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Option: Literature

**Beyond the Pain: Coping Mechanisms and Recovery from Trauma in  
*Girl in Pieces* (2016) by Kathleen Glasgow**

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***Dedication:***

*To the warrior person who held my hand tight when I was nervous at school day one. Dearest daddy, I wish to offer you even a fraction of what you gave me.*

*To the guardian of my dreams and the eternal source of support and tenderness. The woman who first taught me how to read and write. Mom, words are not enough to express my gratitude and appreciation for you.*

*To the kindest creature my eyes have met at the first session at the university. The one who made me fall in love with literature ever since. Miss Moumene, I did it for you and because of you.*

*To my sisters and brothers Houda, Islam, Mouna, Amine and my cousin best friend Aya, Thank you for your endless support.*

*Dad, Mom, Miss Moumene Soumia, brothers, sisters and best friend, I owe it all to you.*

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate and understand the diverse coping mechanisms employed by individuals in their journey towards healing as a response to the traumatic experiences they had during their childhood. Particularly within the context of family relationships, this research seeks to identify the lasting impact of parents' problems on their children's mental health. The study will be based on American writer Kathleen Glasgow's novel *Girl in Pieces* (2016). The novel vividly portrays the story of the protagonist, Charlie Davis, a young girl, as she tries to cope and cure the wounds that the traumatic experiences have left on her by rebuilding herself again. This research aims to uncover the novel's use of self-harm as a coping mechanism, its characteristics, and the role of creative expression, particularly art and writing, in healing from trauma, as exemplified in the novel *Girl in Pieces*. The current study will employ an analytical approach and apply trauma theory. This latter explores the psychological and emotional impact of trauma on an individual's mental health and general well-being. The study holds important significance because it raises awareness of childhood abuse, trauma, and mental health among teenagers and sheds light on various coping mechanisms to help them overcome their difficult situations.

#### **Keywords:**

Trauma, Coping mechanisms, Recovery, Children's mental health, *Girl in Pieces*, Kathleen Glasgow.

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## Introduction

Feeling shattered and lost, struggling to make sense of the chaos and pain that has been thrust upon them is basically what can describe an individual inside of a traumatic turmoil. Despite human being's best efforts to plan for the future, yet they are often blindsided by the unpredictable nature of existence. Life often includes unexpected traumatic events, such as the sudden loss of a loved one, the acceptance of difficult truths, or experiences of childhood abuse. These events can lead to deep emotional wounds and result in feelings of overwhelming grief and shock.

However, regardless of the damage that trauma brings to our soul and body, survivors still choose to fight a hard battle in order to find their path towards healing. Through learning how to acknowledge their pain and find a sense of peace and acceptance, they develop a sort of coping mechanisms such as seeking support from loved ones, art and therapy. Even though the scars of trauma may never fade away, they can serve as a reminder of strength and resilience.

The discussion of such important topics has gained significant attention by many writers in recent years. Among them is the American author Kathleen Glasgow in her international bestseller novel *Girl in Pieces* (2016). Through her artful storytelling and the shattered pieces of her protagonist's broken soul, Glasgow crafts a hauntingly beautiful narrative that follows Charlie Davis's struggle with mental health and self-harm in addition to her journey towards healing after the traumatic experiences she has faced. Therefore, this study will discuss the theme of trauma and healing, drawing inspiration from the evocative narrative *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow. This study sheds light on the coping mechanism people use to overcome their challenges and emphasizes the significant influence of mental health on the well-being of young adults.

This study aims to investigate and understand the diverse coping mechanisms employed by individuals in their journey towards healing as a response to the traumatic experiences they had during their childhood. First, the current study attempts to reveal how family problems affect the children's well-being. Consequently, the study explores the representation of recovery in the novel *Girl in Pieces*. Moreover, it explores the protagonist's use of self-harm as a coping mechanism, the role of creative expression, particularly art and writing, in healing from trauma, and the significance of positive relationships and social support in the effectiveness of coping mechanisms.

Contemporary young adult literature has increasingly been addressing important topics such as trauma and healing. The most known example is this thesis's case study, *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow, which has become a subject of interest and exploration in many scholarly articles, like "The Main Character's Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Kathleen Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces*" by Gantina Sitepu . The present study aims to examine the novel from the lens of trauma theory to investigate the psychological wounds of the protagonist as well as her recovery journey. Hence, numerous studies about trauma are going to be taken into consideration.

In their book *Trauma*, Lucy Bond and Stef Carps describe and highlight the concept of trauma from interdisciplinary perspectives, such as psychology, sociology and literature. Bond and Craps argue, "Today, trauma is big business. It is the focus of numerous novels, artworks, films, songs and video games" (3). In general, this work provides a comprehensive examination of the ways in which traumatic experiences shape individual identity and collective narratives.

In addition, Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, argue that trauma is an experience that defies representation. Caruth asserts that trauma involves intense emotions, sensations and memories that individuals find difficulty to put in

words or coherent narrative. Through a deep analysis of literary texts, psychoanalytic theories and testimonies, Caruth clarifies how the “unclaimed” experiences of trauma manifest in fragmented narratives. This work provides insights about the complexities of trauma and memory, shedding light on the profound impact of unresolved experiences on individual and collective psyches.

It is widely recognized that trauma often results from overwhelming situations and events, such as violence, physical abuse, or verbal abuse, particularly when these experiences involve parents. According to Susan Forward, in her book *Toxic Parents: Overcoming their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming your Life*, she emphasizes the great impact of abusive parenting on an individual's psychological and physical well-being. Susan Forward asserts that "toxic parents can inflict long-lasting harm on their children, impacting their self-esteem, relationships, and overall mental health." Additionally, the author empowers readers to break the cycle of toxicity and cultivate resilience.

Furthermore, psychiatrist and Neuroscientist Bessel Van Der Kolk, in his well-known book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, explains how traumatic stress leads to a range of symptoms such as brain numbness and dissociation. These symptoms can persist long after the traumatic event has ended, affecting an individual's overall being and quality of life. Ven Der Kolk asserts, citing Lyons Ruth, that infants at high risk of developing difficulties in knowing and seeing others as they grow into adolescence are those whose mothers do not truly see and know them. To cure these wounds that trauma has left, people must go through a healing journey. Ven Der Kolk emphasizes that while it is not possible to treat traumatic events such as war, abuse, rape or molestation, the imprints of trauma on the



body, mind and soul can be dealt with (218). This work provides insights about healing, which includes yoga, mindfulness practices and body-based therapies.

This study sheds light on coping mechanisms employed by individuals in their journey towards healing from the traumatic experiences they faced. It emphasizes the importance of mental health and positive family relationships and its great impact on people's general well-being. The academic works discussed in this literature review will be referenced throughout the thesis, as it aims to study the portrayal of trauma and healing in Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces*.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will be theoretical and divided into three main sections. The first section will shed light on the effects of childhood by mothers on their children's mental health. In addition, the second section will discuss the significance of young adult literature. Finally, the last section of the first chapter will be a theoretical framework about trauma, coping and defense mechanisms.

Moreover, the second chapter will be practical and divided into three main sections. The first sections will provide an introduction about the novel, *Girl in Pieces*, and its writer, Kathleen Glasgow. The Second section will analyze the depiction of trauma in the selected case study. Furthermore, the last section will highlight the negative coping mechanisms employed by the protagonist Charlie Davis.

Finally, the third chapter will be practical and divided into two sections. The first section will discuss the positive coping mechanisms employed by the protagonist, such as attending therapeutic sessions, engaging in art, and building supportive relationships. Building on this, the last section evaluates the protagonist's recovery progress.

## **Chapter I: Trauma and Maternal Abuse in Young Adult Literature**

This first chapter is theoretical and is structured into three main sections. The first section discusses maternal childhood abuse and its impact on adult's mental health. The second section examines the importance of young adult literature in shedding light on highly important topics. Finally, the focus of the last section is on Trauma theory, the coping and defense mechanisms employed by individuals to overcome the faced traumatic experiences.

