



Tracing childhood trauma, bullying and abuse in Margaret Atwood's "Cat's Eye": Could Elaine Risley be helped by inner child work?

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Abstract— *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood is a story about female friendships, childhood bullying, and the way our past almost always follows us into our present. The paper aimed to explore protagonist Elaine Risley's unresolved childhood trauma and abuse, and whether certain counselling techniques could have helped, with a focus on inner child work. The paper thus attempted to draw parallels between Elaine's life and the possibility of inner child work in therapy. It also tried to address the problems that might arise during the process, the foremost of it being lack of initiative. The paper serves as a possibility of understanding real world individuals and their early childhood trauma through the hypothetical presence of a fictional character, Elaine Risley, in the therapy room.

Keywords— *bullying, counselling, inner child work, psychotherapy, trauma*

I. INTRODUCTION

"With enemies, you can feel hatred and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please. Hatred would have been easier. With hatred, I would have known what to do. Hatred is clear, metallic, one-handed, unwavering; unlike love" (Atwood, 1988, p. 142)

Cat's Eye (1988) by Margaret Atwood is a story about Elaine Risley, an established painter, back in Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her work. Elaine's retrospective exhibition provides the impetus to revisit memories; she vividly recounts childhood events, marriage and motherhood. In doing so, we get a clearer picture of how all those incidents made her who she is in the present. Since it is a Bildungsroman, we go through two time periods- the first being the present, and the second period being Elaine's childhood and her young adult years in Toronto.

The childhood memories start with Elaine travelling around with her parents and elder brother because of her father's profession as an entomologist, never having a place to call home. When they eventually buy a house in Toronto and settle down, Elaine is introduced to a mystical world she has only ever read about before: the world of girls. At the crux of it all is her friendship with Cordelia, her childhood best friend who soon turns out to be her greatest abuser. The quote mentioned at the outset of the paper is a beautiful yet haunting encapsulation of the relationship Elaine had with her childhood best friend, Cordelia.

The book traces Elaine's life, her learnings and her understanding of her traumatic experiences. But all of them become obsolete the moment she arrives at them, she is always a little too late for the realisations to hit her, as late as motherhood and old age. Her whole life she had been carrying the abuse Cordelia inflicted on her, and the emotional scars of it never healed. Elaine was oblivious to it all, her life just lurched on from one stage to the next, with her having no recollection of the trauma she had

endured, which was buried somewhere deep inside of her. It had left her hollow. Even though she did become a painter, her life had no plans, no goals, no passions. Haunting details of Elaine's life make one realise just how much of ourselves we leave in the past, and how much of it we still carry along with us. The following quote surmises Elaine's recollections of her early life when she is well into her middle age-

This is the middle of my life, I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over. I'm supposed to have accumulated things by now: possessions, responsibilities, achievements, experience and wisdom. I'm supposed to be a person of substance. (Atwood, 1988, p. 13)

This paper aimed to dissect the character of Elaine Risley and the traumatic childhood she had due to consistent abuse and bullying, and how it haunted her well into her adult life. The paper would also try to look into the possibility of inner child work to heal her fragile sense of self, which obstructed her from truly being her true self all her life.

II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF CHILDHOOD BULLYING AND ABUSE

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood effortlessly captures the psychological ramifications of bullying, centering around female friendships. Around the period of eight to eleven years of age, Cordelia often teamed up with two other girls, Grace and Carole (also supposedly friends of Elaine), and broke Elaine's sense of self-worth in a way that would make us introspect "what little girls are actually made of" (Dermott, 1989).

The most immediate effect the bullying had on Elaine was a sense of shame. Since Elaine's family had led a nomadic lifestyle because of her father's profession in entomology, it made her "the other" in the group of friends, and particularly susceptible to allegations of 'abnormality'. They conjured up weaknesses of Elaine, which the latter felt she actually possessed (Jones, 2008). This sense of shame Elaine carried well into her adult life, wherein even if she forgot the incidents of her childhood, the name of Cordelia would cause her a "flush of shame, or guilt and terror, and of cold disgust with myself" (Atwood, 1988, p. 299).

