

## **Attachment theory: An analysis of Karen Kingsbury's novels**

### ***Where Yesterday Lives and Like Dandelion Dust.***

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“Psychology” according to Clifford T. Morgan, is “the science of human and animal behaviour”. It also includes the application of science to human problems. Psychology is set apart from the other behavioural sciences such as sociology, political science etc because of its “exclusive interest in behaviour, partly its focus on individuals, and partly the wide range of behaviour it covers” (Morgan 1). The behavioural perspective aims at understanding people's responses to particular situations and hopes to uncover “the unique events of each individual's life” (Morgan 41).

Attachment theory founded by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the early 1960s focussed on children and caregivers. It also owes itself to the experiences of child care professionals during World War II. Many children were orphaned and temporarily separated from their parents and so they had to be cared for. The United Nations asked Bowlby to write a pamphlet about the plight of such children and later the Attachment Theory came into being.

John Bowlby is of the opinion that infants become attached to adults who are responsive and sensitive in social interactions with them. For a child who is attached to the caregiver, it is normal for the child to experience separation, anxiety or grief during the loss of an attachment figure. These behaviours according to Bowlby increase the probability of survival of the child. Kira Birditt is a researcher at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR). She describes parent-child relationships to be “one of the longest lasting social ties human beings establish. Highly positive and supportive... it also commonly includes feelings of irritation, tension and ambivalence” (SAGA).

*Like Dandelion Dust* by Karen Kingsbury brings narrates the story of a boy who is placed as a child in the hands of his adoptive parents Jack and Molly Campbell. After legally acquiring the child the Campbells have a smooth life. According to them the adoption file had been closed and Joey had permanently become their son. However, one fine day the

Campbells received a phone call from a social worker named Allyson Bower informing them of Joey's biological parents deciding to take Joey back. The novel unwraps the story of a couple who have formed a bond with a child that cannot be separated.

Ainsworth has broadly termed the child's bond from childhood to adulthood as "attachment" and the caregiver's response as "caregiving bond". The two bonds nurture feelings and emotions in the child that make him dependent and very possessive. The inspirational novelist Karen Kingsbury has also described the growing bond between Joey and his adoptive parents as such:

Adoption didn't mean a lesser bond with the child. It was a bond she and Jack had chosen, and it was no different than if she'd birthed Joey herself. He was their son. Nothing more could be clear and obvious (LDD 158).

"Alarm" is a term used in the attachment behavioural system. "Alarm" as one knows is expressed when there is a threat to one's life. Joey experiences the feeling of alarm when he is about to face the unknown. The unknown becomes a threat to him. His fears are expressed as such in the following lines:

"Dear God..." he breathed a few hard breaths. "Hi, this is Joey. I'm a'scared because I'm getting on an airplane with a strange lady to see a strange mommy and daddy..." (LDD 153).

Joey is alarmed at the thought of having to travel with someone he has'nt known anything about and so he follows his cousin Jonah's example of talking to God before bedtime. The situation of separation becomes the element that activates change in the behavioural system. Joey is like any normal child but when he comes to the knowledge of separation he becomes 'alarmed'.

Psychologists have observed that at the age of four, children develop greater self control and ingenuity. Their pretend-play becomes more complex and imaginative because the situation plays a role in manipulating the child to behave accordingly. Any situation can have a direct impact on a child whether it be separation, sickness or death. This results in them intelligently managing coping strategy with intense emotions. They would prefer to talk about everything that's on their mind. When Joey is told that he is to take a trip with a lady, he talks it out to his pet dog:

“How come, Gus? Why would I take a trip without Mommy and Daddy?”

Gus took a big breath through his nose. His eyes said he wasn't sure of an answer, either, but at least it would be a short trip.

“I know it'll be short Gus.” He gave the dog a kiss near his nose.

“But short's still too long.”

Gus nodded his head a little.

“Good doggie, Gus. You understand” (LDD 150 - 51).

This coping strategy enables Joey to derive comfort from the fact that he is with someone. Even though the dog does not take the role of a caregiver or adult, Joey is comforted by the very presence of someone i.e. the dog. The child gives an identity to the pet animal and believes his pretend-play conversation to be very real.

In the late 1980's, Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver, researchers from the University of Denver applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. They noticed the interactive similarities found between adult romantic partners, and, children and their caregivers: the desire for closeness and the need of being comforted. According to them, adults are classified under four attachment styles: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive avoidant and fearful avoidant.