### **I.1. The impact of Childhood Abuse on Adult's Mental Health**

Have you ever been told that you are worthless, compared to others or even slapped on your face when you absolutely did nothing wrong? According to the American society for the positive care of children site, 1990 child in the United States die because of abuse and neglect in 2022. While childhood is generally perceived as a period of innocence, safety and care, yet, for many children around the world, this ideal image is shattered by the horrible reality of abuse. This latter may leave scars far deeper than what meets the eye. Especially when it comes from the first caregiver, the initial source of unconditional love and protection. Dr. Susan Forward, in her book *Toxic Parents*, asserts that "it is important to remember that all toxic parents, regardless of their abuse basically leave the same scars"(22). Behind the closed doors we still can find broken little souls that carry the weight of uncommitted mistakes, their voices are silenced by the shadows of fear, praying for understanding and healing. Childhood abuse by mothers has a serious long-lasting impact on children's mental health. Leading to a range of psychological, emotional and behavioral challenges, that will appear clearly later during adulthood. Jasmin Lee Cori, in her book *The Emotionally Absent Mother*, argues that "When the mother is consistently rejecting or non responsive and emotionally unavailable, the child gives up, learns it is futile to or dangerous in relationships to need and consequently turns off his or her needs and attachment feeling" (48).

Maternal abuse can manifest in several forms including physical, neglect or emotional mistreatment. Dr. Gregory L. Jartz in his book, *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse*, defines emotional abuse as “the consistent pattern of being treated unfairly and unjustly over a period of time” (13). He claims that it is the most common type of abuse. Because all family members use it; including the husband, the wife, the mother and the father (13). According to the American Society for the Positive Care of Children site, 7.5 million children maltreated, 38.030 of victims (6,8%) are psychologically abused. Emotional abuse has a negative long-term effects. First, it destroys the child’s character by hindering their self-esteem and creating a sense of worthlessness. By lowering self-esteem, the abuser can easily control the victim. Generally, children who are abused by their mothers will believe the words tell them during abusive interactions, and this, by nature, will damage their self-confidence and weaken their character. They will suffer from self-doubt to the point of not being able to advocate their needs in the future. In addition, Jasmine Lee Cori in her book *The Emotionally Absent Mother: A Guide to Self-Healing and Getting the Love You Missed* states that “significant disruptions in the attachment relationship or loss of an attachment figure is traumatic. Physical or sexual abuse by an attachment figure is traumatic” (54). Generally, the child takes his feeling of security from the attachment he builds with his mother. However, when the harm comes from where he is supposed to feel secured, this will be enough to leave him scared his whole life. Lee Cori highlights this point saying that “secure attachment gives us what is called secure base, which means exactly what you might guess: the security needed to go into the world and explore it. When we don’t feel this security, we’re less ready to leave the nest or even look inside ourselves” (45). This feeling of fear is what triggers anxiety. And as a result, the child who is always anxious about his future and the things he cannot control will be depressed and loses

hope for life. Finally, abusive experiences during childhood involving mothers will destroy the individual's capacity to build stable relationships. The special bond between both the mother and the child plays a crucial role in fostering trust, empathy and emotional balance. Lee Cori in her book *The Emotionally Absent Mother* claims that "The attachment bond, which is the glue between the child and an attachment figure is crucial for many areas of development" (44). When this connection is disrupted due to abuse, it will affect the individual's capacity to form healthy relationships in the future. Dr. Gregory L Jartz in his book *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse*, emphasizes this idea by saying that "When emotional abuse damages one relationship, it can affect all the relationships you form with family, friends and coworkers" (130). Concerning the same idea, Lee Cori asserts that "what happened to you as an infant and young child powerfully shapes how you see yourself and other people, what expectations you have in relationships" (61).

Within the walls of countless American houses, there are some children who still suffer from physical abuse every day. Susan Forward in her book *Toxic Parents Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*, identified this act as "any behavior that inflicts significant physical pain on a child, regardless of whether it leaves marks" (143). This abusive behavior includes slapping, hitting, punching or any other action that causes harm or injury. Forward asserts that the intentional users of physical force most of the time came from abusive families as well (144). Concerning the United States of America, Child Maltreatment statistics has shown that the physical childhood abuse has the highest number of victims (95.026 child) that is to say 17% of the abused children. As a way to cope with the traumatic pain they had, children who suffered such experiences may engage in self-harm behaviors including cutting, burning or even hitting themselves. Additionally, they may find difficulties with attention,

memory and cognitive processes. Bessel Van Der Kolk in his well-known book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, asserts that traumatic experiences such as childhood abuse can have an impact on the child's brain. When a child is subjected to physical abuse, his brain's stress response system is activated which leads to an overproduction of stress hormones specifically cortisol. This, in return, affects the neural brain pathways responsible for memory and attention. In addition, it may even impact cognitive processes like decision-making, emotional regulation and problem-solving.(14).

Maternal neglect in its different forms is another type of childhood abuse. Even though it is not as known as other types; its impact is still damaging. Child Maltreatment statistics say that 76.4 of the children who died from abuse in the United States are victims of neglect. It is identified as the mother's failure to provide her child with the needed support, care and attention for his well-being. Jasmin Lee Cori in her book *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse* argues that it "is the category of abuse which occurs without a word being spoken or a finger lifted. In fact, the abuse comes about because no word is said and no action taken" (88). Wendy Rose Gold mentions that neglect can be physical such as not offering food, clothes and shelter. Supervision neglect for not protecting the child and exposing the child to unsafe environment and situations. And the most dangerous type, emotional neglect. It basically occurs when the mother does not meet her child's emotional requirements, including the provision of attention, affection and comfort. This neglect will affect the child in a negative manner. Lee Cori in her book *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse* asserts that ignoring the child and not giving him attention will put him under the urge to engage in attention-getting activities (88). In this way, the child's feeling of being abandoned grows stronger and leads to attachment issues. Wendy Rose Gould argues that since child does not get the emotions needed from the first caregiver,

growing up, the child will engage in toxic relationships, settle for the bare minimum of what he deserves and get strongly attached to his surroundings just to never feel abandoned anymore. Furthermore, lack of attention will make the child feel worthless, and in order to regain this self-esteem he will be a people-pleaser and forget to prioritize himself first.

In conclusion, childhood abuse by mothers whether emotional, physical or neglect affects the child's mental health in different levels. This traumatic experience targets the child's self-esteem, causes anxiety, depression and attachment issues. And when a child tries to cope with this internal turmoil, he/she may even think of self-harming and suicidal ideas. It is essential to give this issue as much attention as possible in order to build a companionate society that helps those the survivors heal and raises awareness of mental health among adults.

## **I.2. The Significance of Young-adult Fiction**

It is undeniable that reading various genres such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama is essential for intellectual development, personal growth and expanding one's perspective on the world. However, especially for teenagers, reading young adult fiction has become an enjoyable experience; due to the crucial role it plays in entertaining, inspiring and empowering young readers during their difficult times. According to Chris Crowe in "What is young adult literature", young adult literature is "All genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed for young adults" (121). The term young adult fiction can be possibly identified when we focus on two categories, the age of its readers and the themes talked about. Alice Trupe in her book *Thematic Guide in Young Adult literature* states that it encompasses novels and stories that are created for adolescent readers between the ages 12 to 17(9). Yet many people above this age are interested in such novels because they address highly important topics including personal growth, identity, mental health and childhood abuse. Additionally, as Bucher

and Hinton point out, the excellent manner this literature was written made it earn a special place to the extent that it can be used in the school curriculum. It grants adolescents reading enjoyment and elevates their sense of self (1). In discussing its themes with depth and compassion: it relies on the significance of young adult literature.

