

**The failure to overcome trauma: “Eyes” as a silent and silenced victim
in the juvenile novel *Heaven* (2022)**

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ABSTRACT

Realistic depiction and representation of harsh reality of life have markedly emerged in children’s literature. In the age of global conversation around bullying and sexual violence, investigating trauma—formerly a forbidden, delicate topic—has gained crucial momentum. Accordingly, this study (1) examines Eyes’ traumatic disorders in *Heaven* (2022) by Mieko Kawakami, and (2) unveils his result of trauma recovery journey. Applying a descriptive-qualitative approach, data were gathered through systematic close reading and note-taking and interpreted according to Judith Herman’s theory of trauma. It is revealed that Eyes’ trauma stems from chronic emotional and physical bullying, as well as non-direct sex violence, leading to extreme disassociation. His recuperation is represented as incomplete and precarious. There are moments of safety through a comforting letter-writing, yet they are unstable. Remembrance and mourning stages are constrained, as exemplified by a lack of self-consciousness, an absence of empathy from others, and no professional help. Reconnection falls through when he chooses a physical transformation through eye surgery over emotional recovery and relational reconciliation. To conclude, “Eyes” is an example of a silent and silenced trauma victim, whose continuous anonymity throughout the entire story functions as a form of personal, social, and narrative erasure, indicating unsuccessful trauma recovery. From this novel, the significance of performing open and honest discussion supportive environment, and empathetic team—among peers, between students-teachers, children-parents, and general public—emerge as a set of central educational message.

Keywords: Children literature, *Heaven*, Judith Herman, silent and silenced victim, trauma

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INTRODUCTION

Children’s literature has led to an exposure of the deep complexities of real life, allowing young readers to engage critically as they work through the text. This essential engagement problematizes traditional didacticism. By nurturing their capacity to maintain multiple conflicting perspectives, it calls into question the notion that moral knowledge is static or prescriptive (Mukherjee, Leedham & Hunt, 2025). This shift is representative of a broader trend in children’s and young adult literature, with prominent critics such as Virginia Burke Epstein (1986) observing how modern texts are coming to serve—rather than dance around, the genuine realities of life. Instead, harsh topics within the text provoke deep ethical and moral thought, inviting children to interpret subversively with complex circumstances and uncertain moral choices (Rosyida et al., 2025; Taylor, 2011). In this way, children’s literature, particularly books for teens, ceases to serve as a means to inculcate obedience, instead becomes a space where young readers may evaluate information and train them in decision-making independently (Epstein, 1986). Perry Nodelman (in Reynolds, 2007) also argues that books dealing with uncomfortable emotions and confusing situations enable children to name and relate their emotions, thus they do not feel isolated or misunderstood.

Exposing children, especially teens to sensitive subjects that will force them to use their critical thinking becomes much relevant following the surging trend of issues such as bullying and sexual assault aside which continue to grow at an alarming rate. Based on the latest available public UNICEF data

worldwide (July 2024), more than 1 in 3 students aged 13-15, shows that they have been bullied at least once. The statistics are just as shocking when it comes to rape and sexual violence. More than 370 million girls have suffered from such experiences by the age of 18, rising to 650 million if non-contact abuse is included. Boys suffer too, with an estimated 410 million to 530 million became victims of childhood non-contact sexual violence, and 240 million to 310 million having been raped or sexually assaulted. These numbers demonstrate an ongoing trend of bullying and violence in the schools, with low reports indicating that more students could be affected. According to these UNICEF record, most sexual violence in childhood happens during adolescence, with a peak around the ages of 14 and 17. The data also show that the problem of bullying, regardless of being reported or not by the victim, is constant and systemic in schools. Fear, stigma, and societal pressure silence many of the victims which validates concept of silent and silenced victim (Gjika & Marganski, 2020). This situation accounts for the fact that fear of social isolation and negative judgment can cause people falling into a spiral process of silence, bearing a culture of silence within society (Freire, 1970; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In addition, to evaluate the issues in male victims, law enforcement typically does not have the necessary tools to assess their case, leaving the victims become unprotected and vulnerable (Thomas & Kopel, 2023). Hence, as a result of stigmatized male victims, they remain both silent and silenced, carrying the weight of unresolved pain that often leads to psychological effects from their unsettled childhood trauma (Rechenberg et al., 2024).

