

GRIEF CAUSED BY WAR IN “MIEKO AND THE FIFTH TREASURE” BY ELEANOR COERR

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ABSTRACT

War is a part of human history that is full of grief memories. Literature is a written forum for humanity to remember past events such as war which brought many different reactions and results in life. One of the literary works that portrays the concepts of war, grief, and trauma is “Mieko and the Fifth Treasure” written by Eleanor Coerr. This book was the primary data source of this journal. The purpose of this research was to find the changes due to World War II on the main character “Mieko” and the ways of dealing with her changes, by applying the theory of grief proposed by Kübler-Ross and David Kessler. The main results showed that before the war happened, Mieko was a normal girl who had a wonderful life and loved to make calligraphy art. However, after the war happened, Mieko experienced feelings of fear, confusion, abandonment, insecurity, and many other grief reactions, as a result of her injured hand, her movement to the village, and the bullying she got from some of her classmates. However, Mieko’s friendship with Yoshi slowly turned her negative thoughts into positive ones and made her grow more mature than his past personality. This article wrapped up the essence of healing from visible and invisible wounds that can be done through caring and love for others who are experiencing deep problems in life.

Keywords: War, Grief, Trauma

ABSTRAK

Perang merupakan bagian dari sejarah manusia yang penuh dengan kenangan kesedihan. Sastra merupakan wadah tertulis bagi seluruh umat manusia untuk mengingat peristiwa masa lampau seperti peperangan yang dapat menimbulkan banyak reaksi dan akibat yang bervariasi dalam kehidupan. Salah satu karya sastra yang menggambarkan konsep perang, kesedihan, dan trauma adalah “Mieko and the Fifth Treasure” yang ditulis oleh Eleanor Coerr. Buku ini menjadi sumber utama dari pembuatan jurnal penelitian ini. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui perubahan akibat Perang Dunia II pada tokoh utama “Mieko” dan caranya menghadapi perubahan tersebut, dengan menerapkan teori kesedihan yang dikemukakan oleh Kübler-Ross and David Kessler. Hasil utama dari penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebelum perang terjadi, Mieko adalah seorang gadis normal yang memiliki kehidupan yang indah dan suka membuat seni kaligrafi. Namun, setelah perang terjadi, Mieko mengalami perasaan takut, kebingungan, ditinggalkan, tidak aman dan banyak reaksi kesedihan lainnya, akibat tangannya yang terluka, perpindahannya ke desa, dan

perundungan yang ia dapatkan dari beberapa teman sekelasnya. Namun persahabatan Mieko dengan Yoshi perlahan mengubah pikiran negatifnya menjadi positif dan membuatnya tumbuh lebih dewasa dibandingkan kepribadian masa lalunya. Artikel ini merangkum hakikat penyembuhan dari luka yang terlihat dan tidak terlihat yang dapat dilakukan melalui kepedulian dan kasih sayang kepada sesama yang sedang mengalami permasalahan berat dalam hidup.

Kata kunci: Perang, Kesedihan, Trauma

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a collection of works filled with records of everyday human life experiences (Bakhtin; Holquist; Emerson, 1981). Literature has a similar concept to psychology, which is studying the expression of human beings. The literary approach usually uses written works like books, poetry, film scripts, and song lyrics to express the meaning of life implicitly, whereas the psychological approach emphasizes face-to-face conversations (Dar, 2022: 285). One of the phases where humans express loss, fear, bitterness, loneliness, anger, stress, and many other negative feelings is called grief. Grief is separated into four negative responses such as “denial, anger, bargaining, and depression” and two positive responses afterward “acceptance and finding meaning” (Kessler and Kübler-Ross, 2019: 7-8). These responses usually arise because of big events such as war, car accidents, and natural disasters which make the sufferer feel a loss in their life and end in grief. A repetitive imagination from one big post-event that causes deep pain in the mind is known as trauma (Freud 1917: 241).

