



The Consequences of Parental Neglect to A Child: A Psychoanalytical Criticism on Lionel Shriver's Novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

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ABSTRAK

Hubungan orang tua-anak memainkan peran penting dalam kepribadian anak. Artikel ini menguraikan dampak pengabaian orang tua terhadap anak sebagaimana tercermin dalam novel Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Penelitian ini menerapkan kritik sastra psikoanalitik, menggunakan teori *human psyche* dari Sigmund Freud (id, ego, dan superego) dan teori perkembangan psikososial Erik Erikson. Data dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kajian pustaka, dengan mengambil deskripsi, narasi, dan dialog dalam novel yang berkaitan dengan pengabaian orang tua dan dampaknya sebagai data primer, dengan fokus pada karakter Eva, sang ibu, dan Kevin, sang anak. Metode analisis deskriptif diterapkan dalam menganalisis data. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa ambivalensi keibuan Eva mencerminkan konflik batinnya antara kebebasan pribadi dan tanggung jawab sebagai orang tua, sementara keterasingan emosionalnya dari Kevin mewakili ketakutannya akan keintiman dalam membentuk ikatan yang aman dengan anaknya sendiri. Pengabaian emosional Eva berdampak negatif pada perkembangan psikososial Kevin dalam lima tahap pertama, mengakibatkan Kevin mengalami gangguan psikologis dan masalah perilaku, yang ditandai dengan perilaku destruktif dan manipulatif. Melalui novel ini, pembaca dapat mempelajari bagaimana pengabaian orang tua dapat sangat memengaruhi pertumbuhan anak, menggarisbawahi pentingnya hubungan emosional yang aman antara pengasuh dan anak.

Keywords: *Kritik Sastra Psikoanalitik, Masalah Perilaku, Novel Kontemporer, Pengabaian Orang Tua, Perkembangan Psikososial*

ABSTRACT

Parent – child relationship plays an important role in a child's personality. This article elaborates the impacts of parental neglect on a child as reflected in Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The research applies psychoanalytic literary criticism, using Sigmund Freud's theory of human psyche (id, ego, and superego) and Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. The data are collected by using library research method, taking description, narrative and dialogue in the novel related to parental neglect and its effect as primary data, by focusing on the characters of Eva, the mother, and Kevin, the son. Descriptive analysis method is applied in analyzing the data. The result of analysis shows that Eva's maternal ambivalence reflects her inner conflict between personal freedom and parental responsibility, while her emotional alienation from Kevin represents her fear of intimacy in forming a secure bond with her own child. Eva's emotional neglect affects Kevin's psychosocial development negatively in the first five stages, resulting in him developing a psychological impairment and behavioral problems, marked by destructive and manipulative behavior. Through this novel, readers can learn how parental neglect can deeply affect a child's growth, underlining the importance of a secure emotional relationship between caregivers and the children.

Keywords: *Behavioral Problems, Contemporary Novel, Parental Neglect, Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism, Psychosocial Development*

INTRODUCTION

Child neglect is the inability of parents or caregiver to provide a child's essential needs, such as physical care, emotional support, education, and proper supervision (WHO, 2006). It is characterized as physical, medical, educational, and emotional neglect (CAPTA, 1996). Child neglect is a form of abuse that is often less obvious than other child maltreatment, but it can seriously impact the child's growth and overall well-being in the long term equally (Dubowitz, et al., 2005). According to Dhingra, Boduszek, and Sharrat (2015), child maltreatment has been linked to a range of psychological and behavioral problems, such as depression, destructive tendencies, academic struggles, and inappropriate sexual conduct. In other words, children who experience neglect or abuse tend to struggle in psychological issues and they may develop maladaptive personalities. Personality is shaped by consistent patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior formed by early experiences (APA, 2023). Initial parental rejection can disrupt these patterns, resulting to maladaptive personality traits such as insecurity, low self-worth, or emotional detachment.

As the reflection of real life, literature portrays uncountable concerns derived from human experiences, including parental issues. Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is one of the narratives that delivers to the audience the issues regarding parenthood and child maltreatment. This novel follows the story of the main female character, Eva Katchadourian's marriage and her experience of being a mother, which are narrated through several letters Eva has written to her husband, Franklin. From being a workaholic woman who loves to travel around the world by herself, Eva conveys that her life has completely changed after marriage and having children. Eva has never really intended to have a child, but she ends up having a son and a daughter. The novel focuses more on her parental experience in raising her first son, Kevin, whom she has never wanted at first. This research, therefore, examines the causes of Eva's neglectful parenting towards Kevin and its influence on Kevin's psychological and personality development. It explores Eva's psychological state in order to identify the underlying sources of her emotional detachment with her own son, alongside the psycho social development of Kevin. Psychological approach is used to analyze how the character presents the psychological impairment and behavioral problem. From the perspective of psychological approach to literature, this article presents the analysis of Eva's psychological state and neglectful acts, also the psycho social development and behavioral problems that Kevin exhibits as the result of his mother's emotional neglect, which later turns him into the murder of his father, sister and school mates.

