

THE LIFELONG IMPACTS OF ADOLESCENT TRAUMA IN *THE SAFFRON KITCHEN*

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ABSTRACT

Dividing an individual's life cycle into eight stages, Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) believes that adolescence period is one of the most critical phases of life when youngsters question all their previously experienced confusions and crises in childhood, and for the first time they attempt to build up their initial form of identities. In this period, young people seek for more independence and authority to be free to make their own choices which might result in serious disputes and fights for dominance between them and their parents who believe "their almost-adult children want nurturance and need protection" (Donoghue, 2005). In many cultures, this bilateral challenge over gaining dominance, recognition, and respect gives rise to adolescents' facing parental or societal aggression which is likely to "evoke anger, humiliation, alienation, and depression" throughout their lives (Straus, 2009). As a result, they fail to establish "an achieved identity" (Erikson, 1963, 1968). This study is an attempt to investigate how teenage traumatic experiences might leave a long-lasting influence on an individual's identity throughout his/her life. To examine the effects of parental and/or cultural hostility on the process of identity development of youth, the life cycle of Maryam- the Persian female protagonist in *The Saffron Kitchen* written by Yasmin Crowther- is analyzed. This study will primarily focus on Maryam's distressful experiences that have generated from her father's authoritarian parenting style, the corporal and physical punishments that he has applied on her, as well as the rape trauma that she has experienced at the age of seventeen. This paper will manifest the consequences of these aggressive stances during the process of her identity development.

Keywords: Trauma, *The Saffron Kitchen*, Yasmin Crowther

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Identity development is a complex and multilayered process that might show diversity in individuals. Since identity is a process that is likely to be developed throughout one's lifespan, the interdependency of the characteristics/features one needs to develop in each stage, is highly influential in the respective stages of life. Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) asserts that in each stage of psychosocial development, individuals undergo various crises. The individual should have developed physiologically, mentally, and socially in order to get over these crises (Erikson, 1968: 96). Following these crises, the identity finds a form that will decisively determine later life. In addition, Erikson contends that in order to form a sound or "achieved" identity, an individual should re-emerge from the crises that he has lived in the previous stages of his life otherwise any incomplete stage is likely to

display its destructive impacts on the following stages. In other words, any failure in completing a stage shows a domino effect in the succeeding stages, too.

This study* is an attempt to reveal that traumatic experiences that a person lives in his adolescence period might result in failing to achieve a sound identity throughout his life span. To examine the impact of adolescence traumatic experiences in adulthood period, the process of identity development of Maryam, the female protagonist, in *The Saffron Kitchen* is analyzed.

One of the crucial features that needs to be developed in childhood is the concept of attachment figure. Ainsworth's highlights the importance of developing a secure dependency between the parent and the child to contribute to the child's getting ready for the unfamiliar situation out of the home's secure environment (Bretherton, 1992: 760). The infant develops a sense of identity through which he correlates his anticipated inner sensations of being a trustworthy person with the outer familiar, same, continuous, and predictable things and people such as the mother or the caregiver (1963: 247-248). However, frequent substitution of the attachment figure may result in inability in making a long term relation in future (Bretherton, 1992: 763).

Maryam's mother fails to execute the role of attachment figure in Maryam's life. Her position as an immigrant and the cultural norms in the Persian culture become the most significant factors in her failure. Unlike Maryam's father who was a man of position in the King's army in Iran, she was born into a peasant family in Russia, and by marrying an Iranian General she gains a social status that enhances her self-esteem. However, as she does not give birth to a son, her husband marries a second wife- who is about the age of her daughters. This polygamous practice of her husband is the most serious identity crisis in her life. She loses both her husband and the social status she has gained upon her marriage. From then on, she fails to provide a "sense of security, stability, and certainty" (Bretherton, 1992: 760) which are the basis for identity development in her children. Thus, due to her mother's uncaring and ignorant attitude, Maryam develops a sense of mistrust and doubt in the process of identity development in her childhood. That is why all along her life, she has substituted many different characters as attachment figures.

In her childhood and adolescence periods, Maryam identifies herself with her nanny Fatima, who has breast-fed her and has replaced Maryam for her son whom she has lost. Erikson (1963) assures that feeding is the start of building a trust bond with the attachment figures (247). Experiencing a feeling of continuously being cared for or being shown affection by this familiar figure, Erikson believes, strengthens trust in the caregiver or the mother who is an outer social being. As a result, not Maryam's mother but Fatima plays the role of an attachment figure throughout her life.

