

From Failed Human to Failed Man: A Gendered Analysis of Childhood Sexual Trauma in Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* and Eka Kurniawan's *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*

Anna Anganita Theresia Latumeten^{1*}, Dwindi Tamara²

¹ English Letters Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Cultural Studies, Universitas Balikpapan, Indonesia; Email: anna@uniba-bpn.ac.id

² English Letters Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Cultural Studies, Universitas Balikpapan, Indonesia; Email: dwindi@uniba-bpn.ac.id

* Corresponding Author: anna@uniba-bpn.ac.id

Abstract: This study examines the representation of childhood sexual trauma and its impact on male subjectivity in Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* and Eka Kurniawan's *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*. Employing a descriptive qualitative method and a comparative literary approach, the study analyzes how trauma is experienced, narrated, and mediated through gendered expectations of masculinity. The analysis draws upon trauma theory, particularly the works of Caruth and Herman, alongside theories of masculinity and gender proposed by Connell, Butler, and hooks. The findings reveal that both protagonists experience childhood sexual trauma that produces emotional silence, difficulties articulating vulnerability, and long-term psychological dysfunction. However, the consequences of trauma diverge significantly. Yōzō internalizes trauma through alienation, self-erasure, and withdrawal from human relationships, ultimately experiencing a collapse of human identity that positions him as a "Failed Human." In contrast, Ajo Kawir externalizes trauma through violence, emotional displacement, and an obsessive concern with sexual capability, resulting in a crisis of masculine legitimacy that constructs him as a "Failed Man." The study argues that trauma alone does not determine subjective outcomes; rather, masculinity mediates how trauma is understood, expressed, and embodied. By bringing together trauma studies and gender theory, this research contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how similar traumatic experiences can produce different forms of failure through the influence of gendered expectations and constructions of manhood.

Keywords: Comparative Literature; Gender Performativity; Male Subjectivity; Masculinity; Sexual Trauma.

Received: January 16, 2026

Revised: March 20, 2026

Accepted: May 19, 2026

Online Available: July 28, 2026

Curr. Ver.: July 28, 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

Literature plays an important role in mediating traumatic experience by enabling forms of understanding and connection that extend beyond individual suffering. Although trauma often isolates the survivor, the process of surviving it can create new possibilities for relating to others (Marder, 2006, p. 20). In this context, literature becomes significant because, unlike more rigid forms of discourse, it can convey the truth of trauma even when that truth cannot be fully articulated (Felman in Marder, 2006). Trauma survivors often require others to listen to and acknowledge their experiences, allowing trauma to be verbalized and integrated into personal narratives (Mohácsi, 2021). Despite the limitations of language, literature remains a vital means of making trauma perceptible, rendering visible what would otherwise remain silent or unheard (Hartman, 2003).

In this context, literature becomes particularly important in representing trauma, an experience that often resists direct articulation. Rather than being fully understood when it occurs, trauma frequently emerges belatedly through fragmented and repetitive manifestations. As Caruth (1996) argues, trauma is not a simple wound that can be immediately recognized and healed; instead, it is experienced too unexpectedly to be fully known and returns later in disruptive forms. This delayed and fragmented nature of trauma often challenges coherent and linear narration, making literature a significant space for exploring experiences that remain difficult to fully comprehend or express.

Beyond its delayed and fragmented nature, trauma profoundly shapes an individual's sense of self and capacity to function socially. Since traumatic experiences are often not fully integrated into memory, they can disrupt the formation of a stable identity and create a persistent sense of instability in everyday life. This disruption extends to the social realm, affecting one's ability to maintain relationships, fulfill social roles, and engage meaningfully with others. As Mohácsi (2021) notes, trauma survivors frequently struggle to trust others, further complicating social connection. Consequently, trauma produces not only psychological distress but also a broader crisis of subjectivity, in which individuals may experience withdrawal, disorientation, or other maladaptive behaviors that undermine their ability to exist coherently both within themselves and within society.

However, these disruptions are not experienced uniformly. Trauma is often mediated by gender, shaping how it is interpreted and expressed. In narratives of male trauma, suffering is frequently framed as a form of failure due to traditional expectations of masculinity that emphasize emotional control, resilience, and self-sufficiency. Ideals of manhood associated with strength, honor, and emotional restraint (Connell, 1995) encourage men to appear unaffected by adversity while discouraging vulnerability and adaptive coping strategies (Slegh et al., 2021, p. 18). Consequently, male trauma involves not only the challenge of processing traumatic experiences but also the pressure to conform to masculine norms that leave little room for emotional expression. The notion of failure in male trauma narratives, therefore, emerges not merely as a psychological condition but as a gendered one.

This gendered dimension of trauma becomes particularly significant in understanding how the sense of "failure" is represented in literary texts. While trauma may produce similar forms of psychological disruption, its meaning is shaped by the expectations imposed upon the subject. Accordingly, this study proposes two modes of failure: the "Failed Human" and the "Failed Man." The former refers to a condition in which trauma results in a profound breakdown of selfhood, coherence, and human relationality, whereas the latter describes a failure rooted in the inability to fulfill socially constructed ideals of masculinity. This distinction suggests that trauma is mediated by cultural and gendered frameworks that shape what it means to be a functioning subject. Using this framework, the study comparatively examines Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* and Eka Kurniawan's *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* to explore how childhood sexual trauma produces different trajectories of identity disruption across distinct cultural contexts.