This discourse of silent and silenced victims—victims whose voice is suppressed by their own fear and by the oppressive strictures in environment, is well illustrated in Mieko Kawakami's novel entitled *Heaven* (2022). It is a Japanese novel which translated globally into English by Sam Bett and David Boyd, and also shortlisted for International Booker Prize in 2022. In this teen novel, the protagonist is a boy whose real name is never stated, and simply called by the insulting nickname "Eyes" by his schoolmates because he has lazy eyes. This boy around 14-year-old is subjected to relentless bullying, and later non-contact sexual abuse by his peers. Struggling in an environment devoid of full support and empathy, his trauma becomes both physical and psychological. Based on the theory, indeed, trauma is not only an internal pain, but it is also a harmful lingering feeling that follows the victim until it has been completely told and witnessed (Caruth, 1996; Laub & Felman, 1992). Without empathetic listener, victims of trauma cannot heal and move on through their life because they cannot digest their painful experience. In another word, they will remain in isolation. Trauma also leads the victim to feel that they have lost power and control of their life. Hence, the central tenet in trauma recovery is to return that power and control back to the victim (Kardiner & Spiegel, 1947). Additionally, Phillips (2015) cautions that unspoken trauma could escalate into more violence tendency. This is supported by the empirical evidence that early exposure to trauma increases individual's susceptibility to aggressive and violence behavior which can expand to dual harm, including to their self and others (Gélinas, et al., 2025; Madigan et al., 2019; Steeg et al., 2023). It is an unbreakable cycle of helplessness unless the chain is disrupted. Without targeted intervention, emotional agony in response to past trauma is tend to accumulate and recur over time (Hughes et al., 2017).

A remarkable American psychiatrist, Judith Herman (1992) argues that trauma is not simply a painful event, but an experience that fundamentally disrupts a person's sense of safety and control, leaving them overwhelmed by fear and mistrust toward others. Within her framework of traumatic disorders, she identifies several core forms of psychological traumatic experience. First, the notion of terror is a state of mind in a constant overwhelming fear, leaving an individual feels out of control. Second, disconnection refers to the times when a victim is not tuned in or feeling alienated and detached. Third, captivity is trauma condition in which the victims are left feeling trapped either physically or mentally (as in domestic violence or serial bullying). In line with the theories, researches on trauma survivors and trauma-exposed victims indicate that trauma exposure is often linked with a reduced sense of control and power, which has been associated with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Keidar et al., 2025; Salcioglu et al., 2017). Social support, safe spaces for disclosure and understanding listeners are essentials, because without these necessary elements, victims' incapability of emotional processing and prolongs trauma-related distress will continue to persist in isolation (Edwards et al., 2022; Laub & Felman, 1992; Sippel et al., 2024; Thoresen et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2021). It is due to their detachment that they need to remain silent and silenced by their own shame, or fear of stigmatization by the environment. Trauma is, then, much the same as an unfinished story. The victims potentially inter themselves in silence because the memories are too splintered and painful to

recount (Caruth, 1996). The trauma exists as an open-ended result of past painful memories, whereby emotional responses are often processed incompletely during the traumatic event and may emerge only later afterwards (Cao et al., 2025). This delay in processing is what makes it so hard for traumatized individuals to articulate their experience. Moreover, trauma is also not just a matter of the past, but more crucially, about the persistent aftereffects of pain and fear that keep people locked into powerlessness and change their perceptions in response of threats (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Herman (1992) also describes several phases of trauma recovery. The first is safety, which means reconstituting a feeling of physical and emotional security. Healing from traumatic incident, she insists, always starts first with feeling safe. No recovery happens in an unsafe environment where it affects the victims capacity to control trauma-based symptoms including anxieties and flashbacks. The second phase is remembering and mourning, in which survivors are finally able to remember and relive their trauma in a safe therapeutic environment. They are helped to acknowledge, come to terms with it, and voice their long-held traumatic memories that had remained suppressed, so that enabling pent-up feelings to be gradually released and grieved. The third phase, reconnection, is associated with rebuilding real life connections between the survivor and others to have and regain a meaningful existence. Processed and integrated trauma, as after digesting the memories, can result in post-traumatic growth, which includes enhanced self-compassion, reestablished interpersonal trust, healthier relationships and a more forward-looking way to life (Adonis et al., 2025). Yet, as previously stated, recovery from trauma is a relational process that requires a supporting social network for long-term stress relief and cannot be achieved in isolation (Herman 2002; Calhoun et al., 2022).

