

**PATHOLOGICAL SHAME AS DEFENSE MECHANISM IN HANIF KUREISHI'S
THE PENIS AND EVE ENSLER'S *MY VAGINA WAS MY VILLAGE***

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ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis notion of 'pathological shame' is the anxiety of sexual repression when what was originally pleasurable turned into disgust and therefore, victims of sexual trauma are known to experience this. One of Hanif Kureishi's short stories; *The Penis* and a part of Eve Ensler's play; *My Vagina Was My Village* were chosen to fulfill the purpose of current topic. These literary pieces were selected based on the protagonists' experience which led them to suffer 'pathological shame'. The study found that both characters (Doug from *The Penis* and the narrator from *My Vagina Was My Village*) dissociated themselves through abstract self-mutilation of their genitals as a consequence to their traumatic encounter. The study intends to provide new readings on the effect of sexual trauma with particular underlining to self-mutilation.

Keyword; sexual trauma, pathological shame, self-mutilation, dissociation.

Introduction

Sexual trauma is normally associated to child sexual abuse where the victim is exposed to sexual situation in a passive and unprepared state (Brette, 2005, p. 1592). However, in the view of the present study, not only children are prone to experience sexual trauma. It can also be experienced by adults who are subjected to such sexual situations before they are ready or consensual of the exposure. As stated by Campbell (2008), "a child who is subjected to sexual abuse is intruded upon visually and physically before he or she is ready" (p. 78) for sexual contact. Therefore, if an adult who is also subjected to sexual abuse before he or she is ready for any sexual encounter, he or she is also 'intruded upon'. This is supported by Maker, Kimmelmeier, & Peterson (2001) that "adult sexual trauma was defined as any type of nonconsensual sexual act occurring after the age of 16 years old" (p. 352). As a representation on the effects of adult sexual trauma, two literary pieces are chosen for the study; *The Penis* by Hanif Kureishi and *My Vagina Was My Village* by Eve Ensler. The study intends to answer the following research questions; (a) what are the defense mechanisms produced by the characters as the effect of sexual trauma in both literary pieces?, and (b) what are the underlying reasons for the characters to produce such defense mechanisms?

Literature Review of the Works

Midnight All Day (1999) is a collection of short stories written by Hanif Kureishi which comprises of different stories told from different perspectives. *The Penis*, one of the short stories in the collection tells the story of a character named Doug who is a pornographic actor/porn star. Partnering up with Long Dong, his penis personified as his alter-ego from his internal conflict with himself, both of them gain somewhat successful

reputation to land on some roles in films such as *The Little Women* and *Huge Big Women*. This story reaches its peak when Long Dong separates itself from Doug. Long Dong expresses its feeling of being exploited ever since Doug's pornographic involvement in his teen life. As the aftermath of being traumatized by the experience of having to be physically exposed under hot lightings with many eyes scrutinising them inside out all the time, he wishes to escape his current life. This portrays Doug's inner motive of escaping through the construction of his imagination where he lost his penis. Despite the penis unwillingness to reconnect with Doug, Doug manages to find Long Dong and they are reunited at the end of the story.

Hanif Kureishi's works had mostly been studied through the sociological, psychological, and feminist perspectives. In a study done by Chalupský on a novella *Intimacy* (1998) written by Kureishi, it is found that the short stories collections which also include *Midnight All Day* written by Kureishi around the time when the novella was published can be read through the same theme of unresolved dilemmas in the mid-life crises of the male characters (Chalupský, 2011, p. 63). The narration of the works was also seen as fragmented, inconsistent, and leaving the readers hanging with no answers to the questions asked (Chalupský, 2011, pp. 66-67). Kureishi's most popular work would be *The Body* (2002) which had been numerously studied on especially on the consequences of technology in body modification and the issue of youth and beauty. Parlati (2014) found that Kureishi had bitterly portrayed how a body that had been intruded will become nostalgic since the true self is lost with the replacement of a new body and a rival mind (pp. 81-82). Other than that, Ekici (2010) discovered that the novel had depicted how the body surpasses the soul and how destructive it is to pursue eternal youth and beauty (pp. 70-71).

