

# TRAUMATIC CHARACTERS' RE-VICTIMISATION THROUGH DEATH INSTINCTS IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN NOIR NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Sigmund Freud first coined the concept of 'death instinct' in his controversial work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by stating that all beings are driven towards death as the result of living. The concept was introduced to explain the reasons for traumatised individuals to undergo a 'compulsion to repeat' their traumatic state. This concept will be applied to the textual analysis of selected characters who had undergone traumatic experience(s) from three Malaysian noir short stories published by Fixi Novo and written by three different authors. These stories were chosen since they took place in an urban community with its storyline regulating sexual abuse that leads to murder. The paper aims to (a) identify the traumatic event(s) experienced by selected characters in the short stories which provoke(s) their primal 'death instinct' and (b) examine how the concept 'death instinct' by Sigmund Freud compelled selected characters to repeat their trauma outwardly to undo their trauma. The study discovered that 'death instinct' is crucial as an intrinsic force to help victims of trauma psychically undo their traumatic experience by repeating the act of violence upon others as a disguised form of self-gratification in response to a traumatic condition of urban society.

**Keywords:** death instinct, Malaysian literature, noir, trauma, violence

## INTRODUCTION

This paper utilises the short story collections published by Fixi publication, which carry the theme of noir, a theme which, according to Trisnawati (2014), should depict "murder, crime and the supernatural" (p. 93). According to the author, "these noirs are worth studying" since they represent a city's and society's dark side (Trisnawati, 2014, p. 90). In another paper written by the same author, she stated that "literature is highly appreciated as it can remind the society that such things [murder and violence] are happening" and that this type of fiction [noir] should help us to question society's true nature (Trisnawati, 2015, p. 222). Hence, the

paper aims to further evaluate the interrelationships between society, especially regarding the people's psyche and literature as depicted in noir fiction. Several questions have been formed to postulate some answers to this possibility.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper investigates how characters in literature utilised their primal 'death instincts' as a method to heal their traumatic psyche. This will be done by comparing three contemporary narratives of

Malaysian writers: (a) *The Runner* from *KL Noir: Red* (2013), *Savages* from *KL Noir: White* (2013), and *Girl Power* from *KL Noir: Yellow* (2014) published under the Malaysian publishing company, Fixi. The study aims to answer the following questions;

1. What is/are the traumatic event(s) experienced by selected characters in the narratives that provoke their primal 'death instinct'?
2. How does the concept of 'death instinct' by Sigmund Freud compel selected characters to repeat their trauma outwardly to undo their trauma?

**CATEGORIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA**

McCann and Pearlman (2015) wrote in their book *Psychological Trauma and the Adult Survivor: Theory, Therapy, and Transformation* that “[i]ndividuals who have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse as children may evidence serious disturbances of the self, including underdeveloped capacities and resources, seriously unbalanced needs, and generalised disturbed schemas in several areas” (p. 281). This shows that abuse experienced as a child is traumatic and will be carried on later until adulthood. In the selected short stories, most of the characters experienced traumatic abuse in their childhood. However, the paper will also regard the experience of abuse in adulthood as a significant contributors to distorted image of self and needs as well. First of all, it is crucial to identify the types of actions that can be classified as sexual abuse.

According to Clark et al. (2007), sexual abuse is a “form of maltreatment that refers to the involvement of a child in sexual activity with an adult that provides a psychological, sexual, and/or financial benefit to the perpetrator. Sexual abuse may also be committed by a person under the age of 18 when that person is either significantly older than the victim or when the perpetrator is in a position of power or control over another child” (p. 323). Meanwhile, Reyes et al. (2008) defined it as those younger “being forced into sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual exploitation” by adults (p. 3). Based on the reading of *Child Abuse and Domestic Violence* (2007) by Melissa J. Doak, some of the actions that are regarded as sexual abuse;

**Table 1** Depictions of sexual abuse

<b>Sexual Abuse</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fondling a child genitals</li> <li>• Intercourse</li> <li>• Incest</li> <li>• Rape</li> <li>• Sodomy</li> <li>• Exhibitionism</li> <li>• Commercial exploitation through prostitution of the production of pornographic materials</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;">(Doak, 2007, p. 9)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually exploit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct.</li> <li>• The rape, and in cases of caretaker or interfamilial relationship, statutory, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children or incest with children</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">( Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Amendments of 1996 as cited in Doak, 2007, p. 61)</p>

From the lists above, the range of actions done by the selected characters in the short stories can be identified as the causes of psychological trauma experienced by them. The next section will discuss the representation of the established concepts of 'death instinct' and 'compulsion to repeat' in relation to trauma in literature.

