Lingering Shadows: A Short Story Collection Highlighting the Effects of Survivor's Guilt in Indonesian Society

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ABSTRACT

Survivor's guilt is a psychological phenomenon that may occur when an individual survives a traumatic event while others are left injured or lose their lives. Although the concept has been around since the 20th century, it remains not widely acknowledged despite its serious consequences. Recognizing this underrepresentation, this thesis examines the long-term effects of survivor's guilt as researched by Bistas and Grewal, and O'Connor, Berry, and Weiss. These effects are categorized into two main types: mental effects, which include obsessive thinking, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression; and social effects, such as interpersonal sensitivity, hostility, and social isolation. These issues are explored through a creative work in the form of a short story collection, featuring four characters from diverse backgrounds and ages. While the survivors' experiences are also shaped by environmental responses, the effects significantly impact their mental state and their ability to form relationships in social settings.

Keywords: grief, mental health, PTSD, short story collection, survivor's guilt, trauma

INTRODUCTION

Depending on the circumstances of each situation, guilt can take various forms, one of which is survivor's guilt. Jayne Leonard (2019), a qualified counselor and psychotherapist specializing in trauma and emotional well-being, explains survivor's guilt can emerge after a person survives a traumatic event where the others unfortunately did not (para. 1). Survivor's guilt is often neglected and tends to be categorized within the more widely recognized condition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Bistas & Grewal, 2023, Abstract). Moreover, despite not having actual control or influence over the circumstances itself, the survivors usually feel a sense of responsibility for others' deaths or injuries (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, as cited in Hannah, Yasmin, & Evelina, 2021, Introduction, para. 1).

According to Leonard (2019), this emotional response is often seen in various groups such as war veterans, first responders, Holocaust survivors, 9/11 survivors, and cancer survivors. It can also affect transplant recievers, crash and natural disaster survivors, witnesses to traumatic events, as well as individuals who lose a family member to suicide or parents who outlive their children. Additionally, Leonard highlights that survivor's guilt can also occur among relatives of individuals who are diagnosed with fatal hereditary conditions (para. 4). According to Murray (2018), survivor's guilt is closely linked to more severe mental health issues over the long run, such as an increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a higher risk of suicidal thoughts or behaviors (p. 601).

This type of guilt may happen within both small and large scale circumstances. A recent widely-impacting occurrence for example is the Covid-19 pandemic. Mental health experts have informed that many individuals might experience irrational survivor's guilt feelings due to the pandemic (Reuben, 2020, as cited in Palladini et al., 2023, Introduction, para. 2). However, as mentioned, survivor's guilt is not only limited to catastrophic events or large scale like pandemics. It can also happen in everyday life, such as car accidents, house fires, or other

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unexpected events where these individuals survive while others get injured or killed. As Fimiani et al. (2021) suggest, these people may experience survivor's guilt when they realize that others are suffering or have died in the dire situation (p. 1).

In order to create a creative thesis that portrays realistic struggles in everyday life, the creative work is going to be written under the psychological realism genre. Kennedy (2019) explains that psychological realism is a literary genre that focuses on exploring the characters' internal thoughts and motivations, and this genre has gained its popularity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (para. 1). Farzand (2023) further elaborates that this genre uses techniques such as stream of consciousness, introspection, and complex character development to portray the complexity of psychological experiences (*Characteristics of Psychological Realism* section). Through this genre, the creative work is able to show the thoughts and actions of individuals grappling with survivor's guilt, highlighting how this lingering feeling of guilt is haunting and deteriorating their daily lives.

The form of creative work is a collection of short stories. According to Heri (2019, as cited in Muhandra et al., 2023), a short story is a piece of writing that depicts human life in a particular setting and time (p.50). Irhamni et al. (2025) highlights the unique advantages of using this form, such as offering a wide range of genres and themes, giving the readers a chance to explore different cultural perspectives, characters, and real-world scenarios (p. 52-53). Furthermore, due to the brevity of short stories, readers are able to revisit sections of the stories without feeling overwhelmed, creating effectiveness (p. 56). Its conciseness also contributes to a more focused narrative by eliminating unnecessary details. Additionally, short stories allow readers to grasp and complete the piece without requiring too much time. When they finish reading, the relevant information and events remain fresh in their minds, enhancing their overall comprehension of the story.