Another striking effect was Elaine's self-mutilation, wherein she peels the skin of her feet. When the bullying stops, it fades, but less severe signs of it continue, like the chewing of skin around the lips and fingernails (Jones, 2008). Psychoanalytically, this feet peeling was a displacement activity in which Elaine tried

to regain the sense of control that she loses when she is with friends or "tormentors". She also had suicidal ideations; or rather the will to just disappear, "I lie on the floor, washed by nothing and hanging on. I cry at night. I am afraid of hearing voices, or a voice. I have come to the edge of the land. I could get pushed over." (Atwood in *Cat's Eye*, 1988, p. 443). Elaine's dissociative strategies of avoidance, fainting and splitting off from her own body, which she uses to create a provisional sense of control to alleviate her suffering, reveal her lost sense of competence to act or live in the world (Jones, 2008).

Her "friends" torment her with her own image, ostracize her, and in one terrible incident, take things a little too far and bury her alive. Elaine submits. "They are my friends, my girlfriends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I'm terrified of losing them. I want to please." (Atwood, 1988, p. 142). The peak of her trauma was Elaine's near encounter with death and the hypothermia that occurs as she tried to retrieve her hat, which Cordelia had thrown into the icy water from the bridge. Because of her dissociation, she imagines a fantasy Virgin Mary/mother figure guiding her out of the ravine. Elaine finds the will to turn away from her friends and represses this period in her life after being vindicated by her own mother's concerns and the other girls' punishments.

The novel also highlighted how the bully is often the one who has been bullied. Abused at home, and never being able to please her father, young Cordelia displaced her lack of self-worth and insecurities onto Elaine. When their roles were reversed in high school, because Cordelia had failed to pass a year, and Elaine became powerful, assertive, and verbally aggressive, Cordelia faded into powerlessness. A sense of conflicted identity persists that she carries throughout her life when she herself becomes the bully. They did not know when they switched places. In a way, Elaine had absorbed Cordelia and even in her adult life, Cordelia was there, in almost every painting that Elaine ever made.

The ramifications follow well into her adult life. When faced with an issue in a relationship, she refuses to confront it, choosing instead to evade it, as she did to her bullies as a child. She feels that "this act of walking away... is like being able to make people appear and vanish, at will" (Atwood, 1988, p. 378). Even with her affair with her art teacher, she always had this feeling of transience, she could leave whenever she wanted to. So when she became pregnant with her first child with her husband Jon, she was terrified because she felt she was losing control.

Jon was not supportive of her art, imbibing her with self-doubt even amid critical acclaim. As a mother, she was always anxious about her daughters when they were children, "Most mothers worry when their daughters reach adolescence but I was the opposite. I relaxed, and I sighed with relief. Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized." (Atwood, 1988, p. 139)

III. IN THE THERAPY ROOM

For a person like Elaine, even the thought of therapy, of having to talk about her life with another person, would have been threatening. It would have made her feel bare and exposed, in ways that she only permits herself to be in her paintings. But it is also clear that one mode of counselling, inner child work, could have worked for someone like Elaine, and I would like to defend the same. Although her art serves as a therapeutic medium for her, her memories of abuse and trauma burst through almost every painting that she does. But the fact remains that she could never reconcile her past with her present, and had merely managed to repress them.

I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away. (Atwood, 1998, p. 3)

Inner child work is an amalgamation of attachment theory, somatic (or body-based) therapies, Jungian Shadow work, Internal Family Systems, and psychodynamic theories. It works well with anyone because each one of us has a child within us. There are younger parts within us with different ages, different experiences, and different needs, and when we grow into our big bodies, these parts do not necessarily disappear. The concept of inner child work is grounded in psychosynthesis of the ages (Assagioli, 1973) wherein our developmental stages are not seen as something linear but rather laid out in concentric circles with childhood and infancy right in the middle of it. Our personalities then grow outwards, often looking to have what is called authentic personality; "who I think I am matched with how others perceive me." (Firman and Russell, 1994). Our inner child can come out at the most random moments of our life but if we had a tough or loveless childhood, we are actually children most (if not all) of the time.