Both Dazai's *No Longer Human* and Kurniawan's *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* depict protagonists shaped by childhood sexual trauma; though with markedly different consequences. Dazai's novel follows Ōba Yōzō, whose early sexual violation contributes to lifelong alienation, self-loathing, and an inability to connect with others. In contrast, Kurniawan's Ajo Kawir develops impotence as a result of childhood trauma; a condition that places him in conflict with the hypermasculine values of his social environment. While Yōzō's trauma develops into a crisis of being, Ajo Kawir's emerges as a crisis of masculinity, where sexual dysfunction becomes the primary marker of failure. Thus, although both protagonists share a traumatic origin, their experiences ultimately converge on different forms of failure: one as a "Failed Human," the other as a "Failed Man."

Childhood sexual trauma is often marked by silence and difficulty in articulation, as the experience frequently overwhelms the victim's ability to comprehend or process what has occurred. Survivors commonly experience profound helplessness, particularly when resistance or escape seems impossible. As Herman (1992) argues, prolonged exposure to abuse may force victims into a state of surrender shaped by the recognition that the violence cannot be controlled or prevented. Consequently, such trauma often remains unresolved and reemerges later through fragmented memories, emotional instability, or maladaptive behaviors.

For male victims, the articulation of trauma is further complicated by gender expectations. Dominant constructions of masculinity associate manhood with strength, control, emotional restraint, and sexual dominance, leaving little room for vulnerability. Connell (1995) conceptualizes this ideal as hegemonic masculinity, while Butler (1990) argues that gender is produced through repeated performances shaped by social norms. Within this framework, acknowledging trauma may appear incompatible with accepted performances of masculinity. As a result, male survivors face not only the psychological consequences of abuse but also the pressure to maintain an image of masculine control, often leading to repression, emotional isolation, and difficulties expressing vulnerability.

Furthermore, unresolved trauma in men may manifest in destructive ways later in adulthood. Reavis et al. (2013) found significantly higher rates of childhood trauma among criminal populations, with convicted sexual offenders and child abusers reporting particularly high rates of childhood sexual abuse. Although trauma does not inevitably lead to criminal behavior, these findings suggest that unresolved trauma may contribute to violence, maladaptive coping, and other harmful behaviors. Such evidence highlights that male trauma is not solely a psychological issue but is also shaped by broader social expectations surrounding masculinity and emotional expression.

Although both protagonists originate from childhood sexual trauma, their post-traumatic trajectories diverge through different gendered responses. In *No Longer Human*, trauma produces withdrawal rather than confrontation; shaping Ōba Yōzō into an alienated and fragmented subject. Unable to process his trauma or articulate vulnerability, he retreats behind social performances, emotional detachment, and self-destructive behaviors. His reliance on clowning reflects a persistent inability to engage authentically with others, while his fractured sense of self develops into an existential crisis that undermines his humanity itself. Consequently, Yōzō emerges as a “Failed Human,” a subject unable to sustain a coherent sense of self or meaningful connection with the world around him.

In contrast, *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* presents trauma through a crisis of masculinity. Ajo Kawir’s childhood sexual trauma results in impotence; making masculinity itself the central site of conflict. Rather than withdrawing from society, he attempts to compensate through violence, aggression, and hypermasculine behavior. His suffering stems not only from trauma but also from his perceived inability to fulfill dominant ideals of male virility and sexual performance. Within Connell’s (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity, impotence becomes a symbolic failure of manhood; generating the shame and insecurity that shape Ajo Kawir’s actions. Thus, while Yōzō’s trauma culminates in a crisis of humanity, Ajo Kawir’s develops into a crisis of masculinity, illustrating how similar traumatic experiences can produce different forms of “failure”.

Existing studies on *No Longer Human* have largely approached the novel through existential, psychological, and autobiographical perspectives, focusing on themes such as alienation, identity crisis, and social disconnection. Similarly, research on *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* has primarily examined violence, sexuality, and the construction of masculinity. While these studies provide valuable insights, limited attention has been given to how childhood sexual trauma is mediated through gender norms and how it produces different forms of post-traumatic failure. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how childhood sexual trauma shapes male subjectivity in both novels and how masculinity mediates the protagonists’ divergent trajectories, resulting in the emergence of the “Failed Human” and the “Failed Man.”

Within trauma studies, trauma is understood not simply as a physical injury but as a psychological wound that disrupts an individual’s perception of self, time, and reality. According to Caruth (1996), traumatic events are often experienced too suddenly and overwhelmingly to be fully comprehended when they occur. Consequently, they cannot be immediately integrated into consciousness and instead return belatedly through intrusive memories, repetition, fragmentation, and other disruptive psychological manifestations.

Caruth (1996) further argues that trauma is more than an individual pathology; it is a persistent wound whose significance lies partly in what remains inaccessible to language and consciousness. This perspective is particularly relevant to literary criticism, where trauma is often represented through fragmented narration, disrupted temporality, and unstable subjectivity rather than linear storytelling. Consequently, literature becomes an important site for witnessing experiences that resist direct expression. As Marder (2006) suggests, literary representation enables readers to encounter forms of suffering and violence that might otherwise remain unheard, particularly those shaped by violence, suffering, and silence.

The relationship between trauma and literature is closely tied to the concept of testimony (Felman, 2002). Literary narratives provide a means of communicating traumatic experiences despite the limitations of language. Rather than offering complete accounts, trauma narratives often reveal the subject's struggle to remember, articulate, and survive. Testimony therefore functions not simply as the recounting of an event but as an attempt to negotiate the relationship between trauma, language, and survival through acts of narration and witnessing (Marder, 2006). In this way, literary representations of trauma expose the continuing effects of experiences that remain difficult to fully know or express.