When tracing the roots of young adult literature we can find that it has evolved through time reflecting the changing interests of adolescent readers. Beginning with the pioneers who laid the groundwork for this genre in the 1960's and the 1970's. Alice Trupe in her book *Thematic Guide to Young Adult literature* claims that S.E Hinton published the first young adult novel (8), *The Outsiders*, in 1967. Later, in 1970, there was the coming-of-age novel, *Are You there God? It's me, Margaret*, by Judy Blume and finally *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier in 1974.(9). These three novels authentically portrayed the teenager life addressing themes of search of identity, friendship, class conflict and self-discovery. Furthermore, Bucher and Hinton in their book *Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation and Appreciation* assert that the 1980's and the 1990's witnessed a wider expansion of young adult fiction. Diverse genres emerged including science fiction, dystopian literature and fantasy. Similarly, novels in verse and theme based short stories gain widespread acceptance. (6) Writers such as Scott Westerfeld and Tamora Pierce captivated the reader's minds with fantastic worlds and unforgettable stories including *The Uglies* series and *The Song of the Lioness*. In the 21st century, young adult literature is evolving more and more till this day. Excellent authors like Angie Thomas, Nicola Yoon and Rainbow Rowell elevated the writing process.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on representing a wider range of experiences and perspectives through young adult fiction. Mental health has received the fullest attention by writers aiming to raise awareness and support young readers who may be suffering

to maintain a calm nervous system. Mental health can be disturbed by unstable living conditions such as a sudden traumatic event, constantly abuse and violence exposure. These previous mentioned factors lead to a serious mental illness including schizophrenia, bipolar, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders. Mental illnesses have been defined by the American Psychiatric association (APA) as “health conditions involving changes in emotions, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these)”. In the United States, mental diseases impact both individuals and families. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, more than one in five American adults suffer from mental illness (near to 57.8 million in 2021).

A wide range of mental health diseases, from mild to moderate to severe, have been the subject of young adult novels. Starting with the captivating New York Times bestseller *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, which was inspired by the author’s personal story and published in January 2015. The novel follows the lives of two 17-year-old teenagers, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, who formed a strong bond since Finch did not allow Violet to jump from the ledge of the school bell tower. Their friendship grows stronger as they navigate personal struggles and past traumas. Until Finch suddenly commits suicide. Violet Markey is a popular schoolgirl who is dealing with depression, grief and survivor’s guilt following the death of her sister “Eleanor” in a car accident. Kia Jane Richmond, in her book *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature*, argues that depression “is more complicated than a person experiencing sadness and getting over it” (70). Depression comes with a lot of signs that Violet portrayed well in the novel, such as insomnia, self-blame and a sense of unworthiness. Statistics of Mental Health in America website have shown that 8% of American adults are affected by depression each year. This latter can result in diminished enjoyment in daily activities, complicate other health issues



and may escalate to the point of potentially leading to suicide. Thus, it has reached a serious level of danger and has become a threat to any human being, not just teenagers.

Theodore Finch is an intelligent schoolboy who struggles with undiagnosed bipolar disorder. This condition is the result of an unhealed internal scar he received from his family; an absent father and a neglectful mother strengthened the feeling of abandonment and traumatized him. As a way to cope with this internal turmoil, Finch developed suicidal behavior. Bipolar disorder is defined by the American Psychological Association as “a serious mental illness in which common emotions become intensely and often unpredictably magnified”. The character of Finch effectively portrays this disease, exhibiting extreme mood swings from periods of creativity and high energy to periods of depression. Along with symptoms of dissociation where he feels disconnected from the entire world around him. Unfortunately, the lack of the treatment of his disease contributed to his death at the end by committing suicide. ( Ratushima and Suiltyorini)

Additionally, among the great young adult novels, is *The Hate U Give* by the well-known Angie Thomas. It was published on february,2017. The work is of great importance because it addresses significant topics, including race and mental health. The novel follows the story of Starr Carter, an African American 16-year-old girl who was traumatized when a police officer shot her childhood friend in front of her eyes. Post Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD) is portrayed well through the character of Star as the negative feelings of fear, guilt and anger. It has been defined by the American Psychological Association as “an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events such as combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster”. Post traumatic stress disorder have spread widely in the United States. The US

department of veterans affairs site indicates that about 5 out of 100 adults in the US have PTSD in any given year (13 million American in 2020).( How common is ptsd in adults).

Young adult literature plays a crucial role in shedding light on serious topics such as mental health, trauma and mental diseases. Through characters like Finch in *All the Bright Places* and Star in *The Hate U Give*, readers can feel themselves reflected in the stories. In addition, it inspires them to overcome mental health and traumatic experiences whether by seeking support or becoming the support that the community needs to speak out about sensitive topics and promote positive change.

### **I.3. Theoretical Framework**

Numerous individuals around the world face at least one event or a series of events that are emotionally and mentally disturbing. Those traumatic experiences, whether sudden accidents or ongoing abuse, often cause them hidden scars, feelings of fear and hopelessness that prevent them from completing their normal life. In order to overcome those overwhelming sensations and heal, people adopt positive and negative coping and defense mechanisms that somehow limit the damaging consequences. For the reason of understanding the complex nature of trauma and its impact on persons, scholars and researchers have developed what is known as trauma theory.

Trauma, as defined by Cathy Caruth in her well-known book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, is “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (104). Common responses to trauma include symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and anxiety. Trauma theory has emerged as a multidisciplinary framework to comprehend the outcomes of trauma and was built on the Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In the late 19th century, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Bruer

were the early pioneers in the study of trauma by developing theories of dissociation and hysteria. Later, many scholars such as Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman contributed to the development of trauma theory in the 1990's. According to MedicineNet site, ranging from mild to severe, there are three main types of trauma; acute, chronic and complex. Acute trauma is the result of one single stressing event including assaults, natural disasters and violent attacks. In addition, chronic trauma occurs when an individual faces multiple, long-term traumatic events that threaten his/her emotional and physical status. Those events can be childhood abuse, long war or bullying. Complex trauma, on the other hand, is the result of exposure to varied and multiple distressing events. Often in the context of interpersonal relationships and may have a dangerous impact on the person's mental health.

In response to trauma, individuals employ certain strategies to shield themselves from the piercing arrows of pain and fight to win their battle to heal. Dr Lazarus and his collaborator, Dr. Susan Folkman in their book *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*, utilized the term coping to describe the cognitive and behavioral efforts a person employs to manage stress. These mechanisms can be both adaptive such as seeking social support, journaling or talking to a friend that understands you. And maladaptive including avoidance, substance use, anger and suicidal behavior.

Defense mechanisms have been identified by many scholars, researchers and psychologists in many ways. Psychoanalytic theory conceptualizes defense mechanisms as unconscious strategies individuals employ to shield themselves from the painful emotions associated with trauma. Anna Freud, in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, defines the defense mechanisms as "unconscious resources used by the ego to decrease internal stress ultimately."

She points out that the term defense is used to “describe the ego’s struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects” (42).

Furthermore, the psychologist Jhon M. Grohol argues that “defense mechanisms are one way of looking at how people distance themselves from a full awareness of unpleasant thoughts, feelings and behaviors”. That is to say, they work as armor to the mind whenever it feels threatened by a trigger. According to Grohol, most defense mechanisms are unconscious. Hence, people are not aware of using them at the given moment. Defense mechanisms include dissociation, repression and projection. First of all, as defined by Jhon Dollard and Neal E. Miller in their book *Personality and Psychotherapy*, repression “is the symptom of avoiding certain thoughts” (210). When an individual experiences something that is too painful to deal with, it automatically protects itself through unconsciously pushing the unwanted thoughts. Second, dissociation as defined by Jhon M. Grohol “is when a person loses track of time and/or person. And instead finds another representation of their self in order to continue in the moment”. This defense mechanism is often a reaction to an overwhelming incident like trauma which serves as a way to cope with situations that are difficult to handle. Additionally, projection is a process where individuals attribute their unwanted thoughts to someone else. Frank B. McMahon and Judith W. McMahon in their book *Psychology and You* claim that it “refers to the process of mentally giving someone else our own thoughts and feelings” (480).

