

The Art of Attachment from Infancy to Adulthood: A Study on Silas House's *Eli the Good*

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Abstract

The Appalachian region has a salad bowl of culture and heritage. The region abundant with nature weaves a tapestry of myth and stories to explore. The Appalachians connect their parchment of narratives together to gain a sense of identity. The children in Appalachia are exposed to these narratives to develop a belongingness to the region. The study examines the disturbed psyche of individuals related to their issues on behaviour and attachment. Attachment Theory formulated by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and the other improvisations made by several other theorists form a base for the study. The theory is used as a tool to analyse the behavioural and attachment issues of individuals through Silas House's *Eli the Good*. The objective of the study is to enunciate the prominence of providing a congenial environment for the children to grow, as that has a huge impact in external behaviour, shaping their interpersonal relationships in future.

Keywords: Attachment, behaviour, Appalachian, Relationships, Children

The Appalachian region comprises twelve states. As it is far away from the Centre of the United States, the Appalachian people are discriminated. They are hit primarily by unemployment issues which

further lead to poverty. Most of the Appalachians try to construct a stable life from the remnants left behind. Victims of wars, veterans, slaves and other immigrants merged with the already existing American indigenous population. Gradually, industrialisation measures grabbed the mountains with mountain top removal activities and coal-mining industries, that corrupt the lush natural landscapes. With this general history of Appalachia, the people try to grapple with the ebb and flow of their life, while they meander within their traumatic lifestyle. (Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness and West Virginia University, 2015)

The works produced by Silas House conjures up the shackles that bound the Appalachians. He explores mainly on their psychological issues and their quest to match the pieces of their shattered life. Being an Appalachian, House has a primary vision on molding a peaceful way of living for the ailing people. He has praised them for their self-reliant nature and has taken story telling as an act of preserving something that is about to be extinct (Hoffman et.al). He considers it his responsibility to pass on the lineage through narratives to the younger generation. The children of Appalachia are exposed to all the issues on their land, their caregivers submerging themselves within the issues on identity, and doing multiple errands to meet up the unemployment crisis. Silas House's attachment for the place and considering it as a sense of identity revolves in most of his works. He comments on it as, "I always had the fear that if they knew who I really was, they wouldn't love me anymore, and I would be banished. So, in a way, that made my connection to the place even deeper because I was afraid of losing it always." (Gleason, 2022)

In *Eli the Good*, Silas House throws light on the life of Stanton, a Vietnam war veteran and the people who are associated with his life. All the characters are explored through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy, Eli. These characters are entangled within their natural environment. Everyone carries some hidden trauma within, that is linked to their past life. The people who revolve around the story include Stanton, his wife Loretta, war protestor Nell, Josie, Eli and Edie. On analysing their familial surroundings, and the way they are brought into the state of adulthood, it is proved that they have

problems of attachment which are reflected through their behaviour. Silas House has not stopped with a gentle portrayal of situations and characters. All the characters have a strong connection with the environment in which they were brought up.

One of the major theories that speaks about interpersonal relationships is Attachment Theory. The parent-child relationships on Attachment theory were explored by John Bowlby in the 1940s. It was further taken to the next level by Mary Ainsworth, who had done research on parent-child bonding using a 'strange-situation' experiment. "The Strange situation also assesses the extent to which the attachment behaviour takes over when the mother leaves the room and is then reunited with the infant" (2). As far as Bowlby's concept is concerned, children are attached to someone who comes as a protector in their times of distress. It would most probably be their caregivers. Mary Ainsworth dragged it to the next level by focusing on different forms of attachment. They are secure, Anxious-resistant, Anxious-avoidant. Susanne M. Jones posits that "Bowlby's attachment theory contends that children are born with a psycho-biological system, the so-called attachment behavioral system that motivates them to seek or maintain proximity to an attachment figure" (Jones, 2017).