A number of studies have examined *Heaven* (2022) by Mieko Kawakami through from different perspectives. First, Jannah et al. (2025) carried out a study in *Kajian Fakta Kemanusiaan dalam Novel Heaven: Perspektif Strukturalisme Genetik Lucien Goldmann*. It concentrates on describing the representation of human truths in novels. The focus of this research is to explore how the novel embodies social and personal human realities, especially in Japanese society through the book. This study employs Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism Theory, focusing on social and individual facts. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach and a dialectical method, the researchers found that *Heaven* abounds with various human truths, including sociological facts (school bullying), ideological dimensions (feminist values embodied by the character Kojima), cultural elements (Japanese funeral practices and purification myths), and individual experiences such as bravery, despair, and the struggle for meaning in life. Secondly, Putri et al. (2024) conducted a study entitled *Social Classes Inequality In The English-Translated Version By Bett And Boyd Of Kawakami's Japanese Novel Entitled "Heaven"*. This study concentrates on how social hierarchy and inequality (particularly contributing to school bullying) are reflected in both the original and translated versions of this novel. The reserchers employed Karl Marx's class theory, Levy Jr.'s Japanese social structure, Goldmann's concept of worldview and trans-individual, and Newmark's cultural translation theory. Using a qualitative descriptive combined with grounded approach, the researchers discovered that Kawakami creates her characters based on actual class differences in Japanese society. Bullies like Ninomiya represents the bourgeoisie class, while victims like "Eyes" and Kojima are portrayed as laborers or low class. The translators, Bett and Boyd, succeeded in preserving the social class markers in the English version by incorporating culture-specific elements. This ensures that the socio-cultural values contained within the novel remain intact for readers around globe to read.

Nonetheless, existing studies largely overlook the psychological depth of Eyes as both protagonist and narrator, thereby limiting a nuanced interpretation of the traumatic experience depicted in *Heaven*. In this regard, Herman's Trauma Theory offers more appropriate framework for understanding the character. Herman's model provides a deep insight into how psychological trauma can harm identity, block the conscious articulation of the self and sever social connections. As a work that centers on childhood experience, *Heaven* and trauma perspective are suitable match, given that repeated trauma in early childhood profoundly shapes personality development (Herman, 1992). From a trauma-informed perspective, the absence of a personal name for "Eyes" carries deep psychological and symbolic significance, reflecting the erosion of identity perception commonly experienced by trauma victims.

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Therefore, this study aims to (1) examine how the character “Eyes” experiences multiple forms of trauma in *Heaven* (2022) by Mieko Kawakami as categorized by Herman’s traumatic disorders. This research, moreover, intends to (2) explore Eyes’ process of trauma recovery journey based on Herman’s stages of trauma recovery. The importance of this study is also to emphasize the need to invest in examining the research findings as a part of educational teaching segment for children, teacher & parents as adults, and general public as readers to engage trauma perspective in both preventive and curative measures. Reading this research is not only limited to identifying the causes and consequences of trauma, but also highlighting practical insights into how this issue be addressed, managed, and mitigated through preventive strategies and effective trauma-healing processes.

METHOD

This study applied a descriptive qualitative research approach. This method can be categorized as a humanist literary criticism, which aims to restore human subjectivity by liberating individuals from being viewed as powerless objects or inanimate entities (Faruk, 2014). This type of qualitative study seeks to understand and interpret phenomena from the researcher’s perspective, in which the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009; Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

The primary source of the data is an adolescent novel, *Heaven* (2022) by Mieko Kawakami. The data were consist of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs and discourses found in the novel, all of which analyzed as interrelated elements that forming a network of meaning. Data collection was conducted through close reading and note-taking. The data collection procedure completed by repeatedly and attentively read the novel, *Heaven* (2022), to gain a deep understanding of the narratives. The researchers then selected and marked relevant data by practicing a note-taking technique to meet the intended corpus data within the research classifications. The data were classified by elements of traumatic disorder and recovery within the concept of Judith Herman’s trauma theory. The data analysis stages were initiated generally through 3 (three) steps: data condensation, data display, and conclusion making (Miles et al., 2014). Firstly, researchers arranged the data into a specific, ordered elements, and grouping them by shared characteristics in refer to the classifications based on Herman’s theory. In this stage, only necessary data were taken into the next step. Second, researchers presented the corpus data built upon the research results and discussion in tabular forms (e.g. tables 1, 2, and 3) to facilitate more comprehensible reading. Third and last, researchers established holistic conclusions according to the their analytical reading and thinking in line with the theory applied. The validation process was performed through researchers’ interdisciplinary backgrounds and professionals expertise in academic journal writing. To refine this article, iterative analysis supported by multiple scientific studies on trauma was also incorporated to minimize bias and misinterpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study focuses on traumatic experiences of the main character, “Eyes” as silent and silence victim, using *Heaven* (2022)—named as one of TIME’s 100 Must-Read Books of 2021—as its primary object material. It explores how trauma molds his characters, that representing victims of bullying and non-direct sexual abuse in early childhood whose voice is silenced by culture of fear and stigma. This exploration is not only a literary analysis but also a reflection on the topic of trauma that remains sensitive, particularly when the victims choose to remain silent. By examining the character’s journey through the lens of Judith Herman’s trauma theory, this research aims to uncover the hidden wounds of human as social beings who is a part of society.

