

Impaired Mother-Child Bonding: Avoidant Attachment in Zelda Lockhart's Fifth Born

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ABSTRACT

Studies on attachment verified that interaction and reaction of caregiver of a child have essential role in formation of child's attachment. The selected narrative is analysed using the framework of John Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment developed by Mary Ainsworth. The mother-child bonding falls under the category of *avoidant attachment*. The impact of unresponsive behaviour of the mother is structured in perceiving life as threatening which results in loneliness and social isolation of the child. Grappling with the situation and struggling not to subdue to oppression and neglect turns her irritated. However, the reminiscences of grandmother go parallel with the harrowing present, which play a mediating role helping the protagonist to carry on with an insensitive and cold mother. The literary text can be viewed as therapeutic engagement because when such problems are externalized, they promote reflection on detrimental effects of avoidant attachment of a mother towards a child.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to analyze the insensitivity of a mother towards a daughter which is a consequence of *avoidant attachment* as practiced by the caretaker of the child who is playing the role of a mother to her niece in *Fifth Born*. It is essential to study Literature Review of theoretical framework of John Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment which led Mary Ainsworth to notice different patterns of attachment that exist between child and mother-figure/caretaker. The textual analysis of the selected novel will elucidate the fact that unresponsive and spiteful behaviour of the caretaker badly affects the psychological health of a child.

II. Literature Review

John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst propagates the significance of mother-figure/caretaker in the personality development of a child. Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment suggests that children are biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with caretakers as it essentially helps them in surviving. He believed that attachment behaviors are instinctive as a child feels threatened on separation from the caretaker. Initially the child forms only one attachment and that attachment figure acts as a foundation for exploring the world. Bowlby writes, "Attachment theory regards the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals as a basic component of human nature, already present in germinal form in the neonate and continuing through adult life into old age" (*A Secure Base*, 1988, 120–121).

Mary Ainsworth, a collaborator of Bowlby, designed an experimental situation, which she calls the *strange situation*. She spent much time in observing actual mothers with their children, documenting their behaviors and interactions. In these experiments, the level of exploration in which the child is engaged in and the child's reaction to the departure and return of the parent is closely observed. Ainsworth notes three patterns of attachment: secure, ambivalent and avoidant. The *secure attachment* pattern provides a framework for ideal development.

In it, the primary attachment figure provides consistent and sensitive responsiveness. This responsiveness facilitates the child's *internal working model*—their perception of himself as worthy and others as reliable. These children develop stronger self-esteem and better self-reliance as they grow older. They tend to be more independent and perform better in the community as they develop successful social relationships, and experience less depression and anxiety. When they grow-up, they feel secure and connected with their life-partners also. They offer support when their partner feels distressed; they also go to their partner for comfort when they feel troubled. Their relationship tends to be honest, open and equal, with both people enjoying independence, yet feeling connected to each other. The *ambivalent attachment* pattern develops as a response to inconsistent, unreliable and at times intrusive responses from the attachment figure. The infant experiences uncertainty about his self-worth; other people are perceived as unreliable, fearful and insensitive. The child perceives the world as unpredictable and chaotic. Exploration of the environment is often repressed. Ainsworth thinks that there is a possibility that development of cognitive aspects of brain might also be inhibited. Third is the *avoidant attachment* pattern which develops when the attachment figure is unresponsive or insensitive in her relationship with the infant. This results in the perception that the self is unworthy since others were unavailable and spiteful. The environment is perceived as threatening due to lack of support in stressful situations and consequently the child learns to become self-reliant at a very early stage. In order to protect the self from repeated rejecting experiences, the child starts avoiding reliance on others. The anxious and avoidant people are insecure individuals who suffer loneliness and social isolation. They worry that others do not love them, and get easily frustrated or angered when their attachment needs are not fulfilled. They have relatively low relationship satisfaction so there are chances of frequent relationship breakups, and more frequent conflicts and violence. Main and Solomon developed a fourth category of attachment i.e. *disorganized/disoriented attachment* pattern (1990, 121). The authors maintain that a child displaying this attachment pattern is likely to have parents who are overwhelmed and frightened at the responsibilities of parenting. The

parents appear to be insensitive and unresponsive to the child who are not helpful to him to explore his immediate environment. The parents often feel negatively about themselves and they find the demands of parenthood to be too burdensome. In such situation, the child fails to find an effective way to receive the parenting he requires; so often feels anxious. This leads to fear and aggression in his interaction with others which may leave him unwilling to engage in new experiences.

