

NAVIGATING CHILDREN MENTAL HEALTH IN *MY QUIET SHIP*: A LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*This study aims to examine the mental health issues of Quinn, the main character in the picture book *My Quiet Ship* (2018) by Hallee Adelman. Quinn's various traumatic experiences are analyzed through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic stages: the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. A descriptive qualitative method with a psychoanalytic approach is employed. The primary data consist of narrative and visual elements from the book. Findings reveal that the real phase is reflected in Quinn's trauma caused by his parents' quarrels. His creation of an imaginary world illustrates the imaginary phase, where he builds a sense of safety and comfort through fantasy. The symbolic phase emerges as Quinn begins to express his fears to his parents. Moreover, the quiet ship in Quinn's imagination functions as an *objet petit a*, symbolizing lost security and inner peace. This study confirms that *My Quiet Ship* not only portrays children's traumatic experiences but also highlights the crucial role of imagination and language in identity formation in line with Lacanian theory.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects human imagination and serves as a medium for communication, often embodying values and cultural expressions in various genres such as poetry, novels, and drama (Ahyyar, 2019). Within literature, children's literature holds a unique position by addressing issues and experiences through the perspective of children, using imaginative language to convey values, fantasy, and aesthetics accessible to both children and adults (Krissandi, Febriyanto, Cahya.S, & Radityo, 2018). Among children's literature, picture books are particularly effective as educational media, combining simple text with illustrations to facilitate children's understanding and engagement (Vadilah, Kusuma, Rohmadi, & Khoirul, 2021). Their attractive visuals and careful choice of words enhance children's interest and emotional connection to the stories. Furthermore, children's literature increasingly addresses vital topics such as mental health, promoting early awareness and insight for young readers (Vadilah, Kusuma, Rohmadi, & Khoirul, 2021).

Children's mental health is a pressing concern, given its impact on emotional and psychological development. Data from the United States (2022-2023) indicates that anxiety (9,2%), behavioral disorders (9,6%), and depression (1,9%) are among the most common mental health issues in children aged 6-11 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). Mental health challenges are often linked to family dynamics and adverse experiences, which can leave lasting emotional effects (Harmony United Psychiatric Care, 2024). Literature that explores



these themes can provide valuable support and validation for children who encounter similar struggles.

My Quiet Ship (2018) by Hallee Adelman is a children's picture book that addresses mental health through the story of Quinn, a boy facing emotional distress amid familial conflict. Using imaginative elements, the book portrays Quinn's coping mechanisms in response to domestic tension. The narrative and illustrations together depict the complexity of a child's inner world and emotional resilience, making it a relevant case study for examining children's mental health in literary contexts.

This study employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic frameworks, focusing on the real, imaginary, and symbolic phases of subject formation, as well as the concept of *objet petit a*, to analyze Quinn's psychological development in *My Quiet Ship*. Rather than providing detailed plot retelling, this research aims to explore how Lacanian theory illuminates the processes of identity formation, trauma expression, and desire negotiation in children's literature. Through this lens, the study contributes to deeper understanding of the interplay between imagination, language, and mental health in a child's experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employs Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to explore identity formation, the confrontation with reality, and the management of internal emotional conflict. Lacanian concepts offer a valuable framework for understanding the psychological dynamics of literary characters, including children experiencing trauma and conflict, as depicted in the picture book *My Quiet Ship*.

Previous research has applied Lacan's psychoanalysis primarily to adult literary works. For instance, Sahtyaswari (2018) analyzed the subject formation of Jayanegara, the main character in Okky Madasari's novel *Kerumunan Terakhir*, highlighting how he progresses through Lacan's three psychoanalytic phases from childhood to adulthood. Similarly, Annisa and Shodari (2024) examined psychological development in *Harapan di Atas Sajadah* and found that individuals' life experiences and spiritual dimensions influence their Lacanian trajectories. Alfiani (2024) used a qualitative approach to interpret the psychological complexity of the protagonist in Sapardi Djoko Darmono's *Sunyi adalah Minuman Keras* through Lacanian psychoanalysis.

