

Preventing Mental Disorders: The Significance of Recognizing Nice Girl Syndrome Symptoms in Gaskell's *Ruth*

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Abstract—This study explained Nice Girl syndrome in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* to prevent mental disorders. A mental disorder is a clinically significant disruption in cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour. There are several mental disorders, including Nice Girl syndrome. Beverly Engel's Nice Girl syndrome was the study's grand theory. The Nice Girl Syndrome theory was used to analyze Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth's* female characters' thoughts and behaviour. This study revealed seven of ten signs of Nice Girl syndrome, such as "other people's feelings and needs are more important than her own", "she believes that she will be treated nice and fair as long as she is nice and fair", "other people thought about herself is more important than her self-esteem, health, and safety", "she will be accepted and loved if she is good and perfect", "she believes that she does not have the right to stand up for herself or act on her behalf", "she believed that anger is a destructive emotion and should not be expressed directly to those with whom she was angry", and "she believes that it is better to avoid conflict at all costs".

Index Terms—mental disorder, Nice Girl Syndrome, *Ruth*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, mental health is a significant issue engaging in society. The prevalence of severe mental disorders in the Indonesian population is 1.7% (Hartini et al., 2018). In 2017, 970 million people worldwide had a mental disorder, which increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sara, 2022). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines mental disorders in terms of cultural, social, and familial norms and values. Mental disorder is a wide range of conditions that affect mood, thinking, and behaviour (Sara, 2022). Mental disorder is a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Furthermore, mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other essential activities. There are several mental disorders, such as Nice Girl syndrome.

Nice Girl syndrome is a condition where women continuously prioritize being kind and pleasing to others, often disregarding their feelings or rights (Engel, 2008). According to Kompasiana (2020), psychologists believe that childhood experiences play a significant role in the development of this syndrome. During childhood, individuals are

often taught and expected to be friendly and obedient, catering to the desires and happiness of others. These behaviour patterns may persist into adulthood, where individuals constantly strive to maintain a friendly image to appease people. This syndrome is uncommon and rarely discussed in a society where people live together.

Literature captures and writes people's lives in specific eras and areas. Literature creates its world through the author's imagination (Arafah et al., 2021), not only in fiction but also by illustrating the existing reality of a particular era (Arifin et al., 2022). Literature is also the art of expressing meaning using beautiful language (Arafah, 2018). Literary works are often used as mirrors, reflecting the realities of a specific era (Arafah et al., 2021). Literary works provide an author's thoughts, manners, behaviour, and attitudes, give readers insights into their specific styles, and enable a deeper understanding of their work (Hasanah et al., 2021). Additionally, the literature study delves into personal, cultural, societal, and aesthetic values, understanding the human experience in life (Sunardi et al., 2018). Presenting unusual or absurd personalities, some authors try to portray characters in different ways to raise the various feelings of the readers (Fadillah et al., 2022). Therefore, literary work has a societal purpose to portray life in a context of socio-cultural reality (Arafah et al., 2023). Literature also functions as a form of communication, as a gateway to explore and introduce culture, social dynamics, and the intricacies of human existence (Mutmainnah et al., 2022).

In linguistic communication, senders and recipients communicate directly or indirectly through various mediums, such as social media (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). In communicating, some signs are categorized as meaning relations, indicating that the words have additional meanings to be interpreted within their context (Hasjim et al., 2020). Those signs need to be interpreted using an implicit method to achieve an understanding (Kuswanti et al., 2023). As well as computational linguistics and emoji, signs and symbols are subject to interpretation that conveys different meanings or specific messages (Iksora et al., 2022). In literary work, the author and reader serve as the sender and recipient, whereas literary work functions as a communication medium in which thoughts and emotions are expressed utilizing language with cultural backgrounds (Takwa et al., 2022). At this point, language is expected to deliver messages from an author to the readers (Asri et al., 2023). Language, shaped profoundly by cultural influences, is integral in navigating the complexities of social interactions and daily life (Arafah et al., 2023). The language employed should be effectively aligned with the environmental characteristics of the story, as effective communication lies at the core of human interaction (Yulianti et al., 2022).

