

Lionessheart: A Screenplay of Firstborn Daughter's Struggles in Family and Society

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ABSTRACT

Eldest Daughter Syndrome, more commonly recognized as Child Parentification of the firstborn daughter, describes the phenomenon of parents burdening family responsibilities to their firstborn daughter. Child parentification is common in Asian families including Indonesian families, where parents tend to have an authoritarian parenting style that emphasizes strictness, harshness, and the expectation of obedience from their children (Ang & Goh, 2006). Using Gregor Jurkovic's theory of "Lost Childhood," this creative work will highlight the difficulties of being a parentified child, its impacts on their psyche, and potential solutions. It will also explore how individuals can deal with their trauma by seeking support and empowerment from their socioemotional environment. The screenplay portrays the parentified character struggles with anger and resentment towards her parents, stress, and identity disruption. The main impact of these struggles is deep trauma, which is addressed through empowerment and support in her socioemotional growth from her friends.

Keywords: child parentification, eldest daughter syndrome, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

The firstborn daughter has always been known as someone responsible for taking care of their siblings and nearly everything going around the house, physically and emotionally. Asian parents have an authoritarian parenting style as they are often strict and harsh and focus on gaining a child's obedience to parental demands (Ang & Goh, 2006). To make it happen, Asian parents usually introduce their firstborn daughter to house duties from a young age, so they can be more disciplined and responsible (Shahid, 2023). This also occurs to firstborn daughters as they do not have the time and chance to grow freely as growing children. They cannot play as much as their younger siblings, usually putting their needs aside and gradually discovering their identity as the family caretaker or helper because of the responsibilities they have to live with (Endaya, 2021). They also take on the emotional burdens of their parents and siblings (Shahid, 2023).

To elaborate how destructive parentification can destroy a child's childhood, adult life, and how the child deals with it, the creative work will be in the form of a screenplay. Screenplay is a story told with pictures, dialogue, and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure (Nannicelli, 2019). Using a screenplay as a form of creative work to give the audience a better understanding and visualization of what the main character is going through throughout her life as a parentified oldest daughter. The idea of the screenplay as the start, the spawn, and the foundation of the final work of art seems the strongest support for the idea that it is therefore the most pertinent piece of the product (Richards, 2010).

To make this topic recognized, specifically by the younger generation, the drama genre with a romance sub-genre is chosen. The genre explores the subject matter in an emotionally realistic and serious manner. Drama investigates human frailties, disappointments, hopes (lost or to be gained), dreams, and

even the tragedies of life (Selbo, 2014, p. 52). It is appropriate since the drama genre has a more serious tone than other genres since the work will discuss a real-life issue: parentified children, specifically the parentified oldest daughter. In the work, the main character will go through the characteristics of the family drama genre. For example, the protagonist experiences the ups and downs in her relationship with her family. Meanwhile, romance as the sub-genre will be used when the protagonist meets a man who will be her helper to help her recover from being a parentified firstborn daughter. The idea of romance includes the experience of intimacy, compassion, and deep caring for another individual—caring so deeply for another that one would put one's happiness at risk to better the life of the one loved (Selbo, 2014).

Some movie examples that portray family-themed drama movies with a romance sub-genre are *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini* (2019) and *Losmen Bu Broto* (2019). The movie *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini* talks about how the youngest daughter is trying to find the meaning of life and freedom in a family full of secrets of the past after meeting a man who can bring out the best in her. As for *Losmen Bu Broto*, it talks about two sisters who are forced by their narcissistic mother to take care of their mother's losmen out of their own will.

According to Selbo, the screenwriter may choose to include scenes pointing to the character's imperfections, neuroses, worries, and insecurities to help make the persona more "real" to the viewer (Selbo, 2014, p. 72). The method is used to make the audience able to sympathize with or connect deeper with the characters. Another example is when the main character's father is hurting her, she always feel pain, anger, and feeling unwanted. That is when at the end of the story, the main character chooses to go back to Jakarta again after lots of consideration.

The work will tell the story of Annika Dirgantara, the firstborn daughter of divorced parents who is parentified and has to take care of her father and younger sister her whole life. However, she never actually finds true happiness, knowing that she still keeps a lot of trauma inside and deep down wanting to fix her family, which leads her to depend on alcohol as a coping mechanism. Things turned upside down when an accident befell his father, and her sister forced her to go back to Surabaya to take care of him. Annika is faced with two missions: to deal with her trauma while trying to fix her family.

Parentification

The work will use the parentification theory, which describes a situation where children take on adult roles, leading to mental health problems like psychological distress, traumatic stress, attachment issues, personality disturbance, and severe psychopathology (Levesque, 2011). Parentification can be transmitted across generations, as parents often replay painful childhood experiences (Jurkovic, 2014). Divorce can cause children to fill a parental role due to the absence of one parent, creating a role vacuum (Freud, 1965; Jurkovic, 2014). Similarly, the death of a parent can lead to children becoming replacement figures (Jurkovic, 2014). Lastly, an absent or under-functioning father can result in children taking on parental responsibilities due to the mother's anxiety and helplessness (Jurkovic, 2014).