Table 1. Identification of Traumatic Disorders

NO.	TRAUMATIC DISORDER	PRESENCE	NOTES
1.	Terror	☑	Mental, verbal, and Physical
2.	Disconnection	☑	Mental and Physical
3.	Captivity	☑	Mental and Physical

Table 2. Eyes’ Stages of Recovery and Corresponding Outcomes

NO.	STAGE OF RECOVERY	PRESENT	PARTIAL	ABSENT	NOTES
1.	Safety	-	☑	-	Failed recovery outcome
2.	Remembrance and Mourning	-	☑	-	Failed recovery outcome
3.	Reconnection	-	-	☑	Failed recovery outcome

Based on the data compiled, the lack of a personal name attributed to “Eyes” can be understood as a manifestation of identity disruption, in which the subject’s sense of self is reduced to a fragmented or objectified being—reflecting disconnection, emotional numbing, and the erosion of personal agency commonly associated with traumatic experience. Thus, based on the book, this research also encourages a broader conversation about the importance of empathy and awareness among peers, and within school environment and family. This is crucial, as peer bullying constitutes a form of early childhood violence with serious psychological and social consequences in the children’s future. With many difficulties happening in the world right now, whether directly affected as a victim or watching from the outside, it is always important to have communication and discussion. Awareness does not belong only to the victim or the center of a conflict, but also all of aspects integrated in society.

Table 3. Educational Messages Derived from the Analysis

Target Groups	Types of Measure	Educational Messages	Analytical Basis from the Novel
Children’s peer relationship (school situation)	Preventive	Encourage steady communication with trusted peers. Improve self-agency.	Eyes’ prolonged silence and his reluctance to communicate even with his only friend intensify his trauma and enable the normalization of bullying in his school.
	Curative	Emphasize the importance of empathy among school friends as the first step toward trauma recovery.	
Students & Teachers	Preventive	Foster a safe school environment where emotional distress is recognized and addressed early. Implement anti-bullying rules and regulations in school.	The school setting in the novel functions as a primary site of trauma rather than protection. It is too late when adults from school informed and acted about the bullying.
	Curative	Support the victim through sustained emotional support and non-judgmental hearing. Practice the rule violation.	
Children & Parents	Preventive	Build emotionally responsive family communication to reduce isolation and emotional withdrawn in children.	The absence of meaningful adult intervention deepens Eyes’ sense of abandonment, especially from biological family.
	Curative	Validate memory-sharing and mourning as necessary stages in processing trauma.	
General Public	Preventive	Promote awareness of bullying as an act of violence.	“Eyes” has no clinical professional help (psychologist/psychiatrist) to support him recovering from his severe trauma of bullying.
	Curative	Seek professional help to recover from traumatic experiences in a safe way.	

The author’s deliberate decision to not give a clear name for the main character, referring to him only as “Eyes,” serves as a form of foreshadowing that invites deeper critical exploration. A name is marker of identity (Dion, 1983; Gegg-Harrison & Tanenhaus, 2016). The character “Eyes” is being left in anonymity throughout the story, meaning it symbolizes existence erasure as a fully recognized human being. His nickname “Eyes” reflects a profound process of dehumanization, through which his identity is stripped and reduced to his insecurity. This reduction serves his presence socially insignificant while

simultaneously anchoring his traumatic experience in physical condition that becomes the starting point of bullying. “Eyes” symbolizes a form of self-separation (his real self and someone with traumatic past), indicating how chronic childhood trauma often gives rise to complex dissociative processes in which trauma fragments the personality (Steele et al., 2005). This case—peer bullying victimization in the form of verbal abuse, including repeated name-calling, is also linked to heightened psychological distress and trauma-related social impairment among adolescents (Ajibewa et al., 2025; Kapitanoff & Pandey, 2024). Founded on some scientifically studies and theories synced to trauma, the ending of the novel depicts “Eyes” as a victim adopting a flight response as a means of coping with a repetitive early age trauma experience. Yet, such quick strategy—functioned as a temporary escape, ultimately fails in long-term trauma recovery, leaving trauma unresolved in isolation and capable of disrupting future normative trajectories of brain development, behavior, and emotion regulation (Daley et al., 2025; Herman, 2002; McLaughlin et al., 2019; Smith & Pollak, 2020; Zingela et al., 2022).