This disruption becomes particularly severe when abuse occurs during childhood, a formative period in the development of identity. Herman (1992) argues that prolonged childhood abuse forces children to develop psychological strategies to survive overwhelming experiences, often disrupting the relationship between memory, reality, and selfhood. The resulting symptoms may simultaneously conceal and reveal trauma, expressing painful experiences through indirect and fragmented forms. Moreover, when escape or dissociation is impossible, children may construct meanings that normalize or justify the abuse as a means of psychological survival. Consequently, childhood trauma not only inflicts lasting psychological harm but also reshapes the development of identity and the individual's understanding of self and world.

When trauma intersects with socially constructed expectations of masculinity, the formation of male subjectivity becomes increasingly complex. Although research on male responses to trauma remains limited, studies suggest that boys and men often face particular difficulties in coping with traumatic experiences (Slegh et al., 2021). Early attachment patterns and gender socialization may contribute to maladaptive coping strategies, while dominant masculine norms emphasize self-reliance, emotional restraint, and toughness. Consequently, boys are often encouraged to suppress vulnerability and endure distress in silence, shaping how male subjects understand and respond to traumatic experiences (Slegh et al., 2021).

Consequently, male trauma often manifests differently from conventional notions of victimhood. Rather than openly expressing vulnerability, men are more likely to respond through social withdrawal, anger, risk-taking behavior, aggression, or violence (Slegh et al., 2021). Studies further indicate that insecure attachment and unresolved trauma may contribute to externalizing behaviors later in life. Although traumatic responses vary across individuals, they frequently involve emotional dysregulation, dissociation, difficulties in forming relationships, or heightened aggression. Within literary representations, these responses reveal how trauma destabilizes not only psychological coherence but also the male subject's ability to embody culturally valued ideals of strength, control, and emotional stability.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that trauma is not merely a psychological injury but a force that reshapes identity, subjectivity, and social existence. Within literary texts, its effects often emerge through fragmented identities, emotional disconnection, and unstable constructions of the self. For male subjects, however, trauma is further mediated by masculine norms that discourage vulnerability and privilege strength, control, and resilience. As a result, literary representations of traumatized men reveal not only the enduring consequences of violence and abuse but also the gendered pressures that shape how trauma is expressed, concealed, or negotiated. This perspective is central to the present study, which examines how childhood sexual trauma produces divergent forms of male subjectivity in *No Longer Human* and *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*, ultimately resulting in the figures of the "Failed Human" and the "Failed Man."

Masculinity is not a natural or fixed attribute but a socially constructed set of meanings, expectations, and practices. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity argues that masculinity exists as a hierarchy of culturally valued ideals rather than a singular identity. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity associated with authority, strength, heterosexuality, self-control, and emotional restraint. Rather than being an inherent quality, masculinity is a social position that must be continually established and recognized within specific cultural contexts. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity functions as a standard of legitimacy through which certain masculine behaviors are privileged while others are marginalized or perceived as inadequate.

This perspective can be further developed through Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but is produced through the repeated enactment of socially sanctioned norms and behaviors. As such, masculinity is not something one possesses but something one continually performs. Because these performances depend on repetition and social recognition, gender identity remains inherently unstable and open to disruption. Moments of failure or inability to meet expected gender norms expose the constructed nature of masculinity itself. From this perspective, trauma becomes particularly significant because it may undermine the subject's capacity to sustain socially recognizable performances of masculinity, revealing tensions between masculine expectations and experiences of vulnerability, fear, or powerlessness.

The relationship between masculinity and vulnerability is further illuminated by hooks's critique of patriarchy and masculine socialization. hooks (2004) argues that patriarchal culture encourages men to suppress emotional expression by associating vulnerability with weakness and emotional control with masculinity. As a result, male subjects are often discouraged from openly acknowledging pain, fear, or dependency, limiting their ability to process and communicate traumatic experiences. Consequently, trauma may be expressed through silence, withdrawal, aggression, or other maladaptive coping strategies rather than direct vulnerability. Together, the perspectives of Connell, Butler, and hooks provide a framework for understanding masculinity as a socially constructed, performed, and regulated identity that can be destabilized by trauma. This framework is particularly relevant to the present study, which examines how childhood sexual trauma produces different forms of masculine subjectivity and failure.

Previous studies on *No Longer Human* have largely approached Ōba Yōzō through existential and psychological frameworks. Kishore (2024) interprets the novel as an exploration of alienation, despair, and existential crisis, while Bagra (2026) reads Yōzō as an anti-hero whose isolation and self-loathing function as forms of intellectual resistance. Despite their differences, both studies primarily understand Yōzō's condition through philosophical concerns, examining his alienation and sense of being "no longer human" as manifestations of existential crisis rather than the consequences of trauma.

Other scholars have examined Yōzō through psychosocial and clinical perspectives. Using Erikson's theory, Astuti and Hanif (2025) argue that Yōzō's identity crisis emerges from alienation, role confusion, and inadequate social support, leading him to adopt the clown persona as a defensive mask. Similarly, Török (2025) interprets his isolation and self-destructive behavior through the lens of psychological pathology. While these studies offer valuable insights into Yōzō's fractured identity, they primarily emphasize developmental and psychological explanations. Consequently, limited attention has been given to childhood sexual trauma as a formative experience shaping his subjectivity, or to the role of masculinity in mediating his response to trauma. By foregrounding trauma and masculinity as interconnected analytical categories, the present study offers an alternative reading of Yōzō's alienation and identity fragmentation as manifestations of a "Failed Human."

Previous studies on *Seperti Dendam*, *Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* have largely focused on masculinity, sexuality, and desire. Wahyuningtyas and Karkono (2026) examine how masculine myths shape character formation and conflict, while Sahara (2019) and Prasastyo (2017) employ psychoanalytic approaches to analyze masculinity, sexual desire, and the symbolic significance of the phallus. Despite their different theoretical perspectives, these studies share a common concern with masculine legitimacy and sexual identity as central themes in the novel. However, they tend to approach these issues as ideological or psychoanalytic phenomena, giving relatively limited attention to trauma as a formative force underlying them.