Literary work considers language the most crucial element in serving aesthetic aspects (Manugeran et al., 2023). In order to put ideas aesthetically, literature mainly uses figurative language to convey the author's ideas (Baa et al., 2023). Authors of literary work utilize beautiful language and distinctive writing styles to convey unique issues (Hasyim et al., 2020). To emphasize the uniqueness of their narratives, the authors combine various characteristics and signs that enhance the story's speciality (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019b). Moreover, local languages may familiarise people with a specific area's cultural heritage, encompassing its traditions and rituals that symbolize meaningful values (Arafah et al., 2020). As a part of the local wealth of Indonesian society, rituals are related to traditions and customs, which are full of values that the society has maintained (Takwa et al., 2024). Culture can strengthen personal identity and express specific values through signs and symbols (Hasyim et al., 2023). Literary works serve as manifestations of each author's vision and record of cultural events in the past (Yudith et al., 2023). Therefore, preserving local language is an attempt to keep local wisdom and cultural heritage essential for a society (Halil et al., 2024; Takwa et al., 2024).

Literary work is produced in various forms, including written works and performances (Asriyanti et al., 2022). It differentiates into several types, such as short stories, poems, novels, plays, and songs, presenting valuable insights (Arafah, 2018). Novels stand out for their complexity, as they depict characters' lives in specific forms, times, and places, presenting conflicts and their resolution. The complex reality of human life can be seen within the storyline of a literary work (Afiah et al., 2022). Regardless of their form, literary works contain meaningful lessons and information about human existence (Purwaningsih et al., 2020). In the era of information and technology, literary works have developed and strengthened their quality in illustrating the diversity of human thought (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019a). Readers gain insights from a novel about various aspects of the characters' lives within the depicted world, including their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, traditions, and customs (Arafah, 2018).

Available in various languages, novels become a worldwide phenomenon. Numerous popular novels exist in English as an international language. People who understand and communicate in English can surely get more opportunities (Kaharuddin et al., 2023). Reading an English novel can be an attempt to test the readers' skills to comprehend a text (Mardiana et al., 2023). Regarding enhancing skills in using English as a second language, Indonesian readers, especially EFL students, may easily use and access literary resources offline and online (Anggrawan et al., 2019; Purwaningsih et al., 2020). Any societal changes will affect the whole system (Takwa et al., 2022). Globally, people can connect through digital media and instantly access information (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a). This rapid access to information brings out various issues (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b). Due to the young generation's changing internet use, it will be easy for them to learn through digital media (Arafah et al., 2023). Digital media and the young generation can even utilize electronic devices through artificial intelligence (AI) in the learning process (Kaharuddin et al., 2024). Furthermore, technological advancement is advantageous and has disadvantages for educators and students (Suhadi et al., 2022). Encountering innovation in the technology era, educators have tried providing various online materials simultaneously with digital literacy that enhance students' skills in learning language (Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). In response to the situation, teachers must use a learning model with a technological-based framework

(Usman et al., 2024). Regardless of the challenge, students, especially beginners with high motivation for learning, may overcome learning difficulties and achieve their goals (Arafah et al., 2020). Being optimistic and confident with a basic and social skill will make it easier for students to face and solve problems (Arafah et al., 2024; Misnah et al., 2024). Another aspect of second language acquisition is that students may improve their cultural knowledge of the language they are learning (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023), which allows students to build and strengthen their characters more firmly (Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022). Therefore, at this point, literary work can teach the readers character education values based on the cultural knowledge in the story (Arafah et al., 2024). This kind of cross-cultural learning improves cross-cultural interactions to identify more cultural norms and values (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019). This is captured by eco-literacy, where humans closely treat the environment (Abbas et al., 2024). Cultural knowledge related to constantly evolving phenomena captured by authors of literary work represents their dissatisfaction or disagreement with the environment (Siwi et al., 2022; Sunyoto et al., 2022). Elizabeth Gaskell is one of the female authors specializing in critiques of women's issues and their experiences.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810-1865), born on September 29, 1810, in Lindsey Row, was a highly admired female Victorian author. Gaskell made a noteworthy contribution to the literary world through several outstanding works, namely *Cranford* (1853), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1855), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), *Cousin Phillis* (1863), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866). In the early 20th century, these works were considered ancient and provocative, but today, the writer ranks as one of England's most respected Victorian authors. In this new century, Elizabeth was recognized as an accomplished artist, capturing the attention of literary theorists, academics, and readers who appreciate engaging storytelling. These refined and evocative narratives are now being published for her growing readership. The writing style is bold and progressive, often presenting stories as critiques of Victorian attitudes. Being recognized as vulnerable, women have faced discrimination ever since (Yudith et al., 2024). This incident forced women to be treated unequally by men (Arafah et al., 2024). Gaskell fearlessly addressed topics such as traditional views on women's roles in society, prostitution, and prohibition, notably exemplified in her novel *Ruth*, which challenged the disapproval of the husband's Unitarian congregation (Gaskell Society, 2018).