Discussion

Traumatic Disorders

Terror by Peer Bullying as a Catalyst for Persistent Hyperarousal

Trauma—especially psychological trauma, happens when a person experiencing overwhelming event and its ruining the victim's ability to cope (Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services, 2014; Herman, 1992). Trauma is not a rare occurrence, rather it is fairly common as the result from natural disaster, accidents, and violence such as robbery, torture, or war. The signs of victims who has undergone traumatic experiences include: intense fear, numbness, withdrawal, and feeling a loss of control (Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services, 2014; van der Kolk, 2000). These signs combined together produce a persistent state of hyperarousal condition. Trauma victims often experience heightened panic and perceive their surroundings as dangerous and potentially threatening at any time, even when no actual threat is actually present (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

They pushed me, threw me into a wall. Happens all the time... Ninomiya and his friends just watched, laughing like crazy. Thus far I had been forced to swallow pond water, toilet water, a goldfish... (Kawakami, 2022:9)

“The whole day in class, I kept an eye on Ninomiya and his friends as best as I could, but I couldn’t detect any significant change in their behaviour. Eventually one of them noticed and said, “Hey, what’re you looking at?” and whipped one of his classroom slippers at me. It smacked me in the face then dropped to the floor. He told me to pick it up, so I did.” (Kawakami, 2022: 3)

The data above are the examples of Eyes’ experience being a school bullying victim who is subjected to peer violence. In the novel, he is mocked for his lazy eye (the origin of his nickname), forced to eat chalk, swallowed toilet water and goldfish, shoved into a locker, and other mean acts. These violence evokes his sense of terror. Intense fear and helplessness appear as he constantly watches Ninomiya and friends, dreading another further violence. When a sandal is thrown at his face, he does not resist but ironically obeying the command to retrieve it. This indicates he is already in a state of powerlessness and has entered a pattern of obedience driven by fear. The loss of control over his situation is evident. “Eyes” is unable to defend himself nor negotiate boundaries; he can only accept the abuse out habit of fear of worse consequences. The act of throwing slippers at his face is not only physically painful, but also degrading. It can potentially damaging his perception of self-integrity. “Eyes” subconsciously sees himself as a worthless and powerless person who does not has the facility to escape his cycle of daily bullying.

“I’ve never seen anybody do it in real life. I want you to show me.”

“Show you what?” I asked. My voice was thin enough to wonder if I’d spoken. But Ninomiya heard me.

“Sex.”

“They all laughed. Really getting into it. I felt something stall my breath, and replayed inside my

head what Ninomiya had just said. Sex. The word made my heart race and forced weight onto my shoulders. I heard spit rasping in my throat. My tongue went dry, and the breath rolling over it was hot.”(Kawakami, 2022: 147-148)

The data depicted above involve sexual abuse, even though it is non-direct rather than physically enacted between abuser and the victim. Ninomiya’s demand for “Eyes” and his friend to “show sex” is an act of explicit cruelty. Witnessed by his classmates, this act of savagery becomes not just a one-on-one act of harassment, but also a public humiliation skyrocketing his sense of shame and fear. The coercive control by the bullies violates private boundaries as human being, especially since he is still a teenager who does not understand about the idea of consent. The sentence “dogs do it here” indicates that he is seen as worthless being with no dignity equated with a feral animal.

“It started feel like, somewhere behind me, somebody was watching me snoop around. Nervousness filled my stomach like a gas...(Kawakami, 2022: 53)

The terrors of bullying happened to “Eyes” trigger his chronic state of hyperarousal system driven by fear, stemming from verbal, psychological, and physical bullying. Hyperarousal is a state of heightened physiological activation and excessive alertness toward potential threats that becomes maladaptive in individuals with traumatic experience (Weston, 2014). Based on the research about molecular aspect in the body of trauma victim by Brzozowska & Grabowski (2025), increased amygdala activation contributes to this state by amplifying arousal in response to nonconscious fear, thereby helping to explain the persistent distress and difficulties experienced by individuals with dissociative PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). In this case based on the novel, “Eyes” remains in a state of persistent high arousal, meaning constantly alert to potential danger, as if he is always being watched despite the absence of any real threat. This condition arises from the constant stress and terror of bullying he has endured, triggering an automatic bodily response into fight-or-flight mode as means of subconscious survival (Zingela et al., 2022). Unfortunately, what often “Eyes” demonstrating in the book is an act of flight or passivity rather than resist his powerlessness. It is because he has no control over his own agency, in which make the situation worse. From this level, what can be learn is that maintaining a sense of agency of life is crucial to regain and build back mental and physical control. Improving self-agency is the most productive way for people to improve their emotional health and resilience from all troubles.

Trauma-Induced Disconnection: Fragmentation of the Self

Trauma can sever and damage connections between themselves, others, and their surrounding (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Scoglio et al., 2022). Herman (1992) suggests that trauma victims often feel a loss of connection: such as emotionally by being unable to express their emotions properly, cognitively by the disruption of brain functions involved in thinking, learning, and understanding, and relationally by withdrawing from the outside world. Pierre Janet was the first to clearly describe this state as a concept of dissociation. He demonstrated that dissociative symptoms, such as memory gaps and feelings of detachment from the self, are central to post-traumatic stress reactions and were historically classified by Janet under the nineteenth-century diagnosis of hysteria (in van der Hart & Horst, 1989).