Whenever significant others treat us as "non-beings", a feeling of not being seen, recognized, and respected as a human being, it inflicts psychological

wounding to the child's deepest sense of identity (Firman and Russell, 1994). The events which lead to such wounds can be overt or covert. The overt category includes acts of violence, such as physical abuse or sexual abuse, while the covert category might be even more pervasive. The more covert types include such things as emotional battering, psychological incest, and identity enmeshment; bigotry (sexism, racism, etc.); compulsions and addictions which remain unrecognised and untreated by the caregivers; or denial in the family system of any important aspect of human life (e.g., sexuality, spirituality, death) (Firman and Russell, 1994). In the case of Elaine, it was mostly covert incidents that had wounded her deeply, leading her to develop a survival personality which is also called the "false self" (Winnicott, 1960) wherein one cuts off an aspect of ourselves, and becomes distant from our authentic personality. We see this when Elaine internalised Cordelia's vengeance, and meanness, she became "what she must become to survive" (Firman and Russell, 1994). Moreover, all of this happened without Elaine's parents knowing about anything. This made young Elaine a lone defender of her own sense of safety.

In the therapy room, inner child work is carried out in various ways by various therapists. It is not easy, one's survival personality kicks in whose whole function is not to feel the non-being wounding. An empathic connection to the inner child goes directly against this prime motivation. Elaine would be resistant, not even recognizing that she needs therapy. A certain level of defensiveness can rise, and the survival personality will want to get rid of these resurfacing memories, so that "my life can continue in the way I see fit." (Firman and Russell, 1998). McGuire (1993) talked about how in the therapy room, clients who have suffered abuse or trauma, bring with them either "toxic shame" (which has already been discussed in the case of Elaine), idealise the abuser(s), or deliberately "forget" chunks of their childhood. As Elaine put it, "The past has become discontinuous, as stones skipped across the water, like postcards: I catch an image of myself, a dark blank, an image, a blank." (Atwood, 1988, p. 356)

Healing the relationship with one's inner child is a protracted process. Contacting the inner child is a matter of mirroring, of empathic attunement. The splitting off of the inner child was created by a disruption in mirroring, and only mirroring can mend the disconnect with the inner child (Firman and Russell, 1993). The process of inner child work can be roughly condensed into three parts according to Firman and Russell (1993)- recognition, acceptance and inclusion.

The first is recognizing that there is a wounded child within us. It is not an easy feat since our survival

personalities are so resilient that they would not allow us to look within. Willingness is the beginning of the recognition stage of inner child work. One often has to hit rock bottom, often in intimate relationships, to be willing to look within (Firman and Rusell, 1993). Perhaps the most direct manifestation of the inner child is in empathic, personal interactions. For instance, it so happens that in long-term relationships, which started out beautifully, the couple soon finds themselves plagued with feelings of dislike and disgust towards each other. Suddenly, "small things" that never mattered before become hurtful and intolerable; one person's tone of voice, mannerisms, and habits disgust and enrage the other; and they find themselves acting strangely and unusually, fighting over things that appear to be silly. But we are so used to being with our adult selves that we do not realise that these small things are the ones that hurt the child within us. When Jon thoughtlessly criticised Elaine's work, for Elaine it felt like an assault on her deepest self, something similar to what Cordelia did with her. Recognition, either by herself or in the therapy room, would be the first step in knowing that her inner child was wounded in those years of bullying, abuse and trauma.

After recognizing, acceptance is the next step. This often entails working with the parts of oneself (subpersonalities) which tend to criticise, discount, and belittle the child. Because when we belittle or criticise in a way to suppress our inner child, it withdraws further and further away from us (Firman and Rusell, 1993). Until one is honest with one's inner child, with no judgement, or criticism, one cannot fathom connecting with the inner child. A therapeutic setup can help bring forth and just let the child sit with us. Elaine would have to accept that somewhere along the way she had buried her 11-year-old self, she never wanted herself to remember that self of hers, but then again, it is that self that is the closest to her. Once her inner child breaks forth, it would also mean that her adult personality would undergo a change. This is because our survival personality is based on certain psychological contracts, which have helped us to become accepted by our close ones. And if she listens to her inner child, she might discover a whole new world of experience that reveals her early life to be far more destructive than she or anyone else had ever realised. Elaine's paintings are a testimony of that.