While these studies share a common theoretical foundation, this research differentiates itself by focusing on children's picture literature rather than adult novels, which allows examination of identity and trauma from a child's perspective. Unlike prior works that emphasize narrative and spiritual dimensions in adult fiction, this study foregrounds the role of imagination and symbolic language in shaping a child protagonist's psychological experiences. In particular, it scrutinizes the manifestation of *objet petit a* as a driver of desire and coping mechanism within the child's inner world.

Moreover, this review of literature reveals that previous research has predominantly described Lacanian phases in character development without extensively connecting these phases to the functions of language and fantasy in children's mental health. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the interplay of language, symbolic expression, and desire in *My Quiet Ship*. By integrating psychoanalytic theory with children's literature, the research contributes new



insights into how imaginative constructs support emotional resilience and identity formation during childhood trauma.

Thus, the research questions guiding this study are: (1) How does the process of psychic formation occur in the main character of *My Quiet Ship* through Lacan's psychoanalytic framework? (2) What role does *objet petit a* play in elucidating the inner conflicts of the character? Exploring these issues enriches understanding of language and symbolism as tools children use in negotiating trauma and selfhood.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a psychoanalytic approach to analyze the children's picture book *My Quiet Ship* by Hallee Adelman. The primary data consist of the book's narratives and illustrations, supplemented by relevant academic literature. Data analysis was conducted through detailed observation and systematic examination of the textual and visual elements, guided by Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, the analysis focused on identifying manifestations of the real, imaginary, and symbolic phases in the main character's psychological development, as well as the role of *objet petit a* in the dynamics of desire.

According to the theory, Lacan divides the developmental journey of a human being through three (3) phases, namely *the phase of the real*, *the phase of the imaginary*, and *the phase of the symbolic* (Mukarromah & Zamroni, 2018):

3.1. Real Phase

The real is one of the most difficult phases to define and also the most interesting to discuss. The real phase is the stage where a person gets full basic needs from both parents (Andika & Surip, 2024). In this phase an infant is still unable to recognize language and distinguish between self and needs (Alfaini, 2024). Aspects of this phase cannot be fully explained in the form of language or symbols. The feelings of loss and tension that a person experiences after a traumatic experience, which cannot be expressed with symbols or words, can be categorized as the real.

3.2. Imaginary Phase

The second phase, imaginary, is where a person at the age of 6-18 months begins to recognize themselves by seeing themselves in a mirror for the first time (Alfaini, 2024). Therefore, this phase is often referred to as the mirror stage in Lacan's concept of psychoanalysis. In this phase, a person can see his or her full image in the mirror, but still does not know the full concept of self.

3.3. Symbolic Phase

The last phase is the symbolic phase, at this stage a human being begins to enter a world full of rules and norms that can shape personal character. Children gradually begin to adapt to the social environment as the use of language develops (Alfaini, 2024). In this phase, language has an important role as a system that marks that a person begins to understand himself as part of an extensive social network.

3.4. *Objet petit a*

The *objet petit a* is one of the concepts in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Literally, *objet petit a* means "object small o," where 'o' itself is interpreted as "other" (Krupka, 2018). This concept refers to an object that causes desire or drive that continuously arises within a person (Katta & Nitali, 2023). It describes an endless search for a lost object, because something that cannot be fully possessed yet always remains a source of desire (Katta & Nitali, 2023). Lacan explains that humans will always feel a sense of lack, and to compensate for this, they will desire



something (*objet petit a*). However, this desire is never truly fulfilled because the desired object cannot make a person feel completely whole. This concept is an individual's response to the condition of lack they experience. According to Lacan's perspective, *objet petit a* serves as the driving force behind desire.

The process involved categorizing relevant themes and symbols within the data according to Lacanian concepts, enabling a structured interpretation of the character's mental and emotional experiences. Since this study analyzes a published literary work, formal ethical approval was not required.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Quinn and Lacan's Dimensions of the Real

The discussion in the story *My Quiet Ship* begins with Quinn as the main character who experiences a traumatic experience. In the incident, Quinn is depicted running towards his bedroom after hearing the commotion caused by his parents' quarrel. The illustration can be a manifestation of the real phase because loud noises and arguments can represent inner conflicts that can create feelings of anxiety and stress, especially when children are victims of such experiences. A child who experiences such an event can experience mental and emotional disturbances to the point of losing a sense of security and comfort due to a fractured parental relationship (Masi, 2021).