A second group of studies has examined trauma and its effects on the characters. Drawing on Caruth, Sartika (2020) identifies symptoms such as intrusive memories, flashbacks, avoidance, and emotional distress, while Santoso (2018) analyzes Ajo Kawir's sexual trauma through Freudian psychoanalysis. Although these studies offer valuable insights into the novel's psychological dimensions, they largely treat trauma as a psychological or narrative phenomenon. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how trauma and masculinity interact in the construction of male subjectivity. Addressing this gap, the present study combines trauma studies and gender theory to examine how childhood sexual trauma shapes Ajo Kawir's identity and how hegemonic masculine expectations transform that trauma into a crisis of masculine legitimacy. From this perspective, Ajo Kawir's impotence is understood not merely as a psychological consequence of trauma but as a condition that produces the "Failed Man."

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a comparative literary approach to examine the representation of childhood sexual trauma and its impact on male subjectivity in Dazai's *No Longer Human* and Kurniawan's *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*. The primary data consist of narrative passages, character descriptions, dialogues, and events related to the traumatic experiences and identity formation of the protagonists, Ōba Yōzō and Ajo Kawir. Data were collected through close reading, focusing on textual evidence that reflects trauma, masculinity, identity construction, and manifestations of failure. The analysis is grounded in trauma theory with the addition of perspective from gender and masculinity theories. Employing a comparative framework, this study identifies similarities and differences in the ways childhood sexual trauma shapes the protagonists' subjectivities and explores how gendered expectations of masculinity mediate the emergence of distinct forms of post-traumatic failure, conceptualized in this study as the "Failed Human" and the "Failed Man."

3. Results and Discussion

Childhood Sexual Trauma as the Origin of Dysfunction

Although *No Longer Human* and *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* ultimately portray different forms of post-traumatic failure, both narratives originate from a similar traumatic foundation: childhood sexual trauma. In both novels, the protagonists' later struggles with identity, relationships, and social functioning can be traced back to experiences of sexual violation encountered at a young age. Rather than remaining isolated events in the past, these experiences continue to shape their perceptions of themselves and others well into adulthood. As Caruth (1996) argues, trauma is often not fully comprehended when it occurs and instead returns belatedly through repetitive and disruptive manifestations. Similarly, Herman (1992) notes that childhood trauma can profoundly alter an individual's sense of self, reality, and interpersonal relationships during crucial stages of development. Consequently, childhood sexual trauma in both works functions not merely as a narrative event, but as the foundational source of the protagonists' subsequent dysfunction, shaping the ways they navigate identity, vulnerability, and social existence.

The childhood sexual trauma experienced by Yōzō and Ajo Kawir is narrated in markedly different ways, revealing distinct relationships between trauma, memory, and subjectivity. In *No Longer Human*, Yōzō discloses his abuse retrospectively and with striking brevity, stating only that he had already been "taught sorrowful things—violated—by the maids and manservants" (Dazai, 2025, p. 8), before condemning such acts as among the cruelest crimes imaginable. Beyond this brief acknowledgment, the novel offers little elaboration regarding the event itself, its circumstances, or Yōzō's immediate emotional response. The abuse therefore emerges as a fragmentary memory rather than a fully narrated experience, reflecting Caruth's (1996) assertion that trauma often resists direct representation and instead appears through partial disclosures and narrative gaps.

In contrast, *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* presents Ajo Kawir's trauma through an extended and graphic sequence in which he is forced at gunpoint to witness the rape of Rona Merah and is subsequently coerced into participating in the assault. The narrative foregrounds his fear and helplessness through repeated descriptions of his trembling body, pale face, and inability to act while under threat, emphasizing the overwhelming nature of the experience (Kurniawan, 2014). Significantly, the novel acknowledges that certain aspects of the event have become blurred with time while other details remain vividly preserved in memory, illustrating trauma's fragmented yet persistent nature. While both characters experience childhood sexual trauma, Dazai narrates the violation through omission and brevity, whereas Kurniawan renders it through detailed reconstruction and explicit depiction. This contrast suggests that trauma in both novels is remembered differently, yet in each case remains a formative experience that continues to shape the protagonists long after the original event has passed.

A notable similarity between Yōzō and Ajo Kawir lies in their difficulty in fully understanding and processing their traumatic experiences. Despite recognizing that something profoundly harmful has occurred, neither protagonist is able to immediately make sense of the abuse or integrate it into a coherent understanding of themselves. In *No Longer Human*, Yōzō acknowledges the servants' actions as "vile crimes," yet he remains

unable to communicate the experience to others, explaining that he could not even understand his own parents, let alone trust them with such a disclosure (Dazai, 2025, pp. 18, 19–20). Rather than interpreting the abuse as an isolated act of violence, he absorbs it into a broader perception of human incomprehensibility, suggesting that the trauma contributes to his growing inability to understand people and human relationships. Similarly, Ajo Kawir struggles to fully comprehend the significance of the traumatic event he witnessed and experienced as a child. Years later, he continues to speculate whether killing the men responsible might somehow restore his impotence, indicating an unresolved attempt to establish a clear causal relationship between the event and the condition that has shaped his life (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 114). This uncertainty demonstrates that the trauma remains only partially understood, as Ajo Kawir continues searching for an explanation that might make sense of his suffering. As Caruth (1996) argues, trauma often exceeds the subject's ability to fully comprehend it at the moment it occurs. In both novels, childhood sexual trauma is therefore not immediately recognized or fully processed by the protagonists; instead, it persists as an incomprehensible wound whose meaning remains elusive even years after the original event, shaping their identities precisely through its inability to be fully understood.