Mary Ainsworth's formulation of Attachment Theory pioneering the contributions of John Bowlby for the same has provided a backdrop for various attachment models. Through her strange experiment with Sylvia Bell, she asserts the connection between a child and mother. It was a twenty-minute experiment. They use four criteria which are Separation, Stranger anxiety, reunion behaviour and willingness to explore. On conducting this experiment, they end up providing three attachment styles. They are 'Secure' when the caregiver is removed from the environment and feel comfortable with their arrival. They are 'Anxious-resistant' and express little preference to the caregiver. They are 'Anxious-avoidant' and show a high range of distress once the mother is removed but are not soothed by their return. (Mary Ainsworth: Attachment Theory and the Strange Situation – Attachment project)

Ainsworth's strange situation helps to understand the prominence of providing a secure base for a child that helps him/her to maintain a positive outlook on life. Children who are brought up with 'insecure base' find it hard to maintain good relationship with others. Considering the ideas of Bowlby and Ainsworth, the outcome of the Attachment Theory is produced where the theorists discuss the process of child's detachment from its caregiver when sufficient care and attention is not given to them. It is provided as follows:

If during the separation from his mother a child is fortunate enough to be cared for by a substitute figure who plays a thorough maternal role, separation distress may be greatly alleviated, and the child may come to direct attachment behaviour toward the substitute figure. Nevertheless such sensitive foster care does not diminish a child's attachment to his own mother figure; on the contrary it facilitates rather than hampers the prompt reestablishment of normal relations with her upon reunion... there may be some delay in the reemergence of attachment behavior after a long period of separation, especially if separation was experienced in a depriving environment without adequate substitute mothering and this delay is associated with the length and extent of disappearance of overt attachment behavior during the separation itself. Upon reunion the child may seem not to recognize his mother, or he may reject her advances, or he may seem merely to be uninterested in proximity to or contact with her. It is noteworthy that such behavior is not displayed to the father or to other familiar figures.

(Patterns of Attachment, 18)

Pioneering the concepts of Bowlby and Ainsworth, the theorists have advanced the concept by analysing the gradual evolution of feelings and emotions in adults and the changes that impact their behaviour. The major theorists who spoke about Adult Attachment Theory are Kim Bartholomew and Horowitz. Bowlby and Ainsworth's model of the self and of the other is further used in advanced levels by Bartholomew in Adult Attachment Theory. Bartholomew has dissected the image of the self as positive or negative and the image of the other as positive or negative. Thereby, he ends up producing

four combinations. They are Secure, Preoccupied, Fearful and Dismissive. Based on further research conducted on Bartholomew and Horowitz's attachment model, the researchers on Psychopathology have posited as follows:

There are different methods of assessing and conceptualizing attachment styles in adulthood. Bartholomew and Horowitz describe a four-category model of adult attachment and have developed a brief self-report questionnaire to assess an individual's attachment style. The four categories of attachment (Secure, preoccupied, dismissing and fearful) can also be conceptualized as dimensions, either in cognitive terms as beliefs about self and others, or in affective terms as anxiety and avoidance. The dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance have been found to underlie a number of other self-report measures of attachment.

(83)

Eli, the protagonist of the novel *Eli the Good*, is a ten-year-old boy. He is an expert in eavesdropping. By doing that he gets to know more details that his family has been hiding from him. His father, Stanton is a Vietnam war veteran. He goes close to death in the warfront. He has seen so many of his friends dying in front of his eyes. From the perspective of Eli, the state of Stanton is gradually revealed to the readers. He is a victim of PTSD, that affects the members of his household. Eli's relationship with his mother, Loretta, is not a loving one. Having happy moments with his mother has become rare occasions in his life. Most of the time, Loretta is busy handling Stanton's tormented mental state.

Eli's sister Josie and her relationship with her mother, Loretta, often complicates the story. The contempt Josie has on her family makes her more skeptical about her own relationship with her boyfriend, Charles Asher. Nell, who is the sister of Stanton, is a war protestor, that further tightens the shackles of the story. A patriot who fights for the country, and a war protestor who shouts against the country to stop the war, end up living under a same roof. This has become a major source of the

complications that happen in their relationship. The only strong companion Eli has is his friend Edie, who is of Eli's age. Even though Edie's home is not fine in offering a convenient environment for her, she finds refuge and peace during those times she gets with Eli.