The ambiguity and confusion in the concept of attachment figure for Maryam continues in her adolescence period as well. In her adolescence, Maryam still does not trust her mother as the main attachment figure. Instead, Fatima keeps her dominant role as the attachment figure in Maryam's life, for her mother has never initiated the sense of security in her. As a young girl, Maryam's dependency on Fatima is very strong as she states:

In many ways, she has helped me hide my growing up: binding my breasts so they do not show and washing the rags when I bleed, keeping it secret so that everyone thinks I am still a child. She has helped me safe for myself, as if I am her own daughter, in some ways, I am. (Crowther, 2006: 36)

Fatima's treating Maryam as her daughter and hiding her bleeding is a supportive manner of a caregiver. In Iranian culture, it is believed that bleeding women are polluted and unclean, so they have to be excluded and isolated from the others, and they cannot pray with others (Crowther, 2006: 131). This categorization of women results in developing a negative gender and social identity. As for gender identity, women are categorized as the ones belonging to the undervalued groups of people who feel humiliated and degraded for their menstruation, so this cultural belief enhances a sense of inferiority in young girls. In addition, since menarche in women starts in adolescence period, when girls are in the most critical ages of their life cycle, they blame themselves for this biological event that leads them to get isolated and outgrouped. Upon this social categorization, they lose their self-esteem and gradually develop a social identity that alienates them based on their biological and gender differences. That is why Fatima's hiding Maryam's menstruation is perceived as protection by Maryam.

Edward- Maryam's English husband- partially plays the role of attachment figure in Maryam's adulthood period as he instills a sense of trust in her. Being far away from her homeland and the ones who are valuable to her, she assumes Edward as a trustworthy person who would be protecting her in this new environment in Britain (Erikson, 1968: 93). The reason behind her sense of security and trust in Edward is that "he never punished her, not once, ... [and] he always made her feel safe. In a way it was why she had married him" (Crowther, 2006: 30). Apparently, Maryam compares Edward to her father, and when she notices that he is different from her father who punished and banished her and caused all the pain she has been suffering from, she identifies Edward as an attachment figure and develops a sense of security in the unfamiliar setting in exile.

In the early stages of her adolescence period until the age of sixteen when her father asks her to marry one of her suitors "the son of a nearby merchant and landowner" (Crowther, 2006: 44), Maryam manifests a positive relationship with her father. However, under the effect of Persian culture, the childhood attachment with her father seems to be vanishing due to the cultural norms that position women as the ones who have to attain the roles of wives or mothers thereafter and the ones who do not have any autonomy or freedom to make their own decisions as to what they seek to achieve in their lives.

Maryam becomes the subject of her father's rage as she rejects to marry the suitor his father suggests. Although Maryam's father's parenting style in this specific case seems to be democratic and authoritative that inspires a sense of autonomy and freedom in her and encourages her to make her own decision and share it with her father freely (Baumrind, 1966: 891), noticing Maryam's disrespectful attitude toward tradition and order, he tries to restrict his daughter's autonomy in an authoritarian manner (Baumrind, 1966: 890). Maryam is quite aware of the cultural practices in Iran, so she knows that as a woman she has to conform to the rules and regulations, otherwise she would be

outgrouped. That is why she feels herself trapped, and she falls into despair. Maryam feels degraded when she finds out her father does not recognize her as ‘someone,’ (Erikson, 1968, 128) so she develops a sense of inferiority and hopelessness. As Erikson (1968) puts it, forceful parental wishes might be realized as external attacks that might result in the identity loss which is one of the most fearful aspects in the adolescence period (132). Thus, in order to re-emerge from this crisis, she takes a firm stand against her father and informs him that she will not get married. This objection to the father’s will in a patriarchal society has its own harsh consequences.

When Maryam tells her father that she would not marry her suitor, he spits on her, slaps her face and his ring cuts her lip (Crowther, 2006: 64). He adopts an authoritarian parenting style by which he “attempts to shape, control, and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of ... [her daughter] in accordance with a set standard of conduct, usually an absolute standard, theologically motivated and formulated by a higher authority” (Baumrind, 1966: 890). Assuming Maryam’s rejection as a threat toward their traditional and cultural constructs, he uses a vigorous and harsh method of punishment to make Maryam submit to his will and conform to her paternal wish.

When she encounters her father’s spit on her face, psychologically she is influenced on various levels. Firstly, her sense of trust toward her father is shattered. Maryam feels ashamed since spitting in many cultures is the sign of dishonoring (Clifford, 1988: 133). Thus, she loses her self-esteem and feels herself as an inferior individual who is not recognized by her father. The impact of the paternal slap on her is also obvious in the process of her social identity development. With the slap of her father on her face, Maryam realizes that she is no more ingroup with her father as she has not respected his values. Therefore, it affects her social identity negatively.

Straus (2009) proposes that the act of abuse or corporal/physical punishment could convey a wrong message to the adolescents, who are in the most critical years of their life circle, so they might come to the idea that they can possibly use the same method when their wish is not fulfilled (9). This wrong message that Maryam receives from her father in her adolescence period, is transmitted to her adulthood period so that she tries to apply physical and corporal punishments both on her daughter Sara and nephew Saeed.