The emotional consequences of childhood sexual trauma also emerge differently in the two protagonists, revealing distinct patterns of post-traumatic response. In *No Longer Human*, Yōzō's trauma is largely internalized, manifesting through persistent anxiety, insecurity, distrust, and guilt. He admits that interactions with other people caused him to “break out in cold sweat,” leading him to conceal his fears and uncertainties beneath the carefully constructed persona of a clown (Dazai, 2025, p. 14). This tendency to suppress his authentic emotions is also visible in his relationship with his father, where fear motivates him to prioritize pleasing others rather than expressing his own desires. Similarly, after the abuse, Yōzō develops a profound distrust toward humanity, believing that disclosure would ultimately be futile because no one would genuinely understand or protect him (Dazai, 2025, pp. 18–20). These feelings gradually evolve into a pervasive sense of guilt that accompanies him throughout his life, suggesting that trauma becomes embedded within his perception of himself and his place in the world.

In contrast, Ajo Kawir's emotional responses are more outwardly expressed and closely tied to the physical consequences of his trauma. His impotence repeatedly generates anger, frustration, and emotional instability, to the extent that those around him recognize that discussions related to sexuality only intensify his rage (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 3). At the same time, beneath this aggression lies a profound sense of helplessness and vulnerability. His attempt to mutilate himself, his tendency to become easily emotional, and his expressions of boredom, longing, and despair reveal an individual struggling to find meaning within a condition he cannot overcome (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 41, 80). While Yōzō responds to trauma through withdrawal and self-concealment, Ajo Kawir responds through anger and emotional volatility; however, both responses reflect what Herman (1992) identifies as the enduring psychological effects of trauma, in which overwhelming experiences continue to shape emotional life long after the original event has passed.

Following the traumatic experiences, both protagonists exhibit signs of dysfunction that extend beyond the initial event and begin to shape their everyday lives, although these manifestations emerge in different forms. Yōzō's dysfunction is primarily psychological and social. Even within his own family, he confesses an inability to understand the emotions, motivations, and behaviors of those closest to him, forcing him to conceal his confusion behind a carefully maintained smile while privately experiencing anxiety and distress (Dazai, 2025, p. 13). This persistent sense of alienation is later accompanied by a search for escape through alcohol, cigarettes, and prostitutes, which he describes as temporary means of alleviating his overwhelming fear of humanity (Dazai, 2025, p. 34). Significantly, Yōzō also develops a peculiar attraction to illegality, admitting that activities deemed criminal felt less frightening than the incomprehensible social structures governing ordinary life (Dazai, 2025, p. 37). Such tendencies suggest a subject increasingly detached from conventional social norms and seeking refuge in spaces inhabited by society's outsiders. His sense of kinship with Tsuneko, a poor and marginalized woman, further reflects this estrangement, as he finds comfort not in social belonging but in shared vulnerability and despair (Dazai, 2025, p. 48).

In contrast, Ajo Kawir's dysfunction manifests most visibly through impotence, a direct and persistent consequence of the traumatic event. The condition becomes so severe that various attempts are made to restore his sexual function, including physical stimulation and the involvement of a prostitute, all of which prove unsuccessful (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 35, 39). Unlike Yōzō's largely internalized dysfunction, Ajo Kawir's trauma is externalized through a bodily symptom that continuously reminds both himself and others of his condition. In both cases, however, the trauma does not remain confined to memory but develops into enduring patterns of dysfunction that disrupt the protagonists' ability to navigate social life and construct a stable sense of self. This reflects Herman's (1992) argument that trauma often produces long-term alterations in self-perception, relationships, and behavior, extending its influence far beyond the original moment of violation.

Trauma, Silence and the Gendered Repression of Vulnerability

While trauma itself produces profound psychological disruption, the ways in which individuals respond to and express that trauma are often shaped by gendered expectations. For male victims in particular, trauma is frequently accompanied by pressures to remain emotionally controlled, resilient, and unaffected by suffering. As a result, vulnerability becomes difficult to articulate, often leading to silence, emotional suppression, or the adoption of alternative coping mechanisms. This dynamic is especially evident in *No Longer Human* and *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*, where the protagonists struggle not only with the consequences of childhood sexual trauma but also with the expectations attached to masculinity.

The inability of Yōzō and Ajo Kawir to openly express vulnerability cannot be separated from the masculine environments in which they are socialized. In *No Longer Human*, vulnerability becomes difficult to articulate because Yōzō grows up within a familial and social structure characterized by distance, authority, and emotional inaccessibility. His father occupies a position of unquestionable authority, while emotional communication within the family appears limited, teaching Yōzō from an early age that direct expression of fear, insecurity, or emotional need is neither welcomed nor safe. Consequently, rather than admitting his anxieties, he learns to conceal them through performance. Although he privately confesses to being terrified of ordinary social interactions—riding trains alone, entering restaurants, speaking to strangers, or navigating public spaces—these fears remain largely hidden beneath the persona he constructs for others (Dazai, 2025, p. 33). Similarly, his perception of society as something “strong, strict, and terrifying” further reinforces the belief that weakness cannot be openly displayed (Dazai, 2025, p. 69). Through Butler's (1990) framework of gender performativity, Yōzō's clown persona can be understood as a repeated performance that conceals vulnerability while maintaining a socially acceptable identity.