Attachment theory of Bowlby and Ainsworth is used to analyse the relationship between Josie and Loretta. By examining more about the childhood of Loretta and a secret that lingers between them, the reason for the current strange behaviour of Josie is analysed. Bartholomew and Horowitz's Adult Attachment Theory is used to analyse gradual changes in the emotions and feelings that develop through the evolution of young adults in *Eli the Good*. The conceptualised four categories are applied to each character to bring in the environment of their childhood and to connect it with the current atmosphere to portray the effect.

Bowlby along with his colleague Robertson has discussed the process of some children detaching themselves from their parents. It happens in three phases of 'separation response'. They include 'protest' that happens due to having 'separation anxiety', then 'despair' that occurs due to wailing over the absence and the final one is detachment. Detachment develops through repression, after developing some prominent defense mechanisms (Bretherton, 1992). Absence of the caregiver makes the child develop affinity towards a stranger, if that person gives a congenial space to the child. That bond with the caregiver still maintains with his/her arrival. But detachment happens in those circumstances when the child is not loved by the caregiver, even in his/her presence.

In *Eli the Good*, the process of detachment happens with Josie. Her bond with her parents is fine during the initial days. When she comes to know about the secret of her identity, that starts to shatter. She is a child born to Loretta out of wedlock with some other man. Stanton marries Loretta when she is carrying Josie. This was hidden from him, but when he learns about the same a rift occurs between them. That 'separation anxiety' is not managed well by anyone. All the trauma that she has is repressed within her own psyche. She gets more attached to Nell, Stanton's sister. That bond with Nell

helps her and comforts her ailing soul. The repressed anxiety quells out in the form of anger and stubbornness in behaviour with her mother. Eli describes Josie's state as,

Josie was looking into the mirror as if transfixed. She sang one verse of the song – beautiful loser, read it on the wall – beneath her breath, concentrating on each word. There was a tight look of disgust on her face, a scowl that didn't really change the shape of anything. Still, she looked awfully cool to me, standing there in flag pants and what she called peasant blouse and her black hair so long that she could sit on it... There was a secret between them that I didn't know about yet. I hated seeing them into it like that. There were times when Mom drew her hand back, but let it quiver in the air, never striking Josie. Once Josie had sidled up as close as she could to Mom and screamed in her face. (22, 24)

Bowlby's concept of child attachment starts when the child reaches six weeks after birth. Further behaviour is related to childhood attachment. Thus, providing a secure base for a child is mandatory to form healthy relationships. Children who are not provided much care have the deep tendency to develop 'less positive internal working models' that lead them to not cope well with stress mechanisms. These children, to maintain or cope with their anxiety and stress depend on some 'affect-regulation strategies'. They use these strategies in their interpersonal relationships. The two kinds of affect regulation strategies include: Hyper activation strategies and Deactivation strategies. "Hyperactivation strategies are insistent attempts at establishing proximity and include clinging or coercive behaviors. Deactivation strategies reduce or suppress proximity-seeking and involve distancing and other thought-suppressing strategies." (Jones, 2017)

The hyperactive affect regulation strategy is adopted by Edie and Josie in the novel *Eli the Good*. Edie has problems with her parents who are divorced when the novel progresses. Her mother leaves her to pursue her career. On getting separated from his wife, Edie's father turns into an alcoholic. This makes Edie detach herself from her parents. She holds on to hyperactive strategy to

stop others from having sympathy for her. In one of the incidents, Eli describes her as a person who has the courage to manage the boys, when they try to bully her. "She was as good as a boy, anyway, and all of us knew this, even if we never would have admitted it aloud. She was tough. She could balance herself as she walked across the narrowest fallen tree, carry more rocks to build the dam than anyone else, climb the steepest cliff without shedding a tear if her legs got all scratched up from the rocks. All of us boys lived in secret fear of her, to be honest" (9). Edie's coercive nature is evident when she despises Eli for passing harsh comments on her.

