

From 'Bad Objects' to 'Good Objects': an Object Relations Analysis on Maternal Abuse and Trauma Recovery in Pelzer's a Child Called "It"

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Abstract

Child abuse, especially from the mother, has the capacity to create severe consequences in the lives of children. It impacts their psychological development, hindering their emotional stability, negatively impacting on their self-perception and also affecting the children's ability to form later relationships in their lives. Dave Pelzer's memoir, *A Child Called "It"* explore such traumatic experience Pelzer confronted during his childhood from his mother, which developed insecurity and self-rejection in him. This paper aims to analyse the maternal trauma endured by Pelzer through the lens of Object Relations Theory, specifically through the concepts of the "bad object", "splitting" and "internalized trauma" as theorized by Melanie Klein. Pelzer's mother exhibits herself as a "bad object", a figure who not only rejects and isolates her child, but also physically and emotionally abuse him making Pelzer internalize a distorted image of himself. As his father remains as a passive figure, not interfering into the abuse he encounters, he feels a sense of splitting, that is, even while understanding his mother as cruel, he still craved for her approval. This inability of him to completely reject her even while he wanted to get rid of the abuse has resulted in his emotional fragmentation and trust issues while facing the external world. Even though the psychological damage drowns Pelzer, as he eventually encounters the "good objects" in the form of teachers and social workers, he slowly heals and embraces his life. These figures play a critical role in his life providing him validation and encouragement in reconstructing his identity and making him detach from the negative perception of him which is instilled in him by his mother. By applying Object Relations Theory to *A Child Called "It"*, the study highlights the long-term impact of maternal abuse in children and the importance of reparative relationships in recovering from traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Child trauma, Object relations theory, internalized trauma

INTRODUCTION

Childhood stands as a crucial period in shaping an individual's emotional and psychological development. This formative period influences people in developing their social relationship and well-being too. Therefore, proper care, guidance and nurture is essential for the children in their early stages of their lives. As the children rely on the primary caregivers their relationship always has an upper-hand in building the child's self-perception, and their later relationships in life. When a child receives uninterrupted love and support from its primary caregiver, the child feels a sense on security and self-worth. But, in contrast to this, if the caregiver is a source of abuse and neglect, it will affect the psychological development of the

child negatively, leading to emotional fragmentation, isolation, grappling with identity and unable to create social bonding. Many studies related to child development and psychology suggests that the early abusive experiences from the primary caregivers can affect the children deeply, pushing them into attachment disorders, emotional imbalance and insecurity.

The Object Relations Theory, put forward by Melanie Klein is one of the most influential frameworks that could best explain the effect of the primary caregiver relation with the children. Klein's theory suggests that, children often distinguish their primary caregivers as "good objects" and "bad objects" based on the caregiver's early approach to them. A "good object" is considered as a source of security and warmth whereas, a "bad object" signifies rejection and isolation, carrying the children into stages of fear, anxiety and emotional imbalance. This study focuses on the analysing Dave Pelzer's memoir, *A Child Called "It"* through the lens of Object Relations Theory, to understand the psychological effects of maternal abuse in the emotional and psychological growth of the protagonist, a five-year-old boy.

A Child Called "It", a memoir written by Dave Pelzer, details the abusive experience he had from his mother during his childhood. The book portrays the severity of physical violence, emotional fragmentation and social detachment the child endured and also his strive to survive amidst all the chaos he faced. The brutal abuse included subjecting him to starvation, dehumanising punishments and making him detach even from his own family members. This memoir stands as a testament to the impact of maternal abuse on child's early growth and development, making it an apt text to apply Object Relations Theory to understand the 'mother figure' as a "bad object" exhibiting extreme cruelty. Through qualitative analysis of *A child Called "It"*, using Object Relations Theory as a theoretical framework, this study explores the internalization of the "bad objects", splitting and emotional conflicts in children as a result of it and the emotional recovery of the child with the support of "good objects", the alternative nurturers. Along with the long-term consequences of neglectful and abusive caregiving, the work also highlights the role of nurturers in the child-trauma recovery.