“I had been gazing up for some time at my body stuck there in the air, when my lips on the me above me parted. I realized I was saying something, but the motion was so subtle that I was unable to read my lips. Some moments later, the me above me relaxed his face. I couldn’t understand what this was supposed to mean, but I lay there staring back into my face.” (Kawakami, 2022: 87).

Trauma causes “Eyes” to become disconnected not only from others, but also from his own consciousness. In the novel, he subconsciously often appears to shut down his emotions and suppress what he feels as a way to protect himself. The data mentioned above tells his inner turmoil after he took a terrible beating; his friends kicked his head like a soccer ball, in which getting him a fractured nose and heavy bleeding. His indirect method of survival is by detaching his body from his mind when the physical pain and his current mental state starting to become unbearable to endure. He lost control of

his sense and disconnect when he begins to see his own body floating above him. His awareness of rational thinking develops into blurred images as he feels his body turns into separate external object. He also wonders why his voice seems distant, even he does not realize that he is actually speaking. This narration is a clue of the dissociation sign, in which symbolizing his fragmented self and identity whose his own self also cannot really comprehend. This signals a failure of cognitive functions that typically processes human rational reasoning. His memories can become blurred, fragmented, and difficult to organize as manifestation of dissociation. This condition disrupts his ability to recall experiences in a clear and logical way.

Captivity: A Self Making Prison

Captivity is not only about being physically held in a place like a hostage, but also occurs in situations of violence where the perpetrator exerts total control—both over the victim’s body and mind through traumatic bond (Sanchez, Speck & Patrician, 2019). Due to its prolonged duration and the victim’s inability to escape, this form of captivity becomes a kind of mental prison: constantly monitored, persistently threatened, and enforced dependency. As a result, many victims begin to feel emotionally bound to their abuser, perceive themselves as worthless, and suffer emotional breakdowns from being relentlessly controlled (Giuliani, Petrucci & D’Urso, 2025). Trauma victims are also have similar patterns—they are threatened, repeatedly abused, and incapable to escape (Herman, 1992). This leads them to surrender to their circumstances.

“What would happen if they found out that I’d left? What would they do to me? The thought kept coming back. My patience had run out. It felt like my heart wanted out of my chest. I could never get used to the burden of these questions. Maybe they would cut some slack if I explained I had to use the bathroom.” (Kawakami, 2022: 16).

In the data cited above, “Eyes” finds himself in a captivity state when his classmates lock him inside a locker and forbid from leaving with no clear indication of when he will be released. “Eyes” becomes both a physical and his own mental captive. He is confined in a small enclosed space whilst his mind is trapped by fear. Even after the bullies had left and no one is watching him anymore, he is reluctant to leave. He repeatedly thinks, *“what would happen if they found out that I’d left? What would they do to me?”*. Under constant fear, he does not consider trying to escape. He even willingly returned to the locker where he had been locked, after anxiously and stealthily going to the toilet. This moment illustrates how in a state of captivity, his agitated mind orders him to remain still. This condition transforms the victim’s low self-esteem into a mental prison. Every thought of fleeting freedom is immediately met with an overwhelming fear and a deep sense of subservience.

Stages of Recovery

A Pseudo Sense of Safety

The first stage of recovery process is building a sense of safety in oneself. Establishing safety begins by regaining self-control (Herman, 1992). In the novel *Heaven*, “Eyes” is depicted as a character who rarely feeling safe, as his school is the main place of his bullying. Also, at home, he is in solitude and very much withdrawn, because lacking family members who emotionally could support him. He is also plagued by intrusive thoughts and paranoia that appear suddenly, making him trapped in his subconscious low self-esteem thinking. A victim like “Eyes”, often feel unsafe in his own bodies, as the body stores memories of traumatic experiences, creating a sense of being at war with oneself (Van der Kolk, 2014). The only space where a sense of “safety” seems to emerge is through his secret letter-writing exchange with Kojima. These moments of communication become the only source of small comfort in his life.

“Kojima and I were still leaving each other notes. This was honestly my only source of pleasure. Using the paper she had given me, I spent hours writing my replies. The slipcase of my dictionary was filled with notes. On nights when I found myself inexplicably disturbed and unable to sleep, or when thoughts about my future or school depleted me, I turned towards my bookshelf, without getting up, and gazed at the spine oh the slipcase holding all the notes. It held the words Kojima wrote for me.” (Kawakami, 2022: 25).

However, none of these situations the data mentioned truly provide “Eyes” with a sense of safety for himself. He does not making any effort to report his bullying case to the adults like teachers or his parents. It is because he feels so withdrawn with his family that speaking up would not improve his situation. By the end of the story, he only shares his experience only with his stepmother, while his father remains constantly occupied with work and emotionally distant. As a consequence, the stage of establishing safety is never fully achieved. Eyes’s trauma appears to be instantly “resolved” through eye surgery, which addresses the physical cause of his suffering from his point of view. However, this practical practice by undergoing surgery leaves his deeper emotional wounds untouched. Without a stable sense of safety, genuine trauma recovery remains extremely difficult.