**DEPICTIONS OF DEATH AND VIOLENCE IN NOIR LITERATURE**

Smith (2010) attempted to transfer “Freudian notions of the death drive into the creative realm ... [and] also tries to redefine death in a new ‘aesthetic’ sense” (p. xiii). He claimed that “[a]rtworks do tend to live on” (Smith, 2010, p. xi). The author also suggested that “the death drive is likely to be found as much in works of art as in the individual or collective psyche, and that, although it is humans who produce those works of art, they do not finally determine them. The death drive finds its locus in the artwork as much as in the psychically vested human that has given birth to it” (Smith, 2010, p. xii). This indicates that artworks

are the products of creators influenced by something innate in their unconscious, which is the death drive (death instinct). According to Smith (2010), "the death drive, as Freud has said, can divert itself outwards as aggression" (p. 96), and thus, death and violence as depicted in literary works, whether intentionally or unintentionally, may carry the essence of human being's collective psyche, that is, a collective trauma. A collective trauma in written forms can become an avenue to analyse the connections between trauma and an innate instinct to cause repeated violence.

Osteen (2014) scrutinises the intertextuality in William Faulkner's novel *Sanctuary* through "noir's dark mirror [which] enables us to evaluate the novel's impact and perceive the prismatic light noir sheds on their shared themes: the infernal force of public opinion, the strangling grasp of gender roles, the reach and limitations of legal and carceral institutions, and the power of the past over the present" (p. 12). The author claims that the novel "dramatises what we have seen to be a key noir concept: the intimate relationship between civilisation and incarceration" (Osteen, 2014, p. 30). It is seen in the novel, "as in film noir, citizens monitor and punish violations of conventional gender roles, both applaud and abhor gangsters and murderers, and seek scapegoats for their outlaw impulses" (Osteen, 2014, p. 13). The author found that "*Sanctuary* amidst numerous intertextual mirrors. It may be more proper to say that *Sanctuary* is itself a prismatic mirror whose myriad light bounces ceaselessly from its cinematic adaptations to later crime films, to its sequels, and, ultimately, back to us [, the readers]" (Osteen, 2014, p. 32). This paper displayed how a novel written in the past may continue the story that had ended through adaptations into film and engagement from audiences. In a study reported by Trisnawati (2014), the author looked into several noirs from Southeast Asia to "figure out their similarities and differences, particularly the noir as a genre and their relation to the society issues, to read widely what is happening in those metropolis cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Singapore. [S]ince those cities are in the Southeast Asia area, those noirs are eventually helping the readers to see the face of contemporary Southeast Asia" (p. 90). The author uncovered that "[n]oir fiction is dark fiction" because "it could tell the dark sides of the city" that are characterised by "the murder story, the drug dealing, the supernatural, the ghost, etc." (Trisnawati, 2014, p. 93). Crime in noir

fiction has revealed the dark side of a society, which indicates that some societies could collectively go through certain changes and incidents which are traumatising to them.

Trisnawati (2015) further attempted to argue that KL Noir fiction illustrates the experiences of alienated residents in Kuala Lumpur, while also highlighting the representation of Kuala Lumpur from its darker aspects (p. 217) in another study. The study found that The KL Noir series distinctly captures the defining elements of noir fiction, such as themes involving murder, drug trade, mental health challenges, and the struggles faced by the alienated protagonists (Trisnawati, 2015, p. 222). The author later claimed that the artistic realm of noir fiction has the potential to influence and shape the dynamics within a society (Trisnawati, 2015, p. 223).

Through art, such as literature, the psyches of the individuals in society could be examined to find further reasons why certain individuals are tempted to commit crimes. Subsequently, Trisnawati (2018) undertook another study that paid attention to one of the short stories from one of the *KL Noirs*, "Amir Hafizi's *The Unbeliever*" of Amir Muhammad's *KL Noir: Red*, where the paper examined the short story to "demonstrate what constructs the dark narratives from Malaysian noir anthology, and whether or not the noir narrative differently offers the meaning of darkness" (p. 60). It is discovered in this study that "the theme of mysticism locates *The Unbeliever*" as one noir story with a slightly different noir theme from the noir tradition. Also, the theme offers a different meaning of darkness by exploring the dreadful and mysterious sides of mysticism and supernaturalism practised in Southeast Asia. The notion of violence occurs only after the mysticism terrorises the characters in the story" (Trisnawati, 2018, p. 65).

Another important finding in this study is that "[s]urprisingly, this study offers an added noir sensibility which is constituted by subversions of West and East representation as a result of the mystical East's magical power. This fact may expand the source of darkness and bleakness showcased by one Malaysian noir story that mysticism and its mystical East figure coexist to constitute the noir element of this story" (Trisnawati, 2018, p. 70). Other than crime, the supernatural also causes collective fear to society. The significance of

fear is that, according to Freud (2003/1920), "fear is the manifestation of a retreat from danger" (p. 124) and that "all fear is essentially fear of death" (p. 125). Hence, a 'death instinct' could instigate fear in a society; hence, the society is traumatic since such fear was produced.