METHODOLOGY

This article is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research relatively emphasizes words rather than numerical data in both data collection and analysis. John W. Creswell defines qualitative research as an approach to interpret an individual's experience in life (Creswell, 2013, p.4). In contrast to quantitative method, this method aims to profoundly understand human experiences, behaviors, and meanings. The data is analyzed by applying psychoanalytical approach. Lois Tyson suggests that this approach shows that the reader's perspective towards human behavior affects the way they engage with literature (Tyson, 2006, p. 12). Psychoanalytical approach is rooted in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis that examines the human psyche. Freud argues that human psyche has three parts: id, ego and superego (Freud, 1923/1961, pp. 12-25). The Ego is always in a struggle to balance between the demand of id to be satisfied and the superego as the rules to be obeyed. The conflicts between id and superego would seemingly result in psychological issues. Tyson (2006) argues that it is rooted from repetitive self-destructive behaviors (p. 15). These issues are not always immediately noticeable nor it is just some occasional negative emotions. Instead, they tend to be persistent throughout life while significantly influencing an individual's thought and behavioral pattern in harmful ways. Tyson identifies six types of core issues: fear of intimacy, fear of abandonment, fear of betrayal, low self-esteem, insecure or unstable self, oedipal fixation (Tyson, 2006, pp. 16-18).

The eight stages of psychosocial development concept are introduced by Erik Erikson in *Childhood and Society*. Erikson highlights the role of environmental influences and cultural context on personality development, stating that individuals encounter certain psychological issues at different stages in life (Erikson, 1963, pp. 247-274). He differentiates the eight stages with psychological crisis in each, an individual must resolve them to avoid impaired psychosocial development; trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, integrity vs. despair. On the other hand, Sigmund Freud, in *Repression*, describes repression as the process of dismissing disturbing thoughts and urges out of the consciousness (Freud, 1915/1957, p. 147). It involves internal psychological conflicts and acts as defense mechanism against unwanted thought. It begins in an individual's early life, when a child is emotionally vulnerable but already learns that certain action results to consequences (Freud, 1926/1959, p. 164). Repression is later shaped by moral and societal expectation. Freud highlights that repression is heavily influenced by discipline and punishment from a child's caregiver (Freud, 1940/1969, p. 185). The issue of parental neglect and its effects on a child in *We Need to talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver is analyzed by using these lenses.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

After a comprehensive reading on the characters of Eva and Kevin, the analysis shows that Kevin grows up with behavioral problems as a result of his mother's parental neglect. Thus, the results of analysis is divided into three: 1) the causes of Eva's parental neglect; 2) Kevin's psychosocial development; 3) the effects of Eva's parental neglect on Kevin's behavior.

The Causes of Eva's Neglectful Parenting Towards Kevin

Eva's neglect possibly causes by two reasons. The first is the maternal ambivalence as the root of Eva's emotional distance from Kevin, and the second is the fear of intimacy that might underlie behind Eva's emotional alienation.

Maternal ambivalence as the root of Eva's emotional distance

Eva is portrayed to have inconsistent thoughts about having children. Even before Kevin's birth, Eva experienced persistent ambivalence towards parenthood. She was uncertain if she truly wanted to be a parent or not; her perception changed constantly. In the novel, her first impression about being a parent was that she considered her and Franklin's decision to do that as irrational. Eva questioned why they risked their stable marriage for the uncertainty of parenthood. This statement of hers represented perplexity and regret, as she perceived that having Kevin was a reckless mistake that caused the restraint of their marital relationship (Shriver, 2003, p. 14). Before having Kevin, Eva lived a life full of freedom and independence where she could frequently visit various countries and established her own traveling agency. Eva earned a lot of new experience in unfamiliar places with completely different people and environment. However, Eva describes motherhood as a 'foreign country' (Shriver, 2003, p. 19). In some parts of the novel, Eva's perception towards motherhood changes drastically. One time, she is portrayed to be able to accept parenthood as she agrees with Franklin that it would be the most significant decision they could ever make together as a couple (Shriver, 2003, p. 16). When she feels like she wants to be a mother, it is relatively for a ridiculous or selfish reason. For example, if she gives birth to a child, she would have a lot more things to talk about with Franklin (Shriver, 2003, p. 25). This reasoning shows that Eva's drastic changing perception towards motherhood does not come from real maternal instinct. Instead, it is from the desire to maintain her stable marital relationship and intimacy with Franklin. Her decision to be a parent is less about embracing motherhood itself but more about protecting her marriage, suggesting that Eva views being a mother as a way to satisfy her personal fulfillment rather than a parental devotion. Eva's ambivalence towards motherhood roots from this inner conflict, she desires the role of motherhood, but not for its true essence.