When a human infant is separated from his parent, the infant goes through a series of three stages of emotional reactions. First is *protest*, in which the infant cries and refuses to be consoled by others. Second is *despair*, in which the infant is sad and passive. Third is *detachment*, if the parent returns to the infant, the infant actively disregards and avoids the parent (Goldner et al. 2016, 124). The protest state involves severe distress that comes from separation, while the despair state involves preoccupation with grief and mourning leading to hopelessness. Detachment is experienced by the child after he has gone through prolonged separation. The child may never resume proper attachment with his primary caregiver. He may become completely indifferent. He diverts his attention from human beings towards inanimate objects and starts loving them. He may adopt the attitude of withdrawal as “[t]o withdraw from human contact is to avoid further frustration and to avoid the intense depression which human beings experience as a result of hating the person whom they most dearly love and need” (Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, 1951, 57). These characteristics which stem from disruption of a secure attachment are seen in children who engage in delinquent behavior.

Ainsworth, like other psychologists, laid emphasis on mother’s consistent attention to child. *Maternal responsiveness* can be defined as how immediate, appropriate and sensitive the actions of a mother are towards a child. Maternal responsiveness is one of the primary factors that are thought to impact child’s attachment (Ainsworth, 1985). One of the main reasons that maternal responsiveness is important is that

responding to the child's signal considerably and consistently creates trust, which is one of the major results of attachment.

Bowlby advanced attachment theory by integrating his and other clinicians' work with adult patients. He integrated empirical findings from cognitive psychology, ethology, and developmental psychology. He has been collecting evidence of devastating consequences of disruptions in the infant-caregiver relationship. He distinguished attachment theory from mainstream psychoanalysis by drawing on systematic observational methods, treating the developing infant as complex but behaviorally intelligible subject. At that time, Bowlby's work was not appreciated by the psychoanalytic community for his departure from Freudian theory which stressed the role of the child's internal fantasies about the mother and gratification of libidinal drives. Instead, Bowlby developed an independent theoretical position which suggested that a child's need for affection is a primary one, not based on hunger or other physical gratification. A child wants to build enduring patterns of relationships. Bowlby connected trauma of childhood with the relationship of a child to his attachment figure.

III. Discussion

Just at the age of five, in the darkness of the night Odessa's father rapes her. She not only gets physically injured but mentally confused at the strange action of her father. The painful reality is that Bernice sleeps very vigilantly; for if a child cries during night, she immediately wakes up to see if all is well with the child or not. But in Odessa's case, though the heart of Bernice is beating at a faster rate, but she is trying her best to sleep deeper and deeper. She does not jump forward to stop the obnoxious act of the father. This shows that Bernice is also supporting the action of her husband by letting him do whatever he is doing. Probably if she has been her real mother, she must have stopped it but because she is her aunt who hates her sister whose daughter she is, that is why she lets it happen.

In the morning, after sending the husband to work, Bernice comes to Odessa to see her condition. Though shocked and surprised to see her wounds which are so obvious, she does not say a word to console the child. She does not dare to look into the child's terrified eyes. Odessa cries loudly saying *Mama* (Lockhart, 2002, 40) but receives no positive response from her. The child tries to relate the last night's incident but by seeing mother's expression, she comes to the conclusion that Bernice already knows what Odessa wants to relate. The mother must have heard her moaning in pain. This time the big hand of the father is replaced by the big hand of the mother. Father used his hand to cover her face and to keep her mouth shut; mother also uses her hand to cover her face and forcibly says "Shut up! You hear me?" (Lockhart, 2002, 41). Though she helps in reducing her physical pain by giving her homemade syrups and applying ointment on her bruises but she never listens to her sympathetically and consoles her lovingly which contributes in developing *avoidant attachment*. During her deep sleep, Bernice washes away all signs of her husband's sin. Stains from bed sheets are cleared and ointment is applied to "the burning spots" (Lockhart, 2002, 41).