In connection to society, Philip (2018) explored the recurring theme of vigilantism in stories from the *KL Noir* series published by Fixi Novo (p. 110). These anthologies, set in Kuala Lumpur, offer diverse narratives, but vigilantism emerges as a common motif, reflecting a lack of trust in official authorities' ability to address crime effectively (Philip, 2018, p. 111). The stories in these volumes illuminate the hidden crevices of society, shedding light on corruption and crime that authorities may want to keep concealed. This focus on darkness and crime characterises these anthologies as 'noir' (Philip, 2018, p. 113). The author delved into the theme of vigilantism in *KL Noir* stories, particularly focusing on how individuals in a corrupt and crime-ridden society respond to a lack of trust in law enforcement. It provided examples of characters who become vigilantes after being victimised, highlighting their motivations and actions. The study emphasised the moral ambiguity that pervades these stories, where the line between good and bad blurs as characters take the law into their own hands. It also underscores the pervasive corruption within the police force and society as a whole, which often drives individuals to seek their form of justice. Overall, the text portrays a bleak and morally complex world where vigilantism is a response to the failures of the established systems, leaving readers to grapple with the ethical dilemmas presented in these narratives (Philip, 2018, p. 121-122).

In another study, Philip (2018) argued that crime fiction, including the Golden Age style, is fundamentally concerned with disrupting societal order and the quest for resolution within a changing and tarnished world (p. 2). The study shifted to discuss Barbara Ismail's *Kain Songket Mysteries* series, which adapts the conventions of this genre to the socio-cultural setting of a 1970s village in Kelantan, Malaysia. The novels in the series initially present a tranquil society disrupted by murder, reflecting underlying tensions and societal changes. The study compares Ismail's work to other crime fiction in Malaysia and underscores her unique approach as an anthropologist. However, it also points out the absence of a deeper social critique in her

novels, focusing primarily on murder mysteries and the protagonist's role in restoring societal balance (Philip, 2018, pp. 3-4). The study subsequently delves into the theme of violence and disruption within seemingly idyllic village settings in Golden Age crime fiction. It emphasises that hidden tensions and potential disruptions exist beneath the tranquil facades of these villages. The eruption of violence through murder serves as a means to confront and resolve these issues, ultimately restoring a sense of safety, although the previously pristine society remains permanently tarnished (Philip, 2018, p. 4). In Ismail's novels, the central theme revolves around the importance of good manners, encapsulated in the 'budi bahasa' concept, for maintaining the harmony of Kelantanese society. Each murder in the novels is triggered by a breach of these principles, whether committed by the murderer or the victim (Philip, 2018, pp. 12-13). This failure to restore order reflects a pessimistic tone at the end of the novel, hinting at the gradual breakdown of the once well-ordered Kelantanese society, with old customs and rituals failing to provide protection. Ismail's portrayal of this idyllic past serves as a commentary on the changing societal norms and roles (Philip, 2018, p. 13).

Concurrently, Ismail (2019) examined how the theme of exploitation by the empowered class upon the disempowered is depicted in two Malaysian literary works, specifically focusing on the consequences faced by each class when they violate the law. The analysis centres on two short stories, 'Ballerina in Pink' by Roslan Mohd Noor and 'Sinful Saints' by Iqbal Abu Bakar, both part of the *KL Noir: Blue* anthology (pp. 114-115). The stories emphasised the differential treatment of upper-class criminals, such as white-collar offenders, who are defended by experts in financial crime, and the impact of drug-associated crimes on society, including health problems, robbery, rape, murder, and financial burdens. Ultimately, these narratives underscore the need for addressing power imbalances and systemic corruption in society (Ismail, 2019, p. 122). The two short stories illustrated how the legal system is often disproportionately harsh on people experiencing poverty, regardless of the relatively minor nature of their offences. Ultimately, both authors underscore the stark contrast between law violations by the empowered and disempowered classes, highlighting the differing degrees of societal damage that result (Ismail, 2019, p. 123). The studies



mentioned above suggested that noir themes frequently immerse themselves in the dark underbelly of a corrupt society, often portraying murder as a means of escaping from this pervasive corruption.

Following Haller's study, the author found that noir and neo-noir texts chronicle time and culture, referencing the past while addressing contemporary life as tragically doomed (Haller, 2022, pp. 3-4). These works explore the corruptible human condition, the myths of stereotyping, and the uncertainty of life, emphasising universal themes of greed, disparity, and prejudice within society. The emergence of neo-noir introduces a new spin on traditional styles, allowing for more realistic and devastating representations of spiritual homelessness, absurdity, and nihilism, unveiling the dark forces that bind feral identities together. Noir and neo-noir are chronicles of time and culture, expounding domestic and global contemporary life as incomprehensibly tragic and doomed (Haller, 2022, p. 5). Later, the author discovered that noir and neo-noir fiction captivate readers and viewers with deceptive narratives that mirror the uncertainties of life. Despite the world's darkness, art, especially in the form of literature and film, illuminates reality and offers insights into survival, making noir a mythic substance that both liberates individuals from reality and teaches them how to navigate it (Haller, 2022, pp. 55-56).