In Jacques Lacan's theory, the real phase is a sphere that cannot be represented in words or images. Like someone who feels deep fear and trauma from a bad environment, things that cannot be expressed clearly. This phase is often present as something that can be disturbing and unsettling because it cannot be conveyed by thought or language. The real phase is characterized as a mental experience that cannot be fulfilled by the symbolic system of society, so a person experiences a desire to return to a previous state of wholeness (Mukarromah & Zamroni, 2018)



Figure 4.1 Quinn is seen running into the room after hearing the commotion.

Source: (Adelman, 2018)

The tension that occurs is also narrated by a sentence, namely:

"Whenever I hear the yelling, I run to the spot" (Adelman, 2018).

It is illustrated from the sentence that the sound of the argument that occurred was not an ordinary sound, but a traumatic experience that disturbed Quinn's mental health. Quinn's attempt to run to his room in order to calm down and feel safe is in line with Lacan's concept of the real phase, which can lead to anxiety and tension that is difficult to overcome. Quinn's spontaneous



and emotional response reflects that the event cannot be represented in the symbolic realm, so it remains in the realm of the real.

The family photo seen on the page can represent the fulfillment of emotional needs that Quinn gets from his parents. In the context of the real, the photo can be a symbol that Quinn is still in a state of need fulfillment, before he experienced a traumatic event in himself. The photo is also a sign that the psychological tension between the period of fulfillment and the reality of emptiness experienced by Quinn now. The photo can evoke feelings of loss, loneliness, and tension that cannot be expressed verbally, so it can be in line with the concept of the real.

The conflict that occurs cannot be described symbolically. In the real phase, *desire* emerges as an impulse that cannot be represented, giving rise to a deep sense of loss or emptiness within Quinn. This impulse arises from the loss of feelings that cannot even be expressed through language or symbols. This creates an emotional experience that is difficult to forget.

Broadly speaking, Quinn's character is not only a victim of the quarrels made by his parents but she also experiences many losses and traumatic experiences that are the result of these events. Ngewa (2021) reveals that the warmth of the family environment can foster new seeds born within the family itself (Andika & Surip, 2024). Therefore, parents have an important role in maintaining the warmth of the family which can be absorbed and become a medium of learning for children.

4.2. An Exploration of the Imaginary Phase in Quinn's Journey

Quinn, as the main character, creates his own fantasy world in the form of a "quiet ship" as a space for himself to get protection and become an escape from a life full of conflict. This is in line with the imaginary phase proposed by Lacan that individuals have a response to the gap between expectations and reality. In understanding the formation of human identity, there is also an imaginary phase where the ego is formed through the process of self-identification with certain images (Hakim, 2024). In addition, the imaginary aspect is also a place for individuals to express unfulfilled desires and desires in the real world (Maleja, Baruadi, & Bagtayan, 2022).



Figure 4.2 Quinn tries to enter his imaginary world.

Source: (Adelman, 2018)

After a big fight between Quinn's parents, he started to enter and ran into the room to build his imaginary world. The picture shows an illustration where Quinn feels disturbed by the commotion that is happening. This is written as a response from Quinn, namely:

"From the sound that hurts my ears and makes my heart ache" (Adelman, 2018).

Through this writing, Quinn feels deep emotional pain when he hears his parent's arguments. From the sentence, it can be interpreted that Quinn not only feels physical pain (the sound that hurts the



ears), but also creates inner wounds that can adversely affect his growth and development. In dealing with the harsh reality that is being experienced, Quinn creates his own imaginary world as a response to painful events. The following narrative supports this statement:

"Quickly I became commander of the Quiet Ship, which takes me far, far away. From here, from there" (Adelman, 2018).

Alfadilah (2024) in her research, explains that the imaginary phase is a space for a person to build an identity through fantasy, which plays an important role in the psychology of characters in literary works (Alfadilah, 2024). In the context of Quinn, the "Quiet Ship" he builds is a symbol of the anxiety or anxiety he is experiencing. By becoming a "commander", he feels that he can control his imaginary space into a place full of security and comfort. The narrative can illustrate that Quinn uses his fantasy as a method of psychological protection. The phrase *"far, far away"*, also shows that she feels desperate to get away from the situation.



Figure 4.3 Quinn has created his imaginary world.

