

Behind the Canvas:
A Novel Exploring Childhood Verbal Abuse's Effects on
Adolescents' Behavioral Development

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ABSTRACT

The number of child abuse, particularly verbal abuse, has been increasing over the past decades. The increase happens because of some people's rationalization toward verbal abuse, especially because they believe that verbal abuse is an effective discipline method for their children. Reflecting on this reality, this creative work highlights the issues of childhood verbal abuse on the victims' behavioral development by displaying the types, the consequences, and the healing steps of childhood verbal abuse. The exploration of the aforementioned issues is supported by Rohner's Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory and Bowlby's Attachment Theory. The form of this creative work is a bildungsroman novel about the journey of a boy named Elliot who suffers from verbal abuse from his mother due to his birth origin.

Keywords: bildungsroman; behavioral development; child abuse; childhood verbal abuse; novel

INTRODUCTION

The matter of child abuse has been prevailing for the past few years. The World Health Organization (2022) defines child abuse as "every type of physical and emotional mistreatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that can cause harm to the child's health, survival, and dignity in the context of the relationship's responsibility, trust, and power" (p. 1). The Children's Bureau (2021) stated that the number of children confirmed as abuse victims were around 656,000 in 2019. This matter does not simply stop in the United States as it also happens in Indonesia. According to Epa (2021), the number of child abuse in Indonesia rose from 4,369 to 6,519 in 2020. In addition, UNICEF (2021) also added that this matter worsened due to the lockdown that happened during the pandemic as children were left with no choice but to be stuck with their parents. Therefore, if the situation was abusive before, it turned worse during the pandemic.

One of the recurring types of child abuse is emotional abuse which is defined as an unsympathetic action that obstructs the child from fulfilling their emotional needs (Barnett et al., 1993 as cited in Dye, 2020). Verbal abuse is a type of emotional abuse that people still often rationalize. It is the usage of deprecatory language to hurt and manipulate another individual outright or secretly (Stark, 2015). Thomason (2018) stated that based on a study conducted by Horwitz (2005), it was 10% more often than sexual abuse and 21% more often than physical abuse. The reason for this may come from people's lack of understanding of the lasting effects of childhood verbal abuse. An interview conducted by Abdurrohman (2021) also depicts how some people rationalize verbal abuse as tough love and an effective method of discipline. This, however, is a misconception because the usage of verbal abuse as a child-rearing tool is proven to be destructive toward children's development (Madrigal & Mayo-Dosayla, 2021). Seeing this misconception, education on this issue seems to be necessary so that the rationalization and the abuse itself will be put to a halt.

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To touch upon the matter of childhood verbal abuse, I make a creative work in the form of a novel. A novel is a form of literary work that is suitable to show the inner part of someone's life (Logan, et al., 2016, p. 232). Different from the other literary forms, a novel has a writing technique named the 'stream of consciousness' which can be defined as a narrative style that genuinely portrays the character's thoughts the way it is (Delf, n.d). Additionally, according to Sumardjo & Saini (1998), a novel has a complex theme and plot, as well as various settings and characters (Azhari & Setiawan, 2017). Its complexity can contribute to the formation of an explorative story, especially with a topic that needs an in-depth explanation. It is not in a rush to end things, and its complexity will allow the writers to paint a vivid image of the issue's importance by going inside the characters' feelings and thoughts. This will enable the writer to explore the effects of verbal abuse without trying to water down the issue's intricacy.

To give the wanted effects to the readers, this novel incorporates bildungsroman as its genre. Bildungsroman is "a genre that focuses on the development of the mind and character of the young protagonists from childhood to adulthood" (Christy, 2016, p. 1234). It usually contains obstacles that are highly influential in the main character's ascent to maturity. In addition, bildungsroman has a particular pattern, which usually begins with the protagonist being estranged, then a life-changing event happens, and they will find something that they have always yearned for, whether it is security, peace, or a sense of belonging. Fennel (2016) also added that bildungsroman tends to explore the character's struggles and paint it as clearly as possible. This will prove instrumental in my creative work as bildungsroman shows more clearly what affects the protagonist to turn into the person they are now. In addition to that, it is also seen in the previous works of this genre, the writers tend to describe the raw emotions of growing up and the characters' behavior development in relation to their surroundings.

