



Research Article

The Silent Wounds of a Child in L.H. Pde *Tang Ma Phi Khun Baieid*: A Critical Psychological Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21555393>

Abstract

This paper examines the psychological consequences of bereavement and emotional neglect on Wanda, the young daughter of Bianglang and Melamon in L. H. Pde's Khasi novel *Tang Ma Phi Khun Baieid*. Reading the character through attachment theory and the concept of cumulative trauma, the study isolates two events that structure her emotional collapse: the violent death of her mother by poisoning, and the sustained emotional unavailability of her surviving parent. The paper argues that these two wounds are not merely additive but compounding — the first removes Wanda's primary attachment figure, while the second forecloses the possibility of repair, converting acute grief into chronic despair and, finally, into suicidal ideation. Wanda's silence throughout the novel is read not as narrative incidental but as symptom: the muteness of a child whose distress has no available listener. The paper concludes that the novel functions as a social critique, indicting a domestic and political order in which adult ambition renders a child's inner life invisible.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 12-06-2026
- Accepted: 20-07-2026
- Published: 25-07-2026
- IJCRM: 5(4); 2026: 441-444
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Sohtun P G. The Silent Wounds of a Child in L.H. Pde Tang Ma Phi Khun Baieid: A Critical Psychological Analysis. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(4):441-444.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: child psychology, attachment theory, cumulative trauma, parental bereavement, emotional neglect, Khasi literature, suicidal ideation.

1. INTRODUCTION

A child's emotional development is not a private, self-generating process. It is scaffolded by the responsiveness of caregivers — by protection, predictability, and the reliable presence of someone who registers the child's distress and answers it. When that scaffolding is withdrawn, whether by death or by indifference, the child is left to manage affective states she does not yet have the internal apparatus to manage alone. Literature has long been attentive to this asymmetry, portraying children as the silent accountants of adult failure: the ones who absorb the cost of decisions made above their heads and without reference to them.

Wanda, the only daughter of Bianglang and Melamon in L. H. Pde's *Tang Ma Phi Khun Baieid*, is such a figure. Her presence in the novel is quantitatively small; she speaks rarely and is granted little interiority by the narration. Yet this narrative marginality is precisely the point. Wanda is written as a child who is *not attended to*, and the reader's experience of her — glimpsed at the edges of scenes dominated by electoral politics and adult desire — reproduces the neglect the novel is criticising.

This paper reads Wanda's deterioration through two events. The first is the death of her mother, poisoned at the instigation of Balari. The second, longer and less dramatic, is her father Bianglang's failure to become emotionally available in the aftermath. The paper argues that the second injury is the more decisive one. Bereavement in childhood is survivable when a surviving caregiver remains responsive; it becomes pathogenic when the child is left to grieve without a witness. Wanda receives no such witness, and her stated wish to die "like Mother" is the outcome of that abandonment rather than of the death alone.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Child psychology and the developmental lens

Child psychology is the scientific study of emotional, cognitive, and social development from infancy through adolescence. Its central methodological commitment is that a child's behaviour must be interpreted against developmental norms rather than adult ones: a behaviour that would signal pathology in an adult may be developmentally ordinary in a seven-year-old, and vice versa. The discipline is therefore not merely descriptive but diagnostic — it exists to identify, early, the points at which a developmental trajectory has been disturbed, so that intervention becomes possible (see Berk; American Psychological Association).

This orientation matters for reading Wanda. Her responses to loss — withdrawal, flatness, the literal-minded wish to follow her mother into death — are not adult grief in miniature. They are age-typical expressions of a specific developmental predicament, and reading them as such is what allows the critic to distinguish sadness from psychological injury.

2.2 Attachment theory

John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* proposes that the infant's bond with a primary caregiver is a biologically grounded system whose function is the regulation of fear. The caregiver serves as a secure base from which the child explores and,

crucially, as a haven to which the child returns when distressed. Bowlby's central claim for the purposes of this paper is that the availability of this figure — not merely her physical presence but her emotional responsiveness — determines whether the child develops the capacity to tolerate and organise difficult affect (Bowlby, *Attachment* [page]).

In the third volume, *Loss: Sadness and Depression*, Bowlby extends the argument to bereavement specifically, observing that a child's mourning is shaped less by the fact of the death than by the response of the surviving adults: whether the loss is spoken about, whether the child's questions are answered, whether her distress is permitted expression (Bowlby, *Loss* [page]). A child who is bereaved and *also* unattended experiences what Bowlby terms a double deprivation.

