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Analyzing the Emotional Journey from Trauma to Healing in the Album GUTS by Olivia Rodrigo

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Abstract

This research discusses the emotional journey from the experience of trauma to the recovery process depicted in Olivia Rodrigo's GUTS album. This study uses Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery theory as the main foundation. The aim is to examine how the lyrics in the songs reflect the psychological phases that experienced by traumatized individuals, namely hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, and the stages of healing which include the Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, to Reconnection. Using a qualitative approach and text analysis method on selected songs, this research shows how Olivia Rodrigo cultivates elements of emotional language, imagery, and narrative to describe feelings of hurt, betrayal, and crisis of confidence, which ultimately lead to inner strength and emotional resilience. The results show that the album GUTS not only illustrates the complexity of emotions due to trauma, but also becomes an expressive tool in the process of self-healing and re-establishing personal identity. This study also enriches the understanding of the role of popular music as a reflection as well as a medium to interpret and deal with traumatic experiences emotionally.

Keywords: trauma; recovery; emotional journey; Olivia Rodrigo; Trauma and Recovery Theory

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas perjalanan emosional dari pengalaman trauma hingga proses pemulihan yang digambarkan dalam album GUTS karya Olivia Rodrigo. Kajian ini menggunakan teori Trauma and Recovery dari Judith Herman sebagai landasan utama. Tujuannya adalah untuk mengkaji bagaimana lirik-lirik dalam lagu tersebut mencerminkan fase-fase psikologis yang dialami individu yang mengalami trauma, yaitu hyperarousal, intrusion, dan constriction, serta tahapan penyembuhan yang mencakup Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, hingga Reconnection. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode analisis teks pada lagu-lagu terpilih, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana Olivia Rodrigo membangun unsur bahasa emosional, citraan, dan narasi untuk menggambarkan perasaan sakit, pengkhianatan, dan krisis kepercayaan diri, yang pada akhirnya mengarah pada kekuatan batin dan ketahanan emosional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa album GUTS tidak hanya menggambarkan kompleksitas emosi akibat trauma, tetapi juga menjadi sarana ekspresif dalam proses penyembuhan diri dan pembentukan kembali identitas personal. Studi ini juga memperkaya pemahaman mengenai peran musik populer sebagai cerminan sekaligus medium untuk menginterpretasikan dan menghadapi pengalaman traumatis secara emosional.

Kata Kunci: trauma; pemulihan; perjalanan emosional; Olivia Rodrigo; Teori Trauma dan Pemulihan

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A. Introduction

Emotion is a fundamental part of the human experience because it influences how individuals think, behave, and interact socially. As cited in Choirudin & Setyabudi, (2020), Lazarus explains that emotions arise from an individual's appraisal of events, especially when such events are perceived as threats to one's well-being or personal identity. Emotions can be expressed through various forms of art, such as painting, writing, and music. Among these, music particularly song lyrics plays an important role as a medium of

emotional expression, as it combines language and rhythm to deeply touch human feelings. Song lyrics are often referred to as "sung poetry" Muzakka et al., (2021) because they contain symbolic meanings, figurative language, and emotional power that reflect the songwriter's inner experiences. In a psychological context, music serves as a cathartic medium through which individuals can channel pain and sadness that are difficult to express directly. McFerran et al., (2020) emphasize that songs can provide a safe space for individuals to externalize inner wounds, while Baker et al., (2018) add that through music, one can reinterpret traumatic experiences and begin the healing process.