Meanwhile, Napper (2019) argued that the idea of the hard-boiled detective as a modern knight-errant championing honour and virtue is challenged by the complex and flawed characters in noir literature and film. The author claimed that noir protagonists are frequently tarnished, morally ambiguous, and far from heroic (pp. 5-6). The author indicated that global noir serves as a discourse that delves into the casualties inflicted by modernity. The iconic archetypes of the Android, Gunslinger, Samurai, Private Eye, Refugee, and Veteran embody the complex contradictions arising from rapid progress, including the conquest of ancient lands, invasive technologies, and the shadowy underbelly needed to sustain the facade of modernity (Napper, 2019, p. 135). The fractured narrative style of noir effectively communicates the trauma experienced by veterans and refugees, while extreme climates symbolise the internal turmoil and distress of noir characters. These archetypes may not be able to change the world, but represent a commitment

to integrity in the face of corruption. Noir offers a narrative of resistance and humanism, highlighting its anti-heroes' flawed and doomed nature. It unveils the less glamorous side of progress, shedding light on criminal underclasses, environmental destruction, and the erosion of cultural identity. Through its global perspective, noir challenges dominant historical narratives and serves as a voice for the marginalised in an ever-changing world, reminding us of the human cost and the unheard voices (Napper, 2019, p. 136).

To further support the idea of noir challenging those in power, Samarawickrama (2022) investigated heterosexual marriages within domestic noir, which explored themes such as the reversal of traditional gender roles, gender performance, female victimhood, and the portrayal of gender-related violence. The author aimed to uncover how domestic noir challenges conventional gender stereotypes, allowing female protagonists to engage in nuanced gender performances and shedding light on the portrayal of female victimisation and gender-based violence within the subgenre (p. 21). The study focused on four key aspects within domestic noir literature: the reversal of traditional gender roles, the gender performance and masquerade by female protagonists, the relationship between gender and violence, and the concepts of female victimhood and agency (Samarawickrama, 2022, p. 22). The findings of the study revealed complex dynamics in which female protagonists adopted pariah femininities, engaged in gender performances and manipulations of patriarchal norms, experienced victimhood, and agency simultaneously, and used violence as a means to regain control, emphasising the pivotal role of recognising their victimhood in this process (Samarawickrama, 2022, p. 336).

In the meantime, Eng (2013) investigated three Malaysian novels by women authors featuring affluent women facing domestic violence and turning to murder—a sub-genre within crime fiction (pp. 134-135). The study explored moral universes in these novels regarding law, justice, and truth. The study found that conflict resolution prioritizes truth-telling over truth-seeking. This priority challenged detective story structures and questioning the novels' moral frameworks of law and justice. (Eng, 2013, p. 136). The unique traits discovered in the novels with abused women turning to murder in contrast to earlier

Malaysian English literature are; (a) these women are victims of physical domestic violence with diverse backgrounds, illustrating a society where domestic violence remains silenced, (b) these women not only endure but transform, resorting to murder with notable success, and (c) they wield substantial influence, shaping the moral and social narratives by revealing and concealing truths, making them central figures in the stories. (Eng, 2013, p. 137). The author later claimed that these novels shed light on Malaysian crime fiction's portrayal of moral universes in relation to perceptions of law, justice, and truth. The novels also emphasised their complex and philosophically grounded critiques of contemporary Malaysian society (Eng, 2013, pp. 151-152).

Kukushkina (2020) argued that exploring the historical development of the crime fiction genre in Malaysia is valuable as it sheds light on the local perspective on Western influence in literature (p. 37). The study suggested that, despite their initial imitation, Malay crime fiction eventually evolved to incorporate more localised elements while blurring genre boundaries (Kukushkina, 2020, p. 42). However, the focus of the stories shifted from solving mysteries to addressing ideological narratives and moral lessons, reflecting the socio-political discourse of the time. While detective elements remained, they were no longer the central aspect of the stories, emphasising the broader societal issues at play (Kukushkina, 2020, p. 45). Following this, the study found that in modern times, crime fiction in Malaysia has become more functional, emphasising ideology and didacticism over the criminal mystery (Kukushkina, 2020, p. 47). In short, noir literature covered vast aspects of a corrupted society that traumatised the victims of such a society, which resulted in them committing crimes to retaliate or flee from society's confinement.

Despite the existing research on the issue of trauma and death in literature, few of them have done in-depth exploration into the connection between death, trauma, and compulsion to repeat, as discussed by Sigmund Freud in his controversial work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Even fewer of such research was conducted on Malaysian noir narratives. This paper, hence, concentrates on the significance of 'death instinct' as a driving force to undo trauma in characters' lives through compulsion to repeat in response to their traumatic experience(s). This paper