Meanwhile, *The Vagina Monologues* (2001) is a play written by Eve Ensler constructed from an outcome of interviews with women from all parts of the world on their personal views of their vaginas and also personal experiences particularly sexual encounter. In a part of the monologues, *My Vagina Was My Village* narrated from a first person point of view, describes her vagina metaphorically as an undisturbed village, purest and cleanest in its nature, a place she once familiar with until it is invaded by the cruelty of the soldiers. The narrator describes how the soldiers shove up things into her vagina such as long thick rifle, bottles, sticks and also the end of a broom. She listens to the sound of her vagina tearing and a piece of her vagina being butchered off. Not only that she encounters physical sexual abuse of being raped by different soldiers at a time but she also has to endure mental abuse being in fear if the soldiers will end her life. Due to her traumatized sexual encounter, she removes herself from her genital; the vagina is no longer her village.

The Vagina Monologues had been studied mostly under the lens of feminism theory. Some of the issues discussed about are women's exploitation, freedom, and also lesbianism. Mazurski explored the issue of women's victimization in the monologue and found that Ensler had framed the idea of women being coerced into wearing the garment called burqa as a method of treating women as "other" (Mazurski, 2015, p. 74). Along the line, Dubey & Singh (2015) found that Ensler held a vision for all women to free themselves from exploitation and sufferings (p. 262) through self-empowerment in her New Age feminist perspective (p. 252). On the other hand, Durham (2012) critiques the monologue for its contradiction of the author's intention and content in representing lesbian identity as somewhat a form of censorship since the whole monologue is still bound to the heterosexual symbolic (pp. 59-60).

The current paper will however study both literary pieces through the lens of psychoanalysis focusing on defense mechanisms after a traumatic sexual exposure rather than focusing on the sociological or feminist aspects in the characters.