In developing the creative work, I have three questions that act as a guidance: a) what kinds of verbal abuse Elliot experiences, b) what the impacts of verbal abuse on Elliot's behaviors in his daily life are, and c) how Elliot heals from the negative impacts of childhood verbal abuse. The answers that I find while writing the creative work and would like to show to the readers are: a) Elliot receives overt and covert verbal abuse from his mother Rosalina, b) the verbal abuse turns Elliot into a loner who feels undeserving of love, and c) Elliot heals from the negative impacts of childhood verbal abuse by having a supportive relationship with another parental figure and going into therapy. The answers are found with the help of two theories, Rohner's Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory and Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

The first theory that is applied in this creative work is Ronald P. Rohner's Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory. Rohner (1980) explained that Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory talks about the repercussions of a parent's attitudes for a child's behavioral, emotional, and cognitive development. Parental acceptance is described as the portrayal of endearment from parents to their children through physical or verbal means. Meanwhile, parental rejection is described as the portrayal of displeasure from parents to their children through physical or verbal means, one of which is what is usually known as verbal abuse. Verbal abuse, or usually known as verbal aggression in this theory, consists of: cursing, being sarcastic, saying brutal words, derogating, mocking, bickering, quarreling, and telling someone off (Rohner, 1975 as cited in Cahn & Lloyd, 1996). Based on the manners they are applied, they can be divided into two groups: overt, which refers to the aggression that is expressed in a direct manner; and covert, which refers to the words that are filled with hidden aggression (Gordon, 2022; Lancer, 2017). It is also elaborated that children who experienced emotional abuse will be prone to aggression, become either too dependent or too independent as their defense mechanism, suffer from destroyed self-esteem, become emotionally unsteady, and have a negative outlook (Rohner, 1980). These are because the victims view themselves the way their parents do, yearn for love but do not receive it, and have been exposed to so much negativity that they end up

viewing the world negatively as well. It is also mentioned that the aforementioned effects can also lead to having insecure attachment which refers to Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

The second theory that is applied in this creative work is John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. Bowlby found that child-mother relationships and separation have an impact on the children's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Vinney, 2019). This finding is in line with Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory by Rohner (1980) which also talks about the impact of parents-children relationships on a child's development. With the help of Mary Ainsworth's research, Bowlby found that the bond formed with parental figures during childhood could affect the attachments that are yet to come (Vinney, 2019). There are four attachment styles mentioned: secure, anxious, avoidant and disorganized (McLeod, 2018; Vinney, 2019; Duschinsky, 2018; Pittman, et al., 2011). The attachment style that is going to be highlighted in regard to my topic and creative work is disorganized attachment, in which the children may have contrasting feelings for their caretakers, either fearing them or liking them due to the past abuse or neglect they have previously experienced. These attachment styles that have been dubbed by Bowlby and Ainsworth are able to complement Rohner's findings. It gives a deeper context of how the children will act around their parents in their daily lives while reflecting on their relationship with their parents. Such attachments can actually continue into their adulthood (Fraleay, 2018). Thus, the children with disorganized attachment may show some toxic attitudes like drastic shifts of mood, fear of trusting, self-centeredness, or emotional ineptitude in their platonic and romantic relationship as well (Robinson, et al., 2022).

While it is true that the formed attachment style can be brought into adulthood, it can still change for the better. If children can have an emotionally-supportive relationship with another adult besides their abusive parents, they can grow into more supportive parents instead of following in their abusive parents' footsteps (Egeland, et al., 1988; Berzenski, et al., 2014). Its importance in breaking the cycle of abuse is evident in the research by Egeland et al. (1988) where it is found that the victims without a supportive figure ended up repeating the cycle despite their promise not to do so. This issue is revealed to be due to their untended anxiety and depression, which come from their frustration over the lack of affection during childhood. Therefore, having a supportive parental figure who can help increase the victims' self-confidence and trust is necessary (Egeland, et al., 1988). A supportive parental figure who is available can also become a trustworthy person in the victim's life, especially when their trauma causes them to be untrusting. Besides having an emotionally-supportive parental figure, shifting the attachment style can also be done through psychoanalytic psychotherapy, in which the victims can speak about what they feel with a therapist (Stefini, et al., 2013; Shedler, 2010). Through the therapy, the victims would be able to open up and process their emotional turmoil. Rather than trying to forget the trauma they have faced without addressing it, they will get to understand it and learn to pardon their parents' wrongdoings (Egeland, et al., 1988). Moreover, they will also process how the abuse affects them, as well as understand how it may affect their children if it continues. They can even gain a new outlook throughout the therapy.