In the world of literary works, feelings of pain in mind can also be told through a character, for example, the character King

George VI who experienced childhood trauma in the historical drama film “The King’s Speech” written by David Seidler in 2010. Anwar (2013) used this drama film to make a research study about the reasons for the emergence of King George VI’s childhood trauma. In his findings, Anwar (2013) found that the reason King George VI experienced childhood trauma was because he experienced bullying from an early age, a strict upbringing under the guidance of his father (King George V), and pressure to conform to society’s expectations as a royal family member. This affected his growth period and caused him to stutter when communicating and succeed his father as a successor to the throne.

Today, many people also experience feelings of being overwhelmed with negative emotions and thoughts that seem insurmountable. Due to the many tensions and challenges in life, people start to lose hope and become increasingly immersed in feelings of not only trauma but also grief. Herman (1992) mentioned that trauma can cause a variety of emotional responses, and grief is one of them. Trauma survivors may grieve not only for the loss of security but also for the loss of self, relationships, and life before the trauma. Working through this grief is an important part of

the recovery process. Here, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005; 2019) further stated that through the four stages of grief “denial, anger, bargaining, and depression”, people can also learn to understand the concept of grief in a positive light, such as “accepting” their problems and “finding meaning” to fill the hole of their imaginative fear into a new face full of happiness and purpose in life.

Through “Mieko and the Fifth Treasure” written by Eleanor Coerr, the writer of this journal wants to explain further the negative and positive reactions of the main character before and after the war occurred through the grief theory. The war here is not only about a battle of physical strength but also a mental battle. Gladwell (2013) explains that a mental battle is an excessive stress that accumulates due to not being able to handle difficult conflicts in the fields of education, business, medicine, and other social activities, which in the end can cause disorders in the body. Through the concepts of war, trauma, and grief, the writer decided to make this research a basis for all of us to learn from Mieko’s life experiences and the grief she has overcome so that we know how to take steps to build a strong mentality and even able to provide support to others who need help.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This journal used descriptive-interpretive qualitative research to break down the analysis of the negative and positive reactions of the main character before and after the war occurred. Descriptive-interpretive qualitative research is a

methodology utilized in sociologies and humanities to investigate and figure out the intricacies of the human way of behaving, encounters, and peculiarities (Elliott & Timulak, 2021: 3-4). Not only that, this research also used online library research. The primary data source for this research was “Mieko and the Fifth Treasure” written by Eleanor Coerr. This book is a fictional story about children published by Puffin Books in 2003 with a total of 47 pages. The book was originally searched through Google and got the free Digital Version (pdf.), as for the secondary materials, the writer also browsed several reliable (institutional) websites to access related articles from online journals. The data collection procedure of this research was inspired from Elliott & Timulak’s theory (2021), and then developed into methods of reviewing the questions from statements of problems, conducting a literature review, analyzing the book “Mieko and the Fifth Treasure”, applying “The Six Stages of Grief” theory from Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005; 2019), checking and combining the data. Data analysis of this research was also inspired from Elliott & Timulak’s theory (2021), and then formulated into methods of taking notes, organizing the research body, sorting and typing the findings, formulating results and conclusions, double-checking, and minimizing mistakes.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the main character’s personality before the war occurred, Mieko was portrayed as a ten-year-old girl with good manners (p. 15). She loved her parents. She had several

friends in her hometown, near Nagasaki (p. 11). She is also skilled in calligraphy painting and practices her art regularly, it is explained on (p. 10) that Mieko could never feel any happier than having a brush in her hand.

After the war occurred, Mieko's personality underwent several changes in grief thinking about her house being destroyed, her hand hurting from the bomb explosion, and having to stay at her grandparents' house in the village for several months (p. 11). From these bad experiences, Mieko began to deny the possibility that her hand could heal. It is proven on (p. 11) that Mieko rejected her father's talk about her hand recovering in a short time. Mieko did not believe it because she knew her father worked as a doctor and used to calm his patients in this way. Moving on from there, Mieko did not want to harbor the false hopes she received from her father. Denial with the current state of her hand has made Mieko really resented the war. Mieko believed she was transferred to the village, estranged from her parents and feeling many inconveniences that she had never experienced before because of the war and bombs that destroyed her hometown. On (p. 13), Mieko even had nightmares from the images of war that were still echoing in her mind. It is explained that Mieko's nightmare was about an airplane dropping a big-scale bomb and it exploded right in her face. Based on this statement, the writer concluded that Mieko has a tendency to have trouble sleeping or insomnia.