Methodology

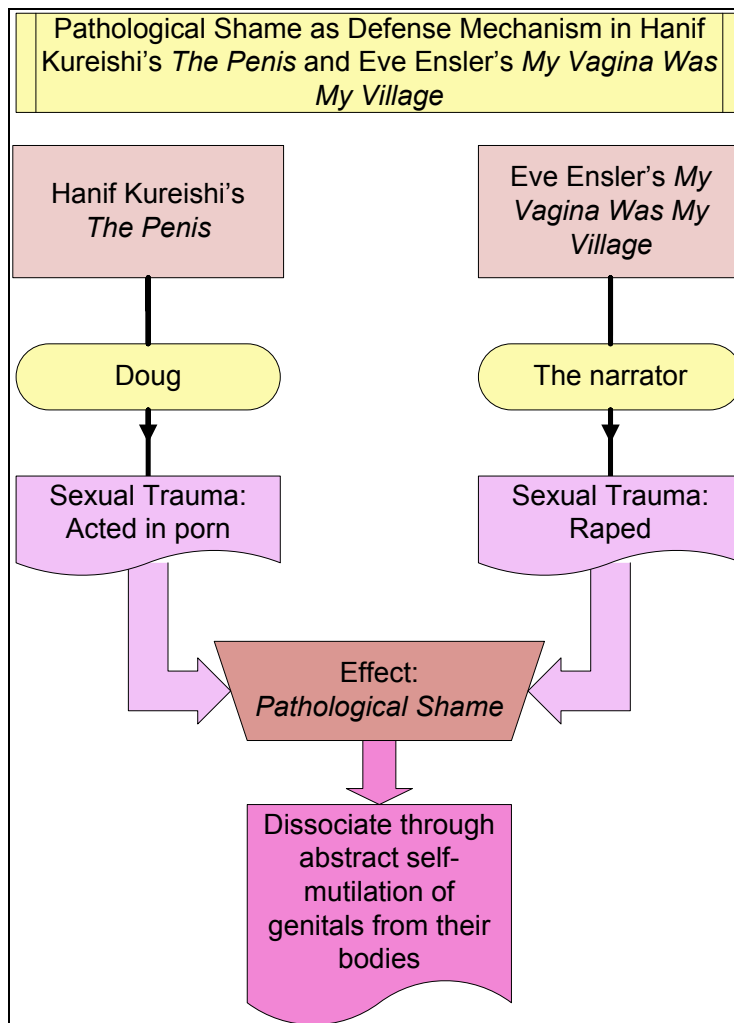


FIGURE 1. Pathological Shame as Defense Mechanism in Hanif Kureishi's *The Penis* and Eve Ensler's *My Vagina Was My Village*

Figure 1 illustrates how both characters from the two literary pieces experience sexual trauma whereby, in *The Penis*, Doug's sexual trauma is his involvement in pornography and in *My Vagina Was My Village*, the narrator is raped violently. They both suffer pathological shame as their first defense mechanism for the traumatic experience. But later on, it develops into dissociation and abstract self-mutilation whereby both characters separate themselves from their genitals.

Crafted with metaphorical wits, both literary pieces portray abstract genital removal from the body due to sexual trauma. They are therefore suitable to be studied through psychoanalysis theory emphasizing on the effects of traumatic sexual abuse as the base of the argument. This is due to the strong portrayal of pathological shame, dissociation, and abstract self-mutilation in them.

Through textual analysis, both literary pieces will be analyzed to see the manifestation of defense mechanisms as a consequence from the sexual exploitation on the characters where *The Penis* and *My Vagina Was My Village* representing the male and female genitalia respectively. Beforehand, the relationship between sexual trauma to

pathological shame, dissociation, and self-mutilation will be further explained in the next section of this paper.

Sexual Trauma and Self-mutilation

The *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* defines 'trauma' as a sudden psychic shock to someone;

In its psychoanalytical sense, *trauma* denotes an event of such violence and suddenness that it occasions an inflow of excitation sufficiently strong to defeat normally successful defense mechanisms; as a general rule trauma stuns the subject and, sooner or later, brings about a disorganization of the psychic economy. (Brette, 2005, p. 1800)

This shows that trauma does not necessarily can happen only to children but a sudden sexual shock can also occur to adult who are not ready. This will cause them to be wounded in their psyche from the experience.

This 'psychic wound' will cause them to feel pathological shame or also known as toxic shame. According to Mollon (2008), the overwhelming state[s] of toxic shame will cause psychosis where it is experienced as a violent exclusion from someone's psychic symbolic order (p. 31). Hence, the victims of sexual trauma whom got themselves in the state of pathological shame dissociate themselves at the slightest reminder of their traumatic experience.

The concept of 'shame' in psychoanalysis was first introduced by Sigmund Freud as a feminine characteristic due to women sexual repression of penis-envy;

The effect of penis-envy has a share, further, in the physical vanity of women, since they are bound to value their charms more highly as a late compensation for their original sexual inferiority. Shame, which is considered to be a feminine characteristic *par excellence* but is far more a matter of convention than might be supposed, has as its purpose, we believe, concealment of genital deficiency. We are not forgetting that at a later time shame takes on other functions. (Freud, 1974, p. 132)

The 'other functions' shame can take on as indicated from the excerpt above are associated with powerful emotions such as guilt, hate, and disgust as a consequence of repression. This concept was later on, further developed by other psychoanalysts as a pathological effect of ego, superego, and id relations rather than just a product of repression;

... Sigmund Freud linked shame to the action of the forces of repression (what was initially an object of pleasure becomes an object of modesty, disgust, or shame)... To a certain extent, shame was a "blind spot" for Freud and, in his wake, for many psychoanalysts who reduced it to a pathological effect linked to the ideal ego and opposed to the guilt associated with the oedipal superego. However, it is a concept that is essential to the understanding of the dynamics of social bonds (it protects people from engaging in nonhuman actions) and intergenerational secrets. (Tisseron, 2005, p. 1599)