Finally, as Dr. Susan Forward points out in her book *Toxic Parents* denial “is both the most primitive and most powerful of psychological defenses. It employs a make-believe reality to minimize, or even negate, the impact of certain life experiences.” (35) In this defense mechanism, the individuals refuse to accept the truth about a certain situation to protect themselves from an uncomfortable or anxiety-provoking reality.

On the one hand, coping mechanisms are conscious strategies that individuals employ to avoid the stress often related to the traumatic experiences they have been through. On the other hand, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies individuals utilize to shield themselves from anxiety and the emotional pain of trauma. The mind uses them both to protect itself from any trigger or danger.

In the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow, the protagonist Charlie Davis experiences many traumatic incidents and employs both coping and defense mechanisms to cure her wounds and find peace. We will follow trauma theory to analyze them.

As a conclusion, by understanding the psychological effect of trauma and the different coping and defense mechanisms individuals apply to protect themselves, we participate in raising awareness for the importance of mental health giving and seeking support whenever we need it.

## **Chapter II: Shattered Pieces: Trauma and Unhealthy Escapes in Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces***

This second chapter is practical and is going to be structured into three main sections. The first section provides an introduction to the case study *Girl in Pieces*, its writer, Kathleen Glasgow and its significance. The second section examines the depiction of trauma in Glasgow's novel. Finally, the last chapter sheds light on the negative coping mechanisms employed by the protagonist.

### **II.1. Unveiling the Mind behind *Girl in Pieces*: Kathleen Glasgow**

In the world of literature, Kathleen Glasgow emerges as an American New York Times-bestselling author of young adult fiction books. Her beginnings can be traced back to the enchanting world of poetry. According to her official website "Kathleen Glasgow Books," she has an MFA in poetry from the University of Minnesota. Among her illustrious works is the breath-taking novel *Girl in Pieces* (2016), in addition to *How to Make Friends with the Dark* (2019) and *You'd be Home Now* (2021). She also co-authored the mystery series *The Agathas* (2022) and *the Night in Question* (2023) with Liz Lawson. Glasgow's books have been published in more than 30 countries. Hence, she has gained critical acclaim for her ability to create characters that are both authentic and relatable. Her writing is characterized by its honesty and unusual capacity to draw readers into the imaginative world of her protagonists as they seek healing and recovery from the traumatizing incidents they had. In addition to her greatest success as a novelist, Glasgow is also an advocate for mental health awareness through her writing. She has helped and empowered readers to seek healing and overcome their hardship.

One of the masterpieces of Glasgow is her New York Times best-selling *Girl in Pieces*. The novel tells the story of an inside-out wounded, but resilient girl named Charlie Davis.

Despite her young age, she had been through a lot including her father committing suicide, her brain-dead best friend, and the emotional, physically abusive mother she had. The terrible life of Charlie deeply traumatized her. From the sense of abandonment she felt to the low self-esteem she had, the visible and hidden scars that Charlie had are the reason for the negative coping mechanisms she used to release her inner turmoil, including self-harm, addiction and toxic relationships she engaged in. However, Charlie is also a brave warrior. She fought a tough battle to heal. Charlie has developed a set of positive coping and defense mechanisms to shield herself from self-harm. For instance, Charlie participates in therapy sessions that guide her to realize that her trauma is not her fault. Despite her love of isolation, Charlie forms bonds with people who see beauty in her wounds. Through the artistic talent she has, she begins a journey of self-discovery to transform her pain into creative expressions.

Glasgow has written *Girl in Pieces* with a fully personal intention to shed light on the stigma often surrounding self-harm and mental health. In the author's note at the end of the novel's paper back, she argues that "self-harm is not a grab for attention. It doesn't mean you are suicidal. It means that you are struggling to get out of a very dangerous mess in your mind and heart and this is your coping mechanism" (400). According to her own experiences, Glasgow reveals the motivation to write her novel, *Girl in Pieces*. According to her, she remembers that she was on a bus writing notes for another book, a girl came and sat next to her. Glasgow was surprised for a moment by what she saw. She remembers thinking "She had skin like mine" (399). The girl felt uncomfortable being seen by Glasgow, so she tried to hide her "fresh red scars view" (399). Since Glasgow had a history of self-harm as well, she wanted to tell her that she was not alone and that she also used to do what the girl did. Unfortunately, she kept silent. However, she regretted doing that. Glasgow states "I let the girl get off the bus without saying a

word. And I shouldn't have. I should have let her know that even mired in the very depths of herself, she wasn't alone ... because she's not" (399). At first, Glasgow did not want to write her story. But after what happened, she felt the urge to encourage people who were suffering from similar challenges. She declares "Years ago, I didn't want to write the story of my scars, or the story of being a girl with scars, because it is hard enough being a girl in the world, but try being a girl with scars on your skin in the world" (399). Finally, through the character of Charlie Davis, Kathleen Glasgow invites readers to confront the harsh reality of trauma and mental illnesses. Glasgow tries to convey a message of hope about the power of self-acceptance and healing in reclaiming one's sense of self-worth. She says:

"Charlie Davis finds her voice, and her solace, in drawing. I find mine in writing. What's your solace? Do you know? Find it and don't stop doing it, ever... It's not always sunshine and roses over here, and sometimes the dark can get pretty dark, but it's filled with people that can understand, and just enough laughter to soften the edges and get you through to the next day" (401).

## **II.2. Depiction of Trauma in Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces***

In Kathleen Glasgow's novel *Girl in Pieces*, the protagonist Charlie Davis sadly declares "You will spot the girls who will have it easy... and then there is me, that one who never got anything right" (69). Once upon a time, a normal girl was born to parents who not only failed to provide her with love, care and protection but also traumatized her to end up the first enemy to herself; "my own body is my deepest enemy" (194). Even the only person who *chose* her, her best friend, decided to be a living ghost too. In the incredibly amazing Kathleen Glasgow's novel *Girl in Pieces*, trauma is not just words on paper but is rather portrayed through a breathing human being. In their article "Posttraumatic Response and Children Exposed to Parental



Violence”, Rousman BBR and Ho J describe the experiences of domestic violence and how they affect their children as “... a type of war zone. Sometimes they can feel they can predict the “attacks,” and sometimes the aggression is unexpected. This leaves them with a sense of damage and uncertainty” (85). Unquestionably, this is the case of Charlie in *Girl in Pieces*, different kinds of abuse, especially the physical one, caused her to be shattered into pieces.

Moreover, for the purpose of understanding the post-traumatic stress disorder in Charlie’s character and analyze her reactions, there are some concepts that must be covered. American researcher and psychologist, Judith Herman, in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, argues that “the likelihood of harm is also increased when the traumatic events include physical violation or injury, exposure to extreme violence, or witnessing death” (34). This clearly explains that the abuse Charlie had been through had a significant and awful impact on her. Herman further explains that whenever humans are exposed to danger, they respond with a diverse array of interconnected reactions that evolve both the body and mind (34). She declares that “threat initially arouses the sympathetic nervous system, causing the person in danger to feel an adrenaline rush and go into a state of alert” (34). The benefit of such reactions here is the protection from danger; “they mobilize the threatened person for strenuous action, either in battle or in flight” (34). However, when an individual faces a traumatic incident in his life, it tends to impact this sympathetic nervous system of self-protection. This latter stops functioning in the right manner: “each competent of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over” (34). In this way, the natural reactions become traumatic reactions. Herman states that many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder can be categorized into three main sections: hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction (35). One can argue that all these three post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are

present in *Girl in Pieces*. Concerning hyperarousal, Judith Herman explains “after a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment... in this state of hyperarousal, which is the first cardinal symptom of past-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocation, and sleeps poorly” (35).

This post-traumatic symptom, hyperarousal, is portrayed at the beginning of the novel, when Charlie is in the rehab center. She is always alert, fearing Frank, who tried to get her into sexual work when she used to stay in his house, would be back. Charlie affirms this idea by saying that “the good doctor says you have to start taking meds at night to sleep and I have a feeling you don’t wanna do that...I don’t want drugs, especially at night when I am most scared and need to be alert” (25). This can be interpreted as the “fight or flight” response. Additionally, the intrusion reaction, as Herman points out, occurs when,

long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts...The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep (37).

