Adverse Childhood Experience and Lifetime Self-Victimization: A Psychoanalytical Study of Gail Honeyman's *Elinor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*

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***Abstract*—This research paper examines how an adverse childhood experience leads to a lifetime of self-victimization depicted through literature. The study focuses on the main character, Eleanor Oliphant, portrayed by Gail Honeyman in her debut novel *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017). This study is an attempt to examine how the central character experiences childhood abuse and self-victimizes herself in her adulthood. This study uses qualitative method, psychoanalytical approach and analyses dialogues reflecting psychological condition of the main character. The study draws heavily on psychological critics who present different discussions and theories of adverse childhood experience, trauma and its effects on human behaviour and psyche.**

***Index Terms*—Child abuse, Victimization, Self-victimization, Psychoanalysis, Trauma theory, English literature, Gail Honeyman.**

English literature always helps to understand the human life and trauma by frequently exploring the connection of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) and lifetime self-victimization. It depicts how child abuse and early trauma defines a character's identity, social behaviour and vulnerability. Literature with the theme of psychological trauma elucidates a character's ambiguous thought processes and behaviour through their day-to-day routine. Literature artistically presents the ACEs and trauma – child abuse, violence, household dysfunction, and neglect – since ages. The present study is a psychoanalytical study of Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017). The research probes into the narrative of central character Eleanor Oliphant and analyses the dialogues that depict her mental state and navigates the presence of physical and emotional abuse and neglect endured in childhood. By looking at the prevalent crisis of childhood adversity and self-victimization through the psychoanalytical lens this study provides a roadmap for deeper understanding to cultivate empathy.

I. PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE INDICATORS

Physical abuse is coded as: when a person is being pushed, grabbed, shoved, hit and causing injuries or bruises. Physical neglect is caused by an adult when a child is being forced to do dangerous or difficult things ultimately pushed into a fatal situation, left alone and unsupervised, moreover, deprived of regular meals, medical help or needed things.

Emotional abuse indicator is threatening behaviour that results in fear: throwing insults, say hurtful things or threaten to hit and intimidating behaviour of and adult or the caregiver. Emotional neglect describes a family which is not closely-knit, for children there is – rarely or never – no one in the family who believes and understands them, cheers or supports them or make them feel important and be a source of strength for them.

Researches show that, ACE exposure in early childhood may affect children's physical and mental health, learning and behaviour. Some researches show that childhood victimization, parental physical or emotional abuse and witnessing domestic violence results in lifetime victimization. The individual experience of victimization reoccurs during the course of life. Research has also established that ACE scores are linked to higher rates and severity of psychiatric and mental disorders, as a result prescribed psychotropic medication use and substance abuse or addiction rates has also accelerated. The present study

investigates the lifetime links between ACEs and self-victimization as a result of victimization experiences.

II. PSYCHOANALYTICAL LITERARY THEORY

Psychoanalytical literary theory was popularised after the revolutionary works of Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923) in which Freud formulated the structural model of psyche. Freud borrowed the term "introjection" coined by Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi to explain how ego and superego built by internalizing the mannerisms, ideals and authority of parents and external world. Freud used introjection to elucidate melancholia or severe depression caused by a lost person or object of affection. Introjection is the part of the ego's system of relational mechanisms where the individual internalizes and identifies with the lost person, turning misery into internal remorse. Freud in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" asserts that melancholia is a result of uncertain feeling of love and hate towards the lost object or person. The melancholic person, instead of retracting the lost object, directs it inwardly, he points out that, "the ego wants to incorporate this object into itself" (Freud 258).

D. W. Winnicott defines introjection in his work *Home is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* as, "projection and introjection mechanisms . . . let the other person be the manager sometimes, and to hand over omnipotence" (Winnicott 50). According to Freud "The Unconscious" of human psyche is vast reservoir of supressed thoughts, desires, fears and memories and have profound impact on individual's behaviour.

Trauma theory

However, Trauma has vast scope in the field of psychology; it has entered into the domain of literature in late twentieth century as 'trauma studies' or 'trauma theory'. Trauma studies explore the narratives influenced by the events that affects the human psyche and results in unusual behaviour of a character considering cultural and social context. Cathy Caruth, pioneer of Trauma Theory in literature and professor of English, in her foundational work "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History" (1996), explores psychological trauma and defines it as "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon" (Caruth 11).

Caruth proposes that trauma is not just an event that occurred at a particular moment and that event does not affect the individual instantaneously. Instead, the effect of trauma lies in "belatedness" and is visible much later through a survivor's nightmares, long after the horrifying incident.

Sigmund Freud in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) elucidates trauma as,

"It is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event . . . not locatable to the original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way that it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Freud 4).

Roger Luckhurst in his essay "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Trauma Theory" (2006) describes trauma as,

"Something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in our mind like an intruder or a ghost" (Luckhurst 499).

Trauma is an emotional and psychological response to extremely disturbing and terrifying events or experiences.

The Oxford English Dictionary outlines trauma as "a mental condition that is caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time" or "an unpleasant experience that makes you feel upset and/or anxious." Trauma leaves wounds on a person's psyche and affects sense of self resulting in psychological disorientation. Psychological injuries remain even after the physical wounds have healed. However, some people develop psychological problems right after the incident and it is argued by Jon Allen, a psychologist in his book *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding* (1995). Allen proposes that "Helplessness is at the core of trauma", the more a person feels endangered the more a person will be

traumatized. According to Judith Herman trauma includes incessant reliving of some hurting experience.