2.3 Cumulative trauma

M. Masud R. Khan's concept of cumulative trauma is indispensable here. Khan argues that psychological damage often arises not from a single catastrophic event but from the repeated failure of the caregiving environment to function as a protective shield — breaches that are individually minor and that "become visible only in retrospect," accruing silently over time (Khan [page]). Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* makes a complementary point from the clinical side: prolonged, repeated trauma in conditions of captivity or dependence produces a distinct symptom picture, marked by despair and the collapse of the sense of a future (Herman [page]).

Read together, these frameworks yield the analytical structure of this paper: one acute traumatic event (the poisoning) set within a chronic traumatic environment (paternal neglect), with the latter preventing the metabolisation of the former.

3. A Note on the Text and Translation

All quotations from the primary text are given in the original Khasi, followed by the present author's English translation in parentheses. Transliteration follows the orthography of the 20XX edition of the novel. Where the translation requires interpretive choices — particularly with kinship terms such as *I Mei*, whose affective register in Khasi is not fully captured by English "mother" — this is indicated in a note.

4. The First Wound: Maternal Death by Poisoning

The novel's originating catastrophe is the murder of Melamon. The mechanism is disclosed in a letter from Pradip to Balari, which records the administration of the poison in her tea: "nga la khleh 8 drop kato ka dawai ha ka sha" (I have mixed eight drops of the medicine into the tea) (Pde 17). The clinical flatness of the sentence — the counted drops, the domestic vehicle of the tea — is itself significant. The murder is committed in the register of household routine, in the very object that ordinarily signifies care and hospitality. The novel thus stages the poisoning as a perversion of nurture, which is precisely what it will mean for Wanda.

For a child of Wanda's age, the mother is not one relationship among several. She is the organising centre of the child's affective world: the source of physical care, the regulator of fear, the guarantor that distress will be met. Her sudden removal does not subtract a person from Wanda's life so much as

remove the framework within which Wanda's emotional life had been legible to her.

Two features of this loss intensify its traumatic weight. First, its suddenness: there is no illness, no forewarning, no interval in which the child might begin anticipatory mourning. Second, its violence and concealment. The death is a murder, and one whose truth circulates among adults while remaining unspoken to the child. Wanda is therefore placed in an environment saturated with a secret she can sense but not name — a condition that clinical literature consistently associates with heightened anxiety and impaired mourning in bereaved children, since the child's perception of "something wrong" is contradicted by the adults' silence.

In Bowlby's terms, Wanda has lost her primary attachment figure. Her trauma at this stage is not yet pathological; it is the appropriate, if devastating, response of a child to an unbearable event. What determines its outcome is what happens next.

5. The Second Wound: The Father's Emotional Unavailability

What happens next is nothing. Bianglang, the surviving parent, does not step into the vacancy. His attention remains fixed on his electoral campaign and on his relationship with Balari, and the novel is explicit that this is a *choice* observed and named by those around him. His uncle confronts him directly: "mem don por shuh ban peit la ka khun" (you no longer have time to look after your daughter), sharpening the accusation by contrasting the daughter with the lover — time for the one and not the other (Pde 8). Balari herself, from the opposite position, corroborates it: "phim don por na ka bynta jong ka" (you have no time for her), noting that he is spoken of as occupied entirely with the election and his election agent (Pde 25).

The corroboration is structurally important. The novel does not leave Bianglang's neglect to be inferred by the reader; it places the indictment in the mouths of two characters with opposed interests — a disapproving elder and the woman who benefits from his distraction. Neglect is thus established as public fact within the world of the novel, which forecloses any reading of Bianglang as merely overwhelmed or unaware. He is a man whose community has told him what he is doing.

Bowlby's account of insecure attachment describes what follows for the child. Where caregiving is inconsistent or absent, the child does not simply wait; she constructs an internal working model to explain the absence, and the explanation available to a young child is almost always self-referential. She is not attended to because she is not worth attending to. Abandonment is converted into evidence about the self, producing the low self-worth that Bowlby identifies as characteristic of this pattern (Bowlby, *Attachment* [page]).

