years later, Neil becomes self-destructive male-prostitute, he begins prostituting himself by his mid-teens. Looking at Neil's sexuality, Freudian Psychoanalytic would infer that Neil experiencing such sexual deviation. What is considered as deviance according to Freud has something to do with our psyche (*id*, *ego*, *superego*) that do not develop correctly during personality development. This is true as what explained by Barry that those three levels of the personality roughly corresponding to the consciousness and unconsciousness (2002). The sexual abuse happens to Neil corresponds to the development of his *id* in which sexual desire from his first sexual encounter (with coach) define his *libido*. In relation to libido, Freud has explained further through his definition of sexuality and sexual aberrations in his essay "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex" as follow

The fact of sexual need in man and animal is expressed in biology by the assumption of a "sexual impulse. This impulse is made analogous to the impulse of taking nourishment, and to hunger. The sexual expression corresponding to hunger not being found colloquially, science uses the expression "libido". Popular conception makes definite assumptions concerning the nature and qualities of this sexual impulse. It is supposed to be absent during childhood and to commence about the time of and in connection with the maturing process of puberty; it is supposed that it manifests itself in irresistible attractions exerted by one sex upon the other, and that its aim is sexual union or at least such actions as would lead to union. (Freud, 1953)

We can see that what Freud means by deviation here will reflect in his explanation about sexual objects and sexual aims. Sexual object is either men or women, could also animals from which the sexual attraction comes. While sexual aim is the various sexual action (kissing, anal intercourse, sadistic, etc). In regard to Neil, the deviance is categorized into deviation in reference to the sexual object what so called *inversion* by Freud where the sexual object must be always of the same sex. Freud also examines that the characteristics of the inversion in any individual may date back as far as his memory goes, or they may become manifest to him at a definite period before or after puberty (ibid). This is what really happen to Neil when he is prostituting himself, he is haunted by his sexual experience with the coach leads him to prefer to male as sexual object. This was because he wrongly interprets the coach's abuse as an initiation into sexuality and becomes sexually addicted plus he sees couch as surrogate father from whom he never had. He involves in sexual intercourse with same sex, he enjoys it as much he convincing that the coach is the only man he ever loved. This was consequences of his childhood experience where he has to shift it into destructive action, prostitution, and this pretty much contributes to his sexual development. Although at first he is depicted as having same sex tendency, it is not merely the factor that makes him as gay, yet the sexual abuse event is the factor that triggers and worsens Neil's behavior.

This is what I want to emphasize that it is the sexual abuse thing makes him deviant and destructive. Indeed, sexual abuse in his childhood becomes the trauma for Neil that leads to his present behavior. However, sexual deviation in Neil resulted from childhood sexual abuse is not a thing that solely to be noticed, apart from it, we also have to see how he struggles from the haunted events in every time he prostituting himself. In that, actually he seeks for the figure of father, by re-enacting flashback memories during sexual intercourse with coach. This is the dark side of Neil where although he seems to enjoying every sexual intercourse, there is actually a feeling of sadness inside his heart. As his best friend, Wendy, in the dialogue attempts to warn Eric by identifying Neil such:

"Where normal people have a heart, Neil McCormick's has a bottomless black hole. And if you don't watch out, you can fall in and get lost forever." (00:32:47)

Yet, he seems to be more accepting the reality rather than Brian, and that is what make him tougher.

Brian's Traumatic Memories

Brian, on the other hand, a quiet shy kid with few talents and even fewer social skills. Brian, on the contrary, cannot remember any of his abuse experiences. One day, Brian is found in a cellar with nose bleeding and from this day forward, he always experiencing nosebleeds, flashbacks, nightmares and other physical symptoms that happen over time, even he attributes to alien abduction. In Halloween scene, we know that the relationship or connection between these boys is developed by the fact that Brian believes he was abducted by aliens because one night he blacked out and there was a boy with him. This is what he is going to explore. Since Brian does not remember at all, it drives him into finding the truth what has happened to him. Since then, he becomes nerd and withdrawn young man, even perceived by others (Eric, Neil's friend) as nearly asexual. He has reoccurrence dreams about being touched by a strange, a bluish hand. He next interprets this bluish hand as alien. It is clear what happens to Brian is a form of repression he had because of his inability to bear the striking traumatic memories. Repression is the 'forgetting' and 'ignoring' of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past event, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious (Barry, 2002). Defense mechanism are ways made to reduce the anxiety, in which Freud believes without it, a person with conflicting personality would be so much under stress that they develop mental illness. As a form of defense mechanism, repression does not eliminate painful experiences and emotions, rather it gives them force by making the organizers of current experience: we unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to 'play out,' without admitting it to ourselves, our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress (Tyson, 2006).