In contrast, Ajo Kawir inhabits a social environment where masculinity is explicitly associated with courage, toughness, and sexual capability. Although he occasionally allows himself to cry in private, such moments remain hidden from public view and are framed as exceptions rather than acceptable expressions of masculine emotion (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 81). More significantly, Ajo Kawir repeatedly evaluates himself through masculine standards, insisting that he cannot withdraw from a fight because he is “a man,” while simultaneously describing himself as a “loser” because of his impotence (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 96). His understanding of masculinity becomes so deeply intertwined with sexual function that he eventually describes the penis as a “second brain” capable of governing a man's actions (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 126). From Connell's (1995) perspective, such statements reflect the influence of hegemonic masculinity, in which masculine legitimacy is tied to strength, bravery, and sexual performance. Consequently, while Yōzō suppresses vulnerability through performance and self-erasure, Ajo Kawir suppresses it through adherence to masculine ideals that equate weakness with failure. In both cases, vulnerability becomes difficult to express not because it is absent, but because masculinity itself renders its expression socially and personally threatening.

Masculine expectations shape the protagonists' silence by discouraging direct expressions of vulnerability and redirecting emotional suffering into alternative behaviors that appear more socially acceptable within their respective constructions of masculinity. Yōzō responds to fear and insecurity not through confession but through performance. Growing up under the shadow of an emotionally distant and authoritative father, he learns

that openly expressing anxiety or weakness offers neither protection nor understanding. Consequently, he develops the clown persona as a strategy for navigating a world he perceives as overwhelmingly frightening. Rather than revealing his distress, he masks it through humor, eccentricity, and self-deprecation, allowing others to perceive him as amusing rather than vulnerable. Even when women interpret his timidity and sadness as qualities that invite care and affection, Yōzō remains incapable of accepting such intimacy, retreating further into despair instead (Dazai, 2025, p. 66). Likewise, when criticized or misunderstood, he rarely defends himself, choosing silence while internally experiencing intense fear and psychological turmoil (Dazai, 2025, pp. 13–14). His inability to form meaningful connections with others, combined with his preference for prostitutes whom he perceives as existing outside ordinary social expectations, further reflects a desire to avoid the demands of authentic human relationships (Dazai, 2025, pp. 34, 61). Yōzō's silence can be understood as a gendered performance in which vulnerability is continuously concealed beneath socially recognizable behaviors.

In contrast, Ajo Kawir's silence is shaped by a masculine culture that explicitly equates manhood with sexual capability, courage, and physical dominance. Rather than verbalizing the emotional consequences of his trauma, he repeatedly interprets his suffering through the language of impotence, treating his dysfunctional body as evidence of personal failure. Even when offered affection and acceptance by Iteung, he remains unable to imagine himself as worthy of love because he continues to define his value according to his inability to perform sexually (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 90). Instead of confronting the trauma directly, he channels his frustration into violence, repeatedly seeking physical fights that allow emotional pain to be expressed through aggression rather than vulnerability (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 4). This pattern becomes particularly evident when he discovers Iteung's pregnancy; unable to process feelings of insecurity, betrayal, and inadequacy, he redirects his emotional turmoil into rage and lethal violence against others (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 119–120, 157). Significantly, despite spending years obsessing over the event that caused his impotence, Ajo Kawir ultimately refuses the opportunity to confront or kill the policemen responsible for his trauma (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 214), suggesting that his violence functions less as a means of addressing trauma than as a mechanism for avoiding it. From Connell's (1995) perspective, such behavior reflects the influence of hegemonic masculinity, which privileges strength, aggression, and sexual potency while discouraging emotional openness. As a result, both protagonists remain silent about their suffering, yet masculinity shapes that silence differently: Yōzō converts vulnerability into performance and withdrawal, whereas Ajo Kawir converts it into violence, anger, and obsession with masculine legitimacy.

The Production of the “Failed Human”: Yōzō's Collapse of Human Identity

While both protagonists experience childhood sexual trauma and struggle under gendered expectations of masculinity, the consequences of that trauma ultimately diverge. Yōzō's response to trauma is characterized by profound alienation, self-erasure, and an increasing inability to understand himself or others. Rather than producing a crisis centered on masculinity, trauma gradually destabilizes his entire sense of human existence, leading him to perceive himself as fundamentally different from and incapable of belonging among other people. As a result, Yōzō's post-traumatic condition extends beyond psychological distress and develops into what can be understood as a collapse of human identity, positioning him not merely as a traumatized subject, but as a “Failed Human.”

The production of Yōzō as a “Failed Human” can be observed through his increasing alienation from both himself and others, accompanied by a persistent reliance on performance as a substitute for authentic identity. Throughout *No Longer Human*, Yōzō repeatedly expresses an inability to understand the people around him, a condition that gradually expands into a broader inability to comprehend human existence itself. Following Yoshiko's violation, for example, he admits that he no longer understands anything and that the world has become entirely incomprehensible to him, leaving alcohol as his only refuge (Dazai, 2025, p. 89). This incomprehension is accompanied by an inability to form genuine human connections. Even his relationship with Horiki, one of the closest figures in his life, is ultimately revealed to be built upon misunderstanding, as Yōzō realizes that Horiki never regarded him as an equal human being but merely as an object of amusement and convenience. Such moments reinforce his belief that authentic connection is impossible and that he exists outside ordinary human relationships. Faced with this persistent alienation,

Yōzō increasingly resorts to self-erasure through performance. He explicitly describes becoming a clown as his final strategy for approaching other people, acknowledging that while human beings terrified him, he could not simply withdraw from society altogether (Dazai, 2025, p. 13). Consequently, rather than presenting his authentic self, he adopts a series of roles designed to entertain, comfort, or satisfy others. Whether within his family, among friends, or even within political groups, Yōzō consistently becomes the comedian, the fool, and the crowd favorite. Through these performances, he gains social acceptance while simultaneously concealing his fears, anxieties, and insecurities. From Butler's (1990) perspective, identity is constituted through repeated performances; however, in Yōzō's case, performance gradually replaces identity altogether. The more he relies on masks to navigate social life, the further he becomes estranged from any coherent sense of self, producing a condition in which he no longer experiences himself as fully human. His failure, therefore, lies not in an inability to achieve masculine legitimacy, but in the gradual collapse of authentic personhood itself.