Serving as the theoretical framework are the academic research by Bistas and Grewal (2023) and O'Connor, Berry, and Weiss (1999, as cited in Fimiani et al., 2021). The 2023 paper by Bistas and Grewal also provides a case study of individuals who suffer from survivor's guilt, offering more accurate information on the condition.

From the wide range of effects mentioned in the research, I have selected six—three pertaining to mental effects and three related to social impacts—to emphasize, as these basic effects are easier to recognize in everyday life.

Mental effects:
1. Obsessive thinking
   Obsessive thinking is characterized by persistent, unwanted thoughts or mental images that often cause feelings of anxiety and distress (Catchings, 2022, para. 3). This constant mental replay amplifies their guilt, making it difficult for them to move on (Powell & Swift, 2019, p. 17).

2. PTSD
   Mann et al. (2024) describes Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a common yet complex psychiatric condition that may develop after being exposed to traumatic experiences and has a major negative impact on an individual's mental well-being (Introduction, para. 1). According to Miao et al. (2018), PTSD is considered to be a potentially long-lasting and debilitating disorder, marked by re-experience and avoidance symptoms, along with negative alterations in cognition and arousal (Introduction, para. 2).

3. Depression

Depression is a mood disorder characterized by a persistent sense of sadness and a loss of interest in daily activities. It often involves feelings of sadness, emptiness, or irritability, as well as physical and cognitive symptoms that can significantly impair a person's ability to function (Chand & Arif, 2023, para. 1). In addition to the emotional and cognitive impact, depression can also manifest in physical symptoms. For instance, Kapfhammer (2006, as cited in Bridwell et al., 2015) describes depression's cognitive-affective dimension, which includes negative moods or effects, while its somatic dimension is seen by symptoms like fatigue and loss of energy (p. 91).

Social effects:

1. Interpersonal sensitivity

Carney and Harrigan (2003) defines interpersonal sensitivity as "the ability to accurately assess others' abilities, states, and traits from nonverbal cues" (Abstract). When this sensitivity becomes heightened, it can cause mistakes in judgment and feelings of inadequacy. Increased sensitivity tends to amplify stereotyped thinking, which hampers decision-making, causes social difficulties, and results in issues such as social withdrawal and conflict. A person with high interpersonal sensitivity may experience negative impacts like indecisiveness, hopelessness, fragility, personal insufficiencies, exaggerating small problems, relationship difficulties, conflict avoidance, interpersonal stress, and a decreased level of tolerance (Aydin & Hiçdurmaz, 2016, p. 45).

2. Hostility

Hostility is defined as a complex of negative attitudes, beliefs and estimations directed towards other people, including perceiving them as likely sources of frustration, deception, provocation, and similar threats (T.W. Smith, 1992, as cited in Ermakov et al., 2016, p. 10834). According to Mani and Savarimuthu (2018), hostility is the most socially damaging consequence of anger. Since it comes from emotional interactions between individuals, hostility is rarely influenced by rational thinking or logical reasoning (p. 51-52).

3. Social isolation

Social isolation is defined as a condition in which a person experiences a lack of social belonging, limited engagement with others, few social connections, and an absence of meaningful relationships (Nicholson, 2012, as cited in Shvedko et al., 2018, p. 131). Research from behavioral and fMRI studies indicates that social isolation heightens sensitivity to negative social cues, such as perceived threats, while also increasing the desire to reconnect with others in an attempt to regain social fulfillment (Cacioppo et al., 2011, p. 134).

