



## **Broken Bonds: Exploring the Impact of Maternal Attachment in Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper analyses the negative effects of attachment theory in Gail Honeyman's Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine, with a particular emphasis on the protagonist's broken relationship with her mother. Eleanor's journey is an exploration of attachment theory, which states that early bonds with caregivers shape an individual's emotional health and interpersonal relationships. Eleanor has a difficult time navigating self-worth, trust and social interactions due to her mother's abusive and manipulative behaviour. This study reveals the extent to which a toxic maternal relationship can have a profound effect on a daughter's psychological well-being and how she interacts with others.*

**Keywords:** Attachment Theory, Emotions, Psychology, Dependency

### **Introduction**

Gail Honeyman, the author of the novel *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, born and brought up in Stirling, Scotland. This novel delves into the themes of loneliness and personal growth. Gail shared the character Eleanor is not the replica to her real life, but the emotions related to loneliness which is universally relatable. Since the debut novel, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* captured the hearts of the readers worldwide, currently she is working on a new novel in a different period and location, promising to the readers to deliver another captivating work.

The novel *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* is a heartwarming one about a woman who, despite her unusual behavior, manages to find love and connection with the world. The story revolves around the character Eleanor Oliphant, a socially isolated woman who lives a solitary life. She is in her late twenties and early thirties, following some strict routine and spends her weekends alone. She was satisfied with whatever she had and assumed her life was perfectly fine. The carefully constructed world begins to shatter into pieces on the arrival of Raymond in her life. With the help of Raymond, Eleanor starts to overcome the fact and explore the possibility of human connection.

The protagonist Eleanor Oliphant is a finance administration assistant, nearing her 30's she worked at a graphic design company since she graduated from the college. The story begins from Eleanor's isolation state. The only people who visit her apartment are social workers, for a particular interval of six months. The weekend food routine of Eleanor consists of frozen pizza and vodka and the weekly chats with Mummy, every Wednesday are the only means of communication with regular social outlets. Phone calls with Mummy are always painful for Eleanor, feeling unworthy of love and respect.

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory in psychology is a framework that examines the emotional bond between a child and their caregivers and how it affects their development. This theory was developed by British psychologist John Bowlby and it is based on the idea that early relationships with caregivers are critical for a child's social and emotional development. The main idea of the theory is that the emotional bonds one form with their caregivers in infancy affect their relationships later in life. Caregivers play an important role in the development of the child.

According to Britannica, "Attachment theory in developmental psychology, the theory that humans are born with a need to form a close emotional bond with a caregiver and that such a bond will develop during the first six months of a child's life if the caregiver is appropriately responsive". The components of attachment theory provoke different kinds of emotions, in different persons. If any individual lost their caregivers at a young age, the vulnerable infants show their reactions through their actions. Bowlby believed that the absence of the caretakers at the young age of the child builds some will power in the young mind and it also promotes the factor of survival at the very dependent state.

### **Despondency**

Despondency is the second level to promote the survival state of the individual. This is also called the period of despair and this period, who are yet to reunite with the caregivers entered into the next stage, the state of detachment. During this stage, the infant begins to do day to day normal activities without the presence of the caregivers, they become more independent and self-reliant. This emotional detachment with the caregiver creates a new emotional bond with the new caregivers. Bowlby addressed that these reactions, the prolonged separation in the relationships leads to the formation of new romantic pairings.

### **Mother-daughter Relationship**

As attachment theory explains about the early childhood experiences with caregivers especially with mothers and how significantly it shapes the later relationships and the

emotional development of an individual. Eleanor's relationship with her mother was marked by the emotional distance and the detachment from the close bonds. The mother never gave any value towards her emotions, which made her feel unimportant. In relation with Eleanor, she had difficulty in expressing emotions and avoided intimacy on the fear of rejection and abandonment. Mother's neglectful behavior may have led to the fear of abandonment.

Eleanor always bottled up her emotions and often suppressed her feelings; particularly she had trouble forming close relationships with others even with her own mother. Eleanor's present life tracked back to her early childhood experience with her mother. She felt really ashamed and guilty about her inability to rescue her one and only sister, Marianne. When someone asked about her mother, she always said that she prefers not to share about her mother. This can lead to the sense of emotional isolation and difficulty in forming healthy attachments in adulthood. The childhood trauma can disrupt the formation of secure attachments and leave individuals with emotional wounds.