In this context, Charlie starts to remember and relive the traumatic incident that happened to her when she first harmed herself trying to escape from Frank. Charlie declares:

I remember the security guard and the forest of hair inside his nose. I remember lights above me bright as suns, the sound of beeping that never seemed to stop. I remember wanting to kick out when hands were on me, when they were cutting away my clothes and boots. I

remember how heavy my lungs felt, as though they were filled with mud. I remember being so scared that ... Frank was going to appear in the doorway and take me away, back to Seed House, to the room where the girls cried. (19) Charlie's description in the previous quote provides a vivid image of the scene of her traumatic incident. This can be interpreted as Judith Herman argues, "Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (38). The last post-traumatic stress disorder symptom is constriction. In this regard, Herman states that:

When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness. Analogous states are observed in animals who sometimes "freeze" when they are attacked. (42) This traumatic reaction will be furtherly analyzed in the next section as dissociation.

The 17-year-old Charlie Davis opened her eyes in a place where her father seemed to struggle with his own demons; he suffered from mental illness. In this regard, Charlie states "Sometimes silence and sometimes too much laughter, a strange laughter that seemed to crack him from the inside until there wasn't any laughter but crying and tears..." (29). Unfortunately, he committed suicide by draining himself into a river. Poor Charlie was not even allowed to feel sad about his death or to freely express her feelings. She contemplates "Was my father my first momentous? He was there, and then he wasn't, and I wasn't supposed to ask about him or cry or be anything, really because my mother was upset" (310). This unfortunate incident makes Charlie has flashbacks of his suicide to the point that she wants to do what he did: "Straight into the river, to be swallowed, just like my father" (27). In addition, Charlie's father's suicide

shatters her sense of stability. It charges her with feelings of guilt and sorrow, and she becomes unable to neither trust others nor properly express her emotions; "I nod, trying not to cry" (378). Charlie declares "I'm relieved to be able to turn away and do something so she can't see the tears coming" (378).

Charlie's mother used to love Charlie's father so much, and after he committed suicide, she turned out to be a completely different person, to the point that she became *a ghost* at home. Since she was a child, Charlie's mother used to neglect her daughter's needs by leaving her home for a long time; "she left lunch for me under plastic wrap" (25). Despite Charlie having done nothing wrong. Her mother physically abused her. Charlie shares that "Once my mother hit my ear so hard I heard the howling of trains for a week" (79). This unusual act taught Charlie to be in constant fear from her mother to the point of making herself as small as possible, "especially when I was small, it's how I first learned to be small" (226). The book *The Emotionally Absent Mother: A Guide to Self Healing and Getting the Love You Missed* by Jasmine Lee Cori serves as evidence to the previous idea. Lee Cori explains that the attachment between the mother and her child holds a significant importance and affects the child's self-esteem. Lee Cori argues, "Secure individuals learn to perceive themselves as strong and competent, valuable lovable and special- thanks to being valued, loved, and viewed as special by caring attachment figures" (44). Unquestionably, abuse leads to a child's lack of secure attachment, which results in low self-worth.

Being treated like that, Charlie developed anger issues. Once she hit her therapist and broke her mother's nose, which led her to be kicked out of the house. Charlie asserts, regarding this, "My mother used to hit me, so I started to hit back" (80). This supports Susan Forward's idea in her book, *Toxic Parents Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*,

where she states that "physical abusers themselves often come from families in which abuse was the norm, most of their adult behavior is a direct repetition of what they experienced and learned in their youth"(144). In addition to being homeless and the losing her loved ones, Charlie's mother emotionally abused her. She remembers "My mother is alive, but she's a ghost too" (46). She kept convincing her that she was worthless, and no one cared about her until she lowered her self-esteem and had what is known as "selective mutism". This latter, according to the American Psychological Association, is a "rare disorder, most commonly but not exclusively found in young children characterized by a persistent failure to speak in certain situations despite the ability to speak and to understand spoken language". Concerning this issue, Charlie declares "My mother was always telling me to keep quiet, not be a bother. "Nobody's interested Charlotte" she'd say" (222). When Charlie was in the Creely Center, they used to call her *Silent Sue* because she was unable to speak properly. Even when she talked, she kept repeating the same words: "I don't want to drink anymore I don't want to drink anymore" (328). Her therapist, Casper, wanted to engage her in talking sessions; she was not able to talk anymore, "Casper always has blank sheets of paper on her desk for me. I write, then push it to her... though I don't say anything because my throat is filled with nails" (32). All the previous traumatizing acts left deep scars in Charlie's heart. Charlie's emotions seemed to contradict each other: "I miss my mother, even though missing her feels more like anger than sadness...while I say sadness what I really mean is black hole inside me filled with nails and rocks and broken glass and the words I don't have anymore" (20). In this context, Dr. Priscilla Wong in "Selective Mutism" article, declares that post-traumatic stress disorder with dissociative features has been associated as a potential precursor of selective mutism. Wong states that "several cases of children who experienced severe abuse and trauma fit in the classification of selective mutism". In other

words, the cessation of speech with the other world in children with post-traumatic stress disorder may be the child's coping mechanism.

Poor innocent Charlie contended with undesired feelings of guilt and self-blame for a long period and started to cut herself into pieces. She was so attached to her best friend Ellis because she was the only one who had seen beauty inside her scars "Charlie, your arms. Did you do that? It's kind of beautiful" (70). After harming herself and bleeding until her brain was damaged, Charlie started questioning herself if she could have done something to help her in her hard times and prevent her death. She sorrowfully proclaims, "*I miss Ellis so much it's like a huge dark carven inside my heart*" (226).

### **II.3. Living with Trauma: Negative Coping Mechanismsq**

Every individual who has been traumatized by a dreadful incident. Struggles to regain their sense of self. Yet, if the person does not engage in a healing process, they may resort to maladaptive strategies to cope with and alleviate the internal turmoil within their body. Throughout the novel, Charlie Davis employs a set of negative coping mechanisms. For instance, she engages in self-harm, relationships, substance abuse, dissociation and isolation. She also employs defense mechanisms to protect herself.

Charlie struggles with Non suicidal self-Injury (NSSI). Whenever she feels overwhelmed, she tends to cut herself. Unfortunately, she states "I need to cut myself away piece by piece until there is nothing left" (343). Non suicidal self-injury means, as she said, "I hurt myself, but I don't want to die" (172). She physically harms and cuts herself to release all the negative emotions from her soul and gets temporary relief. Charlie is sent to Creely Center in order to get rid of doing this. However, when she faces a new trigger, she goes back to self-harm. This

coping mechanism transforms emotional wounds into physical ones. Reflecting on her self-harm tendencies, Charlie declares “How powerful I am. I can grind the glass to my face, *erase* my eyes eat the glass and disappear from the inside” (342). Charlie’s contradictory statement of announcing her extraordinary ability to harm herself in a hideous manner can be interpreted as denial defense mechanism. It is very obvious that she refuses facing reality about her self-destructive behavior and rather perceives it as a feeling of control. As mentioned in the book *Psychology and You* by Judith W McMahon et al, denial “is the process of refusing to admit that there is a problem” (477).

Since she was a child, doctors have given Charlie drugs to control her self-harm. When she grew up, she found it an easy way to escape from the painful memories and isolate herself from her surroundings. As a result, she became addicted to alcohol and drugs. Her environment where her father and mother were both alcoholics played a significant role. She satirically states, “A drunk and a drunk met and they made a mess = me. I was born with a broken heart” (264). Martin A. Plant, Jim Orford and Marcus Grant in the article “The Effects on Children and Adolescents of Parents’ Excessive Drinking: An International Review,” argue that “Parents who drink excessively are also likely to have children who experience long-term adverse consequences. These include heavy and problem-causing psychoactive substance use, criminality suicide, depression, personality disorders, and psychological and behavioral disturbances” (2). Studies in North America, including the United States of America, have found a higher risk of negative effects of drinking problems parents. This includes: loss of concentration at school, anti-social behavior, substance abuse and anorexia nervosa (7). This confirms that living in toxic environment affects the individual’s character and standards.