Because the sexual abuse event is too horrifying for him, he represses it by blocking those threatening memories from his consciousness and that is why he cannot remember clearly. The memories left in his memory appear partial in a form of flashbacks. He tends to deny the trauma and thus he makes sort of memories about other thing which he eventually believes as reality or fact. In result, he believes that the nightmares and nosebleeds are results of an alien abduction. He attaches himself with alien fantasy, obsessed with the uncovering truth of UFO. Sexual abuse consequences are very terrifying here if we look from Brian's point of view, how it resulted in remarkable traumatic condition. Thus, every time Brian trying to remember, he suddenly nosebleeds, blackouts and how it affects his entire life in finding the truth. The nosebleeds are a physical reaction and visual manifestation of his emotional trauma (Tziallas, 2008). As appear in Brian dialogue;

"But I cant remember a thing. But I know it was linked to the other time, when I woke up in the cellar. And I also knew no matter how long it took... I had to find out what happened, I had to find an answer to the mystery." (00:19:27)

The odd dreams lead Brian to suspect that there was another boy also have been kidnapped by aliens who is actually Neil. At the age of 18, Brian meets a young woman named Avalyn (Mary Lynn Rajskub) who also believes she was kidnapped by aliens. She makes me begin to realize that perhaps she has experienced similar childhood sexual abuse as well (perhaps by her father). The fantasy of alien abduction is actually a form of projection, part of defense mechanism when aspects of us (usually negative ones) are not recognized as part of ourselves but are perceived in or attributed to another (Barry, 2002). He projects the memories and fear into more recognizable form, through alien. Brian's repressed memories have manifested into fantastical explanations, which have become obsessions (Tziallas, 2008). Projection aims to decrease the tensions by replacing one object into another object that is less dangerous for the fear (Suryabrata, 2013)

Brian finally found out that it is Neil, the boy in his odd dreams, and then they met after ten years. Neil, as asked by Brian, recalls his forgotten memories and explains how the coach raped them to make the abuse seem normal and acceptable. This makes Brian more frustrated and he cries hard to Neil's arm. In this case is alien figure projection and mysterious touch of alien (actually was the couch's touch) in his dreams could explain his repressed feelings as he manifested to it. Once again, the trauma of child sexual abuse becomes the sole factor for Brian experiencing such inability to memorize the real situation at that time, he experiencing physical and mental difficulty. His trauma in every time he tries to remember the

abusive event contributes to the awkward behavior of him, which reflects in the development of defense mechanism through repression and alien projection.

Dysfunctional Family

It is believed that the concept of consciousness by Freud, level of unconsciousness is the most influential in determining human behavior. The existence of the unconsciousness reveals the notion that human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware and gives so much control over us. In other words, human has long record about their psychological history in which experiences during the formation affects the way of thinking and the behavior as well. Of course, in the process of mind formation, exists sort of difficulty, psychological wounds, distortion that experienced by all human beings. Family is considered the first in this case since it is an area that our identity is shaped. As explained by Tyson that family is very important in psychoanalytic theory because we are each a product of the role we are given in the family-complex (Tyson, 2006). Freudian theories such as oedipal conflict, sibling rivalry, castration more or less are influenced by family conflict at first. In this regard, looking back at the movie, both Brian and Neil are portrayed as child with less affection of the father figure. Both Neil and Brian live only with their mother since their childhood until their adulthood, although their mothers give much affection yet it is never enough for them. The bond with father do not grow along their development or in other words father figure here has no role even non-exist. This reality is one of the factors that do not allow them to enjoy attention and to develop such feeling to be loved.