Eleanor's complex relationship with her mother is a powerful illustration of attachment theory. The early childhood experiences had profound implications for her ability to form healthy relationships with society. Eleanor's relationship with her mother was deeply troubled, she was emotionally troubled and abusive in nature, since she had traumatized life, she showed her attitude towards her own children. Eleanor was neglected by her mother and she was the one and only reason for her traumatic event in her childhood which left a long lasting scar in the face of Eleanor. Eleanor expressed her pain as, "I was brought up by a mother who didn't know how to love me. I was always on my own. I had to learn everything myself" (91). Since the mother encouraged the attitude of loneliness and isolation, Eleanor felt disconnected from others and herself. She also instilled some guilt and shame on her own child.

Eleanor thought that she was responsible for the mistakes which were committed by her own mother. The qualities of abusive and neglect in the life of the protagonist led towards the consequences of low self-esteem and emotional disconnection. It is proved that Eleanor's mother is partial towards her children, and there is gender discrimination in that society too. She always wanted a son. She thought if she had a son she could really cope up with society. She expressed with sorrow, "I was cursed with a daughter yet I always wanted a son" (224).

In this novel, Eleanor Oliphant as she got detached with her family, especially with her mom, she was in search of finding peace and harmony in new relationships. Even she didn't know anything about her father, she found pleasure in finding new relationships. Since she did not have any emotional support from her childhood, she was really fond of making

new companions in her life. But her attempt was not a successful one. She found difficulty in framing relationships with others.

### **Impact of Separation**

The strange situation due to the separation leads to negative emotions in the child. The new caregiver of Eleanor Oliphant was Mr. and Mrs. Reed. Her relationship with other children was completely a broken one and she became hysterical and physically violent. Mr and Mrs Reed were much worried about the effects of Eleanor's behaviour on their three children. Rudeness, loud talking, tattling and tendency to blame others were some of the self-protective dynamisms of the insecure children. Eleanor expressed her pain as, "Once I'd dared to think I could belong with other people, but I was wrong" (168). Her first and only boyfriend was Declan. She saw him as the figure of her healing process but during her university days, he became physically abusive and broke her arm twice thus she had to break up with him. Her experience with Declan also caused deep trauma in the inner feelings of Eleanor Oliphant, this would become a reason for her social isolation and difficulty in forming healthy relationships. Her fear of rejection prevented her from trusting people and opening up emotionally.

The early bond formed with the caregivers, especially mom, can continue to influence attachments throughout the life of an individual. When this attachment system is activated fully the child feels safe and secure, these attachment figures protect themselves from harm. If the child senses that the attachment figure, mom, is nearby and responsive to the need, they feel secure and more likely to explore and socialize. If not, it means the child feels distressed and their attachment system also deactivates. Eleanor is the best portrayal of this distressed figure who finds it really hard to socialize and to mingle with other people in her life. Eleanor's chaotic and unpredictable life often controls her emotions, and has led to the distrust of institutions which includes religion.

By rejecting religious beliefs, Eleanor may be able to avoid the emotions associated with faith and spiritual connections may find difficulty in trusting any higher power and rely on others for her emotional support. Her social disconnection and fear of intimacy played a significant role in her rejection of religious beliefs. Eleanor felt really happy about her relationship with Johnnie Lomond and she also stated him as, "husband material ... I'd found the love of my life" (8).

Eleanor's relationship with her mother was very intrinsic. Even though they got separated from the distant, their feelings connected both as a mother and daughter was interconnected together as the common belief of the society. On the contrary Eleanor and her

mother had no intrinsic relation with one another. She was not there in a position to choose her own family. She was really fond and longed to make and create a perfect family structure, when Raymond told her about his family, which consists of father, mother and children. The women like Eleanor always wanted to escape from their painful past and hope for new beginnings. But the trauma of past experiences always affected their life and prevented them from having good relationships with others.

### **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the challenges faced by an individual who struggle with social anxiety and trauma. Her broken relationship with her mother affects her whole life and her relationship with others. At the end of the novel, through the journey of connection, Eleanor discovered solace with others and this is the power of human connection. Thus, Eleanor's journey is a story of hope and redemption. Through the lens of Eleanor Oliphant, a socially awkward woman with a troubled past, the novel delves into the complexities of mental health and importance of empathy.

### **References**

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