Charlie's therapist highlights a significant point regarding her conditions and struggles, stating, "You were given very few emotional resources as a child and your life, until now, has been one of hiding your feelings until they become simply so powerful you can't control them anymore" (210). Her past trauma, the absence of her parents, fear of abandonment and low self-esteem made her get attached to an old musician named Riley. Charlie engaged in a toxic relationship with him. At first, he was a source of great support to her. But later, he turned to be a drug dealer who betrayed and poorly treated her; "He's shouting now, like my mother, what is wrong with you? And then one of his hands is in the air, fingers together palm flat" (274). She had a people pleasing behavior so he would not leave her. Dr. Mike Bechtle in his book, *The People Pleaser's Guide to Loving Others Without Losing Yourself*, asserts that "for people pleasers, it's easy to focus on the needs of others because their positive response on the moment makes us feel better" (18). When Riley treated Charlie in a nice way, that somehow made her feel satisfied and comfortable about herself. However, when she discovered his true personality, this surprised her. Charlie recounts "... I have it now here I see it: Riley's hidden face" (275). Lost in a stream of consciousness, Charlie's thoughts wandered to "like a dog now, stupidly, I only want him to pet me, love me, not leave. And that makes me suddenly, blazingly angry and sad all at once. Which feels like fire inside me" (274). Charlie also over apologizes "...to wait down the sign of his street. To say I am sorry, but for what, for what." (275).

In order to shield herself from unwanted thoughts and feelings, Charlie employs a set of defense mechanisms. Including denial, dissociation, projection and repression as explained well in the previous chapter.

Charlie's therapist, Casper, tries to simplify things for her saying that "It's all right if you can't remember, our subconscious is spectacularly agile. Sometimes it knows when to take us



away as a kind of protection. I hope that makes sense” (19). Charlie used to dissociate whenever something triggers her past trauma. She fully detaches herself from her emotions and surroundings. About to leave herself again, Charlie declares “my body is weirdly heavy and light at the same time and a little bit of me is leaving, floating away. Casper calls this dissociation” (39). Through this mechanism, she copes with overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame and fear; contradicting herself, Charlie states, “I wish I could open my eyes. I don’t want to open my eyes. I hear the sounds of crying again and now, I recognize that it’s me, I am crying” (343). Dissociation here is a freeze response. As previously mentioned in the second section, Judith Herman in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, states that “the person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body, or as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken” (43).

Moreover, the other defense mechanism used by Charlie is projection. She projects her feelings of shame and sadness onto her surroundings, Riley and Blue. By displacing the internal turmoil onto external relationships, this defense mechanism is serving as a way to distance herself from confronting the challenges of her own emotions. This idea is portrayed when Charlie fights with Riley and put the blame on him; yet it was not his fault. Saying her true intention, she declares “Riley says stop, but I don’t, because I want to hurt him, just a little and just a lot, for how he looked at Regan or whatever might have happened with Wendy, or the way he laughs with Blue and won’t let me be her friend, but mostly because I am so tired” (328).

Furthermore, the last defense mechanism employed by Charlie is repression. She continuously keeps disturbing thoughts from being conscious; “My brain starts to circle, circle, even as I keep drawing Blue. There are things happening that I don’t want to think about, not

right now...” (36). Whenever she remembers any hurting or sad memory from the past, she tends to block it out immediately; “Out, cut it all out... my father... my mother... missing Ellis...” (38)

Ultimately, while Charlie’s previous coping and defense mechanisms, such as self-harm, engaging in toxic relationships, substance abuse, projection, dissociation, denial, and repression, may alleviate some of her internal turmoil, they remain negative and should be avoided by others. As Herman emphasizes, “because these altered states keep the traumatic. Experience walled off from ordinary consciousness, they prevent the integration necessary for healing” (45).

### **Chapter III: Seeking Healing in Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces***

Organized into two main divisions, the last chapter is practical. The first section focusses on the positive coping strategies Charlie utilized to facilitate her recovery including going to therapeutic sessions, establishing healthy relationships, as well as making art. The aspects of Charlie's recovery and its advancement are addressed in the second section.

#### **III.1. From Shattered to Strong: Positive Coping Mechanisms in *Girl in Pieces***

From the yin and yang symbol, which portrays the balance of opposing forces in Chinese philosophy, one can understand that positive and negative elements usually complete each other and lead to the desired goal. This is also the case with Charlie. In order to cure her wounds and cope with the traumatic stress she suffered from, Charlie employed harmful mechanisms as well as a set of positive ones. Both they contributed to her recovery. Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, asserts that "the capacity to preserve social connection and active coping strategies, even in the face of extremity, seems to protect people to some degree against the later development of post-traumatic syndromes" (58). Positive coping mechanisms include healthy and supportive relationships, art and engaging in therapeutic sessions.

Charlie, after a suicide attempt, was sent to a rehabilitation center for girls who harm themselves, where she began a journey of self-discovery and healing. Charlie was able to stop self-harm after attending therapeutic sessions with Dr. Bethany Stinson. Dr. Levine Petere in his book *Healing Trauma* asserts that "the body is the container of all our sensation and feelings. It is also the boundary separating us from our environment and from others. This boundary gets ruptured in trauma so that we often feel raw and unprotected. Skin is our line of defense" (38). This serves as evidence to why Charlie cuts her skin into pieces and that the first step an individual takes when he/she starts healing from trauma is to stop self-harm. The therapeutic

sessions that she assisted consisted of breathing and talking tasks; their main aim was to confront her fears and understand her thoughts in a safe environment. Doctor Stinson, or as the girls call her, “Casper,” is Charlie’s therapist. Charlie narrates “Casper tells us to breathe, to make accordions by spreading our arms way, way out, and then pushing in, in, in... meds come after group, then quiet, then launch, then crafts then individual, which is when you sit with your doctor and cry some more” (6). In almost all cases when a traumatized individual engages in therapeutic sessions, he/she makes a good progress in their healing journey. Herman stresses that the relation between the therapist and the patient is “a unique” relationship due to many reasons. Among these reasons is that “the therapist becomes the patient’s ally.” (134). Many other researchers emphasized this important idea of alliance. Among them is Dr. Stubbe in her article “The Therapeutic Alliance: The Fundamental Element of Psychotherapy” by asserting that “there is consistent evidence that the quality of the therapeutic alliance is linked to the success of psychotherapeutic treatment across a broad spectrum of types of patients, treatment modalities used, presenting problems, contexts, and measurements” (402). One can comprehend that when the relationship between the therapist and the patient is characterized with respect, collaboration and empathy, excellent results will be achieved. Herman emphasized this conception by arguing that therapists empower their patients using all the knowledge and the skills they have (134).

Moreover, Charlie forms a special connection with supportive individuals. These supportive individuals include her friends Blue, Louisa, Mikey and Ariel, her therapist, Casper, and her craft’s teacher, Miss Jony. In this context, Herman explains that the social support from people the traumatized individual cares for makes a huge difference in lowering the amount of damage; “people in the survivor’s social world have the power to influence the eventual outcome of the trauma. A supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event”

(61). Having such a positive circle has provided Charlie with guidance and a sense of companionship; “Casper should be someone's mother, she should be my mother” (14). Casper was Charlie’s first supporter and the one who sat in silence with her when she had nothing to say. Even after being discharged from the center, Casper keeps sending Charlie emails that really guide her “... practice your breathing, take walks, do your art. Be kind to yourself” (210). Charlie followed her instructions to be a better person.