Source: (Adelman, 2018)

After entering his imaginary world, Quinn met several other alien beings and was seen chatting warmly. The feeling of comfort is clearly expressed in the sentence Quinn uttered, namely: *"Sometimes we get off the ship and explore other planets with their smiling creatures who hug us and speak in nice voices"* (Adelman, 2018).

The narrative clearly shows that Quinn feels much happier and more comfortable when he is in his imaginary world. He feels that he has many friends who care and can be a place to express his happiness. In the sentence *"who hug us and speak in nice voice"* illustrates that in reality, Quinn does not get a sense of security through hugs and only hears loud voices from his environment. This escape forms Quinn's ideal self-image behind the traumatic experiences she has suffered. At this stage, Quinn's *desire* to maintain a sense of wholeness, seek security, and distance himself from chaotic emotions. The imagination he constructs reflects the image he aspires to have a place filled with happiness and peace. Though it is merely an illusion meant to mask the sorrow of the reality he faces.

The imaginary phase provides an important framework in understanding the psychological experiences of Quinn as the main character. Through the narrative and the symbols depicted, we can see how Quinn has an ingrained response that serves as a protection for his mental and physical health. "Quiet ship" symbolizes Quinn's self-identity that plays an important role in the process of forming his ego. Thus, the imaginary phase is not only a space for the developmental stage of one's ego, but also a space for individuals to manage their identity and deal with emotional dynamics.



4.3. Quinn's Transformation into the Symbolic World

The conflicts Quinn experiences in *My Quiet Ship* make him want to express himself and reveal his hidden feelings. At first, language limitations and social norms are challenges that Quinn faces. He always feels afraid and finds it difficult to express his personal desires, because the symbolic system or language cannot fully represent his emotional state.

Symbolic phase is the stage where individuals begin to use language as a means to voice their opinions, desires, and other things (Alfadilah, 2024). In this phase, a person will always need language in every activity. From a linguistic perspective, Lacan's theory explains that a person begins to apply language, both in a preconscious and unconscious state (Alfadilah, 2024).



Figure 4.4 Quinn tries to stop the commotion.

Source: (Adelman, 2018)

The events that occurred illustrate the transformation that occurred in Quinn, he began to be brave in expressing what he felt. In the symbolic phase, children begin to express and express their feelings through language as the main tool in communication (Annisa & Shomary, 2024). This shows a deficiency in the social sphere and makes Quinn seek recognition for his feelings. On this page, language is highly emphasized as a bridge between the psychological condition that is full of trauma and the outside world that has certain rules and norms. The sentences spoken by Quinn are full of deep emotions, such as:

"Everything except for all the sad inside of me so I yell, STOPPPP YELLLLLING!!!!!!" (Adelman, 2018).

The sentence describes the deep sadness experienced by Quinn, but he cannot express it perfectly. He has endured all the bitterness that occurred and ventured to use language as a way to protect his psychological condition. Quinn's shout of "STOP YELLING!" to his parents can also be a symbol of resistance in overcoming the chaos. He also expressed his feelings as seen from the sentence, namely:

"They say absolutely nothing. Nothing. Nothing." (Adelman, 2018).

The sentence shows no resistance or follow-up from Quinn's parents. This condition shows that there is a dilemma that occurs in Quinn in the symbolic phase, where he tries to assert his identity and desires even though he is often marginalized. It is also depicted on the page that Quinn's parents look shocked at the statement made. The reaction shows that Quinn has successfully entered the symbolic order by saying things that he previously could not express with language.



In real life, which is limited by family norms and language systems, Quinn experiences a void that is the result of not receiving recognition and a sense of security within his family environment. Quinn's desire at this stage manifests itself as a desire to be accepted and recognized in the midst of his family's conflict-ridden circumstances. He continues to search for meaning within his chaotic family's symbolic system.

Thus, language and symbols are used as important tools in the process of forming the main character's identity. The symbolic phase becomes very relevant in the psychological understanding of the main character in this story. Based on the sentences and depictions from the illustrations in the story, it shows concretely how the symbolic phase plays a role in helping children deal with traumatic experiences, while strengthening their position in the family structure and norms.