The short story collection tells the story of Lucy, Theodore, Ariani, and Haryanto. All of these characters are from diverse age groups who suffer from survivor's guilt after losing a loved one in an unfortunate event. Each story portrays the various mental effects and social effects of survivor's guilt in their respective lives.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of the creative work revolves around how survivor's guilt can greatly impact a person's life. Therefore, the theme is "surviving a tragic event can lead to overwhelming guilt,

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internal struggles, and difficulty in justifying one's survival." Each story explores how traumatic events may affect someone's mental well-being as well as their social capabilities. Through these narratives, the protagonists experience varying symptoms of survivor's guilt after undergoing traumatic experiences, leading to a damaging emotional and psychological state. The stories will not only focus on the survivors' internal struggles but also on the diverse environments around them—their families, friends, and communities—and how these environments further influence the protagonists' thought processes and decisions.

Plot

Below are the four plots of the stories.

A Piece of Me

The story begins with a flashback to three years ago, when a gas explosion took the life of Elizabeth, Lucy's twin sister. Lucy, now 12 years old, wakes up from her nightmare with the same guilt she has for years. In a new city and starting junior high school, Lucy still has not moved on from the tragedy, and the thought of starting junior high school in an unfamiliar place only deepens her sense of loneliness. During student orientation, Lucy finds it difficult to get along with other students despite once having a bubbly personality. She is overly self-conscious, second-guessing everything she says and interpreting other people rejecting or attacking her. When she does have to socialize, she forces a smile, pretending to be fine while internally battling her guilt and doubt. Despite her parents' support—especially her mother's attempts to help her—Lucy chooses to keep a distance. Feeling the need to overcome her trauma, Lucy decides to join the school's culinary extracurricular—tata boga. Her first few lessons there are filled with anxiety. She avoids cooking tasks and assigns the job to her teammates. After the extracurricular, Lucy actively withdraws herself from others and remains distant from her friends. When she eventually has to cook on her own, she gets triggered by the smell of gas, which gives her flashbacks and causes a breakdown. Seeing her condition, Lucy is sent back home early, and her mother comforts her. Later that day, Lucy's culinary extracurricular friends unexpectedly visit her to check on her condition. Realizing their genuineness, Lucy tries to open up and finds the courage to tell about the past that has been haunting her. Her friends respond with acceptance and encouragement, helping her realize she is more than her guilt.

The Aftermath

The beginning introduces Theodore who is sitting alone at the school rooftop, feeling disturbed by thoughts of self-harm and suicide. Every day at school is the same—he avoids eye contact with others and struggles to focus, as his mind constantly replays the day his girlfriend Alice died saving him. When he arrives home, he sees his mother doing laundry. They make eye contact, but none of them say anything. He tries to escape his feelings by sleeping, but a nightmare about the fight that led to Alice's death brings everything rushing back. Unlike the actual tragedy, he pushes Alice to the car, leading to her death. He immediately wakes up to his head hurting and finds himself feeling triggered because of the dream. He tries to convince himself he is okay, but ends up crying as the guilt of being blamed for her death overwhelms him. When he goes to school the next day, he accidentally bumps into a girl who reminds him of Alice and what she could have been if she were still alive. When he reaches class, a group of bullies mock him and bring up Alice, encouraging him to end his life. When class begins, he is unable to focus and leaves the class to go to the rooftop. He breaks down in there and hurts himself. As the final exams approach, his isolation worsens and the pressure of graduation looms over him. After an uncomfortable, detached conversation with his mother about his future, he forces himself to focus on his studies. But when the last day of exams arrives, Theo finds himself back on the rooftop, overwhelmed by everything he has been suppressing. Desperate for relief, he blurts out all the emotions he has bottled up over the past few weeks in

the hopes of feeling better. Instead, the memories of happier times intensify his guilt. Caught up in too much pain and spiralling depressing thoughts, Theo finally finds the guts to end it all.