Neil, at early of his childhood is living only with his mother, the father is unknown and non-existence. There is no indication of him being loved by father figure despite his mother having relationship with her boyfriends it does not help him at all. On the other side, Brian has complete parents, father and mother, yet he is rejected by the father because of his inability playing sport. Only then, his father shows ignorance and leaves the family, and he does not play role at all during Brian development. Brian's father appears in the scene when he tries to say happy birthday to Brian, however, Brian shows opposite behavior as he yells and questioning his absence and attention at the moment of his traumatic childhood. This indicates that Brian is instead expecting the father to be there, not the abandonment from neglectful father. The father figure absence points out that both children are wounded by feeling abandoned, lack of affection, Neil with the father's love he never had, while Brian feels abandoned as a child. The dysfunctional family experienced by Neil and Brian is initiating as well as triggering factor, putting them into repressed condition. In other words, they cannot bear the unresolved conflict in related to abuse and the dysfunctional family worsens the condition. They do not well-perceived their place within the family since it does not much in function as mentioned by Tyson that the birth of unconsciousness lies in the way we perceive our place in family and how we react to the self-definitions (ibid).

The title and Alien Symbolism

As the supporting element which has direct influence to the narrative aspect, movie title should be placed as important aspect. It directs the spectators into the narrative level and play significant role on seeing how it relevant with what the story conveys. *Mysterious Skin* title at first sight is eye-catching enough and pretty much attract attention. Yet, what does the producer wants us to see through the title is something worth understanding and carries meaning. The writer argues that the mysterious skin is related to the child sexual abuse victim reflects from Brian experience of alien fantasy. He was haunted by the dreams of alien touching his skin face with bluish hand. Touching the skin according to Freud is indispensable for a person in order to attain the normal sexual aim, causes much pleasure and produces a supply of new excitement (Freud, 1953). The undiscovered thing is whose skin is that? Brian unconsciousness blurs the fact that it is the coach's hand touching him. That is why the touching which associates with uniting skin is likely underlying the title meaning, where skin is associated with intimacy. For Brian the skin touching him is mysterious and therefore he must investigate, while skin has significant meaning in Neil's relationship (with couch and his prostitute clients) as something intimate and intense.

In this movie, alien becomes the fantasy of Brian. He does not remember he was molested by the coach and he believes that the alien (the coach) has abducted him. What is mean by alien symbolism here

suggests something hidden. Many dreams interpretations direct to the explanation that alien symbolizes the undiscovered part of ourselves. Brian manifestation to an alien abduction may be the way of "escaping" from reality. It can also means that he experiencing such 'social alienation' since he withdrawn and socially awkward and he feels 'alienated' as he having difficulty with his psychological situation in remembering. Alien in Brian fantasy represents aspects of his mind that never been consciously experienced and it frightening or difficult to understand.

There are a number of different styles of lighting. Usually designated as a lighting key, the style is geared to the theme and mood of a film, as well as its genre. Tragedies and melodramas are usually lit in high contrast, with harsh shafts of lights and dramatic streaks of blackness (Giannetti, 2002). *Mysterious Skin* becomes an effective movie that also performs its supporting elements in symbolic ways such as the color, light and nuance. The nuance in the movie mostly presented as dark, blue and somewhat warm. The melodramatic genre of this movie is well represented with the blue and darker nuance. Blue perfectly represents the vagueness situation within the movie.



Figure 2 (00:33:05)



Figure 2 (01:25:45)

Blue is perfectly visualized by Araki in alien's hand **Figure 1** and movie's atmosphere **Figure 2**, are prominent especially when it comes to the memories remembering and fantasy to show that the mood is slowly arising.

Conclusion

Mysterious Skin is a movie that depicts the phenomenon of child sexual abuse around the victims. The discussion of childhood sexual abuse becomes important since it carries important issue and problems. Through the movie, we are invited to understand the great impact results from traumatic past events that leads to certain behavior. Certain behavior here reflects in and manifests in the development of defense mechanism (repression, projection and denial), dreams (fantasy) and sexual deviation experienced by the characters as well as the dysfunctional family worsens the condition of both characters. *Mysterious Skin* enables us to see how child sexual abuse trauma can be interpreted within different mental framework and how it remarkably causes psychological difficulty.

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