Blue and Louisa were in the rehab center with Charlie. Louisa was her roommate who kept telling her stories during the night. When Charlie had panic attacks, she used to comfort her “Louisa, she comes up very close to me in our room.... she says, ‘Little one, you are with your people’” (9). Blue, despite bothering Charlie when she first entered the rehab center, later she became her best friend “I like living with Blue. I like having a friend, a girlfriend, again. Ellis is still inside me and always will be. But Blue is good in her way and kind” (374). Judith Herman emphasizes that “sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world” (51). The role that the community plays to support the traumatized person is undeniable. Furthermore, Mikey is Charlie’s friend who financially and emotionally supported her. Once he told her “the object is to move forward not back, right? I don’t want you to get hurt, more hurt” (219). And she always listened to his advice to stay away from alcohol consumption and self-harm.

Ariel, Mikey’s friend, was so kind to Charlie. She tried to comprehend and help her in many ways. She asked her to join her drawing workshops and invited her to dinner when they engaged in deep talks about her harm acts. Charlie narrates, “She reaches across the table and brushes the scar on my forehead. Her fingertips are warm and for a second I relax, sinking into

her touch. ‘You’re just a baby,’ she says quietly. ‘So young’” (36). This act of kindness affects Charlie so much especially that she has not received any emotional support since she was a child.

Art is a key element in Charlie’s healing journey. For her, drawing is not just a hobby; it is an escape through which she transforms her pain into creative outlets. Through words full of passion, Charlie describes it as “drawing is my words, it's the things I can't say” (192). Every time her soul hurts, she draws in an unstoppable manner to feel herself again; “I draw like a demon, but this time on the wall next to my bed. Filling up all the emptiness that surrounds me, some kind of mural of my own to wrap me up and keep me safe...” (238). The mention of safety in this context emphasizes the fact that drawing aids Charlie in coping with and progressing in her struggle against trauma. Many art therapy interventions have shown a noticeable reduce in anxiety and an improve in mental health outcomes in traumatized individuals. As reported by Schouten et al in their article “The Effectiveness of Art Therapy in the Treatment of Traumatized Adults”, “the aim of art therapy is to elicit processes of change, development, and acceptance, using art like (like drawing, painting, collage, and sculpting) in a purposeful and methodological way in the treatment of psychosocial problems and mental disorders” (221). For Charlie, drawing serves as a non-verbal expression through which she processes and express her complicated traumatic memories and emotions.

Numerous people helped her invest in her talent; among them is Miss Jony, her craft teacher. She gave her a beautiful blank pad of all-purpose newsprint paper and a brand-new charcoal to draw again “I breath hard, I Work hard. My fingers take care of me. It’s been so long, but they know what to do... I draw her, I draw them... I fill every last piece of paper until I have a whole world of missing” (75). Art here can be interpreted as a cathartic experience.

Through creating visual representation of their stories, individuals organize their thoughts and emotions.

Another individual who played a significant role in Charlie's recovery was Felix, the grandfather of her two friends. He is the famous painter that his canvases and art works amused her. Talking about his art works, Charlie declares: "...but looking at them excites me. Fills me up, blunts the ache" (354). Throughout the novel, she repeats that she feels empty from the inside. The loss of her loved ones voided her. Heartbrokenly, she says "I lost something, I keep losing things. I am tired" (287). Felix made a great effort to get Charlie out of her mess. He offered her a job, a place to live in his home and emotional support. Felix once assures her:

Everyone has that moment, I think, the moment when something so... momentous happens that it rips your very being into small pieces. And then you have to stop. For a long time, you gather your pieces. And it takes such a long time, not to fit them together, but to assemble them in a new way, not necessarily a better way. (355) This can be interpreted as if he is assuring her that it is not her fault to be traumatized and that life events are unpredictable. Felix always insisted on taking Charlie out of questioning and non-sense overthinking zone. He desired to make her focus only on her healing journey and curing her wounds. At last, his plan worked well. Undoubtedly, one can notice the extraordinary impact of Felix's support on Charlie.

For any individual who has faced a traumatic incident, the act of writing serves as a strong weapon to help understand his/her thoughts to heal. As Felman Shoshana and Dori Laub, in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*, explain that the traumatic event's memories must be repeated so that survivors can heal. This process can happen when the individual put it into a therapeutic process "a process of constructing a narrative... of externalization of the event has to set in motion. This re-externalization can only occur and take effect when one can

articulate and transmit the story” (69). It is the same case for Charlie. She starts to write her thoughts on a blank sheet of paper and pass it to her therapist; “I write down how it feels like and push the paper across Casper's desk” (27). As an individual who finds it difficult to articulate her thoughts and feelings verbally, the act of writing plays a crucial role in being a safe escape in describing how she feels when she suffers from ‘selective mutism.’

All the previous positive coping mechanisms from supportive relationships, art and drawing in addition to therapy not only serve as the grounding for Charlie’s healing, but also allow her to control and cope with her stress.

### **III.2. Moving towards Recovery in Glasgow’s *Girl in Pieces***

Healing from trauma is a complicated process. Judith Herman argues that “with survivors of prolonged, repeated trauma, the initial stage of well as recovery may be protracted because of the degree to which the traumatized person has become a danger to herself... with survivors of chronic childhood abuse, establishing safety can become an extremely complex and time consuming task” (165-6). One cannot even imagine how difficult it has been for Charlie to recover because she has suffered from both prolonged and chronic childhood abuse trauma. It takes great deal of courage for people to confront their own demons and run from their past ghosts that keep haunting them today. The inside and outside scars that trauma causes may be far deeper than what others can see. It requires patience and strength to cure them. The protagonist's Charlie Davis journey towards recovery has been full of twists and turns, as well as sunny and dark days. Slowly but surely, she makes great progress in putting her broken pieces back together.

After harming herself for the first time and being sent to a rehabilitation center to receive therapy, Charlie starts to trace her first steps toward becoming a better person. She reveals her



inner thoughts by saying that “And I promised myself I would do better” (109). She talks for the first time in a while, removes her bandages and gets a new haircut. This is the result of the therapeutic sessions and the support she received from her surroundings. In addition, Charlie starts to draw again, and this really enhances her self-confidence. Regardless of the harm Charlie has been through, she never forgets her talent. She states “My fingers never forgot what to do, like they’ve been waiting for me to come back” (36). She went out of her isolating shell and started to interact with people, especially her therapist; “today I’m excited to meet with Casper. I want to tell her about Crafts, and what I drew and what drawing means to me. I think that will make her happy” (77). Charlie is discharged from the Center due to her mother’s financial situation that she cannot offer more money for her to stay there anymore. She gives her a bus ticket to go to Mikey’s place. Charlie, then, is all on her own, and her real adventure begins. Comforting herself, Charlie states that “I tell myself: you made it out of Creely, however it happened. You got on a bus. You came to desert you found food. You have not hurt yourself in this new place. You found a job” (138).

The protagonist’s healing journey continues to progress because of the positive relationships she forms including with Ariel and Julie, who play a crucial role in convincing her that she is still too young for what she is doing to herself. Surprisingly, when Blue moves in to live with Charlie, she gives her a sense of companionship to the point that she starts to accept who she really is. In this context, Charlie states “I think my face looks better than it did all those months ago; my skin is clearer, there’s less color underneath my eyes” (235). Accepting and loving herself again can be seen as a good sign that she is healing.

Unfortunately, Charlie’s state worsens. Despite her efforts to stop self-harm, she falls victim to the urge to cut herself again. On the one hand, this indicates how severe her trauma is,

and on the other hand, the triggers she continuously receives make her return to the starting point. The triggers include Riley's betrayal and the suicide of her friend "Louisa who ran out of space," and the absence of Ellis "who went too deep" (339). Undeniably, this serves as evidence that the path to recovery is very challenging. Many scholars argue that it is not possible to completely heal from trauma due to its long-lasting impact on both the body and the soul. Among them is Bessel Van Der Kolk. In his well-known book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, he explains how trauma affects the brain and the body, causing long-term symptoms that can be challenging to treat and heal from. He adds, "Our study showed that having a history of childhood sexual and physical abuse was a strong predictor of repeated suicide attempts and self-cutting"(158). This explains Charlie's unstoppable self-harming acts. Additionally, Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, asserts that "...recovery, like a marathon, is a test of endurance, requiring long preparation and repetitive practice" (124). That is why there are moments when Charlie feels totally in control, and moments when she wants to just disappear.