Research Objectives

The paper aims to critically analyse Dave Pelzer's memoir *A Child Called "It"* using Melanie Klein's Object Relation Theory and explores how Pelzer's experiences of maternal abuse has shaped his early growth and development, including his emotional regulation, self-perception and his ability to form social relationships. Through the application of Klein's concepts like internalization of bad object, splitting and emotional fragmentation, the paper showcases the far-reaching impacts of abusive caregivers over child's psychological development. The paper also aims to examine the potential role of nurturers or "good objects" in healing and trauma recovery in children.

Literature Review

Bessel Van Del Kolk's *The Body keeps the Score* portrays the long-lasting effects of child abuse and related trauma on the brain development as well as emotional regulation. The book also delves into the physical stress, psychological issues including traumatic experiences that effect the mental faculty of a child leading to anxiety and dissociation. It also talks about different methods to heal trauma in victims. Cathy Spatz Wisdom's "Childhood victimization and lifetime revictimization" investigates the prolonged effects of childhood victimization and its susceptibility of revictimization in adulthood. Using a prospective cohort design, the findings reveal that the children who faced abuse are more at risk to face violence or related revictimization in coming future. It also emphasise the early intervention in the case

of victims in order to avoid the cycle of abuse and thereby revictimization.

Ko Ling Chan's "Child Victimization in the Context of Family Violence" is a journal article which deals with the trauma cure approaches that is essential in the treatment of children who have become victims of abuse. It talks about the polyvictimisation and the need for specialized care for such victims as they are more prone to traumatic exposure. The role of family structure for example, the parenting style is also cited in the trauma creation is also discussed in the article. The efficiency of trauma cure approaches in improving the mental well-being of the victims is also mentioned in this paper.

Ruth Blizard's "Attachment to the abuser: Integrating object-relations and trauma theories in treatment of abuse survivors" examines how the survivors of abuse internalize it in the light of object relations theory and attachment theories, which eventually creates dissociation and complex social relationships. This article also addresses the role of therapy in addressing this issue. The study also aligns with Pelzer's internalization of maternal abuse in his memoir *A Child Called "It"*, showcasing how the maternal abuse moulds his self-perception and his relationship with others.

Methodology and Discussion

According to Melanie Klein, the children often ascribe their nurturers as either good objects or bad objects with respect to their relationship with them. To be a good object, it often comes with being a warm side towards the children, just like being their emotional support, creating secure attachments with them, reassuring a sense of safety in children etc. Contrarily, a bad object showcases neglect, horrors, repulsiveness, leading to anxiety etc. In situations like severe abuse or trauma inflicting scenarios, just like in the book *A child Called "It"* by Dave Pelzer, the children often look upon the primary caregiver as a figure of horror, deranging their normal emotional and psychological development. In this work of Pelzer, the mother could be traced as an image of "bad object". Her relation with Pelzer in the memoir could be seen as abusive and traumatic. She often looked upon him as an object to physically assault, and tear up emotionally, which ultimately created a negative impact on his mental and psychological development. Unlike the "good enough mother" put forward by Winnicott, who shares a nurturing bond with her child, Dave's mother is often projected as a epitome of cruelty and detachment from him. This emotional and physical cycle he makes him fall into often effected his growth instilling a sense of fear, anxiety and instability in him. Through a careful observation on the mother figure in *A Child Called "It"*, it is profound that she centres in the child's life as a "bad object" and has devastating effects on it's psyche. Mother's abuse that Dave encountered was completely in unpredictable ways. He was brutally punished that went beyond a stage that could threaten his life. He was ignored, isolated, put to starve, and she used to beat up his whole body. At one instance, she even forced him to consume ammonia and vomit the food he ate from the leftover without her knowledge. He was even forced to sleep in extreme cold conditions. These repeated abuses that he faced throughout his childhood days creates a sense of powerlessness and self-doubt in him which makes him cautious of trouble, but out of fear. Mother's extremist acts always made him impossible to create a secure bond with her, which is actually a necessity for the children of his age in order to maintain their emotional well-being. Instead of a mother figure that is an abode of love and affection, he often looked upon his mother as a source of terror, which in stills him the image of the world as cruel and unsafe. Such a trauma bond with the caregivers only creates an anxiety that prevents the children from trusting the world outside their home, just like Dave felt.