shows that the compulsion to repeat is a complex and distorted method of healing trauma, especially in the psychological realm. 'Death instinct,' as morbid as it appears, is referred to in this paper as an essential tool for the characters to cope with their varied traumatic experiences. The concepts applied to this study are; 'death instinct,' 'trauma,' and 'compulsion to repeat' coined by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) on three selected short stories by Malaysian writers in English.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Freud (2003/1920) speculated that there is an instinct innate in all human beings that seek to secure death (p. 78). He stated that "*the goal of all life is death,*" and despite there being a drive or instinct [life instinct/Eros] that is supposed to direct us towards preserving ourselves, the ultimate goal of this drive is still to bring death (Freud, 2003/1920, p. 78). Freud (2003/1920), however, indicated that "the organism wants only to die in its particular way; and so these guardians of life [life instinct/Eros], too, were originally myrmidons of death" (p. 78). This means that the instinct that wants to preserve life can also be the one to carry out the order of an intuition that wants death, but it must be done in the method that it desires. The way of death that is chosen by this instinct may vary, but it still believes that it is done to live instead of dying. This varied method is what Freud (2003/1920) classified as 'defense,' whose purpose is to protect "the ego against challenges on the part of drives [instincts]" (p. 181). Regardless of the original intention of the 'defense' is to protect, due to the influence of 'death instinct' that battles with 'life instinct,' 'defense' can also lead to a human's demise rather than preserving life. This is because death instinct in the psyche "do their work unobtrusively," whereby the "pleasure principle seems to be positively subservient to the death drives, but it *does* also watch for any stimuli from without that are adjudged by both kinds of drives to be dangerous, and more particularly for any increases in stimulation emanating from within that make the task of living more difficult" (Freud, 2003/1920, p. 94). This shows that the 'death instinct' is more dominant compared to the 'life instinct,' but its' power to influence the Ego appears to work subtly. It makes the Ego believe that the action that may cause death, whether on others or self, brings pleasure to the Ego instead of leading the Ego towards its downfall. Death becomes a false

sense of self-gratification for the Ego. The Ego is directed toward death under a compulsion influenced by a silent and innate 'death instinct' that is called a 'compulsion to repeat.' For this paper, 'death instinct' is associated with violence and aggression committed by selected characters in the selected texts.

Directed by an innate 'death instinct,' psychological 'defense' corresponding to a 'compulsion to repeat' can be directed onto two sides. One is onto others or the external world, while the other is onto self. As stated by Freud (2003/1920), "death drive finds expression as a destruction drive against the external world and other organisms" though it is "routinely put at the service of Eros" (p. 114) and that 'defense' may help "death drives to assert control over the libido, but it thereby runs the risk of itself becoming the object of the death drives and thus perishing" (pp. 124-125). This 'defense,' which is also known as 'defense mechanism,' is what the current researcher would like to regard as 're-victimisation' whereby a

victim of trauma is compelled to repeat his/her trauma by 're-victimising' either himself/herself or others/ external world. For this paper, the act of violence or aggression depicted in the selected texts by selected characters is what framed this act of 're-victimisation' as a 'compulsion to repeat.'

The concepts of 'death instinct' and 'compulsion to repeat' derived from Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) alongside the criteria of actions listed in the earlier sections categorised as sexual abuse which contribute to a traumatic experience for selected characters, a framework is formed to study character's 're-victimisation' of others to undo their trauma psychically. The flow of how the study is conducted is described in the figure below; As portrayed in the figure above, the selected characters from the selected short stories experienced their trauma through sexual abuse. Influenced by their innate 'death instinct,' the selected characters are compelled to repeat the violence inflicted on them

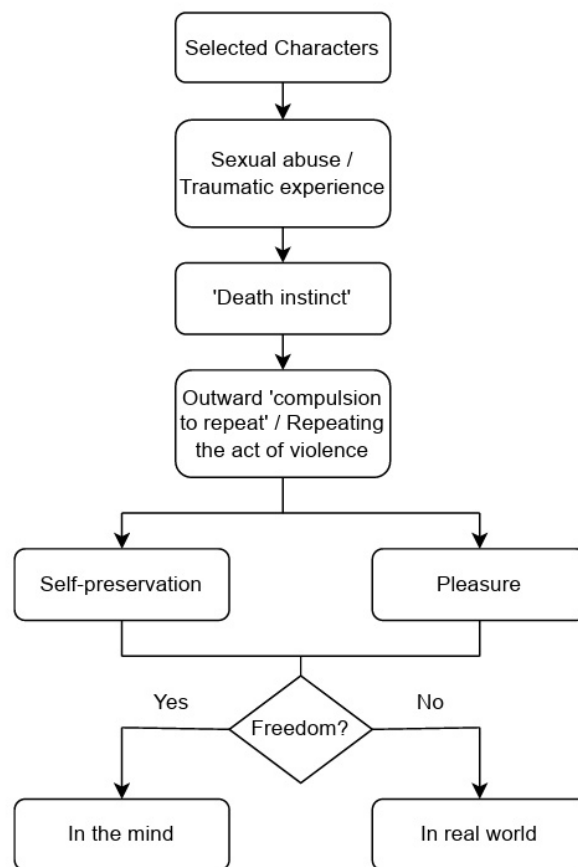


Figure 1 Traumatic characters' re-victimisation through *Death Instincts* flow chart

through 're-victimisation'. An outward 'compulsion to repeat' drives them to 're-victimise' others by becoming a murderer. Either due to self-preservation or simply for pleasure, by causing the death of others, the selected characters believe that they are free and in control of their traumatic experience. This act of violence psychically liberated their traumatic self despite having no control of it in the real world.