Unprocessed and Undeveloped Remembrance and Mourning

Within the stage of remembrance and mourning, the moment when “Eyes” shares his experience with his stepmother represents an early small attempt to acknowledge and process the emotional wounds he has long suppressed. Through his step-mother, he gradually starts to process his trauma, and make sense his suffering by recounting the bullying he has experienced at school and the eye condition that earned him the nickname – “Eyes”. However, the emotional connection is limited, as she is not someone genuinely close to him, being only his stepmother. She listens but offers little reaction suggesting limited capacity to fully grasp his pain. While providing a practical solution to go to the ophthalmologists, the final decision is completely left up to him, underscoring the absence of deeper emotional support at a critical moment of disclosure.

*“I told her about being bullied. About the past year, and everything before that. I thought that it would take all day, but when I started talking, it took no time at all. **Once I had put my thoughts and feeling into words, it felt like it had only lasted a few minutes. Mom rested her cheek on her palm, nodding now and then, listening to everything I had to say. Then I told her about my eyes. About not knowing what to do...I took my time. Mom just listened.**” (Kawakami, 2022: 161).*

As a result, the mourning process, which means the act of feeling grief to slowly releasing the pain within, becomes one-sided. In the term of a healthy grief process, a person is helped to progressively detach themselves emotionally from their past suffering and work towards developing new relationship or invest energy in meaningful activities. This aligns with Freud’s (2009) concept of mourning, which posits that through a healthy mourning, survivors eventually find a way to relinquish pain and move forward. In Eyes’s situation, the lack of guidance makes it impossible for him to grieve and heal. Thus, he remains emotionally attached to his trauma, unable to move on and finding new meaning to his own life. The burden to solve his problems is placed solely based on his decision alone. It may seem an independent thing to do, but and it is also crucial to consider that he is still a teenager who needs guidance. His step-mother only offers a practical suggestion to talk to an ophthalmologist without seeking professional mental help first. The mourning phase, which requires fully acknowledging and working through traumatic pain, remains largely neglected.

(Non-relational) Reconnection

Reconnection is the third phase of trauma recovery, during which trauma survivors seek to create new relationships and rebuild connections with others (social support), meaning (life purpose), and themselves after distressing trauma experience (Herman, 1992). At this point, traumatizing incident is acknowledged as part of their life’s history, but it no longer determines their entire identity. They learn to cope with trauma as a part of their life story. It means that while the trauma is still there, it is not so clearly a major force shaping their perception of themselves. They are learning and gaining new strength, and building new potential to live as independently and meaningfully as possible.

*“Teachers and parents came to our house in droves, but Mom wouldn’t let them in. She sent them away, telling them that she would go to the school to say what she had to say. **I stayed in my room.**” (Kawakami, 2022: 160).*

“Everything that I could see was beautiful. I cried and cries, standing there, surrounded by that beauty, even though I wasn’t standing anywhere. I could hear the sound of my own tears. Everything was beautiful. Not that there was anyone to share it with, anyone to tell. Just the beauty.” (Kawakami, 2022: 167).

In the stage of reconnection, an individual is expected to begin rebuilding relationships—both with themselves and with others, and to live healthily with their trauma without allowing it to fully define who they are. In Eyes’s story, however, this stage ultimately fails. He takes a practical step by directly undergoing eye surgery to “fix” the physical condition that made him a target of bullying, yet he does not rebuild any meaningful relationships. Even his connection with Kojima, his only friend and the one person he once bonded with, is left behind. By focusing solely on physical change without seeking emotional support or sharing his experience, “Eyes” shows his inability to truly process and integrate his pain. Instead of emotional healing, he chooses a practical solution.

The ending of this book also implies this failure of reconnection stage. Albeit he is awed by the beauty that he can finally see with his new eyes after the surgery as described in,—*“Everything that I could see was beautiful. Not that there was anyone to share it with...”*— this particular moment also shows that he remains isolated, and instead of resisting it, he quietly accepts his isolation. Moreover, when parents and teachers from school wanted to visit him, his stepmother prevented the visit. There is no meaningful effort at reconnection that could benefit all parties. The nickname “Eyes,” a mocking name given by his bullies at school still following him. Trauma becomes not something he already went through, but something major that defines him until the end of the story. This sentence, *“I stayed in my room,”* symbolizes his isolation from external world. Without some meaningful reconnection with the self and/ or others, “Eyes” is relegated to his pain and loneliness. It is because trauma recovery is essentially relational procedure. When victims are repeatedly labeled and defined by the suffering they have endured, they come to be seen as powerless and lacking control over their own life. Therefore, people and his own self associate and identify the name “Eyes” as a trauma victim rather than an individual who has recovered, taken charge of their life once again. That is what happened to the protagonist of this novel.