Underlying fear of intimacy behind Eva's emotional alienation

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Eva is depicted to constantly alienate her emotion, which prevents her to form a secure bond with Kevin and neglects him emotionally. She unconsciously protects herself from trying to emotionally connect with Kevin because she does not possess the maternal instinct yet the ability to do it decently, and whenever she fails an attempt to bond with Kevin, her inadequacy as mother will be exposed and Eva is unwilling to acknowledge that. In the letter she wrote for Franklin on December 9th, 2000, she mentions that she always 'remains factual' with her emotions, which she considers it as a 'fragile defense' (Shriver, 2003, p. 48). This shows Eva's fear of intimacy as she tends to express her emotions as logical reasoning instead of being genuine. By 'remaining factual', Eva describes how she always tries to hide her true feelings and replace them with reasoning and detachment. She subconsciously protects herself from the challenge of maternal affection and the risk of being emotionally hurt by Kevin's destructive behavior. Eva also once complains to Franklin about her responsibility as a mother. When Kevin was five years old, he still wore diaper because Eva did not want to bother herself doing a lot things to take care of Kevin, such as cooking and feeding him. She considered changing his diaper is 'too intimate'. Sometimes Kevin makes Eva feels overwhelmed that she cannot bear to be near him so she decides to ignore him (Shriver, 2003, p. 218). This complaint becomes strong evidence of Eva's emotional avoidance from intimacy. Eva describes that she does things to fulfill Kevin's needs, emphasizing that she does her responsibility as a mother. However, those actions lack genuine maternal affection; she does it merely to fulfill her duty. She tries to prove that she is not a neglectful mother, yet she just subconsciously admits that she is. She tries not to get too attached to Kevin in order not to maintain the closeness because it forces her to face her distress being around Kevin. By avoiding intimacy in this physical form, Eva unconsciously protects herself from the bitter realization that she cannot form a secure bond with Kevin as his mother. Fear of intimacy is a psychological defense mechanism.

Kevin's Psychosocial Development as Affected by Eva's Emotional Neglect

The novel exposes that Eva's parental neglect affects Kevin's personality in a serious way. The psychological development is elaborated as follows

Stage One : Kevin's failure in developing a sense of trust to Eva

During the very first interaction with their newborn baby, most mothers fall in love instantly to their own child out of maternal instinct. Eva expects the same thing will happen to her, that she will be able to accept and love her child when she finally sees him. However, Eva feels detached and uncomfortable; her gestures shows hesitation when she tries to hold Kevin for the very first

time, as she describes her attempt as ‘diffidently’. Eva also perceives Kevin to be ‘lacking enthusiasm’, as he constantly refuses to breastfeed from her (Shriver, 2003, pp. 69-70). This early signs of strained connection between Eva and Kevin portrays the moment that is supposed to be an initial development of trust, rather becomes a mutual alienation. Eva feels no connection with Kevin and perceives him as rejecting, while Kevin receives no warmth and affection from Eva as he seems to actually rejects her by not breastfeeding.

Stage Two : Kevin’s distorted autonomy vs. shame and doubt development

During a visit in prison, Eva asks Kevin why he refuses to be potty trained until he is 6 years old, while the time a child should develop this ability is ideally between 18 months old and 3 years old. This shows that Kevin fails to develop autonomy on his own body, which is frustrating and troublesome for Eva. Kevin’s refusal to be potty trained persists until he’s in kindergarten, which Eva mentions to him that it must feel unpleasant. Kevin replies that it must be unpleasant for Eva too, having to constantly change his diaper and clean him (Shriver, 2003, p. 150). At first, this behavior of Kevin is considered as a mere inability to develop autonomy. However, his constant refusal to use the toilet later indicates rebellion towards Eva’s authority. As a result, Kevin develops autonomy in a distorted way. He is rather manipulative and rebel when attempting to show autonomy. On the other hand, Eva is unable to be emotionally close with Kevin that she cannot persuade Kevin to potty train. This maldevelopment in Kevin’s autonomy later influences his troubled behavior, which signified by rebellion and manipulation.