On taking sleep-inducing syrups, Odessa goes to sleep; but finds her head "so heavy with sadness" (Lockhart, 2002, 41) that she cannot lift her head even in her dream. It is such an overpowering sadness that she cannot really get rid of it. Children of Odessa's age enjoy their lives, in strong protection of their parents, free of cares and worries but hers is an exceptional case and the main cause behind her extraordinary troubled life is the loss of her real mother while the father is not ready to accept her as his daughter, though from inside he knows that biologically she is his daughter. Unlike other children, who signify love and bonding between the two people; Odessa reminds Loni of how cruel man he is, who for the sake of humiliating someone has destroyed the lives of many.

Odessa finds herself in a pitiable situation when she realizes that her father has completely forgotten what he has done to his daughter during last night. He gets angry on seeing Odessa not gone to school, so scolds his wife to which the wife replies that the child is not feeling well.

Instead of making him realize of what he has done to his daughter and making him feel sorry, Bernice just lets the incident go in the background and tries to make him feel normal. This, probably, is one of the reasons that he attempts the assault for the second time. If the wife has made him feel sorry, it might have saved Gretal also from his brutal action. Now Odessa fears the presence of her father. She consciously tries not to look at her father. The little child is rather young to perceive the hard matters of life but such a harsh experience has increased her sagacity and changed her approach towards life. She, on observing her father very closely, concludes that her father does not remember what he has done to her so she also attempts to forget the most painful incident of her life. Later on, when she finds her body like a grown-up girl, she wears baggy clothes because the father frequently cuts remarks on her body. She avoids him to such an extent that she prefers to walk on foot while going to the store rather than sitting in his car. When father loudly asks her embarrassing questions she submissively says, "Yes, sir" (Lockhart, 2002, 108) but from inside her face burns hot with anger for him.

When Odessa is replaced by her newborn brother, she finds it very difficult to accept this reality because to reconcile with the fact that what little care and attention she used to draw from Bernice, who is playing the role of her mama, will not be enjoyed by her anymore. Besides this, on observing that Gretal gets all care and attention from her mother, Odessa feels jealousy for her. She frequently gets branded clothes and toys which the *fifth born* can never imagine to have. Bruce Perry, an eminent psychiatrist defines attachment which parents of Odessa fail to develop with her. He writes,

Attachment is the capacity to form and maintain healthy emotional bonds with another person. It is first acquired in infancy, as a child interacts with loving, responsive, and attentive parents and caregivers. This core strength is the cornerstone of all others.

Healthy attachments allow a child to love, to become a good friend, and to have a positive and useful model for future relationships. (2003, 17)

Odessa realizes avoidant attachment of Bernice for her as compared to other siblings, though she is just four. She finds “coldness from Mama that seemed especially for [her]” (Lockhart, 2002, 73). Odessa is unaware that Bernice is not her real mother so she thinks that the only cause of her coldness is the secret related to her traumatic experience with her father. Odessa realizes that when Bernice takes her for annual eye examination, each year her anger increases. It is becoming burdensome and heavier task for her. She has to strain herself to pose a good mother in front of public while sitting in the waiting room for doctor’s appointment. The whole process takes almost four hours which are stressful for Bernice while the daughter tries to remain silent. She knows that if she will look at her mother and ask her any question, she will be severely scolded and snubbed by her. Hazan and Shaver think that avoidant mothers avoid children by rejecting and tending to rebuff or deflect the child’s bids for proximity, especially for close bodily contact (1990, 271). Though Odessa craves for attention of the mother and wants to be loved by her father but at the same time she avoids staying close to them when she finds that her presence is getting on their nerves. In such situations, she used to take solace in bathroom, in basement or by running away out of the house for some time. She is coping with inattention of her parents by taking refuge in these places to avoid the stressful environment. There, by thinking about her grandmother, she tries to smoothen down her anger against herself and others. It is observed that “when caregivers reject children’s bids for reassurance, children tend to develop avoidant attachments, turning away from caregivers when distressed” (Dozier, 2004, 39).

She is often reminded of the cut over her left eye which is fading each year. When someone asks about it, her mother immediately covers it by saying that it is just a little birthmark. Ironically it is true because she has received this mark of domestic violence when she used to sleep in baby-bed. Every time she hears her mother telling lie to the people, she feels anxiety and the “hoarse breathless words” (Lockhart, 2002, 109) of mother touch the walls of her mind. She remains anxious not because of one reason but because of several reasons. Her father yells at her in a

very demeaning and degrading language to make her feel as if she is a very low creature. This makes her thoughts hazy as “million loud noises” (Lockhart, 2002, 110) fill her disturbed mind. The mother thinks that Odessa should be thankful to her father because he has provided her food, clothing and car; failing to realize that the child is psychologically terribly disturbed for the traumatic incidents which have truly touched her soul.

