

Coming Home: A Screenplay Exploring Effects of Parental Divorce to Adult Children's Perception of Romantic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

This thesis and the screenplay written based on the research aims to illustrate how a parents' act of divorce can severely impact their offspring's perception of romantic relationships despite having reached the age of adulthood. In this creative work, Tania, the main protagonist, had to witness her parents who seemed perfectly happy together divorce when she was 19. Referring to the theory of relational trauma by Samantha L. Anders, this moment causes a deep trauma for Tania which becomes suppressed and unresolved during later parts of her life. The story emphasizes Tania's struggle towards healing; with healing being a decisional step centered on Tania herself. Thus, the creative work will place the major spotlight on Tania and how she finally has to confront aspects of her unresolved trauma when suddenly receiving a marriage proposal from her boyfriend.

Keywords: divorce, marriage, relational trauma, relationship, screenplay

INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of parental divorce is an event which leaves a long-term, if not permanent scar on one's life. When a divorce takes place, the family splits along with the separation. As such, divorce takes a huge toll on many aspects of the family's well-being, and is especially prevalent on their offspring (Damota, 2019). Studies have shown that children of divorced parents tend to have poorer mental health than those of children with intact parents. The reason for this, simply put, is the conditions of single parenthood—which more often than not, involves a certain loss of wealth and connection to the other parent (Bohman et. al, 2017).

Divorce has always been a persisting social issue which is very common in our modern world. According to the statistics by Forbes website, it is said that in 2021, there were a total of 689,308 divorce cases spread across the USA. On the other side of the world, Indonesia reported an estimated number of 516,000 divorce cases spread throughout the country in the following year. In addition to these general rates of divorce, reports show that there has been an increase in divorce rates at later periods of marriage especially in the last few decades. This phenomenon, which is often referred to as 'gray divorce', has seen a jump from the year 1990 to 2010. As stated by Brown and Lin (2022), "In 1990, fewer than one in ten (8%) persons getting divorced were aged 50 and older. By 2010, more than one in four (27%) people getting divorced were at least age 50".

When such late divorces take place in a family, there is a huge likelihood that children of the separating parents have reached early adulthood. This phase of early adulthood is called emerging adulthood, and adults who fall within this age category are 18-29 years old (Arnett et. al, 2014). While most studies emphasize on the effects of parental separation to offspring in their childhood phase (examples: Kim, 2011; Lansford, 2009; Rappaport, 2013), emerging adults who are children of divorced parents may also be heavily impacted by their parents' divorce process (Gettelfinger, 2012).

Upon delving deeper into the complex perspectives of emerging adults who had to deal with their parents' separation, We discovered that adult children of divorce (ACD), especially those of the emerging adult age group, generally have to struggle in all their phases of romantic relationship. Many cases report that ACD who are part of the emerging adult category are supportive about the idea of easily resorting to 'divorce' when things go downhill, and on the other hand, those who are not supportive of the idea may unintentionally fall into the fault of repeating their parents' action of 'divorcing' (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).

In addition, fear seems to be an aspect which settles prominently in the emerging adult's romantic relationships. Researchers have discovered that many of these emerging adults develop a certain extent of fear of abandonment as well as attachment issues which similarly stems from fear itself (Ottaway et. al, 2010). Another noteworthy point developed by the settling fear is the lack of trust they possess towards their partner (Ottaway, 2010). However, this lack of trust paired with their poor conflict management skills tend to simply worsen their own romantic circumstances (Amato, 1996).

Furthermore, after being a first-hand witness to their parents' divorce, it is very easy for the child of the divorced couple to feel bitter towards either one or even both parents (Tessy et. al, 2022). With divorce being a very common issue in our society as well, we believe that it is only vital to bring more awareness regarding the seriousness of this issue for adult children of divorce.

In this creative work, we will portray Tania, a woman in her late twenties who just received a marriage proposal from her boyfriend of five years. Due to her traumatizing experience of having to witness her own parents' sudden divorce in the previous years, Tania declines his proposal. Thus, the story revolves around Tania's journey as she finally faces her long-suppressed trauma and finds her point of healing.

For the statement of the problem of this creative work, we would like to explore what the psychological effects of a sudden divorce are to adult children of divorce, and how they may heal from their trauma. To be specific, in this creative work, we would like to explore what the psychological effects of a late divorce are to Tania and how Tania heals from her trauma.

Regarding the purpose of this creative work, we intend to show that the psychological effects of a divorce even to emerging adults can lead them to have a depressing perspective in romance and that forgiveness and gratitude can help her see things in a more positive light. In the context of this creative work, we want to show that the psychological effects of the divorce to Tania lead her to have negative perceptions and attitudes on romantic relationships and that forgiveness and gratitude can lead her to be happier regardless of her situation.

A growing concern for this issue has also stemmed from the fact that there have not been many Indonesian creative mediums which have covered this issue. Hence, this creative work is proposed in hopes of relieving the on-going lack of understanding of emerging adult children's perspective on undergoing their parental divorce.