Beyond entertainment, songs hold an important role in revealing the social and psychological realities of human life. According to Naseri, as cited in Husain et al., (2022), songs are a combination of music and lyrics that complement each other to create a complete emotional experience. Lyrics are not merely accessories to music but function as a medium for conveying messages and profound emotions. Simanjuntak & Lumingkewas, (2022) add that song lyrics possess literary value because they contain symbolic meaning, imagery, and personal reflection that can be analyzed like other literary works. In the context of trauma, songs serve as vessels to express psychological suffering that is difficult to verbalize. Van der Kolk, as cited by McFerran et al., (2020), asserts that artistic expressions such as music can help trauma survivors safely release emotional pain. Through metaphors, imagery, and emotional language, song lyrics are capable of voicing fear, anger, loss, and vulnerability experienced after traumatic events. Therefore, songs can be viewed not only as aesthetic texts but also as therapeutic ones, as they enable reflection and self-healing.

Trauma itself is understood as an emotional response to events that are deeply distressing or threatening to one's safety. Starcevic, as cited in Spytska, (2023), defines trauma as an emotional reaction to extreme situations that exceed an individual's capacity to cope. Robinson et al., (2023) further explain that trauma can disrupt emotional stability and create feelings of helplessness. Bessel van der Kolk, as cited in Ho et al., (2021), expands this understanding by stating that the body stores traces of trauma known as the concept of "the body keeps the score" so that psychological suffering can manifest in physical symptoms such as tension, sleep disturbance, or anxiety. Herman, (2015) categorizes trauma symptoms into three main forms: hyperarousal (excessive alertness), intrusion (the recurrent return of traumatic memories), and constriction (emotional numbing or the inability to feel). These symptoms illustrate the complexity of trauma's psychological effects on an individual's identity and emotional functioning. In social contexts, trauma can also evoke feelings of guilt, shame, and fear of rebuilding trust with others.

Recovery from trauma does not occur instantly but through a gradual process requiring emotional support and self-awareness. Herman, (2015) explains that recovery consists of three stages: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. The first stage emphasizes the importance of establishing physical and emotional safety. The second involves confronting and reinterpreting the traumatic experience and the associated sense of loss. The third focuses on rebuilding healthy relationships with oneself and others.

In the realm of popular music, the themes of trauma and healing are frequently explored by young artists who use their songs as a means of emotional expression. One such artist is Olivia Rodrigo, an American singer-songwriter known for her honest and emotionally charged lyricism. Her second album,

GUTS (2023), presents themes of betrayal, anger, identity crisis, and self-discovery. Rodrigo herself described the album as "a diary about extreme emotions" Remnick, (2023). Through songs such as Vampire, Get Him Back, Logical, The Grudge, Love is Embarrassing, and Making the Bed, she traces the emotional dynamics from pain toward inner strength. The lyrics reflect the psychological journey of a young woman attempting to recover from betrayal and lost trust. Within the framework of Herman's theory, these songs represent the stages of trauma and recovery experienced by survivors, ranging from hyperarousal to acceptance and reflection.

To date, research on Olivia Rodrigo's works has primarily focused on linguistic rather than psychological aspects. For instance, Zahara et al., (2024) analyzed the use of figurative language in the GUTS album, while Jamila et al., (2024) examined the use of similes. Although these studies contribute to understanding Rodrigo's stylistic choices, none have linked her lyrics to the representation of trauma and the healing process. Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap by combining literary and psychological perspectives using Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery theory. Through this framework, the study seeks to analyze how Rodrigo portrays trauma symptoms such as hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, as well as recovery stages including safety and remembrance and mourning.

Based on the explanation above, this study focuses on the main research question: How is the emotional journey from trauma to healing represented in Olivia Rodrigo's album GUTS? The objective is to identify and analyze the representation of trauma symptoms and recovery stages reflected in the lyrics. By integrating trauma psychology and literary analysis, this research offers an interdisciplinary approach demonstrating that music functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as an emotional therapy. The novelty of this study lies in the application of Herman's Trauma and Recovery theory to popular music, an approach rarely employed in English literature studies. This research also contributes to a broader understanding of how song lyrics mirror the human inner journey through pain, loss, and emotional restoration.