This creative work is constructed through secondary research. I gathered information by reading journals, articles, and books related to child abuse. To assure their credibility, I compared the information that I had gotten from one source with another, as well as made sure that the website or journal that I was using was a reputable one. I also read and watched some novels and movies with similar topics and genres. This helped improve my understanding of how to write a proper creative work in that particular genre. Besides that, I also talked to my friends who had experienced verbal abuse before. This further helped me understand the reality of childhood verbal abuse and its impacts due to the different perspective it had given me.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of my creative work is that verbal abuse and its effects can come from the people who love us, but with their support, we can also overcome them. This theme will be portrayed through Elliot's, the protagonist, journey. After being traumatized by his mother's constant verbal abuse during childhood, he falls into self-hatred. He is terrorized by his insecurities, inability to trust, and overwhelming guilt of merely existing. Because of these feelings, he feels undeserving of other people's love, which causes him to retreat into his shell whenever he comes close to opening up to someone. However, as he starts coming out of his shell and opens up to others about his problem, he receives the help that leads him to heal from his self-hatred and realizes his worth. After that, he is able to slowly accept others' love for him.

Plot

Elliot recalls the old days when his mother, Rosalina, told him to never tell anyone that he was her son. However, soon she grew more hysterical and confined him to their house due to her paranoia that people were finding out Elliot's birth origin. Nonetheless, after a month of being confined, Elliot dared himself to see the outside world, but Rosalina found out and abused him. This will serve as the introduction to Elliot as the protagonist. Then, the inciting incident happens when, amid his confinement, he caught the attention of a boy named James through his house's window. James's communication with Elliot and his initiative to tell the story to his mother, Lusi, let them know what Elliot was facing. They planned to let Elliot escape with them to Jakarta and James communicated it to Elliot. Elliot decided to go with the plan.

Arriving at Jakarta kickstarts Elliot's formative experience, which is also the rising action part. Elliot wondered if he had made the right choice, for he felt so out of place. Once he was enrolled in a private school, he had difficulties with his studies because he was so bothered by his mother's words. Because of this, he was worried that James or Lusi might turn on him. Thus, he swore to do his best while trying to keep them at arm's length. Later, because Elliot was struggling to catch up with the lessons, the teachers assigned him to Klara, a student tutor. After meeting Elliot, Klara realized that Elliot was the 'lost child' in her old neighborhood. Piqued by his background, Klara began to pester him with questions, which eventually made Elliot avoid her. When Lusi noticed Elliot's odd behavior, she tried to approach him carefully. Afterward, Lusi began to understand Elliot better and gave him advice. After Elliot regained his senses, Elliot then started to warm up to Klara. However, Elliot's hope for friendship was broken when she let slip Elliot's background to the whole school.

The stake becomes more risky when the fact that Elliot was born out of rape was out, which causes the students at school to look down upon him. The bullying caused Elliot to retreat further into his shell and get swallowed even more by his self-hatred. He also actively avoided James at school because he believed he was too pathetic to earn James's friendship. Klara, on the other hand, tried to make up with Elliot. Regardless of that, Elliot believed he could not open up to her if he wanted to protect himself.

The story hits the climax when Elliot's walls eventually crumbled when the bullies came after James because he defended Elliot. It caused Elliot to go feral at the bullies. Lusi was called to the school, getting notified of what had transpired. When Elliot was brought home,

Lusi questioned Elliot. Elliot spilled everything to Lusi. Lusi comforted Elliot and told Elliot about her past and the reason why she brought him to her family, and he came to an epiphany. Lusi ended the talk by telling Elliot to consider therapy, and she also reminded him to lean on her more. The talk with Lusi will trigger the story's resolution. Elliot reflected on what happened and also found closure with Klara after realizing how his resentment was poisonous to himself, just like what happened to his mother. Refusing to be drowned in resentment, he decided to give Klara another chance. Later, Lusi offered him to get homeschooled, to which he eventually agreed. During his homeschooling, Lusi realized his potential in art and asked if he wanted to go to art school to which he agreed after some time.

The story ends at Elliot's high school exhibition. Elliot is overlooking his exhibition until Lusi, James, and Klara come. However, he suddenly sees a familiar figure, his mother, going out of his exhibition with a more relaxed face. He wonders why she is there but soon realizes that it does not matter. What matters is the three people who always support him through thick and thin.