Theory and Methodology

This creative work centers around a young woman's psychological struggles as she deals with the trauma caused by the sudden separation of her parents. Consequently, the sudden separation leads to many actions which are led by her psychological struggles. To delve further into the cause and effects of this issue, we have chosen the theory of Relational Trauma to address the changes of one's romantic perception as well as the results of those perceptions in

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their actions, and Positive Psychology, especially Flourishing concept, to show how one may effectively heal from the unpleasant experience.

Relational traumas, which involve the literal loss of relationships, rejections or other events which cause irreversible damage to core aspects of interpersonal well-being are particularly noteworthy. These kinds of events may bring about distress in a unique way for the victims, as they threaten the fundamental human need for connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This also aligns with the betrayal trauma theory, which suggests that traumatic events caused by close connections, such as a primary guardian, are particularly destructive because they involve deep feelings of betrayal (Freyd, 2001).

The second theory, Flourishing, is part of a theory called positive psychology. It is a term used to describe the state of high levels of psychological well-being. When someone reaches a state of flourishing, it can be suggested that the person has a complete mental health (Keyez & Lopez, 2002). In accordance with this idea, the flourishing concept is highly correlated with traits of forgiveness and gratitude. Psychology researchers Tessy, Setiasih and Nanik (2022) state that the correlation between flourishing and both forgiveness and gratitude within the context of parental separation can be measured by utilizing emotion-focused coping as a strategy based on the cognitive appraisal model theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

Firstly, forgiveness works as a positive emotional coping as it reduces the levels of negative feelings harbored towards the stressful situation (Witvliet et. al, 2001 as cited in Tessy et. al, 2022). Forgiveness does not only help them flourish even more by replacing negative feelings with positive ones, but also improves the quality of their relationship with their parents. Secondly, when adult children of divorce practice gratitude towards everything in their lives including all the possessions they still have along with the people around them, they get to see their lives in a broader perspective instead of just hyperfocusing on their parents. This will help them reflect on their experiences in a more positive light (Tessy et. al, 2022). Therefore, through these ideas, we can conclude that the state of flourishing may be triggered by external factors, including events and people, which then lead to internal revelations.

In the story, the usage of the first theory, Relational Trauma, answers the emergence of the problem that Tania has with her parents and also her relationship with her significant other. On the other hand, the second theory, the Flourishing concept, provides the possibility for a solution in which Tania can still heal and move forward from the situation by extending traits of forgiveness and gratitude.

For this creative thesis, we have been collecting data, theories, and even references through the secondary research method. In order to complete this study, we sought various resources online which are complementary to the topic of divorce. This research is mostly done online through digital journals and books covering the topic of divorce from many different aspects, such as the romantic perceptions on adult children of divorce, data on the increasing rates of gray divorce, meaning-making in romantic relationships and more. In the making of this creative work, we began from establishing the general plot of this screenplay based on the theories we have collected. After this step, we established the details of each character in the story. Finally, we formulated and polished the details regarding the plot through the step outline of the story.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

This creative work will take the genre of drama. Drama genre movies give a portrayal of the screenplay's fictional world as an unkind place which constantly hurts the protagonist (Selbo, 2014). This means that as the story progresses, the protagonist will regularly face tough situations which may or may not be caused by themselves, fleshing out distinct emotions as response towards those situations. The tragic narrative revolves around the downfall(s) of the protagonist due to their own shortcomings, wrongdoings or even as simple as perspectives (Selbo, 2014).

In the creation of this screenplay, a lot of inspiration was taken from two creative works namely *Little Women* (2019) and *Queen of Tears* (2024). A point of the *Little Women* movie which has been incorporated into the screenplay is the usage of flashback, highlighting the contrast between the past and present to the audience. On the other hand, the second work, *Queen of Tears* (2024) is a Korean original series which tells about the story of a couple's struggle to maintain their relationship after three years of marriage. The topic of divorce was heavily incorporated throughout the series, and it shows the impact of divorce in crucial life aspects especially towards family members hence making this series a great inspiration for the creative work.

In terms of genre codes and conventions, the creative work adapts the drama genre. Dramas utilize characters dealing with the struggles of everyday life (Hellerman, 2023). Tania, the protagonist, is a graphic designer and a stationary shop manager in her late twenties whose parents divorced about a decade before the time of the creative work. In the first half of the story, most of the events will take place in Surabaya, a metropolitan city in Indonesia. The story mostly takes place in the current year 2025, however occasionally with past moments from the years 2010 to 2014 presented in the forms of flashback.

Theme

This creative work discusses the severe effects of divorce on adult children's romantic perception and how the process to reach healing may look like. The creative work depicts the trauma gained through the shattered idea of an ideal romantic relationship, which originates from the individual's foundation of romantic perception—their parents' relationship. Through internal decision-making, the individual may move towards healing and acceptance or remain stagnant without change. Thus, with divorce as the main issue of the story, the creative work emphasizes on the relationship matters, along with forgiveness and personal growth as part of the healing progression.

Plot

The premise of this screenplay is that a girl who is traumatized by her parents' divorce is forced to finally deal with her decade-long trauma when her boyfriend proposes to her. The creative principle of the screenplay is that I want to show the real struggles of a person who is traumatized by her parents' divorce and how it may affect their decision in committing to a marriage. The logline of the screenplay is that, shattered by her parents' divorce, a young woman must confront her past and find healing through forgiveness before she can embrace love and commit to marriage.