4.4. *Objet Petit a* and Fantasy in My Quiet Ship

The issues raised in *My Quiet Ship* are closely related to the traumatic experiences of the main character, Quinn, during his childhood. He uses the "quiet ship" from his imagination as a form of escape from his conflict-ridden family situation, but this escape never truly resolves the emptiness or loneliness that Quinn experiences. In the context of *My Quiet Ship*, the quiet ship in Quinn's imagination can be understood as an *objet petit a*, where this fantasy object symbolizes wholeness, tranquility, and emotional security lost due to arguments and conflicts between parents (Sahara, 2019). Quinn's lack of connection to the symbolic reality within his family environment creates a desire that manifests itself in the silent ship as an *objet petit a*. Quinn's experience shows that the silent ship is not merely a temporarily fulfilled object but becomes a source of *jouissance* (paradoxical pleasure), as it also brings suffering due to the inability to achieve it in reality.



Figure 4.5 Quinn and his "Quiet Ship"

Source: (Adelman, 2018)

Objet petit a is one of the concepts in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Literally, *objet petit a* means "object small o," where 'o' itself is interpreted as "other" (Krupka, 2018). This concept refers to an object that causes desire or drive that continuously arises within a person (Katta & Nittali, 2023). It describes an endless search for a lost object, because something that cannot be fully possessed yet always remains a source of desire (Katta & Nittali, 2023). Lacan explains that humans will always feel a sense of lack, and to compensate for this, they will desire something (*objet petit a*). However, this desire is never truly fulfilled because the desired object cannot make a person feel completely whole. This concept is an individual's response to the condition of lack they experience. According to Lacan's perspective, *objet petit a* serves as the driving force behind desire.



The quiet ship is not a real object that Quinn can physically possess, but rather a symbol of something deeply desired yet unattainable. This symbol serves as a guardian of his desire, keeping it alive and continually driving him into the world of imagination. This aligns with Lacan's view that the *objet petit a* is the "remnant" left over from the symbolic process, serving as the source of lack and stemming from the unfulfilled drive of desire (Qadriani & Khatimah, 2023). This imagination also functions as Quinn's desire to stay alive in the face of painful reality. The fantasy also serves as a vessel for Quinn to manage trauma and emotions that cannot be expressed symbolically.

Understanding the *objet petit a* in the context of *My Quiet Ship* helps explain the role of fantasy and desire in the psychological journey of a child facing conflicts within the family environment. The quiet ship here is not merely an escape but also a mechanism for Quinn to cope with trauma and deficiencies that are difficult for a child of his age to confront directly. This concept also enriches our understanding of managing emotional deficits and how individuals cope with traumatic experiences through fantasy.

5. CONCLUSION

The issue raised in the picture book *My Quiet Ship* (2018) is the traumatic journey experienced by Quinn, the main character who is a victim of verbal abuse in his family environment. These various bad experiences leave deep trauma and cause Quinn to look for ways to survive while protecting himself from the reality. These experiences trigger complex psychological dynamics, causing Quinn to confront feelings of insecurity, confusion, and a drive to seek self-identity. In understanding Quinn's psychological condition, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory can be used as a framework for analyzing the mental health of the main character. Lacan divides the process of individual psychological development into three stages: the real phase, the imaginary phase, and the symbolic phase. In the context of *My Quiet Ship*, the real phase is depicted when Quinn's parents argue. The incident leaves a deep wound on Quinn and drives him into the imaginary world. In this phase, he creates his imaginary world, "quiet ship." This fantasy serves as Quinn's escape to seek the security he had previously lacked, a theme depicted and symbolized throughout the story. Furthermore, when Quinn dares to express his opinions and feelings about the anxiety he has been experiencing, it reflects his entry into the symbolic phase. This process became an important journey for Quinn in confronting his defense mechanisms and desire to process the traumatic experiences he had endured. In addition, it was also found from the problems narrated in *My Quiet Ship*, where the fantasy of a "quiet ship" became an object of unfulfilled desire and a driving force for Quinn in his psychological structure. This event is *objet petit a*, one of the psychoanalytic concepts described by Jacques Lacan. The story not only presents a touching narrative, but also a lesson for children who are experiencing similar events to feel heard and cared for. The book not only highlights the main character as a victim of verbal abuse, but also shows how parents can rediscover a sense of security in their children.



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