Pathologically, shame is used as shield for people in order to constraint them from committing forbidden acts. However, someone's shame shield can be broken due to sexual trauma. When a shame shield is breached traumatically, "other defence[s] such as repression, denial, disavowal, splitting and projection are used to fill the gap created by the failure of the shame shield" (Campbell, 2008, p. 78). Because of this failure, shame as the first defense has to take form of another defense for the tremendous anxiety experienced by the victims of sexual trauma. As stated by Lynn et al. (2004), to diminish anxiety associated with overpowering traumatic experiences, dissociation is a normal psychological coping response used (p. 168) by the victims.

According to Marilee Strong (1998) in her book on numerous case studies and theories about self-mutilation entitled *A Bright Red Scream: Self-mutilation and the Language of Pain*, mind and body are linked and if the mind is wounded from a traumatic experience, the body will take its toll as well;

The study of self-injury makes clear that the mind and body are inextricably linked, each feeding from the other's nourishment of starving from the other's neglect. It is interesting to note that "trauma" derives from a Greek word meaning to wound in the sense of cutting or piercing. Today we use the term to describe both physical wounds—think of head trauma or the trauma team that treats critically injured people in an emergency room—and psychic wounding that results in disordered thinking and behavior, including self-mutilation. (Strong, 1998, p. 88)

Thus, those who experience a sexual traumatic event in their life will be affected not only mentally, but the psychic wound will also be associated with their body.

Since the victims of trauma have the potential to dissociate, repress, and feeling both guilt or shame due to their traumatic experience which lead them to 'revictimize' others as well as themselves to make the experience less agonizing (Mohd Noor, Babae, & Termizi 2015, p. 246), the victims tend to blame their own bodies for the abuse to have occurred to them. Thus, they are inclined to revictimized their bodies.

In a book chapter by Donald Campbell *The Shame Shield in Child Sexual Abuse*, the author indicates that the victim of sexual abuse will have a sense of a distorted sexual body image due to the shame shield they built up during their abuse and one of the method for them to protect themselves from the disgust they feel towards the abuse is to place that very disgust upon themselves;

Relief is sought by resorting to actions that project the confusion, passivity and disgust into others. The victim may try to protect himself by splitting off the disgust for himself and projecting that disgust on to the organs exposed by the abuse. Furthermore, the abused child may project his self-disgust via an abusive act on to another's body that is treated with contempt. In this way, the abused child becomes the abuser. The experience of being abused in childhood or adolescence may distort the victim's sexual body image, an aspect of the ego-ideal. (Campbell, 2008, p. 79)

In other words, a pathological shame is build up within them as a defense mechanism from their disgust of the abuse but later on, the disgust is directed upon the self and they will blame their bodies for the abuse to have occurred. This is proven from one case study by Strong (1998) where a victim claims that she hates her body and she hates being female and that if she is not a female and does not own her body, the abuse might not have

happened to her (p. 123). This shows how someone is disgusted by one's own body and genital as a defense mechanism from their toxic shame. Like an infected disease, one defense mechanism leads to another. The blame is firstly put on the perpetrator of the abuse but later on, the blame is put on oneself, and then on one's body, and later on, on one's genital. This is supported by Badcock (1992);

...unsatisfied love for the lost object tends to make the ego of the mourner identify with it to the point where, in a memorable phrase of Freud's 'the shadow of the object falls across the ego'. Resentful feelings against the lost one for being lost, reinforced by the negative, hating aspect of any lingering ambivalence, cause the ego to direct aggressive feelings back against itself, partly for want of an object, partly because, through identification with it, the only existence the object can have is within itself. (p. 135)

Thus, in order to deal with their self-disgust, these victims will dissociate from their bodies because the physiques remind them of the abuse. According to Strong (1998), there is a distressing effect of dissociating during the time of trauma on the mind and body as they will find ways to express the inexpressible through words in another form when they are faced with the reenactment of their trauma (p. 100). One of the ways to express what they cannot verbally communicate would be through abstract self-mutilation.