### TRAUMATIC CHARACTERS' RE-VICTIMISATION IN THREE SHORT STORIES

In the short story *The Runner* (2013) by Adib Zaini, the protagonist secretly works at a cyber cafe to fend for herself without asking for any help from her father. She was then involved in selling drugs and meeting a dangerous man there named Fazrol. She ended up being gang-raped by Fazrol and his friends;

I tried to fight back, but there was no way to overpower them. I kicked around wildly until Fazrol gave me a backhanded slap that stung all across my head. They started laughing and groping me as I cried, begging them to let me go. Fazrol took out his mobile phone and hit the record button. One of them started singing Nirvana's Polly with badly pronounced English. They forcibly undressed me and then took turns with me. Every single second of their violations was recorded on Fazrol's mobile phone. That was the worst hour of my life. (Adib Zaini, 2013, p. 31)

The excerpt depicted the protagonist being sexually abused in the form of 'intercourse,' 'rape,' and 'commercial exploitation through the production of pornographic materials' as listed in Table 1. After being raped, the protagonist decides that Fazrol should payback for what he has done. She 're-victimised' the rapist, Fazrol, by torturing him and killing him;

I was still wearing the helmet. The fucker looked scared. He was pleading something incomprehensible from behind the duct tape. I stroked his penis, making it hard. Then I brandished my pocket knife. From the pleading look in his eyes, I guessed he knew what was coming next. I severed Lil' Fazrol. No one could hear his scream of agony. Once he settled down, I removed my helmet. "One hour," I said. "You tortured me for one hour. We still have 55 minutes left." I showed him hell. (Adib Zaini, 2013, pp. 36-37)

Through her act of 're-victimisation,' she felt that she was free from her trauma even when she was hunted down by the police for the murder and by the drug dealer for the drugs she had not been able to sell off. She decided to keep on running freely.

In *Savages* (2013) by Nadia Khan, the protagonist was sexually abused by her father. Since a young age, her father had raped her repeatedly;

I was never a gymnast. Although from the years of experience I have bending into different positions as my father raped me over and over again - I would have been great at it, I'm sure. Growing up, it was just him and I. He was a cop - not the crime-fighting type. The type who sits behind a desk all day, doing paperwork with pent-up sexual frustration. Instead of jerking off to easily accessible blue DVDs from his colleagues' constant raids, he decided to exert it all on me. -Who was I supposed to run crying to the cops? So my groans went from "Ayah, jangan..." to "Ayah, pelan sikit..." to complete silence. (Nadia Khan, 2013, p. 19)

The protagonist ran away with another man, Razlan, as she believed he could save her from her father, but she soon found it pointless to rely on another man for help. Razlan had no intention of saving her. He just wanted to sell her off to become a prostitute instead;

"Cepatlah! Kau belum cukup praktis! Macamana aku nak jual kau kalau kau takde pengalaman? Sini dah takde siapa kisah pasal dara lagi dah. Yang penting, pengalaman! Paham?" Me? Experience? Doing what? And what's this about selling me? "Kau ingat kau boleh sedap-sedap duduk sini, nak aku tanggung kau? Banyak cantik! Kau kena kerja! Tak kerja, macamana nak dapat duit?" (Nadia Khan, 2013, p. 22)

As showcased above, the protagonist in this short story is sexually abused in the form of 'intercourse,' 'incest,' 'rape,' and 'commercial exploitation through prostitution,' as listed in Table 1. To deal with her trauma, the protagonist 're-victimised' her abuser by killing him. She killed Razlan, who overlapped with the image of her father as her first victim. Later on, she would go on a killing spree on any other men that reminded her of her father;

Three years. Three years, I have scoured this city. True to my calling, I believe I have lessened the burden of this beautiful



city by ridding it of its savages. One fine day, this city shall stand in all its glory without a single savage walking its streets. Its women shall live till their dying breath in peace, knowing they will be safe forever.

Then, I shall move on to another city. It's my duty.

I looked at the boxer guy all trussed up at the corner of the room. Hopefully, he would wake up soon. This needed to be done with him fully awake -the fear in his eyes as I deliver my lesson would normally propel me towards the next guy. It's waiting for the guy to regain consciousness that always irritates the hell out of me - it delays my mission and sends me on that annoying trip down memory lane. (Nadia Khan, 2013, pp. 23-24)

Through 're-victimisation,' the protagonist believes that she is free from her trauma and her abusers. She believes that her act of 're-victimisation' will save all women from the savages.

In the short story, *Girl Power* (2014) by Subashini Navaratnam, the protagonist (Selvi) went through sexual abuse as her uncle molested her. This was also one of the reasons that contributed to her neurosis;

...she continued to revisit the image in her mind when her uncle – the worst of all men, the type that sits in the living room placidly sipping tea but reveals his fur and fangs only when other men's backs are turned – started touching her. ...Even the ones who appeared sweet and smiling: the claiming of the bodies of the less-powerful, of the women, whenever they wanted. That her uncle made fun of her dark skin, her fatness, and her hairiness in public and tried to rub himself against her whenever no one was around... (Navaratnam, 2014, pp. 263-264)

This traumatic experience caused Selvi to dive into disgust, rage, and madness. Selvi decided to kill all men since she believed that all men are equal to the persona of an abuser like her uncle, who had molested her;

Her uncle continued insulting her, verbally harassing and abusing her mother and his wife, continued drinking and smoking and using up his wife's inheritance, continued touching her after heaping a tirade of hate. It was easy, Selvi reasoned when writing a for her blog, to talk of abolishing the patriarchy. #KillAllMen, she tweeted. (Navaratnam, 2014, p. 265)

As depicted in the excerpt above, Selvi was sexually abused in the form of 'molestation in the case of interfamilial relationship' listed in Table 1. She later revealed that she had actualised her fantasy of killing men through a memory of her killing her own uncle when she had come to terms with the fact that she is now a 'bad girl';

...The world loved a good girl gone bad as long as the girl is punished and made to suffer. Watching her uncle flail under the pressure she applied from the pillow was strangely gratifying; years of being meek and mouse-like had made her accept that she would always suffer under the tyranny of her own docility, and suddenly, all this strength! Selvi mentally high-fived herself; even the docile and chubby had such reserves as it suddenly turned out.