Inclusion is the next step, an ongoing, daily process whereby one adopts the inner child and begins to live one's life in an intimate relationship with him or her. In Elaine's case, this would mean that she restructures the way she looks at and deals with her current relationships. Of course, these steps are merely a broad overview, what goes in the counselling setup would be much more

complex. As Diamond (2008) noticed in their practice of psychotherapy, the adult part of the personality learns to relate to the inner child in the same way that a good parent relates to a child of flesh and blood, providing discipline, limits, boundaries, and structure. These are all essential elements of loving and living with any child, whether metaphorical or real, along with support, nurturing, and acceptance.

Self-compassion and self-empathy are the essences of therapy (McGuire, 1993). In case a therapist is dealing with inner child work, the client must be allowed to grieve the loss of childhood they needed but didn't get- "This is what I miss... not something that's gone, but something that will never happen." (Atwood, 1988, p. 498). Elaine had wanted to have a good relationship with Cordelia, and she still did, but she had also accepted that it may never happen. When a therapist is stuck in an inner child metaphor, they may lose out on a client's more powerful metaphors that emerge from their own knowledge of their experiences (McGuire, 1993). Elaine's admission, "I feel everyone else my age is an adult, whereas I am merely in disguise" (Atwood, 1998, p. 15), would be a window to her own understanding of how she feels like she is only an adult from the outside, fulfilling adult roles out of mere social obligation.

Moreover, it would not be reasonable for the counsellor or therapist to expect the inner child to be easy to work with. Cut off for so many years, she would likely be untrusting, angry, or too hurt to talk. The counsellor would want to gently direct Elaine to think of some way to approach her. And if necessary, side with her resisting part and validate that what she did and who she became, was what made her survive then (McGuire, 1993). As far as one can predict, Elaine's memories do not come out all at once, it comes out in bits and pieces. But in whatever way the past resurfaces in the therapy room, the therapist must help her sit with the felt senses that arise. One can assume that Elaine already had a sense of recognition that when she looks back at her past, she can see the centrality of it all - "The past isn't quaint while you're in it. Only at a safe distance, later, when you can see it as décor, not as the shape your life has been squeezed into." (Atwood in *Cat's Eye*, 1998, p. 428)

McGuire (1993) talked about how "Two seconds of contacting the 'frozen whole' can be the most restorative moment in an hour of therapy. By being contacted, it can even begin to melt and change". While coming to terms with childhood abuse and subsequent adult self-criticism which needs to be confronted before Elaine can move on with her life, she also needs to re-evaluate her present circumstances for a full understanding of herself, as well her rekindle her relationship with her

present husband Ben, and her two daughters. Inner child work in counselling could have been one way to help her achieve this.

IV. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper is merely a speculative account, a what-could-have-been. Moreover, I have no clinical experience of my own and the inputs given in the paper are mere theoretical reflections. It is difficult to ascertain how the whole process would actually play out, and counselling can only do so much. There is a very real possibility of premature termination.

Elaine is a cognitively and emotionally complex individual who might think that she would not benefit from counselling and therapy. Recognizing our past traumas requires conscious cognitive work, (also called cognitive restructuring strategy in trauma-informed therapy) and one needs to be ready for therapy for it to work. But that does not mean that the possibility of it should not exist for Elaine.

In the novel, her twin odysseys - confrontation and deconstruction through her art, and her return to Toronto -allow her to reevaluate her present and progress in her life. Maybe counselling would have been the third odyssey, helping her to get into a dialogue with her inner child (a dialogical self), a reconciliation that would satisfy her whole being if the possibility for it had existed in the story of her life. The paper thus shed some light on the whole process of a fictional therapy setup with a fictional character, and possibly offered some real world takeaways for those interested in the domain of inner child work.

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