Effects of Parentification

Next, the work will also use the theory of the effects of parentification. The effects of parentification vary based on family, economic, and parenting backgrounds. Positive outcomes can occur when children are at an age to learn life skills, gaining responsibility, independence, empathy, and social skills (Jurkovic, 2014). Even in exploitative parentification, children in single-parent homes may develop competence and self-worth (Jurkovic, 2014). However, girls often suffer more from destructive parentification due to traditional gender roles (Ember 1973, as cited in Jurkovic, 2014). In some cultures, such as Southeast Asia, firstborn daughters often take on caregiving roles due to familial expectations (Md-Yunus, 2005; Hwang, 1999; Yeung et al., 2018, as cited in Masiram et al., 2023).

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Despite some positive effects, parentified children are at risk of emotional, cognitive, and social difficulties, including loss of childhood, anger and resentment, stress, and identity disruption (Jurkovic, 2014). They often experience bitterness, disappointment, depression, and even suicidal thoughts due to a lack of appreciation and criticism (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Karpel, 1976, as cited in Jurkovic, 2014). Anger and resentment arise from the inability to express feelings freely, leading to strained parent-child relationships (Jurkovic, 2014). Stress results from excessive responsibilities without adequate maturity, causing anxiety, low energy, and psychosomatic issues (Elkind, 1981; Karpel, 1976; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Wallerstein, 1985, as cited in Jurkovic, 2014). Disruption in identity development occurs as children question their identity after being lifelong caretakers, often feeling guilty for seeking their own identity (Jurkovic, 2014).

Trauma is a significant impact of parentification, leading to suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, and overeating (Jurkovic, 2014). Parentified children often feel abandoned and lonely, struggling with boundaries and anxiety related to intimacy and separation (Jurkovic, 2014). Receiving help is difficult for them, as it conflicts with their self-image as helpers (Valleau, Bergner, & Horton, 1995, as cited in Jurkovic, 2014).

Treating Child Parentification

There are ways to treat children affected by destructive parentification. For the screenplay, the focus will be on empowering parentified children and facilitating their socioemotional growth. Empowering parentified children involves helping them understand their parents' struggles. For instance, in Ansley and Brett's case (Jurkovic, 2014), their mother suffers from depression, which affects her parenting. The children learn not to fully blame her but to understand their emotions, such as anger and sadness, and manage their stress. Support from family, friends, or community helps provide new perspectives.

However, some parents may refuse to acknowledge their role in destructive parenting. Facilitating socioemotional growth helps children who fear leaving their caretaker role. Encouraging them to focus on their interests and develop healthy self and peer relationships is crucial. For example, they should pursue their dreams, join communities, and develop communication skills. Supportive friendships, teachers, and adults can help them break old habits and find their true selves (Jurkovic, 2014).

In the screenplay, these concepts shape Annika's behavior. As the firstborn daughter, she took on parental roles for her sister and father after her parents' divorce. This caused her to lose her childhood, feel constant anger, and struggle with her identity. When she returns to her hometown to care for her injured father, she meets someone with a similar experience who convinces her to join a supportive community, helping her process her feelings and gain socio-familial support.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

The work will be a drama with romance sub-genres, inspired by works like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2011), *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), and *Shameless* (2011). The protagonist's journey centers on dealing with her trauma as a parentified eldest daughter. The drama genre aims to immerse readers in real-world issues, featuring emotional development from realistic characters (Selbo, 2014). The main character, a firstborn daughter from a dysfunctional family, will navigate everyday situations. The work will incorporate romance, focusing on themes of wanting, finding, losing, and gaining love (Selbo, 2014). Romance in the story involves deep intimacy, compassion, and caring for another, even at personal risk (Selbo, 2014). The supporting male character helps the protagonist deal with her trauma, as she

becomes interested in him and follows his suggestions. However, familial conflicts, time and space, and career concerns create obstacles to their romantic relationship.

In the screenplay, character-driven storytelling, flashbacks, foreshadowing, and montages are used. Character-driven narratives focus on character development, internal struggles, and relationships over plot progression (McGregor, 2023). In screenplays, it is useful in telling the main character's story in an intimate and personal way, adding to the audience's engagement. Next, flashbacks will reveal Annika's painful childhood and emotional breakdowns with her father and sister, aiming to deepen the audience's understanding of her background and behavior (Walkley, 2022). These techniques are intended to evoke sympathy and connection from the audience with Annika and similarly those who share similar experiences to her.

Other than that, a technique called foreshadowing, where subtle clues hint at future plot developments is used (Callahan, 2019). It will subtly suggest the romantic interest of a character in Annika from their first meeting, contrasting with her unawareness. Additionally, I'll employ montages to manipulate time, space, and rhythm, aiding in character development and exploring Annika's journey of healing from her traumatic past as a parentified firstborn daughter (Bordwell, 1972).