Ruth (1853) tells the story of a young orphan girl who works as a seamstress after her parent's death. This novel employs a third-person narrator in the past tense about a series of unfortunate circumstances that lead to the girl being fired and expelled from work and home. Ruth and other female characters in this novel show some symptoms of Nice Girl syndrome through their dialogues and thoughts. This study aims to educate its readers to be aware of these symptoms and stop them from developing and having this syndrome.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Beverly Engel first brought attention to Nice Girl Syndrome in 2008 through her "*Nice Girl Syndrome*" book. Engel, a psychotherapist, often observed clients describe painful, shocking, and bizarre experiences. Moreover, Engel (2008, p. 5) focused on the beliefs and attitudes that lead women to be used and abused. Nice Girl syndrome is when a woman consistently prioritizes being kind and pleasing to others without thinking about feelings or rights (Engel, 2008). Engel (2008, p. 17) stated that there are seven types of Nice Girls (women who have Nice Girl syndrome), namely the doormat, the pretender, the innocent, the victim, the martyr, the prude, and the enlightened one. These Nice Girls often have certain beliefs and attitudes in common, which Engel called "The Ten False Beliefs", which are the symptoms of this syndrome (Gaskell, 2008, p. 33) listed below:

1. Other people's feelings and needs are far more critical than my own.
2. If I am friendly (and fair) to other people, they will be friendly (and fair) to me.
3. What other people think about me is more important than my self-esteem, health, or safety.
4. If I am perfect, I will be accepted and loved.
5. If I act naive and innocent, people will take care of me, and I will not have to grow up.
6. I do not have the right to stand up for myself or act on my behalf.
7. Anger is a destructive emotion and should not be expressed directly to those with whom you are angry.
8. It is better to avoid conflict at all costs.
9. There is good in everyone, and if you give someone enough chances, he or she will eventually show it to you.
10. Women need men to protect them and support them financially.

Nice Girl syndrome is not formed by itself. Four primary origins of Nice Girls' behaviour formed gradually (Engel, 2008, p. 27). These four significant origins include biological predisposition, societal, familial, and experiential beliefs. It can trigger a woman to develop a mental disorder, Nice Girl syndrome. It is crucial to recognize and be aware of these symptoms mentioned above, considering the consequences may affect both mentally and physically. Mental disorders affect cognition, emotion, and behavioural control and substantially interfere with children's ability to learn and adults' ability to function in their families, at work, and in the broader society (Jamison et al., 2006). Mental disorders begin early in life and often run a chronic recurrent course.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study applies the procedure and principle of the qualitative method. Data were collected by closely reading and

deeply understanding *Ruth* while taking notes of certain words and lines. They were analyzed using a Nice Girl syndrome theory to identify dialogues and thoughts of female characters that interpret and illustrate symptoms of Nice Girl syndrome. This study is essential to raise awareness regarding mental disorders, especially Nice Girl syndrome, to prevent women from developing this syndrome by recognizing the symptoms early.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gaskell's *Ruth* illustrates seven out of ten symptoms of Nice Girl syndrome. Each symptom is displayed by female characters, namely Ruth Hilton, Jenny Wood, Miss Duncombe, Mrs Bellingham, Miss Faith Benson, Sally, Mrs Bradshaw, and Jemima Bradshaw.

Extract 1

After the first day, she never left the room; she forced herself to eat because his service needed her strength. She did not indulge in tears because the weeping she longed for would make her less able to attend to him. (Gaskell, 1853, p. 1 (162))

The first symptom is, "Other people's feelings and needs are far more important than my self-esteem." Mr. Bellingham, the man Ruth fell in love with, had a brain fever, and no one else but Ruth was around him. Ruth took full responsibility for Mr. Bellingham. She did not think or be aware of what she needed at the moment, like eating or sleeping, but she served and cared for him all the time.

Extract 2

"That's all very fine, and I dare say very true," a slightly surprised Miss Benson remarked. However, as they say, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," and I would much rather have received a sincere "thank you" right now for everything I had been preparing to do for her than the enormous consequences you assure me will occur in the "sweep of eternity." Thurstan, try not to be depressed, or I'll leave the room. When I am a bit too quick or eager, you gaze at me with a calm dejection that I cannot take. (Gaskell, 1853, p. 1 (262))

The second symptom is "If I am nice (and fair) to other people, they will be nice (and fair) to me". In the data above, Faith Benson was trying to help the helpless Ruth by taking Ruth into her home and planning everything so she could live adequately. She expected Ruth to say "Thank you" for her effort, but Ruth never said the word. She has been nice to her, and she expected her to be pleasant toward her.