GIRL POWER! Am I right, Kali ma? (Navaratnam, 2014, pp. 267-268)

This act of violence, whereby she had 're-victimised' her abuser, is what Freud regards as the 'compulsion to repeat.' This is where the victims of trauma repeat the act of violence on others as a means to undo his or her own traumatic experience.

## CONCLUSION

The paper evaluates relationships between society and literature as portrayed in noir fiction. The concepts of 'death instinct' and 'compulsion to repeat' in relation to trauma had been applied to the selected short stories chosen for the study. It was discovered that the selected characters had chosen to 're-victimise' others in order to be psychologically liberated from their traumatic memories. To answer the research questions, three short stories were selected from three different collections due to the strong representation of violence and aggression committed by the characters in response to their traumatic experiences. The findings of the research were as follows;

### **Traumatic event(s) experienced by selected characters in the narratives which provoke(s) their primal 'death instinct'**

The traumatic event experienced by the selected characters in this paper is sexual abuse/trauma. It was discovered that the selected characters from the short stories mostly experienced sexual abuse/trauma in the form of being molested or being raped (including incestuous rape). Lee (2016) related the experience of the author (Amélie Nothomb) to two of her works that

revolved around traumatic experiences (p. 75). In one of the texts, the child character was raped, which was related to the author's own experience of being raped at the age of twelve. The response of the trauma victim depicted in this paper was silence and separation "from her parents and [marked the] end [of] her childhood" (Lee, 2016, p. 84). In the meantime, Linder (2011), upon studying madness presented in Chinese fiction, specified that trauma experienced by the Chinese writers had caused them to produce literary madness as "an enactment of the psychological space of society, a split psyche of victim and executor, [and] of actors and spectators" (p. 302). Hence, trauma is the root cause of madness, as portrayed in fiction by Chinese writers. Additionally, Tulinius (2017) showcased that the authors of Icelandic sagas used their work of art to communicate the destructive forces inside everyone [death instinct], which had caused trauma for them due to the violence that comes from the killings and revenge in their act of honour (p. 93). This study suggests that 'death instinct' could be an instigator of a dark side that comes with trauma through a compulsion to repeat an act of violence. These past studies have shown that sexual trauma victims responded to their traumatic experiences through various means. According to Lynn et al. (2004), "[s]exual abuse can lead not only to a negative self-concept but also to unhealthy or insecure attachments in interpersonal relationships. These negative developmental influences are thought to increase the risk of sexual assault and revictimisation" (p. 162). One of the effects of these traumatic experiences or 'negative developmental influences' would be the repetition of the act of violence through 're-victimisation.'

### **'Death Instinct' Compelled Selected Characters to Repeat Their Trauma Outwardly to Undo Their Trauma**

Mohd Noor, Babae, and Ali Termizi (2015) had conducted a study using the concept of death instinct by Sigmund Freud to investigate the characters' reaction to traumatic experiences influenced by their latent death instinct (p. 245). It was discovered that the death instinct in the characters is internalised and externalised through harming others or self as a defence mechanism towards their traumatic experiences (Mohd Noor, Babae, & Ali Termizi, 2015, p. 248). Meanwhile, Mohd Noor, Ali Termizi, and Ong (2016) also looked into the issue of trauma and death where the authors explored the defense mechanism experienced by the

characters that had gone through sexual trauma in two types of literary pieces: a short story and a play script (p. 29). The study uncovered that sexual trauma caused the characters to experience pathological shame and led them to see their genitals as 'dead.' In a sense, the characters had metaphorically mutilated their own genitals to avoid further feelings of shame (Mohd Noor, Ali Termizi, & Ong, 2016, p. 37). However, these two papers contained loopholes in terms of the relationship between 'death instinct' to 'compulsion to repeat' and 'trauma.' There is a need to extend further the idea of how traumatic experiences can cause death, be it outwardly (to others) or inwardly (to self), as a compulsion to repeat. The findings of this paper, therefore, add to the idea of a relationship between death instinct and trauma through the compulsion to repeat, but more specifically in the works of authors close to home: the noir narratives of Malaysian writers.