The Production of the “Failed Man”: Ajo Kawir’s Crisis of Masculinity

Unlike Yōzō, whose trauma culminates in a collapse of human identity, Ajo Kawir's post-traumatic condition is primarily experienced through a crisis of masculinity. Although his childhood sexual trauma similarly disrupts his sense of self, its most visible consequence is impotence, a condition that directly challenges the masculine ideals of strength, virility, and sexual capability that define manhood within his social environment. As a result, Ajo Kawir's trauma becomes inseparable from questions of masculine legitimacy, shaping how he perceives himself and how he believes he is perceived by others. Rather than producing a withdrawal from humanity, trauma repeatedly confronts him with the fear of failing to meet the expectations of masculinity, ultimately positioning him as what this study conceptualizes as a “Failed Man.”

Ajo Kawir's status as a “Failed Man” is primarily constructed through the relationship between impotence and masculine legitimacy. Unlike Yōzō, whose trauma destabilizes his sense of humanity, Ajo Kawir's trauma is repeatedly interpreted through the lens of manhood, causing his inability to perform sexually to become the central measure of his self-worth. Throughout the novel, he remains acutely aware of his impotence, particularly in his relationship with Iteung. Even when intimacy and affection are offered to him, he consistently distances himself, recognizing his attraction to her while simultaneously believing that he has nothing meaningful to offer because of his condition (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 57–59). This anxiety becomes increasingly explicit when he compares a man incapable of satisfying a woman to a rusted knife that serves no purpose, revealing the extent to which his value as a person has become inseparable from his perceived sexual inadequacy (Kurniawan, 2014, p. 62). From Connell's (1995) perspective, such self-perceptions reflect the influence of hegemonic masculinity, which associates masculine legitimacy with sexual competence, strength, and virility. Consequently, Ajo Kawir internalizes impotence not merely as a bodily dysfunction but as evidence of failed manhood.

Unable to achieve recognition through conventional masculine standards, he turns instead to violence as an alternative means of performing masculinity. His repeated involvement in fights, willingness to kill, and reputation as a feared fighter function as compensatory performances through which he attempts to reclaim forms of masculine authority unavailable to him through sexuality (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 48, 55, 69). Significantly, these violent acts often emerge in moments of emotional vulnerability that he is unable to articulate directly. When confronted with situations that expose his insecurity—whether his inability to maintain a romantic relationship or the revelation of Iteung's pregnancy—his emotional pain is redirected into rage and physical aggression. Butler's (1990) notion of performativity is useful here, as Ajo Kawir repeatedly performs hypermasculinity through violence in order to compensate for a perceived failure in another domain of masculinity. His trauma therefore does not simply produce impotence; it produces a continuous struggle to reclaim masculine legitimacy within a social world that defines manhood through sexual capability. In this sense, Ajo Kawir becomes a “Failed Man” not because he lacks masculine desire, courage, or strength, but because the condition produced by trauma prevents him from fulfilling the particular standards through which masculinity is recognized and validated.

From “Failed Human” to “Failed Man”: Divergent Outcomes of Gendered Trauma

Although Yōzō and Ajo Kawir originate from a similar traumatic foundation, their trajectories ultimately diverge into different forms of failure. This divergence suggests that trauma alone does not determine its outcomes; rather, its effects are mediated by the ways individuals interpret themselves in relation to gendered expectations and social norms. While both protagonists struggle with vulnerability, isolation, and the lingering consequences of childhood sexual trauma, Yōzō’s experience culminates in a crisis of human identity, whereas Ajo Kawir’s manifests as a crisis of masculinity. Examining these contrasting trajectories reveals how trauma can produce different modes of subjectivity and demonstrates that the meaning of failure is not universal, but shaped by the social and gendered frameworks through which trauma is experienced and understood.

Although Yōzō and Ajo Kawir are both shaped by childhood sexual trauma, emotionally silenced by their environments, and constrained by gendered expectations of masculinity, their post-traumatic trajectories diverge significantly. Yōzō responds to trauma primarily through internalization. Rather than directing his suffering outward, he turns it inward through self-blame, guilt, withdrawal, and self-destruction. This tendency is evident following Yoshiko’s sexual violation, where his primary concern is not the act itself but the destruction of the trust he had invested in her innocence, a loss that ultimately reinforces his belief that the world is fundamentally incomprehensible and terrifying (Dazai, 2025, pp. 88–89). Even when confronted with tragedy, Yōzō repeatedly interprets suffering as evidence of his own inadequacy, insisting that misery originates from his personal guilt rather than from external circumstances (Dazai, 2025, p. 93). Consequently, his trauma culminates in alcoholism, repeated suicide attempts, and a gradual abandonment of the desire to continue living. His failure therefore manifests as a collapse of human identity itself: unable to trust others, unable to understand society, and unable to sustain a coherent sense of self, Yōzō ultimately withdraws from human existence altogether.