In relation to the relevant researches, the study titled *Kajian Fakta Kemanusiaan dalam Novel Heaven: Perspektif Strukturalisme Genetik Lucien Goldmann* by Ul Jannah et al. (2025) found that bullying is portrayed as a common phenomenon in the Japanese educational system, and the character “Eyes” demonstrates a certain degree of courage in facing it. Meanwhile, the research titled *Social Classes Inequality in the English-Translated Version by Bett and Boyd of Kawakami's Japanese Novel Entitled Heaven* by Hurul Aini Putri, Deuis Sugaryamah, and Agry Pramita (2024) highlights how the translators effectively convey that bullying stems from a lack of power—where perpetrators typically belong to a higher social class, while victims come from lower ones. Adding reality context, school bullying is becoming an increasingly serious social issue in Japan, and the severity of such behavior has been driven to a new higher counts (British Psychological Society, 2025). Police data in this country indicate that in 2023 alone, they already investigated 292 cases of student bullying. It is an increase of number from last year and the most in a decade (Kyodo News, 2024). Studies on school bullying in Japan have also found that a peer-group hierarchy played an important role. Among middle-school students, there is evidence that long-term bullying occurs most commonly among those in lower status peer groups (Osuka, Toda, & Matsushima, 2019). This indicates that school informal hierarchies originated from social status support the persistence of bullying culture. The findings from this study resonate with the *ijime* culture, which understands bullying as a group phenomenon influenced by power imbalance, social status, and peer interactions (Mizuno et al., 2022).

Back to *Heaven*, those social realities are clearly reflected in this book. It is strongly implied that “Eyes” becomes a target of peer hierarchy-based bullying led by Ninomiya, particularly through the displays of power and wealth. From a trauma perspective, however, “Eyes” is not someone who actively resists or confronts his bullying. Instead, he has no intention to regain his sense of control, unable to challenge the abuser, and finds meaningful relational attempt to fully overcome his trauma. *Heaven* (2022) explicitly shows the pain caused by bullying; including emotional wounds, a lack of support, and deep isolation. The main character is constantly driven by fear and tends to avoid problems rather than face them directly. “Eyes” also shows limited self-awareness and emotional distance from those around him. His choice to have an eye surgery is anticlimactic, as it gives a practical quick solution and not

emotional healing. That choice itself suggests that he never actually processes or fully digest his painful memories first. Consequently, the novel exhibits that “Eyes” does not really attempt to work through, or ever recover from his trauma.

It is believed that this research, as well as previous studies and real data mentioned above, have a common-ground view that school bullying is a pressing social and cultural issue. By applying psychological theories, especially trauma theories, this analysis become more experientially reality-based and relate in today’s mental health issue in early childhood.

CONCLUSION

In *Heaven* (2022) by Mieko Kawakami, “Eyes” represents a silent and silenced victim of trauma. He is an example of trauma victim whose voice is suppressed by both; external fear and the isolation he imposes on himself. The character's anonymity throughout the novel implies the erasure of his identity, making him a silent and silenced victim whose existence is unacknowledged; socially, narratively, and personally. He is not only isolated from his surrounding, but actively chooses solitude which preventing him from undergoing the trauma recovery process. The fact that he remains named as “Eyes” until the end of the story signifies that his healing is incomplete and unsuccessful. His trauma and “physical weakness” caused by his lazy eyes will continue to define his identity. This novel, which addresses bullying and sexual violence as sources of trauma, is a meaningful to read for everyone, especially children, who are still in the early stage of navigating their character and identity. The messages gained from this book can be a learning encouragement for children, teachers, and parents as adults to become one supportive and empathetic team. It is true that children are capable of thinking critically when dealing with problems, but this does not mean they should be left to face them alone. On the contrary, open and honest conversations among peers, and between children and adults can be a healthy way to process complex feelings and traumatic circumstances as an initiative way of healing process. Curatively, seeking professional mental health support when experiencing persistent negative feelings or any struggle disrupting daily life is highly recommended. Thus, whether directly affected as a victim or watching from the outside, it is important to have communication and discussion. Awareness does not belong only to the victim or the center of a conflict, but also all of aspects integrated within society. *Heaven* demonstrates how children’s literature can offer important lessons by creating a bridge to open, honest, and safe communication between children and adults. By doing so, this novel highlights the role of juvenile fiction in raising awareness on early mental health issues which can have long-term effects on children’s future growth.

Input for future research, there are many aspects of this novel that could be explored further. One possible direction is a closer analysis of another key character such as Kojima, particularly on the implementation of feminist lens on trauma. Future studies might also examine trauma in Indonesian context, considering on bullying as a surging global social issue which also taken place in many schools here.

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