B. Method

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on the representation of trauma and emotional recovery in song lyrics. The main objective of this study is to analyze how Olivia Rodrigo's GUTS album portrays the emotional journey from trauma to healing through lyrical expression. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore subjective experiences, symbolic meanings, and emotional depth reflected in artistic texts.

The data source of this research consists of six selected songs from Olivia Rodrigo's GUTS (2023) album: Vampire, Get Him Back, Logical, The Grudge, Love is Embarrassing, and Making the Bed.

This research uses Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery theory as the main analytical framework. According to Herman, (2015), trauma manifests through three major symptoms:

1. Hyperarousal: a state of excessive vigilance and emotional reactivity.
2. Intrusion: the uncontrollable return of traumatic memories.
3. Constriction: emotional withdrawal or numbing.

In addition, Herman identifies three stages of recovery:

1. Safety : establishing a sense of physical and emotional security.
2. Remembrance and Mourning : revisiting and processing traumatic memories.
3. Reconnection : rebuilding one's identity and relationships after trauma.

The data analysis technique used in this research follows the model of Miles & Huberman, (1994), which includes three main stages:

1. Data Reduction: selecting and categorizing lyric lines relevant to trauma symptoms and recovery stages.
2. Data Display: organizing the selected data in tabular form to clarify patterns and relationships.
3. Conclusion Drawing: interpreting the data meaning based on theoretical perspectives to understand the representation of trauma and the process of emotional healing.

Through this method, the researcher systematically interprets how Olivia Rodrigo's lyrics express trauma responses and illustrate a gradual transformation toward emotional recovery.

C. Findings and Discussions

Dinas Kepemudaan

No.	Stage	Song Lyrics	Interpretation
1.	Hyperarousal	"Bloodsucker, fame fucker, bleedin' me dry like a goddamn vampire." (Vampire)	This lyric expresses an outburst of anger and disgust toward someone perceived as having drained the speaker's emotional energy. The harsh language and metaphor of a "vampire" depict an extreme emotional state and a defensive reaction to betrayal. It reflects the hyperarousal phase, in which the individual is in a state of high alertness and struggles to regulate emotions.
		"I wanna break his heart (But then I, I want to get him back...) Then be the one to stitch it up." (Get Him Back)	This lyric shows ambivalent emotions of anger and desire for revenge, reflecting instability and impulsivity. The speaker's conflicting urges to hurt and to reconcile illustrate emotional volatility typical of the hyperarousal stage.
		"And all the things you did to me, you lied, you lied, you lied, oh." (Logical)	The repetition of "you lied" conveys an uncontrollable emotional explosion and deep frustration. The lyrical persona expresses confusion and rage resulting from betrayal, representing the psychological state of reacting to past threats that still feel present.
2.	Intrusion	"I see the parties and the diamonds sometimes when I close my eyes." (Vampire)	This lyric describes the uncontrollable reappearance of traumatic memories. The speaker still envisions scenes from the past when closing her eyes, signifying that traumatic experiences continue to haunt her consciousness an indication of intrusion.

No.	Stage	Song Lyrics	Interpretation
		"Cause then again, I really miss him, and it makes me real sad." (Get Him Back)	This lyric reveals the return of conflicting emotions toward the person who caused the pain. The spontaneous emergence of longing and sadness demonstrates that the memory of the traumatic relationship remains unresolved.
		"I have nightmares each week 'bout that Friday in May." (The Grudge)	This lyric portrays active trauma through recurring nightmares. The speaker repeatedly relives painful experiences, indicating that the past event continues to disturb her emotional balance.
3.	Constriction	"Come for me like a savior, and I'd put myself through hell for you." (Logical)	This lyric shows excessive emotional dependence and self-sacrifice. The speaker appears willing to suffer for another person, suggesting a loss of personal boundaries and self-control. It reflects the constriction phase, where the survivor suppresses pain to maintain attachment.
		"And I say I don't care, I say that I'm fine." (The Grudge)	This lyric illustrates denial of genuine emotions. The speaker tries to hide her pain by pretending to be fine. Such behavior represents emotional numbing, a common coping mechanism among trauma survivors.
		"I give up, give up, I give up everything, I placed my bets, and it's not worth anything." (Love is Embarrassing)	This lyric conveys despair and loss of meaning after enduring a destructive relationship. The speaker appears defeated and unmotivated, reflecting an emotional narrowing that prevents full expression of feelings.
4.	Safety	"Logical, logical, love is never logical." (Logical)	This lyric shows a new awareness that the relationship was unhealthy and irrational. The speaker begins to reevaluate what was once perceived as love, marking the onset of safety, where the survivor begins to protect herself emotionally.
		"And now it don't mean a thing." (Love is Embarrassing)	This lyric illustrates the process of emotional detachment from the past. The speaker releases her attachment and no longer assigns meaning to the painful relationship, signaling the emergence of emotional independence.
		"But it's me who's been makin' the	This lyric reflects self-awareness and accountability for one's role in past suffering. Such acknowledgment is