Besides the physical abuse mother inflicted on him, she always stood as a sign of absence of nurturing. Such behaviours reinforce herself as a "bad object" in his life. Even though mother always made sure of

providing love and protection to her other children, Dave was always treated as a homeless kid, or a secondary option. When his siblings got the best treatment, Dave was denied with the basic necessities like food, a hygienic atmosphere, and uprooting him from others in the family. This lack of nurturing carves out the scars of self-doubt and undeserving of love. Her every act also made sure it always reinforced trauma in him, making him internalise the feelings of rejection. This internalisation of trauma he endured is crucial aftereffect of his subsequent exposure to the abuse of his mother or because of the “bad object”. Instead of considering his mother as a bad image, internalising trauma pushed him to believe himself as the bad object. Through the lens of Object Relations Theory by Melanie Klein, it becomes evident that the mother figure as a “bad object” deeply effects Dave’s life, physically and psychologically, leaving a lasting impact on him which continues even in his adulthood. Klein also introduces the concept of ‘splitting’, which, in actuality is a defense mechanism through which, individuals perceive others as entirely bad or good. This coping mechanism could be seen extensively among the people who have experienced severe trauma for a prolonged period in their life. In Pelzer’s A Child Called ‘It’, he experiences extreme cruelties from his mother which makes him split the whole world into good and bad. Even though, ‘mother’ for him, stood as ‘evilness’, he longed for her approval. Dave’s psychological issues stress the destructive effects of splitting, as he is unable to reconcile his need for maternal affection with the harsh reality of her abuse.

While splitting the world into binaries, and mother was placed in the bad side, few others like teachers and the social workers who helped him come out of the trauma stood as ‘good objects’ in his eyes. They often showed him kindness, care and affection, which he actually craved from his mother. Due to the psychological distress he went through, because of the prolonged violence, he showed reluctance towards all those who showed him care and love. His exposure to prolonged abuse conditioned him to doubt everyone around him. This reluctance to trust anyone showcases the long- term effects of splitting, as his former experiences hinders him from incorporating positive relationships into his world.

All these psychological and emotional instability often comes from the child’s fragmented sense of self, and Dave is a best example of that. He internalised the cruelty he faced, believing that he is unworthy of love and care. This fragmentation of self creates a sense of rejection in him and finds difficulty in bonding with others. According to the Object Relations Theory by Klein, children internalise the treatment they receive from their primary caregivers, moulding their self- perception. That is why the constant rejection he endured made him think himself as flawed or unworthy. As he faced constant degradation for a long time, he absorbs the tarnished view of him from her. That is why, even after his escape, and surrounded with love and protection, he struggles internally with a deep sense of self doubt and worthlessness. Even though distancing himself from everything was his way of defense mechanism against the pain, in a way it further isolated from true bonding with kind people. From his difficulty in forming secure relationships with others, it is visible that even after his escape, he still had the lasting effects of trauma within him, and is torn with his fragmented self. In the case of children, early attachments are crucial in their development. Since Dave’s experiences are overpowered by fear and rejection, the lasting effects of his fragmented self reflects his anxiety in forming secure bonds. In addition to this, the trust issues that brought up with his abuse also becomes barriers in connecting with others.