The timing compounds the injury. Bianglang withdraws at the precise moment when Wanda's need for a responsive adult is at its maximum, and when a single available caregiver might have been sufficient to render the bereavement survivable. Instead, his absence confirms the lesson of the mother's death: that the adult world will not hold her. The novel thereby represents paternal neglect as a form of violence that leaves no forensic trace — no injury to be photographed, no incident to be dated

— and which is for that reason both easier to commit and harder to name.

6. Cumulative Trauma and the Emergence of Suicidal Ideation

The two wounds converge. Following Khan, the damage to Wanda is best understood not as the sum of two discrete injuries but as the product of an environment that has ceased to function as a protective shield. There is no space in which she may grieve, no adult who will explain, no reassurance that the remaining structures of her life will hold. Her world contracts to loss and its unacknowledgment.

It is from within this contraction that Wanda's most devastating line emerges: "Nga kwah ban ĩap kum I Mei" (I want to die like Mother) (Pde 2). The utterance requires careful reading, and three observations are necessary.

First, developmentally: young children frequently do not possess a mature concept of death's irreversibility. Wanda's statement is therefore unlikely to express a considered wish for non-existence. It expresses, rather, a wish for the *cessation of an unbearable state* — and death is the only available image for such cessation that the child has been given.

Second, relationally: the phrase is not "I want to die" but "I want to die *like Mother*." The formulation is one of following, not escaping. It expresses a wish for reunion with the only figure who reliably provided comfort, and it discloses that Wanda's attachment system remains active and directed toward a person who no longer exists. She is seeking her secure base in the only place she can now locate it.

Third, diagnostically: the statement functions in the novel as a communication that receives no reply. Placed early in the text and never taken up by any adult character, it dramatises the condition it describes. Wanda articulates the gravest possible distress, and the world of the novel does not hear her.

Herman's account of prolonged trauma illuminates the transition at work here. Acute grief becomes something else when suffering appears to the sufferer to be endless and without exit; the collapse of the sense of a future is what distinguishes despair from sadness (Herman [page]). Wanda's ideation marks that collapse. Her emotional exhaustion is not a reaction to a past event but a conclusion about a continuing condition.

7. The Novel's Social Critique

Through Wanda, *Tang Ma Phi Khun Baieid* mounts a critique that extends beyond a single failed father. Bianglang's neglect is not idiosyncratic; it is authorised by a value system in which political ambition constitutes legitimate and even admirable adult activity, while the emotional maintenance of a child does not register as work at all. The election is a public matter with witnesses, deadlines, and rivals. Wanda is a private matter with none of these, and so she is deferred indefinitely.

The gendered dimension of this arrangement deserves emphasis. Melamon's death removes the person to whom the emotional labour of the household had been assigned, and the novel shows that no reallocation follows. Bianglang does not fail to take up the role; he does not appear to recognise that the role exists to be taken up. This is the specific mechanism by which patriarchal domestic organisation converts maternal

death into child neglect: the caregiving function was never distributed, and so it does not survive the caregiver.

Wanda's silence is the novel's most economical device. She is given few lines and little narrative attention, and the reader must actively look for her among scenes concerned with other things. The form enacts the content. To read the novel attentively is to notice how easy it would be not to notice her — which is exactly the failure the novel is attributing to the adults within it.

8. CONCLUSION

Wanda's deterioration illustrates a specific and clinically recognisable sequence. The violent death of her mother removes her primary attachment figure and inflicts an acute traumatic injury. Her father's sustained emotional unavailability then denies her the responsive relationship through which that injury might have been processed, converting acute grief into a chronic condition. The result is cumulative trauma: emotional isolation, a damaged sense of self-worth, and finally suicidal ideation expressed as a wish to follow her mother.

The novel presents this sequence not as misfortune but as consequence. Every stage of Wanda's deterioration is traceable to a decision made by an adult who had the capacity to decide otherwise and who was, in at least two instances, explicitly told so. Her character therefore functions as an indictment rather than a lament.

The critical value of reading Wanda through child psychology lies in what it makes visible. Her silence, easily mistaken for narrative insignificance, becomes legible as symptom; her single devastating line becomes legible as a communication that was received by no one. The novel insists, finally, that a child's survival is not adequately measured by whether she is fed and housed. Wanda is fed and housed. What she is not is *held in mind* by anyone — and the novel argues that this absence is sufficient to destroy her.

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