Two influential works for the creative screenplay are *Shameless* (2011) and *Winter's Bone* (2010). Both are dramas with romance sub-genres that explore themes of trauma, similar to the work. They share the common theme of a main character assuming a parental role due to an absent father. Furthermore, both Fiona from *Shameless* and Annika from the story find solace in a romantic interest amid their challenges, albeit temporarily.

In contrast to the inspirations for the creative work, the main character, Annika doesn't pursue a serious relationship with her love interest, unlike Fiona from *Shameless* in its early seasons. In addition, unlike Ree from *Winter's Bone*, who focuses on finding her father and protecting her family, Annika faces and handles her family issues differently. Another distinction to add is that *Shameless* is a TV series, whereas this work is a one-hour screenplay potentially for film adaptation.

Premise and Creative Principle

The aim of this creative work is to portray the struggles of a firstborn daughter who, believing she could find happiness by leaving her dysfunctional family and working outside the city, must care for her sick father after an accident. Her journey involves healing from trauma as she fulfills a parental role for both her father and sister while searching for fulfillment.

Synopsis

Born as the firstborn daughter in a divorced family, Annika shoulders the emotional weight of caring for her younger sibling from a young age, sacrificing her personal life. Despite becoming a successful young architect in Jakarta to seek happiness, she remains plagued by anger, sadness, and identity questioning. The inciting incident occurs when her father's accident forces her to return reluctantly to her hometown, a place she tried to leave behind. Along her journey, she meets a boy with a similar family background, allowing her to confront her emotions. Due to her father's injury, Annika was forced to become the family's breadwinner. Although Annika still works remotely while caring for father, her performance regresses, adding further pressure on her. The climax of the story begins when Annika tries to talk to her sister Adrianna about her work issues and what it might imply, only to discover Adrianna has been withdrawn from her scholarship and is now pregnant. Annika's relapse into alcoholism marks the falling action, culminating in a confrontation with her father and sister after the accident's revelation. Ultimately, she asserts her independence and chooses to end the cycle of familial burden, finding happiness anew in Jakarta.

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Characters

Annika Dirgantara

Age: 24 years old

Annika grew up in a dysfunctional family where her parents divorced when she was seven, leaving her to care for her younger sister. Despite overcoming hardships and excelling in architecture, her newfound happiness in Jakarta is interrupted when her father's accident calls her back to Surabaya, forcing her to reconsider her priorities between personal happiness and familial responsibilities.

Adrianna Dirgantara

Age: 19 years old

Adrianna, Annika's younger sister, is a smart and sweet doctoral student on scholarship, known for her obedient demeanor. Annika is puzzled when Adrianna fails to care for their father, only to discover later that Adrianna is pregnant and lost her scholarship due to skipping classes. This revelation leads to a serious rift between the sisters and a harsh awakening for Adrianna about life's realities.

Darius Dirgantara

Age: 55 years old

Darius, Annika and Adrianna's father, works as a caretaker for elderly people after retiring from his job as a bank teller fifteen years ago. Despite being divorced and responsible for his daughters, he has never been emotionally close to them, focusing mainly on work and basic survival. Financially strained, he often relies on Annika for money. Darius struggles with mental instability, displays depressive tendencies, and has a short temper. After an accident, he becomes dependent on Annika's care in Surabaya, leading to ongoing conflicts due to his difficult behavior.

Avani Gibson

Age: 35 years old

Avani, Annika's supervisor and best friend at the office, is a warmhearted, hardworking leader dedicated to guiding her team to success. She has been a supportive presence in Annika's life, bonding over karaoke and food outings on weekends, helping Annika realize her own worth.

Aiden Ong

Age: 25 years old

Aiden, a stranger who bumps into Annika, is instantly drawn to her. Despite their similar family backgrounds, he keeps his feelings hidden, focusing instead on helping Annika heal and find happiness without confessing his own love.

Conflict

There are a few conflicts including person vs self, person vs person, and person vs society that are used in the creative work. Annika faces internal struggles with her past, contemplating whether to heal or leave her family. The person vs. person conflict happens when a protagonist fights an antagonist in the story (Artawan et al., 2020). Person vs person arises as she contends with her father and sister, who view her only as a caretaker and provider. As conflict of person vs. society occurs when one character or more struggles against the morals of their culture and government (Kenney, 1996, as cited in Artawan et al., 2020), this conflict emerges subtly through neighbors gossiping about Annika's family dynamics. These conflicts drive the narrative, with person vs self and person vs person taking central roles.

CONCLUSION

This creative work shows how child parentification towards first born daughters have negative effects compared to positive effects. It has been discussed that parentification happens because of several reasons and one of them is the divorced parents' situation. It may cause anger and resentment towards their parents, stress, and identity disruption. This work also talks about how child parentification can really affect a person's life and their relationship with others. The work provides more knowledge about Eldest Daughter Syndrome, also known as Child Parentification, regarding how it can lead to destructive thinking, struggles, and the opportunity to leave the role behind.

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