The pitch of the screenplay is as follows:

- a. Tania, a 28-year-old woman with trauma regarding marriage, wants to make sure that her marriage will not end like her parents.

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- b. As soon as her boyfriend proposes she begins to face the complexities of her long-suppressed trauma which is the true reason for her hesitation to get married.
- c. Ultimately, Tania is able to forgive her father, heal from her trauma, and place her trust on commitment in her partner.

To summarize, the story begins with Tania, a woman who possesses long-suppressed trauma regarding marriage due to her parents' sudden divorce. Through her boyfriend's proposal, she is forced to face her trauma head-on and finally start healing from the hurt. In the end, Tania is able to choose forgiveness and gratitude over her situation, which enables her to accept her parents' separation and finally begin to trust her partner.

Characters

Main character:

Tania, a 28-year-old woman, is an individual actively working with practical arts—she is both a full-time graphic designer and the manager of her mother's stationary shop. She has black hair, fair skin and always dresses modestly. Brilliant as she is, Tania is independent in the way she navigates life and is quite detached to most people, which also results in a number of misunderstandings with others. Her seemingly serious and distant attitude is a byproduct of her not trusting anyone but her mother. Unfortunately, this trait also causes her to be dumbfounded and avoidant with highly emotional situations.

Side characters:

Tania's mother, a 57-year-old woman, is a very considerate person who places great value in her relationships. She has short black hair and is quite tall. After Tania told her to stop working, she began to delve deeper into a variety of small hobbies, such as baking, decorating and taking walks. She also has a habit of scanning the social atmosphere and lifting it whenever it gets too heavy. Despite having a soft and selfless exterior, Tania's mother has a wise outlook in life. However, even though she claims to have forgiven her ex-husband, she never fully recovered from her husband's infidelity with another woman and is often reflecting about it without Tania knowing.

Tania's father, a 58-year-old man, is a doctor. By the surface, Tania's father retains a stern demeanor and displays a workaholic behaviour. He is known as a good man who excels in his job, which is a similar trait his daughter took on. Beneath his strict exterior, Tania's father is a man who has difficulty expressing both his affection and emotions. This had caused him to unconsciously harbor pent-up anger towards his former wife, which ultimately led him to cheat on her. After the divorce, Tania's father moved to another city and started a new life, forever weighed by the immense guilt of his grave mistake.

Melvin, a 28-year-old man, is Tania's boyfriend. He is a committed individual who values sincerity above all else. As the middle child in the family, he is used to being overlooked by his parents and strives to be more hardworking in order to achieve greater things. Melvin is currently working for his company as part of the international marketing department, sometimes travelling between cities or even countries for proper market research. Outside of his hardworking nature at work, Melvin can be quite clumsy at times and prefers to take things lightly. This trait makes him someone who tends to share jokes a lot.

Brenda, a 26-year-old woman, is Tania's co-worker. She is also a member of the team Tania leads in their company. Brenda is an easygoing person who pays attention to other people. This leads her to have the tendency to lend a hand to her fellow co-workers easily. As someone who carries a friendly and down-to-earth demeanor, Brenda has earned herself a good reputation among the people in her company. However, being a person who is close to a lot of different people makes her someone who is also akin to others' rumors and gossip.

Conflict

There are two types of conflict in creative work. The first and more prominent conflict is Man vs. Self. According to author Jerry Jenkins, who has written over 200 books, Man vs Self conflict is a conflict which takes place internally and may manifest in both real external actions and also ‘inactions’—which refers to internal actions such as, dreaming, hallucinations and more (Jenkins, 2024). In this story, this conflict takes place through the protagonist’s internal conflict between her trauma and the willingness to trust and commit to marriage. The second type of conflict is Man vs. Man. This conflict happens between at least two characters, where the characters are on opposing sides with each other (Jenkins, 2021). In the creative work, this conflict takes place very briefly during Tania’s flashback about her parents, when they argue with one another.

CONCLUSION

This research along with the creative work created possess two main purposes. Firstly, this creative work wishes to express the severity of how a parental divorce may traumatize their children, even when they have reached the age of adulthood. To be specific, this creative work explores how a parental divorce may leave a traumatizing impact on their children’s romantic perception. The second purpose which this creative work wishes to deliver is the idea that regardless of the complexity of the matter, healing ultimately starts from within oneself, with the first steps being forgiveness and gratitude. Tania’s story which is depicted through the creative work highlights that adults are not exempt from the effects of trauma caused by a parental divorce and that the struggle towards healing from the trauma is real but is also very much possible.

Regarding future plans, there is a possibility to realize the creative work into a movie. However, we believe that the current result of the creative work has room for improvements. Some details from the screenplay related to the realistic aspect could be altered in order for the screenplay to be made into a movie. Furthermore, there is also a plan to publish the story in a short novella format. There are certain people who have a stronger preference for reading stories, as opposed to watching a movie, which is another considerable angle in regards to creative work.

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