Hazan and Philip state that secure attachment styles result usually from a history of warm and responsive interactions with relationship partners. They have positive views of their relationships and also have greater satisfaction and adjustment in their relationships. Securely attached people feel comfortable both with intimacy and independence despite the fact that many seek to balance intimacy and independence in their relationship. In *Like Dandelion Dust*, Joey's adoptive parents are examples of secure attachments. They do not fight over about who has to make the next move nor do they assume leadership as to who is in control.

As parents both of them share the responsibility of raising Joey and spending time with him. When a problem crops up, they face it together by finding comfort and support from each other. Here are a few lines that reveal intimacy balanced with independence:

“No.” he caught her arm and gently guided her back to the bed. “Don't panic.”

They sat down side by side and, he framed her cheek with his hand. “We'll

hire an attorney.” His reassurance was as much for him and as for her. “Joey’s not going anywhere.”

She was shaking harder now. “W-w-when do they want him.”

“It won’t happen.” Jack didn’t want to talk about the possibility.

“But if it does... how much time do we have?”

Molly gripped his knee and leaned hard against him. She looked about to collapse.

“Molly, breathe... We’re going to fight this; I promise you (LDD 114-15).

According to psychologists like Collins and Feeney, intimacy allows an individual to be willing to reveal his/her own fears, feelings and emotion. This results in “constructive communication” and more “intimate self-disclosures” between the romantic partners. Relationship satisfaction is derived at the outcome and romantic partners become encouraged to stay longer in their relationships. They have positive views about their relationships and so feel adjusted to each other. Perplexities in life do not confuse them but allow them to reach out to each other for closeness and comfort. Intimacy also plays a vital role in strengthening the bond between man and woman. It renders complete support to the woman and allows the man to have the feeling of marital bonding.

Amy and Frank in Karen Kingsbury’s *Where Yesterday Lives* are examples of secure attachment styles. Though they seem independent, they rely on each other for comfort and support. Frank is open to Amy’s problems. He talks to her and is willing to listen to her. He is not prejudiced about her family but is concerned at where the problem lies. Amy did not have to carry the burden of being the odd-girl in the family alone. She decided to share her feelings, especially her past with her husband. Though there was the inner struggle to talk about her issues, she did not take too long to tell him what she felt about her family.

Sam George, the Executive Director of Parivar International brings out vital concepts about marriage in his book *Before the Wedding Bells* which is co-authored by his wife Mary George:

Honesty and truthfulness are absolutely essential in marital communication. Covering things up or withholding information to your mate are harmful attitudes, even if you think your mate is going to be upset over the information

you are about to share. In fact, within a marriage you should have freedom to speak your mind and open to sharing anything at anytime, so that you do not have to carry a burden alone. We believe within marriage, a couple should maintain total transparency and keep no secrets (129).

Couples in secure relationships would not consider having to make the first call to an extra marital affair. Conflicts are possible even in the most happiest of relationships, and, the characters in Karen's novel *Where Yesterday Lives* are no exceptions. Ellen and Mike a couple in *Where Yesterday Lives* struggle in their wed-lock because of differences of opinion. But Ellen decides to keep her marriage inspite of her attraction towards her first love Jake Sadler because her husband had been faithful to her. Karen Kingsbury narrates through these lines the importance of being totally transparent and keeping no secrets:

Then they talked for hours about their past mistakes. When Ellen finally told him how seriously she had considered leaving him, Mike cried.

He'd reached out for her, gathering her close and holding her tightly. He buried his face in her hair, and she stroked his back as he cried...

... "I was a fool Ellen. I took you for granted... In the process I let our marriage grow cold" (WYL 356-57).

Sam and Mary George have added a few words on transparency in their book on marriage...

Do not surprise your mate by launching into paste hurts unexpectedly. Prepare your mate. Find the right time and place to bring out the past. Deal with one issue at a time. Be truthful and sincere. Take personal responsibility. Seek forgiveness and help in overcoming failures and hurts. Hold the relationship more dear than the issues (BWB 97-98).

Attachment theory allows researchers to discover the underlying facts behind child-caregiver relationships and adult romantic relationships. A child-caregiver's attachment begins from the period of infancy of the child and extends to adulthood when adult children relate to their parents as adults. The analysis made in this article will allow readers to understand certain features in both these relationships. The significant research made by psychologists of today owes its gratitude to the initial founders of the theory.

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## Abbreviations

**LDD**     *Like Dandelion Dust*

**WYL**     *Where Yesterday Lives*

**BWB**     *Before the Wedding Bells*