Suffocating Silence

   The story starts when Ariani recently transferred to a new branch of a clothing retail store a few weeks prior, where she hopes that a fresh start will help her move on from the tragic loss of her fiancé during the Covid-19 pandemic. She often gets lost in thought or lashes out, especially when something reminds her of the pandemic. While her coworkers simply see her as reserved and simply a bit weird sometimes, Evi—the assistant manager—notices something deeper within Ariani. As someone who lost her mother to Covid-19, Evi sees herself in Ariani and watches as Ariani acts hostile towards conversations about sickness or Covid-19. Evi tries offering small acts of kindness, but Ariani continually shuts her out, insisting that she is fine. One day, a customer ignorantly coughs at Ariani without covering her mouth. She immediately steps back and freezes, but when the customer calls out her overreacting behavior towards Covid-19, Ariani snaps, and she eventually gets her first written warning. On another occasion, as the team tidies up before closing, a coworker jokes about how nice it was to work from home during the pandemic. Their harmless conversation triggers Ariani, and she immediately shows signs of frustration and discomfort. Her coworkers dismiss it as usual, but Evi becomes concerned seeing Ariani withdraws herself from the other coworkers. Evi follows Ariani to the breakroom and finds her visibly shaken. Not wanting to pressure Ariani, Evi offers quiet support, and lets her process her emotions first. Ariani suddenly opens up about her fiancé's death and the overwhelming guilt she feels for her mistake and surviving through the pandemic in the end. Evi listens and empathizes with Ariani, sharing her own experience with loss and encouraging Ariani to seek help. Although still reluctant, Ariani agrees to see a therapist.

The Last Knot

   The story focuses on Haryanto, a single father working as an office manager. He struggles with survivor's guilt after a car accident killed his wife while he and his son survived. He and his son Ethan, now a teenager, live together with emotional distance, where constant silence lives between them. To cope with the pressures in his life, Haryanto often goes to the garage for secret drinking sessions, hoping the alcohol will numb the pain. But no matter how much he drinks, memories of his wife and his own feelings of guilt continue to haunt him, worsening his self-blame. As the anniversary of their marriage approaches, Haryanto's depression worsens. He becomes distracted with thoughts about the accident, replaying it over and over in his mind. At work, his normally reserved composure slowly turns into irritability and impatience. He snaps at his subordinates over minor mistakes, but no one dares to speak up due to his seniority. His team becomes more tense with his presence, and his productivity has plummeted due to the haunting distraction in his mind. Sensing himself deteriorating, he spends more time having drinking sessions in the garage. The thought of not being able to live up to the expectations of his job or his son weighs heavily on him, further increasing his sense of failure. On the day of the anniversary, he fails to bring himself out of bed for work. After a restless slumber, he immediately retreats to the garage to wash away the noises in his head. Drunk and not thinking straight, Haryanto decides to end his life. He takes Ethan's old scout rope that has been sitting in the garage for a long time and ties it to the ceiling. But as he is about to reach for the noose, Ethan opens the door, finding his father ready to leave him forever.

Characters

A Piece of Me

   Lucy, 12 years old, is the older twin of Elizabeth. She is 145 cm tall, with long black hair and bangs. Before Elizabeth's death, she was cheerful and easily connected with others. Her childhood dream was to be the sister Elizabeth could rely on, but now, she has lost her spirit and has become overly sensitive in social situations. Now quiet and distant, Lucy avoids the kitchen

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and spends most of her time in her room. Despite her parents having moved on from Elizabeth's death, Lucy is having a hard time to do the same.

Maya Amalia, 37 years old, is Lucy and Elizabeth's mother. She is a patient and nurturing person. Although she lost Elizabeth, she has learned to accept and move on, appreciating what she has now. Maya is a housewife who always takes care of the house and her family.

Tina Gunawan, 12 years old, is Lucy's teammate in culinary extracurricular. She has a good sense of leadership and she is a friendly person, making Lucy more at ease when she joins the extracurricular activities.