All of the selected characters from the selected short stories for this paper displayed the act of 're-victimisation' to heal their traumatic experiences. This act of 're-victimisation' is where they repeat the act of violence on others (outwardly). The selected characters 're-victimise' others by committing murder and torture. In most cases, the victims chosen by the selected characters who 're-victimise' others are their own abuser(s) or those who reminded them of their abuser(s). It is stated by Campbell (2008) that "the abused child may project his self-disgust via an abusive act onto another's body that is treated with contempt. In this way, the abused child becomes the abuser" (p. 79). The act of 're-victimisation' was done to be free from the prior trauma. This act resulted in "what is known as 'the cycle of violence'" whereby "victims of early sexual, physical, or emotional abuse frequently become perpetrators of the same as adults" (Hare, 1999, p. 84). This cycle of violence is produced due to a compulsion. As indicated by Smith (2010), it is "[p]ainful to say, the notion of compulsion both does and does not further our understanding of the wish as the instrument of the pleasure principle. On the one hand, compulsion takes us further into the psyche, beyond the mere psychology of the wish, into the archaic and, as Freud later contends, a phylogenetic nest of the instincts" (p. 121). Hence, the 'compulsion to repeat' is influenced by instincts. More specifically, it is influenced by a 'death instinct.'

To conclude, an innate 'death instinct' is tasked with "causing animate organisms to revert to an inanimate state" (Freud, 2003/1920, p. 113). It "is routinely put at the service of Eros" (Freud, 2003/1920, p. 114) and will "largely remain silent" (Freud, 2003/1920, p. 117) underneath the guise of working for the Eros. According to Freud (2003/1920), victims of trauma are caught in a state of helplessness that produces a signal calling for help by repeating the traumatic situation in the hope of being able to control it by being an active participant in it rather than being a helpless passive participant in the event (pp. 182-183). Humans are compelled to be freed from traumatic experiences through various means. One of the defense mechanisms when facing trauma is the 'compulsion to repeat.' As Freud (2003/1920) supported, "the patient's experience of the fact then, too, they brought unpleasure instead of gratification makes not a scrap of difference: the action is repeated regardless. The patient is driven to this by a compulsion" (p. 65). This act of repeating the trauma drives the selected characters to 're-victimisation' either of themselves or others to undo their traumatic experience and to be psychically free from their trauma.

The research objectives for the current study have been achieved in several aspects. Firstly, the traumatic event experienced by the selected characters, which led to provoking their inner 'death instinct,' had been identified as sexual abuse. Secondly, the selected characters' 'death instinct' is examined as being exhibited outwardly where the selected characters had murdered others as a means to be free from their trauma. The selected characters believe that they are free from their traumatic experiences through murder. This freedom, however, was only true in the psychical realm of the selected characters. This is because "there is no returning to the source of life and the body as biological or animalistic origin. As Freud knew so well, there is no possibility of returning to innocence and a primordial bliss..." (Campbell, 2006, p. 55). Despite the selected characters believing they are free from their trauma, they could never return to their days when they were 'innocent' before they were sexually abused. As seen from the analyses of the selected short stories, the characters are driven by a 'compulsion to repeat' the act of violence that had been inflicted on them as a form of 're-victimisation' to be free from their trauma. This is supported by Freud (2003/1920), who states that "the patient's experience of the fact then, too, they brought unpleasure instead of gratification makes not a scrap

of difference: the action is repeated regardless. The patient is driven to this by a compulsion" (p. 65). This compulsion was at work due to the characters' strong desire to gain control over their own life as they lost control of it during the times when they were abused or traumatised. According to Phillips (2014), "[o]ur ideas and experiences of pleasure have been muddled by being associated with control" (p. 3). Control is the key factor for these selected characters to repeat the act of violence since, by being the perpetrators themselves, they believe that they are free from being victims.

The act of 're-victimisation,' as represented in the selected short stories, has proven that the healing of trauma is the true intention of the hidden 'death instinct' in the human psyche. Smith (2010) indicated that "[p]erversely, the death drive works on behalf of perpetuity, not destruction..." (p. 124). This effect "sets the pleasure principle the task of driving towards death, for the state of death, according to Freud, manifests itself exactly as that state of zero motion and nil pathos" (Smith, 2010, p. 157). Hence, the selected characters believed that they had attained pleasure through pain, destruction, and death. These unpleasurable situations had turned into pleasurable ones due to the manipulation of an inner 'death instinct.' This paper suggested that contemporary Malaysian writers have unconsciously written about a possible collective trauma experienced in Malaysian society. These writings can be used as a method to incite readers to see a hidden traumatic society that glorifies violence and death as something acceptable to be inflicted on either the innocent or the guilty. The writers' manifestation of their characters' reactions toward death elucidates real-life incidents that happen around us daily. By subliming this hidden desire for violence in their creative writings, Malaysian writers provoke and question the cycle of violence that has been continuing to happen in Malaysian society as depicted in the daily news of crimes happening all around the country. The first step towards preventing 're-victimisation' is to address this issue and understand the victims' helplessness. When it comes to our attraction towards death and humans' tendency to commit violence, perhaps these fictional characters can help us to understand how, deep down, human beings are all unconsciously guided by an innate 'death instinct.' The current study's results help engage other individuals to acknowledge this tendency. By reading the sublimed and the repressed through subtext, readers can critically assess the situation of Malaysian

society, which needs to be liberated from collective traumatic experiences.

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