Stage Three : Kevin’s disturbing initiative vs. guilt development in social

In the novel, Eva recalls the early period during Kevin’s kindergarten year, when she receives a report from his teacher, saying that Kevin is under-socialized and struggles to initiate social interactions that he requires assistance in doing it. Two months into kindergarten, Kevin spends school hours by just sitting in silence at the back of the classroom and observing other students rather than trying to blend in. When he is forced to join and play with them, Kevin responds saying that what they are doing or playing are ‘dumb’ (Shriver, 2003, p. 155). This specific moment proves that Kevin exhibits emotional detachment and underdeveloped social skills. His disinterest in engaging interaction in an encouraged social environment, passive observation of his peers, dismissive attitude towards persuasion indicates his inability to develop a decent initiation. Several months into kindergarten, Kevin can finally interact with his peers. However, it always turns out as an incident, as his initiative to socialize often involves intentionally hurting other children rather than forming pure friendship. His interaction is driven from hostility, showing early signs of inability to socialize with others in a proper and empathetic way.

Stage Four : Kevin's disrupted development in industry vs. Inferiority

Eva recalls a moment when she tries to teach 7 year-old Kevin about arithmetic. Kevin constantly dismisses Eva's persuasion, saying that arithmetic is not important to learn if they can just use a calculator. However, Eva still tries to get Kevin into counting, she explains that it is an important basic knowledge required before using a calculator. Kevin answers to Eva's number quiz in a disinterested manner, intentionally giving her the wrong answer. Later, to her surprise, Kevin proceeds to recite one until a hundred without mistake then asks to 'quit' (Shriver, 2003, p. 164). This scene reveals that Kevin is never incapable, but he rather shows incompetence to annoy and humiliate his mother. Meanwhile, Eva feels dumbfounded and defeated, saying she is losing excitement in teaching Kevin. When a child's initiative is met with encouragement and reward, they will likely to develop a sense of industry. On the contrary, if it is responded with dismissal and humiliation, children will lead to feel inferior. Kevin's behavior demonstrates a distortion of the industry. He uses his competence and intelligence to assert dominance and appear controlling over his mother. Kevin exhibits capability as a tool for power, not personal growth.

Stage Five : Kevin's fragmented development of identity and role confusion

During the early visits in prison, Eva asks Kevin about how the other inmates treats him. Kevin replies with full of pride, saying that they 'worships' him. The conversation changes to Kevin telling Eva about a 13 year-old boy who also commits murder that has just got assigned to the same prison. Kevin criticizes the boy, saying he is not so smart, and points out that he is too young to understand what he did. Eva reluctantly responds with agreement to hide her discomfort (Shriver, 2003, pp. 35-36). Kevin sounds confident and self-assured of the identity he believes in. However, it is not a result of healthy self-exploration, rather a foreclosure from the desire for notoriety and control. His pride in being 'worshiped' by other inmates signifies how his self-worth relies on other's validation, fear, and admiration. In the end of the novel, Eva reflects on the moment where she visits Kevin three days before he turns 18 and soon he will be transferred to adult prison. Eva can see that Kevin is anxious; he is visibly shaking. Eva comforts him by saying that she still would visit him and she finally has the courage to ask Kevin why he committed the murder. Kevin does not answer directly, but he finally responds by saying that he is used to know why he did back then, but now he is not so sure (Shriver, 2003, pp. 255-256). This moment of resolution between Eva and Kevin reflects a crucial significant change in Kevin's psychosocial development, particularly stage five. Kevin's lack of clarity in the motive behind his crime reveals a progressive loss of the prideful self-image he once upheld. This moment shows Kevin's willingness of reflection as a beginning of identity formation. The dominance that characterizes his sense of self

begins to disappear, leaving him uncertain. Kevin's exposed anxiety indicates a progressive self-awareness as his identity is no longer determined by violence and external validation.