Ilany Kogan discusses "deposited representation" in her article "'Enactment 'in the Lives and Treatment of Holocaust Survivors' Offspring" (2012) and emphasizes the role of parent. Parents, sometimes, consciously or unconsciously force aspects of themselves on to the child and force them to perform certain tasks, consequently, affecting the child's sense of identity. Thus, trauma is repeated haunting memory of an unresolved hurtful event. It involves the inclusion and internalization of something dissimilar to the inside of the self.

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine (2017) is psychological narrative of a nearly thirty years old graphic designer, Eleanor, who is living an isolated life in Glasgow. Her routine is marked by exactly same and ordered manner. Her routine includes lonely crossword puzzles, monotonous lunches, reading books, talking to her mother over a phone call once in a week and regular consumption of vodka on weekends. Eleanor lives an isolated life, avoids any kind of social conversation and wants herself to be invisible. Gradually, the narrative unveils the lasting physical and psychological wounds Eleanor suffered after her mother set the house on fire, killing both her mother and younger sister. It is also later to be revealed that her conversation with her mother on every Wednesday was her hallucination.

Sigmund Freud had argued that, the unconscious is constructed by the repression of something (bad experience) that is throbbing and cannot be kept in conscious mind. Human beings often repress such desires that cannot be provided with an acceptable outlet, hence, rechannel those drives into the unconscious. The unconscious serves the speculative function that suggests a lucid connection between childhood experience and adult behaviour. Eleanor shows such connections throughout the novel. Once, on Wednesday evening when Eleanor's mother talks about learning embroidery, Eleanor starts imagining her mother in possession of a long and sharp needle that send, "icy current" through her spine. It indicates some bad experience from childhood that threatens her and causes anxiety.

Eleanor internalized trauma of past events and started hallucinating things, she kept her mother alive in her unconscious mind, who had died long-ago in-house fire. The house was set on fire, initially, by her mother in which her mother and younger sister was died. Eleanor was the only survivor yet she blames herself for what has happened. Neighbours gave their statements to Police as, "the kiddies always seemed terrified of her. Sometimes they had bruises, and people heard a lot crying in that house" (Honeyman 282). The neighbour further says, "One time, I was talking to the older girl – she was only nine or ten, I'd say – and the mum shot her such a look that she started to shake, trembling like little dog. I dread to think what went on in there behind closed doors" (Honeyman 282).

Eleanor behaved like an obedient child long after her mother was gone; she admits that, "I've spent far too long taking directions from Mummy" (Honeyman 262). After all these years Eleanor could not get out of trauma, she identifies herself with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. She remembers every line written in the book, as it tells her own story. Honeyman, through the story of Jane Eyre, depict the mental state of Eleanor. One of the sleepless nights she opens the book and reads, "Jane Eyre. A Strange child, difficult to love. A lonely, only child. She's left to deal with so much pain at such a young age – the aftermath of death, the absence of love . . . I know how *that* feels. All of it" (Honeyman 71).

Psychological researches show that, to individual who have experience trauma often haunted by the past memories reflecting intensely negative beliefs for themselves. Eleanor's perception for herself has been moulded by childhood experience and emotional abuse. Her mother's "judging" nature teaches her to associate herself with negative qualities, which she internalized. Eleanor's damaged self-image repeatedly blames herself for her loneliness and her sister's death. Mrs Gibbon, during a visit, asked Eleanor about her sibling, she replies, she does not have any and that is the reason of her sadness. As soon as she articulated those words she heard a voice in her mind, "and whose fault is that then? A voice, whispering in my ear, cold and sharp. Angry. Mummy. I closed my eyes, trying to be rid of her" (Honeyman 89). Eleanor's self-victimization is a consequence of internalised blame

that has been imparted by her abusive mother. Her self-criticism is the internalised language of her abuser.

One of the major consequences of Eleanor's trauma is her addiction for alcohol which she adopts to escape pain. Her drinking habit is portrayed as a coping mechanism. She frequently buys vodka and thinks, "I yearn for that brief, sharp feeling I get when I drink it – a sad, burning feeling – and then, blissfully no feelings at all" (80). Vodka, briefly, helps her escape traumatic memories and gives some moments of relief. Additionally, the novel reflects that her therapeutic sessions enable her to recognize that her damaged self-image and behaviour is a result of victimhood. And therefore, proposes understanding self as a process of psychological healing.

IV. CONCLUSION

The result shows that, Gail Honeyman in her novel *Eleanor Oliphant is completely Fine*, echoes Eleanor's self-victimization has its roots in childhood abuse and emotional neglect. Self-victimization is portrayed as psychological consequence of prolonged emotional abuse, adverse childhood experience and trauma and internalized her mother's judgemental voice. The novel reveals psychological trauma consequently shapes a person's self-perception throughout adulthood. Eleanor's childhood was marked by extreme violence, emotional neglect and loss that had embedded in her identity. The novel significantly portrays the connection between adverse childhood experience and self-victimization, develops gradually through trauma, negative self-image and internalized self-blame. The novel also showed that, this cycle can be interrupted by recognition and reinterpretation of trauma.

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