No.	Stage	Song Lyrics	Interpretation
		bed." (Making the Bed)	crucial in building emotional safety and self-responsibility signs of early recovery
5.	Remembrance and Mourning	"I loved you truly, you gotta laugh at the stupidity." (Vampire)	This lyric signifies acceptance and self-reflection toward a painful experience. The speaker no longer dwells in anger but looks back with understanding, illustrating the remembrance process, remembering with insight.
		"How could anybody do the things you did so easily?" (The Grudge)	This lyric reveals astonishment and deep regret toward the harm caused by another person. The speaker is in the mourning phase, acknowledging pain and loss.
		"And now it don't mean a thing." (Love is Embarrassing)	The repetition of this line signifies complete release and acceptance. The speaker is no longer bound to the past and begins to move forward, representing the final stage of mourning, where reconciliation with the traumatic experience occurs.

The findings of this study reveal that the lyrics in Olivia Rodrigo's GUTS album explicitly represent the emotional journey from trauma to recovery, as described in Herman, (2015). Through five key aspects hyperarousal, intrusion, constriction, safety, and remembrance and mourning. Rodrigo articulates how painful emotional experiences are transformed into expressions of self-awareness and inner strength. Her lyrics not only portray the anguish caused by betrayal and loss but also demonstrate a gradual progression toward understanding and self-acceptance.

In the hyperarousal stage, Rodrigo illustrates psychological conditions characterized by anger, tension, and impulsivity. Songs such as Vampire and Get Him Back depict intense emotional outbursts and an inability to achieve calmness. This phenomenon aligns with Herman, (2015), who explains that trauma survivors often remain in a heightened state of alertness because their nervous systems have not yet recovered from perceived threats. Van der Kolk, as cited in Ho et al., (2021), adds that the body "stores" trauma in the form of physical and emotional tension, which makes individuals easily triggered by stimuli reminiscent of their traumatic experiences. In this context, Rodrigo channels such reactivity through strong lyrical expressions, aggressive metaphors, and repetition, all of which reflect the inner turmoil of a survivor attempting to regain control.

The intrusion stage demonstrates how traumatic memories resurface uncontrollably. Lyrics in The Grudge, such as "I have nightmares each week 'bout that Friday in May," depict recurring flashbacks—a hallmark of unresolved trauma. Herman, (2015) identifies this phenomenon as a primary symptom of post-traumatic stress. Meanwhile, Lazarus, as cited in Choirudin & Setyabudi, (2020) explains that an individual's cognitive appraisal of emotional events determines how those experiences are perceived and remembered.

In this regard, Rodrigo captures the internal conflict between longing and pain, showing how cognition and emotion interact to sustain trauma's influence.