According to Milia (2000), self-mutilation is a symbolization of a sacrifice of the 'bad self' into a better place of dignity. The body is only a sacrificial victim for the conflict and assassinating it will temporarily wipe away the shameful gap between inner and outer selves of someone (p. 73). Hence, to deal with shame from a sexual trauma, the victim will sacrifice their body in order to gain back their dignity. This is especially true to the victims of sexual abuse who thought of their bodies as an enemy and seen them as dead, unreal, separated from the soul (Strong, 1998, p. 122). Even though the act of self-mutilation is not done physically but only took its abstract form, the victims of sexual trauma still disregard their own bodies and genitals as a consequence to their traumas in order for them to heal. In accordance to Milia (2000), it is a self-healing process to transform oneself (p. 12). This transformation towards a better self will help them temporarily escape their traumatic experience.

For the current study, the literary pieces chosen demonstrate the transformation of the characters from their sexually traumatic experience into different states of defense mechanisms. The first defense is the sense of pathological shame that they build within the self. It is followed by dissociation. And lastly, by abstract self-mutilation in an effort to temporarily heal their traumas. The next section will provide textual evidences in order to prove how this transformation towards healing took place.

Textual Analysis of the Chosen Literary Pieces

Defense Mechanisms in Hanif Kureishi's *The Penis*

Doug's unconscious desire is to have a more respectful profession rather than just being a porn star all his life. Therefore, a compromised formation between his id and superego is made and he begins to experience pathological shame as his first defense mechanism against his extreme anxiety from his sexual trauma of acting in porn films. This leads him to commit abstract self-mutilation by dissociating himself from his genital. According to Badcock (1992), this is an act of moral masochism where someone will find

pleasure through abstract suffering of what is in reality self-inflicted punishment (p. 75). So, he is punishing himself for his sexual trauma through this moral masochism of his.

The Penis is a short story that illustrates the main character's imagination of losing his penis. The penis has been personified as another character with a mind of its own. This demonstrates the mind-splitting of the character and his body due to his inner conflict. The penis is, in truth, Doug's alter-ego that has been dissociated from his body due to his shame from his sexual trauma of his involvement in pornography since teenager;

He had been 'in' pornography since he was a teenager, but recently the market had started to boom. Pornography had penetrated the middlebrow market and he, coupled with Long Dong – the professional moniker he had given his penis – was becoming a recognizable star. (Kureishi, 1999, p. 210)

Because of his shame, he imagines himself separated from his genital;

It wasn't until he passed the mirror on the way to the shower, and looked at himself for the first time that day, that he realised his penis was missing. The whole thing had gone, penis, scrotum, even his pubic hair.

Doug thought he might faint. He sat on the edge of the bath with his head between his legs, but the position only reminded him of his loss. (Kureishi, 1999, p. 209-210)

Unconsciously, Doug, the main character, desires to possess a better life and is shameful of the state he is currently in. This shows when Doug's alter-ego, Long Dong decides to be separated from the man by intending on going solo and tries another profession of a respectful kind;

'I'm going solo. I've been exploited for years. I want my own career. I'm going to make more serious films.'

Doug said, 'Serious films! We're starting the follow up to *Little Women* tomorrow – *Huge Big Women*, it's called.'

'I want to play Hamlet,' said the penis. 'No one has quite understood the relationship with Ophelia. You could be my assistant. You could carry my script and keep the fans away.' (Kureishi, 1999, p. 214)

The excerpt above shows that Long Dong thinks of porn as not a serious genre of film. Long Dong desires to be in a better standard of visual art performance such as acting in a Shakespearean play. This indicates that, unconsciously, Doug desires to escape his current situation. Because of this unfulfilled desire, he becomes pathologically shameful of his own deed.

The excerpt above proves of his shame for his involvement in porn when he is worried about the future the moment he has been reunited with his penis at the end of the story;

A few hours later Doug was on the set. His penis swung between his legs, slapping against each thigh with a satisfying smack.