The accumulation of anger and hatred for the war and bombs have made Mieko feel

her current look useless and ugly. Mieko was of the firm opinion that the state of her current hand would never be able to create calligraphy art as beautiful as before, and other productive activities properly (p. 15). This proved that Mieko was trying to blame her condition on the war and perhaps it was also her God who allowed her to experience this terrible situation. However, Mieko's hatred did not stop there. Her hatred and dislike grew stronger when her grandparents told her to enter a new school in their village (p. 15). Instead of being happy, the writer found that Mieko felt hatred and fear of school, like being mocked and not accepted because of her current look. Then her hatred and fear created a form of denial which could be seen on (p. 15), when she tried to look sick in front of her grandparents by saying she had "mumps" to not go to her new school. Mieko's bad feelings before entering the school became a reality when she received some criticism and bullying from several of her classmates, especially the boys on just her first day of school (p. 18-19). In anger, Mieko said to her grandpa that her new school was awful and she would never want to enter it again because everyone there hated her (p. 21). Based on Mieko's reaction, the writer saw that Mieko often overthinks lots of things that might not be true or have not happened yet. It was explained on (p. 18-19) that only some students like "Akira and the boys" talked badly and mocked Mieko. On (p. 17), Mieko's new teacher "Miss Suzuki" did not talk rudely to her when they met in front of the classroom. Miss Suzuki helped Mieko introduce herself to her students and even told her students to treat Mieko kindly since Mieko was a victim of war

near the Nagasaki area. Apart from that, Mieko was also helped by a girl named "Yoshi" when her bag and art tools were toyed with by Akira and the boys (p. 19). Based on these statements, it is proven that Mieko's assumption that everyone at school hates her was not true. On the other hand, there are still some people at school who cared about her like Miss Suzuki and Yoshi. The accumulated stress from the war left Mieko conflicted with feelings of fear of being judged and looked down upon her look. That is why, when Mieko heard some bad gossip about her look, she is immediately and emotionally provoked, then made her think lowly of herself by comparing her current "horrible" life with the "beautiful" life of normal kids around her age.

Comparing her life with normal kids like "Yoshi" made Mieko want to go back to her wonderful life before the war started. Mieko tried to find the best ways to bargain her old life back again. It was proved on (p. 12) that Mieko truly hoped the war never happened to begin with. Mieko's grandpa showed her a rock carved with the words "Spilled water never returns to the glass". The writer found that the meaning of these words has something to do with Mieko's current situation. Even though Mieko tried her best to deny and be angry about the condition of her injured hand and the long scar left by the bomb explosion, she would never be able to go back to the past and return it to its original state as it was God's will for her. Still in the same context, Mieko showed her envy towards Yoshi's body shape. On (p. 19), Mieko described Yoshi's appearance as a small, dainty, calm, pretty, and flower-smelly girl,

whereas she described herself as an upset, hot, sweaty, freak, and ugly girl. Based on this statement, the writer could say that there must be one moment in Mieko's mind where she felt like she wished to exchange her life with Yoshi. However, one thing that Mieko did not know is that behind Yoshi's beautiful appearance, Yoshi's life was not perfect. Since baby, Yoshi no longer has parents because her parents were killed and the only family left was her aunty (p. 28). Compared to Yoshi's and Mieko's life experiences, Yoshi underwent far more serious grief since she was a baby. In her growth, Yoshi never felt the love of her parents, while to this day Mieko still has her parents who sometimes send letters asking about her condition. However, different reactions could be seen in both of them, Yoshi could fight her hardship with a smile on her face, whereas Mieko still deeply resents and blames the war for ruining her perfect life.