The Deactive affect regulation strategy is adopted by Eli, as he drags himself away from his parents. He does not reveal his longing for his parental love and attention. On reading the letters written by Stanton to Loretta, he gets to know more about the trauma his father has been undergoing. He sees Loretta spending time to make Stanton feel comfortable. He is not given proper care and love by either of his parents. This makes him distance himself from all and indulge in the process of eavesdropping over the discussion of his family members.

Bartholomew and Horowitz's conceptualisation of four levels of attachment in Adult Attachment Theory, following Ainsworth's levels include, Secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissive. Secure attachment level helps that individual to develop high self-worth and comfortable in forming better close relationships with others (Korver-Nieberg et al.). In *Eli the Good*, Stanton's sister Nell appears to be a person who has Secure attachment level. She comes as a war protestor and a victim of cancer. Even though her relationship with her brother Stanton diminishes with her protests against war, she manages to uplift herself and develops a sense of belief in everything she does.

Preoccupied level comes under insecure attachment. "Preoccupied attachment or higher attachment anxiety is associated with hyper-activating coping strategies that results in difficulties in regulating negative affect as well as sensitivity to threat" (83) claimed the researchers on psychopathology (Korver-Nieberg et al.). This makes that person to be dependent on gaining attention,

acceptance and approval. Loretta falls under the category of 'preoccupied level' of attachment. Being an orphan, her initial attachment with a toxic person leaves her bearing Josie. Stanton's family comes as an aid for Loretta. The warmth of Nell and protection from Stanton helps her to restart her life. This makes her more attached to them. She fails to spend time with her children. Her only motive is to make Stanton feel good every time. Josie has mentioned her longing for Loretta's love as, "how dare you act so high and mighty. Do you realize what a terrible mother you've been to both of us? Lying to me, never there for Eli... Always caught up in some la-la land with Daddy, worshipping him... you always loved him more than us, ... You always chose him over us." (247, 248)

Stanton stands for fearful level of insecure attachment. Based on Bartholomew and Horowitz's model of adult attachment, "Fearful attachment is associated with both high levels of anxiety and avoidance or disorganization of the attachment system" (84). Stanton has a disorganised attachment with everyone after facing the warfront. He often shows his vulnerable side to Loretta and ends up making attempts to kill her. All these happens out of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This makes him maintain a distance with everyone, as he has least control of his mental state. He yells at Eli when he enjoys drenching under a heavy downpour. The downpour has a bitter connection with his personal experience. One of his closest friends got struck by lightning and he is scared of losing another person in his life. This fear has makes him to not get attached to people and he maintains a disorganised attachment system to all.

Dismissing level of attachment system was adopted by Josie. In that level, an individual dismisses the importance of close relationships. They give more importance to their independence rather than to get attached to people (Korver-Nieberg et al.). Josie's childhood makes her to be the one, as she feels cheated about her own parentage. She is not aware of her birth secret and is attached to her parents. When she comes to know her real identity, she stops depending more on others. She keeps her boyfriend Charles Asher away and stops him from interfering in her personal things. Josie's words make this evident when she justifies choosing not to be dependent. "How would you feel if you

all at once found out you didn't belong to your father?... Why didn't they tell me before, when I was little?" (134, 135), said Josie to Charles Asher and reveals her option on embracing a detached life.

Childhood Attachment Theory developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth, paves way for the modern Adult Attachment Theory of Bartholomew and Horowitz. These concepts help to carve a detailed picture on behavioural issues for each individual. Silas House's *Eli the Good* explores the characters who carry severe mental pangs with them throughout their life. Applying the concepts and distinct levels of Attachment Theory develops the study to naturally unfurl the tied up internal emotions into the external behaviour of Eli's family.

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