The Aftermath

Theodore Prasetya, 17 years old, is an average student. He has bland, straight black hair that is barely styled, and he is 172 cm tall. When Alice was alive, he never minded the comparisons people made between them. But after her death, everything changed. People were blaming him for what happened, and he gradually withdrew from his family and friends, falling deeper into guilt and depression alone. He no longer finds meaning in life and lives in a hollow routine of sleeping and having nightmares of the accident. His scars from self-harm are always visible, but he later stops hiding them because he believes he is invisible to the world. He often isolates himself on the rooftop during recess, alone with his thoughts and his desire to die.

Alice Felicia Putri, 16 years old, is a senior high school student who died saving Theo from getting into an accident. She is a star student who excels in her studies and has heaps of achievements. Alice has medium-length black hair that she always styles with. Despite people's judgments in her love life, she dearly loves Theodore for who he is. Her death brings a big impact on everyone's life.

Suffocating Silence

Ariani Lestari Kusuma, 26 years old, is an average 162 cm tall employee who does what she is told to. She recently transferred to another branch, where she meets Evi, the assistant manager. Before this, Ariani had lost her fiancé to Covid-19, an event that changed her whole life and left her emotionally scarred. She used to be someone approachable and optimistic, but now Ariani has become sensitive and reserved, keeping her interactions strictly professional. She always tries to appear normal like any other employee, but deep down, she cannot stop thinking about her late fiancé. Her grief makes her emotionally fragile, resulting in her lashing out and being reluctant to rely on others for support.

Evi Pratiwi, 29 years old, is an employee who has worked at the new branch for a few months. She gets along with other people easier than Ariani does, but she is also the first one who uncovers Ariani's unfortunate past. Evi tends to be direct with her mind, likes to lighten up the mood and has a strong will of helping Ariani out of her dark world.

The Last Knot

Haryanto Setiawan, 43 years old, became a single father 14 years ago after losing his wife in a car accident. He has gray hair due to his age and poor mental well-being, but he still stands strong at 175 cm. He has a habit of drinking to cope with overwhelming guilt, using alcohol to numb his emotions and temporarily wash away his pain. Although Haryanto is aware of his struggles and often contemplates giving up, he continues to fulfill his role as a father—not out of genuine care, but rather out of a sense of duty driven by guilt. Haryanto never sought professional help because he grew up with the mindset that "a man has to be strong," despite his relapse episodes and suicidal thoughts.

Ethan Setiawan, 15 years old, is the only child of Haryanto and his late wife. Because of the accident, he grew up without a mother figure, and it has affected his relationship with his father. The bond between them is barely there, and their communication is minimal, which has led Ethan to grow as a quiet and observant person. He always knows Haryanto is struggling because of the past, but he does not know how to help. Despite his emotional distance, Ethan still cares for his father and feels pity for him, but he does not know how to bridge the gap between them.

Conflict

The creative work will focus on Man vs Self. This type of conflict arises when a character struggles with their own emotions, thoughts, or behaviors, often experiencing inner conflict when faced with difficult decisions or situations. As described by Lamb (2008, as cited in Folarin, 2013), this form of internal struggle involves an individual who struggles with their own thoughts and behaviors, highlighting the complexity of their psychological conflict (p.16). In "A Piece of Me", Lucy struggles with survivor's guilt after surviving a gas explosion that killed her twin sister. In "The Aftermath", Theodore deals with suicidal thoughts and feelings of worthlessness after losing his girlfriend, Alice, who sacrificed herself for him. "Suffocating Silence" follows Ariani, who appears composed and sometimes odd due to her survivor's guilt over a loss she unknowingly caused. Lastly, in "The Last Knot", Haryanto, a single father, turns to alcohol to numb his guilt over his wife's death. As their anniversary approaches, his guilt worsens, leading him to his drunken state trying to end his life.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this short story collection is to explore the effects of survivor's guilt on individuals who have undergone traumatic events. Through the stories, it can be seen how this psychological phenomenon not only affects the individual's mental well-being but also influences their social interactions and relationships.