Though Bernice’s attitude has always been uncaring and indifferent towards her but she shows little sympathy when the father assaults the daughter for the second time. The wounds of Odessa are open and obvious. The mother diverts Odessa’s attention and forces her that she should find something to do and be practical in her attitude. On finding her lost and sick, she scolds her on giving the expression of a fool and forces her to make herself useful for the people around her. On hearing this, Odessa gets angry with herself that why she has softened herself “into wanting her to touch [her]” (Lockhart, 2002, 120). After the mother goes to sleep, she comes back to her room to see the stones taken out of Bernice’s body from her gall bladder. Odessa feels lonely and compares herself to those stones and thinks that her existence is no better than these stones which are lying “cold and outside” (Lockhart, 2002, 120) Bernice’s body. At this point, she craves for the love and consolation of her mother which she has never received. She wants to lie close to her, to be a part of her but sorrowfully she realizes that she has never been a part of her. She feels that her condition is just like those unwanted stones, lying outside indifferently waiting to be thrown into the bin. Van Rosmalen et al. think that Bowlby has found in his clinical work that for most problematic behavior in childhood there was a cause in real life, be it neglect, emotional or physical deprivation, or separation (2016, 28).

One day when Bernice feels sick and tired of her husband, she grumbles in anger that she should take decision of leaving this black man. Odessa overhears her loud-thinking so she replies “Why don’t you?” (Lockhart, 2002, 134), the mother gets really angry with this and snubs

her by saying that she does not have any time for her. This is for the first time that she plainly and clearly tells her that Odessa holds no importance for her that is why she has no time for her. The avoidant mother does not stop here but curses her for being ungrateful and thankless. She is severely slapped by her mother that makes her cheek and nose burn. She crashes onto the kitchen-floor. From inside Odessa feels so angry that she really wants to hit Bernice back but she does not and runs to the basement. She feels deeply insulted, degraded and lonely. She cries for her mother but is extremely upset on not finding her. She has never received love, care, attention and consolation from Bernice throughout her life. On the other hand, the real mother is passing a lonesome life in her hut, not knowing that her daughter is alive; always wishing her to be alive. The gap between the real mother and the child is created by the grandmother because she wished that the child may pass life in normal circumstances with a complete family in a comfortable home. She could not realize that she is actually sending the child from a home to a hell where she will be tortured day and night, and will be made to work like a servant. This time Bernice has beaten her so badly that her face is all swollen and she cannot open her left eye. With the right eye, to her surprise, she sees that Bernice has come to dab her swollen body parts with ice to reduce the swelling. Odessa is feeling numbness to such an extent that she touches her head to see if it is there on her body or not. More than this, Odessa wishes to be touched and embraced by her mother. She craves for the words of love which she never hears from the avoidant mother.

IV. Conclusion

Odessa wants comfort from Bernice. She has been severely abused by Bernice's husband because he has never considered her daughter. He has always disowned her. He has gone to the extent of threatening, beating and raping her. But Odessa feels anguished because she has never received any comfort or consolation from Bernice too. There exists avoidant attachment between the mother and the daughter because Bernice has never listened to painful experiences that she has

undergone at the hands of her father. The daughter wishes that the mother on knowing the maltreatment of the daughter at the hands of her father might leave her husband for her daughter's sake. On the contrary, the mother scolds her and says that she should be thankful to her father who gives her food and shelter. Odessa is unable to understand the reason behind Bernice being so indifferent to her feelings. She has lost *agency* as she finds herself caught up in a situation when she feels that she is "nobody" and "nowhere" (Lockhart, 2002, 150). No one in the family has tried to understand her silence and persistent sadness. However, the rag doll, Nakie is a continuous reminder to her that she used to have some relation in her life that truly loved her; this imbues a sense of security within her.

V. Recommendations

According to my findings, it is not that a victim always a supportive relation which might help her in the process of healing. If the victim, unfortunately, cannot find a supportive relation that helps in reducing the anxiety of the victim then the process of healing is likely to slow down. So it is recommended that extraordinary attention should be given to traumatized people by close relations. They should be motivated and encouraged to return to routine activities of life.

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