In contrast, Ajo Kawir externalizes trauma. Although he similarly experiences hopelessness regarding his condition, his suffering is repeatedly redirected into violence, aggression, and an obsessive concern with masculinity. Unable to resolve the impotence resulting from childhood trauma, he channels emotional pain into physical confrontations, treating fighting as both distraction and compensation for perceived masculine inadequacy (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 70, 72). His repeated willingness to risk death in combat reflects not only despair but also an attempt to reclaim forms of masculine legitimacy unavailable through sexual performance (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 75–76). Throughout the novel, Ajo Kawir continually associates fearlessness, physical dominance, and sexual capability with manhood, ultimately defining his future happiness through the possibility of regaining sexual function (Kurniawan, 2014, pp. 104, 225). Thus, while Yōzō’s trauma produces self-erasure and dehumanization, Ajo Kawir’s trauma produces hypermasculine performance and an enduring fixation on masculine legitimacy. The comparison demonstrates that trauma alone does not determine subjective outcomes; rather, those outcomes are mediated by gendered expectations that shape how vulnerability is interpreted and expressed. In Yōzō, masculinity contributes to a withdrawal from humanity, producing the “Failed Human.” In Ajo Kawir, masculinity transforms trauma into a crisis of manhood, producing the “Failed Man.”

5. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that childhood sexual trauma functions as the foundational experience shaping the lives of both Ōba Yōzō in *No Longer Human* and Ajo Kawir in *5*. Although both protagonists experience similar forms of trauma, emotional silence, and difficulties articulating vulnerability, their post-traumatic trajectories develop in markedly different ways. Through the framework of trauma theory, the findings reveal that trauma continues to shape their identities long after the original event has passed, influencing their relationships, emotional responses, and perceptions of themselves. However, the comparative analysis also shows that trauma alone cannot fully explain these outcomes. Rather, the meaning and expression of trauma are mediated by gendered expectations of masculinity. In Yōzō’s case, trauma is internalized into alienation, self-erasure, and profound distrust toward human relationships, culminating in a collapse of human identity that positions him as a “Failed Human.” In contrast, Ajo Kawir externalizes trauma through violence, emotional displacement, and an obsessive concern with sexual

capability, producing a crisis of masculine legitimacy that positions him as a “Failed Man”. The comparison between the two novels therefore suggests that masculinity does not merely influence how male trauma is expressed; it actively shapes the forms of failure that emerge from traumatic experience. While hegemonic masculine ideals discourage vulnerability in both protagonists, they generate different responses according to the social and psychological contexts in which the trauma is experienced. Consequently, the study argues that male trauma should not be understood solely as an individual psychological condition but also as a gendered experience shaped by cultural expectations surrounding manhood, strength, and emotional restraint. By bringing together trauma studies and gender theory, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how literature represents the complex relationship between childhood sexual trauma, masculinity, and male subjectivity. Ultimately, both novels reveal that the most enduring consequence of trauma is not merely suffering itself, but the struggle to construct a coherent sense of self within social frameworks that leave little room for male vulnerability.

References

- Astuti, A. Y., & Hanif, A. (2025). Identity crisis of the clown in Dazai Osamu's *No Longer Human* using Erik Erikson psychosocial theory. *JURNAL JIPS (Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Scholastic)*, 9(3), 172–180. <http://e-journal.sastra-unes.com/index.php/JIPS>
- Bagra, T. N. (2026). Examining the intellectual elitism of the anti-hero in *No Longer Human* and *Notes from the Underground*. *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH*, 14(2), 253–263. <https://doi.org/10.24113/smji.v14i2.11689>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Dazai, O. (2025). *No longer human*. Norris Classics.
- Felman, S. (2002). *The juridical unconscious*. Harvard University Press.
- Hartman, G. (2003). Trauma within the limits of literature. *European Journal of English Studies*, 7(3), 257–274. <https://doi.org/10.1076/ejes.7.3.257.27984>
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. Washington Square Press.
- Kishore, P. (2024). Existential angst and dehumanization in Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*. 24(5). <https://www.amazon.com>
- Kurniawan, E. (2014). *Seperti dendam, rindu harus dibayar tuntas*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Marder, E. (2006). Trauma and literary studies: Some "enabling questions." *Reading On*, 1(1), 1–6.
- Mohácsi, E. E. (2021). Trauma, literature, and culture. *Freeside Europe Online Academic Journal*, (12), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.51313/freeside-2021-5>
- Prasastyo, G. A. R. P. (2017). Seksualitas dalam novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* karya Eka Kurniawan. *Jurnal Ilmiah Kebudayaan SINTEISIS*, 11(1), 53–67.
- Reavis, J. A., Looman, J., Franco, K. A., & Rojas, B. (2013). Adverse childhood experiences and adult criminality: How long must we live before we possess our own lives? *The Permanente Journal*, 17(2), 44–48. <https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/12-072>
- Sahara, D. (2019). Hasrat Eka Kurniawan dalam novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* (Kajian psikoanalisis Jacques Lacan). *Jurnal Sakala*, 1(2), 2–16.
- Santoso, S. G. (2018). Trauma seksual tokoh Ajo Kawir dalam novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* karya Eka Kurniawan: Kajian psikoanalisis seksual Sigmund Freud. *E-Journal UNESA*.
- Sartika, E. (2020). Traumatic experiences in Eka Kurniawan's novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*. *Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.55895>
- Slegh, H., Spielberg, W., & Ragonese, C. (2021). *Masculinities and male trauma: Making the connections*. <https://www.promundoglobal.org>
- Török, D.-A. (2025). Proceedings of the First East Asian Studies Student International Symposium. In G. T. Sipos & A. Putnok (Eds.), *Proceedings of the First East Asian Studies Student International Symposium* (pp. 67–79). Editura Universităţii de Vest din Timişoara.
- Wahyuningtyas, A. F., & Karkono. (2026). Myth of masculinity in novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* by Eka Kurniawan. *Jurnal Sastra Indonesia*, 14(3), 285–296. <https://doi.org/10.15294/jsi.v14i3.33949>