By good fortune, Charlie's two friends, Linus and Tanner, rescue her. The three of them go to New Mexico, where they take Charlie to see their grandfather, Felix. In his home, Charlie's wounds start to recover, "my feet keep getting better, the cuts and gauges heal up nicely" (358). Felix, a talented artist, persuades her that she possesses an extraordinary talent that she should pursue further. In the novel, Felix offers, "You have your skill charlotte, now give your skill an emotion... I have a room you can use; Devie will get it ready for you tomorrow" (360). Charlie becomes passionate and starts to draw the story of "a girl was born". Charlie recounts: "Everything Casper wanted me to say I draw instead. I have a voice, I have a place for my voice" (365). She becomes conscious that something must be done to heal her trauma. Charlie bravely declares "It's time for different things, it's time to speak again" (365).

Finally, Charlie moves to live and work with Felix and due to this decision, all her demons start to disappear. After weathering a harrowing storm, the sun shines so strongly that it burns her haunting internal demons. She witnesses the desired destiny of her dreams. When she is on the airplane, she starts writing a letter to her beloved best friend, Ellis. By doing so, this is an indication that she finally realizes what she and Ellis always wanted to do, to visit other places. Passionately, she writes “Dear Ellis, I have something really ... angelic to tell you” (398). Throughout the novel, one can notice that Charlie’s way of talking, have changed from only focusing on her traumatic memories to confidently realizing her dreams. This serves as evidence to how far she has come in her recovery journey.

It is undeniable that Charlie’s healing journey is non-linear. However, she demonstrates that it does not matter how many turns and twists a person can experience. The wounded individuals can always start from where they stopped and fight to recover. Despite all the challenges Charlie has faced to regain her sense of self, she proves that she is a fearless and unstoppable warrior who is fighting in a vicious battle. Despite enduring long-term damage, she is now capable of pursuing a fulfilling life.

## Conclusion

When facing an unexpected fate that shatters their sense of self into pieces, individuals get traumatized and become stuck in one place. In order to shield themselves against pain and find their way towards healing, trauma survivors tend to employ a set of coping and defense mechanisms. Coping mechanisms can be both positive and negative. In her novel *Girl in Pieces*, the American writer Kathleen Glasgow portrays Charlie Davis as heavily traumatized for a variety of reasons. Since she was a child, she has been physically and emotionally abused by her mother, a trauma further intensified by the loss of her father, who committed suicide by drowning himself in a river, and her best friend, who became brain-dead following a suicide attempt.

The novel portrays Charlie as a courageous warrior who persistently confronts her demons in pursuit of healing. Her progress is non-linear, as she adopts negative coping mechanisms that appear to be ineffective. Positive strategies then replace those maladaptive ones. The novel portrays defense mechanisms as strategies that the protagonist employs to shield herself from unwanted feelings and pain.

The current study is structured into three main chapters. The first chapter discussed the types of maternal childhood abuse and its impact on the child's mental health and well-being. Additionally, the second section examined the significance of young adult literature in shedding light on highly important topics. Finally, the last section of this first chapter was a theoretical framework about trauma theory, coping, and defense mechanisms.

The second chapter employed trauma theory to analyse the depiction of trauma in Kathleen Glasgow's novel *Girl in Pieces*. The last section highlighted the negative coping mechanisms employed by Charlie Davis to release her internal stress and overcome her fate. Charlie's character effectively portrayed self-harm, as she engaged in non-suicidal self-injury. In addition,

defense mechanisms were highlighted in this last section as strategies Charlie employed to numb her pain. They include repression, denial, dissociation, and projection.

The last chapter revealed the diverse positive coping mechanisms employed by Charlie, including attending therapeutic sessions, building supportive relationships, and drawing. Moreover, it examined Charlie's healing process.

One of the obvious outcomes of this study is that maternal childhood abuse, whether it is physical or emotional, is a traumatizing experience that shatters the child's sense of self and leads to unfavorable consequences. Moreover, the second finding is that self-harm serves as a negative coping mechanism for traumatized individuals to release their internal stress. Despite providing temporary relief for the survivor, self-harm remains a negative coping mechanism.

However, positive coping mechanisms including attending in therapeutic sessions and engaging in supportive relationships benefits the survivor and contributes to the progress of his/her healing journey.

Through the analysis of the novel *Girl in Pieces* using trauma theory, the current study is significant because it adds an undeniable contribution to the field of trauma and healing by shedding light on the importance of mental health among teenagers. The study also emphasizes the importance of young adult novels, such as *Girl in Pieces*, in addressing serious topics.

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**Résumé**

Cette étude vise à explorer et à comprendre les différents mécanismes d'adaptation utilisés par les individus dans leur processus de guérison face aux expériences traumatiques vécues pendant leur enfance. Dans le contexte particulier des relations familiales, cette recherche cherche à identifier l'impact durable des problèmes parentaux sur la santé mentale de leurs enfants. L'étude se basera sur le roman de l'écrivaine américaine Kathleen Glasgow, *Girl in Pieces* (2016). Le roman décrit de manière vivide l'histoire de l'héroïne, Charlie Davis, une jeune fille, qui tente de faire face et de guérir les blessures laissées par ses expériences traumatiques en se reconstruisant. Cette recherche vise à mettre en lumière la représentation dans le roman de l'automutilation comme mécanisme d'adaptation, ses caractéristiques, ainsi que le rôle de l'expression créative, notamment l'art et l'écriture, dans la guérison du traumatisme, tel qu'illustré dans *Girl in Pieces*. L'étude actuelle adoptera une approche analytique et appliquera la théorie du traumatisme, qui explore l'impact psychologique et émotionnel du traumatisme sur la santé mentale et le bien-être général d'un individu. Cette étude est significative car elle sensibilise aux problèmes de la maltraitance infantile, du traumatisme et de la santé mentale chez les adolescents, et met en lumière divers mécanismes d'adaptation pour les aider à surmonter leurs situations difficiles.

**Mots-clés :**

Traumatisme, mécanismes d'adaptation, guérison, santé mentale des enfants, *Girl in Pieces*, Kathleen Glasgow.

## الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف وفهم آليات المواجهة المختلفة التي يستخدمها الأفراد في رحلتهم نحو التعافي استجابةً لتجاربهم المؤلمة التي مروا بها خلال طفولتهم. وتسعى هذه الدراسة، في سياق علاقات الأسرة على وجه الخصوص، إلى تحديد التأثير الدائم لمشاكل الوالدين على الصحة العقلية لأطفالهم. وستعتمد هذه الدراسة على رواية الكاتبة الأمريكية كاتلين غلاسكو بعنوان "فتاة في قطع (Girl in Pieces)" الصادرة عام 2016. تصور الرواية بشكل حي قصة البطلة، تشارلي ديفيس، وهي فتاة شابة، في محاولتها للتكيف وعلاج الجروح التي خلفتها التجارب المؤلمة من خلال إعادة بناء نفسها من جديد. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى الكشف عن تصوير الرواية لل إيذاء النفس كآلية للتكيف، وخصائصها، ودور التعبير الإبداعي، وخاصة الفن والكتابة، في التعافي من الصدمة، كما هو موضح في رواية "فتاة في القطع". وستستخدم هذه الدراسة نهجاً تحليلياً وستطبق نظرية الصدمة. وتستكشف هذه النظرية الأخيرة التأثير النفسي والعاطفي للصدمة على الصحة العقلية للفرد ورفاهيته العامة. وتنتم هذه الدراسة بأهمية كبيرة لأنها تزيد الوعي بالإيذاء والصدمة والصحة العقلية في مرحلة الطفولة بين المراهقين وتسلط الضوء على آليات التكيف المختلفة لمساعدتهم على التغلب على مواقفهم الصعبة.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

الصدمة، آليات التكيف، التعافي، الصحة العقلية للأطفال، فتاة في القطع، كاتلين غلاسكو.