First, there are three mental effects in the creative work, which are obsessive thinking, PTSD, and depression. In "A Piece of Me", Lucy suffers from survivor's guilt due to an incident that killed her twin sister. Due to her survivor's guilt, not only does she feel responsible for her sister's death, but Lucy also develops PTSD. She often experiences nightmares of the tragedy and becomes prone to flashbacks when triggered. She becomes on edge and unable to feel safe when she is inside or near the kitchen, let alone be in the same room with a stove, because she's afraid the same thing will happen again.

In "The Aftermath", Theo feels that he is the reason why his girlfriend died. The accident quickly makes Theo suffer from survivor's guilt, leading to PTSD and depression. Despite feeling unsafe due to the traffic he has to pass every day but left with no other choice, Theo is also unable to escape his nightmares about the tragedy to the point they start to become lucid. Aside from his PTSD, Theo's depression causes him to lose interest in the things he used to enjoy, lose his motivation to live, and lose his appetite. To cope with his negative and suicidal thoughts, Theo ends up resorting to self-harm. Additionally, due to depression, Theo ultimately chooses to end his life by jumping from the school rooftop.

In "Suffocating Silence", Ariani develops survivor's guilt after accidentally passing the COVID-19 virus to her fiancé, which kills him not long after. Acknowledging it was her mistake and feeling guilty about it, her survivor's guilt leads her to have obsessive thinking. It constantly amplifies her mistake in the past, making her unable to forgive herself, and disturbs her life through the non-stop reminder, such as often being lost in thought or seen as out of it. She also

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becomes obsessed with health and its safety hazards to ensure she will not repeat the same mistake.

In "The Last Knot", Haryanto is unable to move on from a car accident that killed his wife. He believes that he is the sole reason for the tragedy, therefore feeling guilty to be the one that is alive. He suffers from survivor's guilt, which leads to obsessive thinking and depression. Due to his mind, he resorts to drinking alcohol to drown his constant thoughts about the accident, even though it has been shown to be not effective for the past decade, as seen from him getting reminded of the accident nearing his wedding anniversary. Moreover, Haryanto has to struggle with suicidal thoughts because of his depression but is painfully held back because of his guilt and responsibility as a father. Although he does not self-harm, he shows signs of neglect towards himself, loss of appetite, and motivation to live. In addition, Haryanto also shows an attempt to end his life by hanging himself in the garage.

Furthermore, there are three social effects in the creative work, which are interpersonal sensitivity, hostility, and social isolation. In "A Piece of Me", Lucy's survivor's guilt leads her to have interpersonal sensitivity, in which she becomes overly sensitive towards people's words or actions, creating misunderstandings when she is talking with Tina and assuming negative things about other people's perception of her. Additionally, the guilt leads her to social isolation, where she purposely withdraws or avoids any social interaction and does not initiate conversation unless it is urgent. This is shown by her choice of not interacting with her classmates and culinary extracurricular friends. Both of these effects are influenced by her survivor's guilt, creating a feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt.

In "The Aftermath", not only is Theo battling with himself alone, but he also chooses to avoid any interaction with others, which is a sign of social isolation. He believes that he does not deserve to connect because of what he did. Moreover, Theo is convinced that no one understands his feelings and what he has gone through, despite deep down wanting someone to save him from his miserable life. Because of this, he is distant with his family and the students he used to be friends with.

In "Suffocating Silence", Ariani is shown to have interpersonal sensitivity and hostility due to her survivor's guilt, which hinders her social life. Unable to read social cues properly, Ariani tends to exaggerate small problems when interacting with her colleagues and is unable to tolerate her male coworker's joke. When she feels angry or becomes defensive because of it, she always displays a hostile outburst to the other party, usually through screaming or overly raising her tone before withdrawing immediately.

In "The Last Knot", Haryanto's survivor's guilt manifests through hostility. The main victims of his hostile attitude are mainly his subordinates—people who are not related to the tragedy, unlike his son. As the wedding anniversary approaches, Haryanto becomes more restless and easily irritated, causing numerous tantrums over small things and being physically aggressive towards objects.

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