Characters

- **Elliot**

Age: 11 years old (at the beginning of the story), 18 years old (at the end of the story)

Elliot is a shy and sensitive boy with low self-esteem. He tends to dress in an oversized t-shirt and baggy pants with an utter disregard for his wild dark hair. His disregard for his appearance roots in his struggle with self-worth due to the story behind his birth, in which he is a child born out of rape. This causes his mother to hate his very existence and decide to abuse him both verbally and physically. To Elliot, however, the hateful words his mother spat hurt him more than the bruises. It makes him feel like he is an abomination whom no one would ever love. This feeling, combined with his inability to trust others, causes him to distance himself from the people who show him the love and care he deserves. Nonetheless, despite being distant, Elliot cares greatly about the people who are kind to him, especially his new family and friends, although he is not good at showing it. He can be somewhat hot and cold to those people. Underneath the wall he built, however, he is actually a kind-hearted and protective boy who yearns for love; and his inability to express what he truly wants makes him dive into an artistic pursuit. He believes that art can express the emotions that he has always suppressed.

- **Lusiana (Lusi) Wijaya**

Age: 40 years old (at the beginning of the story), 47 years old (at the end of the story)

Lusi is Elliot's neighbor in Carat, and also James's biological mother, who eventually helps Elliot escape his abusive life. Being the wise, gentle, and nurturing lady she is, she manages to eventually become Elliot's mother figure in his new life. As she was also a victim of abuse back in her childhood, she understands Elliot's suffering and wishes to help him to her utmost. She also swears to raise her son and Elliot with tenderness and love, so they will never have to experience what she previously did. Thus, she truly values love and patience. Besides being a nurturing figure, she is quite perceptive in knowing others' feelings and situations as well. She can always know how to approach Elliot even when no one else can while also offering him some advice to navigate his new life. She tends to put her medium-length hair up in a bun and dress in a casual way.

- **James Wijaya**

Age: 11 years old (at the beginning of the story), 18 years old (at the end of the story)

James is a gentle-hearted and friendly boy who Elliot considers his 'savior' and found brother. He tends to wear neat and clean clothing, further emphasizing how well-behaved he is. He is nice to nearly everyone in sight, even Elliot whom he barely talks to in his old neighborhood. Besides being friendly and nice, James is also a caring person –a lesson he learned well from his mother. He tries his best to make people feel comfortable with him, and he tries to understand the other party. One of the people who is often on the receiving end of his care is Elliot. Knowing Elliot's past, James truly wants to make Elliot feel safe and welcome in his family. He believes that one day, he can really break through Elliot's shell. Nevertheless, despite being a friendly and caring boy, he can also be menacing when someone hurts the person he cares about. He is willing to fight against those hateful people even when his physique is not exactly supportive –he is a lanky Chinese-Indonesian boy with a smile plastered on his face.

- **Rosalina Winata**

Age: 27 years old (at the beginning of the story)

Rosalina is Elliot's biological mother. She used to be a cheerful and easy-going girl during her teenage years, but it all changed when a tragedy struck. Due to the rape that she had experienced at the hands of her lover, she ended up pregnant with Elliot and bore the responsibility of raising him alone. The betrayal, the trauma, the shame, and the responsibility that was suddenly thrust upon her filled her with rage, blinding her with the thoughts that the world is unfair to her and her only. Her pent-up rage and hatred caused her to spit venomous jabs at Elliot even if she tried to tone it down at first. Her abuse and hatred begin as occasional hurtful words, but those words gradually become worse. In the earlier years, she also would still at least fulfill Elliot's daily needs and education, but later, she eventually hides Elliot entirely because of the paranoia that someone knows who Elliot really is. She abuses Elliot because she believes it is how she can redeem herself from the mistake that ruins her entire life. During her teenage years, she tends to wear cute dresses and style her hair, but after the tragedy, she pays no heed to her look as she puts on unmatched clothes and has uncombed hair.

- **Klara Susanti**

Age: 12 years old (first appearance), 18 years old (at the end of the story)

Klara is an old neighbor of Elliot's who also happened to move to the city and school where Elliot is. Dressed in a flowery dress with curly hair and thick glasses, she is a genius mathematic scholar with a loud and curious personality. She is not shy in asking questions whenever she feels curious about something, including about Elliot. Her lack of sensitivity can be annoying to people who hate for their privacy to be breached like Elliot, but later she will learn her lesson the hard way when her curiosity and blabbermouth attitude cause everyone in the school to know about Elliot's past. Nevertheless, even though Klara can be too loud and insensitive in her search for answers, she also has a soft heart. Eventually, after the mess she has caused, she will realize her mistakes and try her absolute best to make it up to Elliot.