The constriction stage appears through behaviors of emotional suppression and denial. Songs like Logical and Making the Bed portray the lyrical persona pretending to be fine "I say I don't care, I say that I'm fine." This indicates emotional numbing, a defense mechanism often employed by trauma survivors to avoid overwhelming pain. Herman (2015) argues that survivors frequently suppress emotions to maintain a sense of control, while Lazarus, as cited in Choirudin & Setyabudi, (2020), notes that distorted self-assessment of traumatic situations can prolong emotional suffering. Rodrigo's lyrics depict this contradiction between awareness and denial, emphasizing the difficulty of restoring emotional stability after trauma.

The safety stage marks the beginning of recovery, during which the survivor starts to rebuild a sense of security and self-trust. In songs such as Logical, Love is Embarrassing, and Making the Bed, Rodrigo expresses newfound awareness that the previous relationship was unhealthy. Lyrics like "Now I'm doing it for me, and not for you" signify the emergence of self-boundaries and the ability to protect one's emotions. According to Herman (2015), recovery begins when survivors can recognize themselves beyond their trauma. This process aligns with Van der Kolk's view, as cited in Ho et al., (2021), that both body and mind require experiences of safety to reactivate the system of trust in oneself.

The final stage, remembrance and mourning, represents acceptance and integration of past experiences. Songs such as Vampire, The Grudge, and Love is Embarrassing reflect reflective and self-aware perspectives. Rodrigo demonstrates a shift from anger to acceptance, as seen in the lyric "I loved you truly, you gotta laugh at the stupidity," which illustrates the ability to look back with insight rather than resentment. Herman (2015) identifies this stage as an essential part of identity reintegration, where individuals begin to reconcile with their traumatic experiences. Similarly, Van der Kolk, as cited in Ho et al., (2021), asserts that healing occurs when one can name, understand, and reinterpret emotional experiences.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the emotional journey depicted in GUTS is non-linear. Rodrigo portrays healing not as a definitive endpoint but as a continuous process of self-reflection and meaning-making. This perspective aligns with Herman's (2015) assertion that trauma recovery does not entail forgetting but rather reconstructing meaning from suffering. Within the context of music, Rodrigo successfully creates a reflective space where emotions, loss, and feminine strength are expressed with sincerity.

Future research is encouraged to explore other dimensions of emotional expression in popular music using complementary theories such as Tedeschi and Calhoun's Post-Traumatic Growth Theory as cited in Ramadhana Reksoprodjo, (2023) to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of emotional recovery processes.

D. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that Olivia Rodrigo's GUTS album successfully represents the emotional journey from trauma to recovery through powerful and meaningful lyrical expression. Based on

Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery (2015), five main phases are identified in the lyrics: hyperarousal, intrusion, constriction, safety, and remembrance and mourning. Each phase illustrates how painful emotional experiences are processed into self-awareness and inner strength. Through her lyrics, Rodrigo not only portrays the wounds caused by betrayal and loss but also reveals the gradual progression of healing from emotional instability to acceptance and self-recovery.

In the hyperarousal stage, the lyrics depict emotional outbursts, anger, and impulsive behavior as initial reactions to traumatic experiences. The intrusion stage shows recurring painful memories, indicating that trauma continues to dominate the mind and emotions. In the constriction phase, Rodrigo represents emotional withdrawal and denial as defense mechanisms to cope with pain. The safety phase reflects newfound awareness and the ability of the lyrical persona to establish healthy boundaries and protect herself from harmful situations. Finally, the remembrance and mourning stage highlights acceptance and reflection on the past, where traumatic experiences are transformed into strength and emotional insight.

These five phases reinforce Herman's (2015) argument that trauma recovery is not a linear process, but a continuous journey involving awareness, reflection, and reconstruction of the self. Moreover, this study shows that music can function as both a reflective and therapeutic medium, helping individuals express complex emotions that are difficult to articulate directly. Through poetic and sincere lyricism, Rodrigo turns personal pain into a form of empowerment and emotional liberation. GUTS stands as evidence that popular music plays a significant role in portraying the psychological dynamics of human experience particularly in the context of trauma and emotional healing.

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