Deeply stressed with her condition, Mieko felt hopeless thinking about her past, present, and future life. At present, Mieko always felt homesick remembering her old home with her parents and friends. She wished to spend time practicing her calligraphy in her room (p. 11). The writer found that even after moving to the village, Mieko still felt homesick and such made her have no appetite for eating or sleeping. The loneliness grew further when she got no friends on her first day of new school. Instead of friends, Mieko received bullying from the boys in her class (p. 18-19). As such, Mieko felt unfocused in the middle of learning and made several mistakes, such as stumbled on her feet, dropped her book, forgot all

the Japanese emperor's name, and did not hear the question (p. 18). Feeling hated by all the kids and teachers at school, Mieko did not want to go back to school anymore. That is why, when Mieko's grandparents told her to re-enter the school after consulting with the doctor, Mieko yelled in refusal and said the word "never" in front of her grandparents and doctor, and then she left the house to the mountain area (p. 26). The word "never" in here, could be said as a sign of threat for Mieko. It could also be a sign that she was deeply under stress and had high pressure from a problem she could not handle. In response to that, Mieko whose mind was in turmoil, decided to run away from her grandparents' house to seek comfort from nature.

As time goes by, Mieko slowly begins to open up to other people again. Mieko did not feel any bitterness from her classmates and teachers after she went to school with Yoshi. All of them, except Akira, showed concern by learning from Mieko's suffering during the war, which made Mieko no longer harbor feelings of hurt towards them (p. 30). Mieko also becomes Yoshi's best friend. Mieko's change in a positive direction was inspired by Yoshi's strong story after losing her parents when she was a baby and also thanks to the help of Yoshi's aunt who made Mieko return to pursuing her dream as a calligraphy artist. The writer concluded that through this point, Mieko finally dared to socialize again and did not isolate herself from nature as a form of personal barrier to seek comfort. Mieko also shows acceptance of her condition and moves on by trying to practice her calligraphy skills once again. Although

sometimes, Mieko's emotional system still goes up and down. With the help of her parents, grandparents, Aunt Hisako (Yoshi's aunt), and especially Yoshi, Mieko managed to rediscover the true meaning and new hope in her life. Therefore, to commemorate her last moments in the village, Mieko gave Yoshi a special friendship gift, which is a beautiful calligraphy painting that she made at the school art competition.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the book "Mieko and the Fifth Treasure" by Eleanor Coer, the writer came to the conclusion that a major event like war can change one's nature from a positive to a negative perspective. In the same way that Mieko initially struggled with the negative effects of war on her life, a lot of people today are dealing with a variety of personal griefs, including the loss of a loved one, unresolved plans, and the disruptions brought on by global events. Mieko, the main character, went through trauma during the war, which changed her thoughts, actions, and feelings. In the case of Mieko, she became more pessimistic after the war, but after becoming friends with "Yoshi", she started to change her mind and become more optimistic. If before the war, Mieko felt that her life was typical and loaded with cheerful recollections of investing energy with her parents and friends. After the war, Mieko thinks from a grief perspective. She had to leave a comfortable place she had never considered leaving, and the beautiful world she had created was shattered. She started to feel scared, lost, confused,

unsafe, insecure, abandoned and saw anyone as an enemy in a strange place. However, after going through that grief and getting to know Yoshi, Mieko tried her best to overcome her negative overreaction to the war and accept her condition in peace, calm, and more mature. From the result of this analysis, we as human beings learned that compassion and caring for others are truly needed even the smallest pieces of the story that we share could have positive impacts or many different reactions in a different meaning of life like Mieko.

Here, despite the fact that the tale “Mieko and the Fifth Treasure” is enjoyable and conveys a profound moral message. The writer of this journal maintains that the theory of grief “denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and finding meaning” developed by Kübler Ross and David Kessler (2005; 2019) might still restrict the scope of the research’s findings and not convey the main character’s overall reaction or emotion. Through this journal, the writer hopes that many new writers will be able to better search for and employ various theories on the same subject of grief and war.

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