Conflicts

My creative work will consist of two types of conflicts. The most dominant one is Man vs. Self. It is a conflict that occurs in one's internal self against their own thoughts and feelings (Stanton, 1965 as cited in Hidayat, 2020). This will be portrayed through Elliot's battle against his self-hatred, which is the main focus of the story. Another conflict shown in my creative work

is Man vs. Man in which the main character faces a hurdle that is the villain or someone who opposes their objective (Ginting, 2021). This will be portrayed by Elliot's struggles to survive the abuse he experiences at his biological mother's hands. The last conflict shown in my creative work is Man vs. Society where the main character is fighting against the community which has a different mindset (Pradnyaningsih et al., 2022). When having this type of conflict, the character is usually rejected by society. This will be portrayed in Elliot's school life, in which he will be bullied by a group of people due to his birth origin.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been written with the statement of the problems and the purpose of the creative work in mind. My first statement of the problem is talking about the kinds of verbal abuse that Elliot experiences in his childhood. The answer to this statement is shown in the creative work when Elliot experiences overt and covert verbal abuse from his mother. At the beginning of the story when Elliot still lives with his biological mother, he suffers from her resentment and occasionally receives some covert verbal abuse, such as sarcastic or derogatory remarks that may seem harmless but are actually offensive. One of the examples is when Elliot washes the dishes, she compliments his cleanliness with a judgy look. Besides covert verbal abuse, Elliot's mother also often overtly abuses Elliot. She directly tells him off with derogatory and brutal words, curses, as well as mockeries. She tells Elliot that he is as horrible as his rapist father, that she wishes him to die, and that he is worthless. In short, she makes sure that Elliot knows how worthless he is no matter how hard he tries to satisfy her.

My second statement of the problem is about the impacts of verbal abuse on Elliot's behavior in daily life. Based on Rohner (1980)'s theory, parental rejection, such as verbal abuse, can make the victims more emotionally unstable, aloof, and unconfident because they view themselves the way the abusers do, yearn for love that they do not get, and have a negative outlook. Complemented by Bowlby (1973)'s theory, the impacts of parental rejection can affect the victims' attachment styles in the long run which may turn into disorganized attachment. In the creative work, the verbal abuse turns Elliot into a loner who feels undeserving of love. Some triggers can easily affect his emotions. One of the examples is when he hurts James without meaning to because he fails to control his rage toward Klara in Chapter 6. In addition, Elliot also portrays his lack of self-esteem through various moments, especially when his mother's voice keeps haunting him. He is really affected by the horrible way his mother views him and even considers it absolute truth. His exposure to words that demean him makes him think that the entire world is against him. This is illustrated in his heart-to-heart talk with Lusi in Chapter 7. He still has difficulties believing that Lusi and James actually want him. To sum it up, Elliot's aloofness and self-deprecation lead him to have contrasting feelings for his caretaker, as well as difficulties to form a trusting and safe relationship with others.

My third statement of the problem is about how Elliot heals from the negative impacts of childhood verbal abuse. According to Bowlby (1973)'s theory which is later complemented by Egeland (1988)'s research, an attachment style can shift for the better by having a supportive parental figure and undergoing psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Elliot has undergone the aforementioned healing steps in the creative work. One of the most prominent examples is when Lusi can finally make Elliot more comfortable with her as she shares a vulnerable piece of herself that Elliot can relate with in Chapter 7. She also suggests that Elliot go to therapy to get better and even sees Elliot's potential in art and even supports him with it. Her caring and loving nature contributes a lot to Elliot's healing. As mentioned above as well, Elliot also undergoes psychoanalytic psychotherapy as suggested by Lusi. It helps him a lot in processing and unraveling his feelings and trauma. He slowly builds a trusting relationship with his therapist, Ms. Lanny, when Ms. Lanny validates his feelings and tries to get to know him carefully. Once

that trust is formed, Elliot comes to therapy and is allowed to say whatever is on his mind. Seeing what he needs, Ms. Lanny also tries to debunk Elliot's negative outlook by giving him logical proof about how his negative thoughts are false. This helps Elliot to understand that what happened to him is horrible and he does not deserve that. Both Lusi and the therapy help Elliot become more emotionally stable and trustworthy.

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