When mother for Dave stood as a “bad object”, reconnecting with the “good objects” like teachers, social workers and others uplifted him to connect with his identity. For a prolonged period of time, Dave was deprived of the warmth and approval from a caregiver. But, gradually, as the external figures or the “good objects” began to replace that loss, he showed signs of recovery. His teachers often showed him kindness

and embraced him with love, which was a contrasting thing compared to what he experienced at his home. Just like them, the social workers also played a crucial role, being the “good” in his life. On discovering the extent of his pain and abuse he encountered, they intervened in his life, removing the maternal figure from him. This actually helped him to relieve from his sense of unworthiness to an extent. While mother instilled negative perception of himself in him, others helped him understand that he is deserving in all sense, offering a foundation for trauma recovery. Even though ample amount of care and affection wrapped him after his escape, he spent days to recover and reconstruct his identity due to the years of internalized abuse. His recovery was time consuming and painful process. According to Winnicott’s concept of “good enough mother”, children often need a constant and nurturing caregiver in their life for developing a stable sense of self in their initial childhood days itself. In the case of Dave, as his growth was under neglectful circumstances, with the cruel treatment of maternal figure, he will surely feel a sense of instability, that could not be easily removed from him even if he is removed from the abusive atmosphere. It is only through his foster parents, teachers and social workers that he showed the gradual emotional repair. They provided him with constant protection, love and validation which was lacking from his mother. Through them, he gradually showed a shift from his mother’s perception of him, understanding that abuse isn’t something that underscores his self. Dave’s life truly suggests the resilience of humans, especially children, healing from their childhood trauma. Even though the maternal abuse left deep scars in Dave, the presence of others, his external source of caregivers helped him to reconstruct his fragmented self. Dave’s journey portrays the critical role of “good objects” in healing the trauma induced by the “bad objects” children usually encounter in their lives. While trauma shape the emotional growth and well-being of a child, the “good objects” always take a leap to not let the trauma define them.

Conclusion

The abuses people confront during their childhood leaves deep psychological scars in them, affecting individual’s later life. In the memoir *A Child Called “It”*, Dave Pelzer narrates his harrowing experience of maternal abuse during his childhood, including years of physical violence, neglect, rejection, and emotional torment. Through the light of Melanie Klein’s object relations theory, the study has examined the lasting impacts of maternal abuse, especially, how Pelzer has looked upon mother as a “bad object”, experienced extreme emotional instability and how he has struggled with ‘splitting’. Since Pelzer’s mother constantly degraded and dehumanized him, her acts always made him feel worthless and he internalised this self-perception which is forced on him by his mother. This in actuality, aligns with Melanie Klein’s concepts of internalisation of trauma, where the child takes the abuse from caregiver and consider it as a part of their identity. His mother was an epitome of “bad object”, showcasing rejection, and violence. Being in her presence, Pelzer always confronted emotional fragmentation which actually made his life even worse. Due to the emotional splitting, even though he wanted to get rid of his mother’s abuse, he also longed for her approval. This trauma also hindered him from making social connections. When his mother stood as an evil figure, his father exhibited passiveness towards the abuse instead of retaliating against it. This also made him puzzled, unable to trust anyone around him. Even though teachers and social workers came his way as ‘good objects’, he struggled to trust them initially as his trauma was deep rooted. Just like what he experienced from his mother, he feared that their kindness would also turn to abuse. But eventually, the validation and security he experienced from his alternative caregivers helped him to reconstruct his identity and made a huge difference in rebuilding his life. It was through them that he recognized his mother as a “bad object” and understood that her abuse was not a reflection of his own

intrinsic worth, but rather the effect of her psychological turmoil.

The study finds that early childhood relationships play a significant role in the lives of individuals, which is even carried onto their adult life. In *A Child Called "It"*, Pelzer's experience serves as a powerful case study of how the maternal abuse can distort the life of a child, distorting his self-perception, leaving him emotionally fragmented and unable to form secure relationships. It also highlights that constant care and affection also plays a significant role in reconstructing the damaged self, rebuilding trust and helps to recover from the traumatic past. Ultimately, Pelzer's life could be seen as a shift from emotionally fragmented child to a survivor reinforcing the premise of Object relations Theory, that even though our early relationships define us to an extent, it doesn't have to confine us. With affection, encouragement and time, even the most shattered self could be put together, proving that trauma isn't an end word of an individual's life.

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