Kevin's Aggressive Behavior as Repressed by Eva's Resentful Caregiving

According to Freud (1940), children depend on their parents to help them control emotions such as anger and frustration. When a parent responds with understanding and acceptance, these feelings can be managed. However, when parents respond with punishment and emotional hostility, the child is forced to suppress these feelings. In Kevin Katchadourian's case, Eva becomes the main catalyst who represses his aggressive impulses during early childhood. From infancy to around five years old, Eva often responds to Kevin's behavior with frustration, resentment and sometimes physical punishment. Eva once broke his toy gun out of anger after he sprayed paint on her map collection with it, even though he knew those maps meant a lot to her (Shriver, 2003, pp. 184-185). Physical punishment Eva once did is slapping Kevin because he keeps mocking the way Eva talks while she is having a conversation with Franklin (Shriver, 2003, p. 151). Eva also once accuses Kevin of ruining life by making it 'suck', because Kevin is a very difficult child to take care of when he is an infant that their nannies keep quitting (Shriver, 2003, p. 125). At this young age, Kevin lacks the ability to understand and control his emotions by himself. He internalizes that Eva's resentful reactions mean showing anger or aggression toward her is unacceptable. As a result, Kevin represses his aggressive feelings instead of learning how to express them properly. Freud explains that repressed feelings do not disappear; they remain in the unconscious and look for other ways to come out (Benner, 1971). Because Eva is the one who suppresses Kevin's aggression, he cannot direct his anger toward her. Instead, he redirects it toward other people who are 'safer' targets. This can be seen when Kevin shoots a delivery worker with water from his toy gun, even though Eva once punishes him for ruining her map collection with it (Shriver, 2003, p. 176). The action reflects his earlier aggressive impulses, but the target is no longer his mother. As Kevin grows older, his aggression becomes more hidden and harmful. His suspected involvement in Celia's injury, which leaves her blind in one eye, shows that his aggression is no longer openly expressed. The fact that Celia never directly accuses Kevin suggests that the act is done secretly (Shriver, 2003, pp. 342-344). This indicates that repression has shaped Kevin's aggression into indirect and hidden behavior. In the end, Kevin's murder of his father, sister, and schoolmates shows the complete failure of repression. The aggression that Eva repeatedly suppressed during his childhood builds up over time and is finally released in an extremely harmful way. Eva's role as a caregiver and the way she reacts to Kevin's aggression does not make the tendency disappear but instead causes it to be repressed

and grow. Therefore, Kevin's violence can be understood as the result of long-term repression imposed by his mother during his early development.

CONCLUSION

This article exposes the impact of Eva's emotionally neglectful parenting to Kevin's psychosocial development through the approach of psychoanalytic literary criticism. By utilizing Freud's concept of human psyche, the id, ego, and superego, Tyson's core issues of anxiety theory, and Erikson's stage of psychosocial development theory, this study reveals how Eva's emotional neglect estranges her interpersonal relationship with her son, Kevin, which later severely influence his psychosocial development, resulting in a troubled and destructive personality. Eva's emotional neglect that she exhibits since her son's birth becomes the main contributing factor to their mutual rejection and the absence of emotional attachment between a mother and a son that persists throughout Kevin's growth.

The findings of the research present the possible causes of Eva's emotional neglect towards Kevin. Eva's inconsistent view towards motherhood is marked by the lack of maternal instinct and selfish reasoning to embrace parenthood. It reflects her unresolved inner conflicts; having to sacrifice personal freedom to conform parental responsibility. Eva's maternal ambivalence leads to her blame on Kevin while she is the one who reluctantly surrender her romantic child-free marriage life with Franklin. Moreover, Eva's emotional alienation represents her fear of intimacy, which serves as a defense mechanism. She subconsciously protects herself by resenting Kevin, avoiding genuine affection that may expose her vulnerability. This allows Eva to intellectualize and hide her true emotion. As the result, Kevin grows up without a decent emotional support from Eva, which severely affects his psychosocial development, according to Erikson's framework. The absence of maternal affection prevents Kevin from developing trust to Eva, which later worsens into mutual resentment. Furthermore, it distorts his development in autonomy vs shame and doubt, and identity vs. role confusion stage, marked by Kevin exhibiting destructive behavior that drives from aggressive tendencies and socially unacceptable self-image. Kevin also struggles in resolving the third (initiative vs. guilt) and fourth stages (industry vs. inferiority) of psychosocial development; he lacks initiative in social interactions and acts malice by advantaging his industry.

Conclusively, this research highlights that *We Need to Talk About Kevin* serves not only as a narrative that conveys family dynamic and moral responsibility, but also a psychological exploration of how the absence of a mother figure deeply affects a child's growth and the shaping of their personality. Through psychosocial perspective, Eva and Kevin's relationship reflects the

tragic consequences of emotional distance between each other, highlighting the importance of a secure relationship between a mother and children.

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