Doug was glad to be reunited with the most important part of himself; but, when he thought of the numerous exertions ahead, he felt weary. (Kureishi, 1999, p. 217)

Here, he thinks of how hard and tiring his life will be in the future. This shows how Doug himself is unsure of the kind of life he will live because of his long-term involvement in porn. With this weariness and exertion he mentioned, it is learnt that deep within, he is ashamed of himself. It is for that reason that he dissociates himself from his genital by projecting it as his alter-ego to deal with the shame.

Defense Mechanisms in Eve Ensler's *My Vagina Was My Village*

The narrator's unconscious desires are to be loved and to have consensual sexual contact when she is ready. However, due to the sexual trauma she experiences when she is violently raped by six different soldiers, she gets into the condition of pathological shame as a defense mechanism. This, in the end, results in her dissociating herself from her genital as a form of abstract self-mutilation.

My Vagina Was My Village was written by Eve Ensler in dedication to the women who returned from a rape camp in Bosnia in 1993. She went to interview these women in 1994 and had published this piece as part of *The Vagina Monologues* in 2001. In the monologue, the narrator demonstrates her unconscious desire to be loved and for her to have consensual sexual contact by talking about the 'light touch of a boyfriend' in her first narration;

My vagina was green, water soft pink fields, cow mooing sun resting sweet boyfriend touching lightly with soft piece of blond straw. (Ensler, 2001, p. 15)

It is agreed that the narrator is still very young during this due to the indicator of youth imageries in the excerpt above such as the color 'green' and also the 'water soft pink' of the field. But since she does not get the 'light touch' that she desires, she experiences sexual trauma from her violent rape;

Not since the soldiers put a long thick rifle inside me. So cold, the steel rod canceling my heart. Don't know whether they're going to fire it or shove it through my spinning brain. Six of them, monstrous doctors with black masks shoving bottles up me too. There were sticks, and the end of a broom. (Ensler, 2001, p. 15)

Her genital is also partly mutilated by them;

Not since I heard the skin tear and made lemon screeching sounds, not since a piece of my vagina came off in my hand, a part of the lip, now one side of the lip is completely gone. (Ensler, 2001, p. 15)

She experiences pathological shame because of this. Thus, she metaphorically symbolizes her vagina as a village that has been burned and destroyed;

... I became a river of poison and pus and all the crops died, and the fish.
My vagina a live wet water village.

They invaded it. Butchered it and burned it down. (Enslar, 2001, p. 15)

At last, she decides to be apart from her genital as if her genital is something else and somewhere else that she no longer knows;

I do not touch now.
Do not visit.
I live someplace else now.
I don't know where that is. (Enslar, 2001, p. 16)

This provides the idea that she dissociates herself from her genital since victims of sexual trauma tend to hate and blame their genitals for their sexual abuse. A survey done on self-mutilation of sexually abused victims indicates that the victims hate their genitals and think that they would be better off without them because their genitals remind them so much of the sexual abuse (Strong, 1998, p. 123). Thus, the narrator in the monologue blames her genital and sees it as no longer a part of her;

There is something between my legs. I do not know what it is. I do not know where it is. I do not touch. Not now. Not anymore. Not since. (Enslar, 2001, p. 15)

Because of her sexual trauma, the narrator sees her vagina as a village that has been destroyed and of which she would never revisit. It is now a place that is lost and gone forever. This shows that her pathological shame of the event leads her to split herself completely from her genital.

Conclusion

In short, we concluded that both literary pieces illustrate how the characters perform different sets of defense mechanisms as an aftermath of sexual trauma encountered in their lives. The defenses of pathological shame, dissociation and abstract self-mutilation are built to meet the sole purpose of freeing themselves from the painful memories of their traumatic experience and also, as an ignition of a desire to start anew in life. This is affirmed by Sigmund Freud's claim that the ego will look for various methods in self-preservation to the extent that even illness and self-destructiveness (Freud, 1974, p. 142) are considered as ways to protect oneself from external and also internal danger.

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