Extract 3

Her behaviour was so docile as to be spiritless; she fulfilled her father's wishes with a neurotic rush and quickness, acting quickly if she believed Mr Farquhar would intervene in any way. It was obvious that she wanted to owe him nothing. After chatting with her father, she left the room when he entered. However, when Mr Bradshaw initially expressed his desire for her to stay, she stayed put—silent, uninterested, and unaware of all that was happening—at least, it appeared that way. She would diligently labour at her sawing as if it were her source of income; her eyes were heavy and puffy from sobbing, and she would lift them before answering any questions. (Gaskell, 1853, p. 2 (162))

The third symptom is "What other people think about me is more important than my self-esteem, health, or even my safety". In the data above, Jemima Bradshaw repressed herself because she had to do what her father desired to make Mr Farquhar think nice of her. Her whole cheerful personality changed to make Mr. Farquhar amused of her.

The fourth symptom is "If I am good and perfect, I will be accepted and loved." In *Ruth*, Jemima Bradshaw tries to be the woman that Mr Farquhar desires by changing her character to make him fall in love with her. As Gaskell depicted, "*For an instant, she planned to become and to be all he could wish her; to change her very nature for him*" (Gaskell, 1853, p. 2 (146)).

Extract 4

Ruth, who had a soft spot on her face and was attracted to small children, went up to pet the little one and smiled. As she was about to kiss him, Harry, whose face had been reddening since the play started, raised his sturdy little right arm and gave Ruth a powerful blow to the face. (Gaskell, 1853, p. 1 (145))

Ruth turned away, humbly and meekly, with a bent head and slow, uncertain steps. (Gaskell, 1853, p. 1 (146))

The following symptom is "I don't have the right to stand up for myself or act on my behalf". In the data above, Ruth was slapped by a kid named Harry simply because Ruth was playing with his younger sister and about to kiss the baby. After being slapped, Ruth just walked away with a bent head. She could stand for herself, but she let the kid do that abusive movement toward her.

Extract 5

With indignation of difference, she dared not show her father, she flashed at him. She had some diviner instinct telling her that, despite their experience, they knew something good and acceptable in her first expressions. However, the opposition turned her irritable and angry, and the arguments he would always start (when he was with her when her father was away) usually resulted in some vehemence of expression on her part that upset Mr Farquhar, who failed to notice how she vented her resentment in self-abjection and tears when she was by herself in her chamber. (Gaskell, 1853, p. 2 (144))

The following symptom is "Anger is a destructive emotion and should not be expressed, especially directly to those with whom you are angry". In the data above, she was angry when Jemima Bradshaw argued with Mr. Farquhar.

However, she repressed her anger, did not show it to him, and returned to her room.

Extract 6

"I am very sorry, sir," said Ruth, her eyes filling with tears; and then she remembered that it was very dull for him to be alone with her, heavy-hearted as she had been all day". (Gaskell, 1853, p. 1 (152))

The last symptom in the novel is "It is better to avoid conflict at all costs". In the data above, Ruth was sad because of the kid's big slap. The kid slapped Ruth because of the rumour that she had been living with an unmarried man. However, Ruth does not have the heart to tell Mr Bellingham about what happened because it may hurt Mr Bellingham's feelings or insult him. She was sullen and sank in her thoughts, but Mr. Bellingham saw it. He scolded Ruth for displaying that sullenness before him and expected her to smile all day. Ruth tried to be friendly, asking for forgiveness to avoid conflict with Mr. Bellingham.

The other three symptoms are not shown in the novel. Those symptoms are "If I act naive and innocent, people will take care of me, and I will not have to grow up", "There is good in everyone, and if you give someone enough chances, he or she will eventually show it to you", and "Women need men to protect them and support them financially". The female characters in this novel are primarily financially independent and work hard for their lives. They try to be friendly, kind, and loveable by suppressing their emotions.

V. CONCLUSION

Nice Girl syndrome is a widespread phenomenon that often goes unrecognized, as societal pressures compel women to conform to specific values and norms. By recognizing and being aware of its symptoms through the example illustrated by Gaskell in *Ruth*, women may avoid developing a mental disorder since it may affect their emotions and physical ability to function in society. Literary work can be used to raise awareness about mental disorders or syndromes. This study emphasizes the idea that literary work is not simply an entertainment product but also can be a game changer that raises awareness of its reader about the specific psychological phenomenon, Nice Girl syndrome, for instance.

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