Maryam’s daughter Sara is the first victim of corporal punishment by her mother. When sharing her bitter memory with her husband Julian she states:

Once, I must have been about eight, I was playing in front of her dressing table on my own, and put on one of her scarves, knotted beneath my chin. I had her bright-red lipstick smudged all over my face... She was so furious when she saw me. She said the scarf was her mother’s and I should know better. She scrubbed my face until it was sore, but the worst thing was that she got out the kitchen scissors and just lopped off my ponytail, so my hair was really short. She said I wouldn’t play with make-up if I looked like a boy. You should have heard me cry. (Crowther, 2006: 22)

Maryam’s way of punishing is much severer psychologically than physically. There are serious impacts of corporal punishment on the psychology of children as a result of which they may either

become aggressive and show a similar reaction to others, or they might lose their self-esteem and withdraw themselves from contact with others (Donoghue, 2005; Straus, 2009). The impact of Maryam's punishment on Sara is much related to the latter consequence, as she feels a sense of shame and hesitates to tell her husband about the severity of the punishment.

Maryam's cutting Sara's pony tail is also an influential factor on Sara's personal identity formation at the age of eight. As stated previously, the first type of identity that any individual forms in the early years of his/her life cycle is personal identity. As Turner (1982) puts it, physical attributes of a person which are shaped by external factors such as social, cultural, and gender-based paradigms are essential in forming a personal identity (15). Harter (1999) asserts that in line with cultural and gender constraints, individuals construct self-representations or false ideal perceptions of physical appearance that conforming to it might enhance their self-esteem. Thus, they feel themselves apt to follow these idealized models in order to gain recognition in their social circle (142). For girls one of the ideal forms of physical appearance is having long hair that would both manifest their gender identity as a girl compared to the short-haired boys, and become a feature to gain self-esteem. Maryam, who has grown up under these false beliefs and cultural norms, cuts her daughter Sara's hair to punish her wrong behavior for using her mother's make up materials, yet in this way she not only applies corporal punishment, but also humiliates Sara and makes her lose her self-esteem. Thus, even after many years, when she witnesses her mother's wrong reaction toward Saeed, she remembers her own painful history and crisis and develops a sense of empathy with her cousin.

Maryam practices corporal punishment on her nephew Saeed, too. When Saeed moves to Britain upon his mother's death, due to his lack of adaptation to the new environment and peer pressure, once instead of going to school, he starts moving around in a shopping centre when he is noticed by police and is taken to the police station (Crowther, 2006: 12). Maryam is so reactive toward Saeed for his misbehavior, she turns to Saeed and says "The shame of it. She shook her head as if she had dirt in her mouth. Why have you brought me here, Saeed? What would your mother say?" (Crowther, 2006: 10). Maryam thinks that Saeed is under her responsibility, and any misbehavior of him is due to her failure in raising or parenting him well. Therefore, she feels herself guilty for not being protective enough to Saeed. Consequently, under the influence of her cultural views and her father's authoritarian parenting style, she believes that she has to correct his misbehavior through corporal punishment (Straus, 2009). That is why when Sara takes her mom and cousin out of the police station, Maryam suddenly reaches over and takes Saeed's chin in her hand, draws back her hand and slaps him so hard that "his head jerk[s] to the side" (Crowther, 2006: 11-12).

Maryam's punishing Saeed has its root in her own history. Maryam is culturally brought up in a family which considers corporal and/or physical punishment as a way to empower their children by punishing their wrong behaviors. Thus, as an adult, when she underestimates peer influence and overestimates the capability of her nephew to get adapted to his new home, she feels herself trapped. Thus, she practices an old authoritative manner that she used to be familiar with from her own adolescence periods. She is not aware of the fact that after all these years of living away from her father, who has been a source of anger and aggression in her life, she is doing what her father used to

do to her. In her adulthood, she shows the consequences of the traumatic crises that she has experienced in her youth. It, in fact, is the manifestation of her lack of developing a sound identity in her old-age as well.

At the age of 16, Maryam is highly influenced by Ali, her father's servant, who is teaching English to Maryam. Due to the class difference between Maryam and Ali it is impossible for them to get united and they are both aware of the cultural norms in Persian culture. However, during the political upheaval (1979 Islamic Revolution) when the streets are on fire in Iran, through an unexpected incident, Maryam leaves home and is caught between two fires when Ali rescues her. As there is no chance for them to go back to Maryam's home, Ali takes her to his home in order to protect her from the chaotic atmosphere outside (Crowther, 2006: 76-77). Traditionally, it is not acceptable for a young girl to go to a bachelor's home alone, and it seems to be an unforgivable act in the Persian culture.

Unfortunately, when she tries to get home the next morning, her aunt's servant sees Ali and Maryam together and there starts a rumor that she has lost her virginity. As it is in many Middle Eastern countries, virginity is the symbol of chastity and virtue which is directly connected to the honor of the family. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian maintains, "Honor is much more than a measure of the individual woman's moral quality: it reflects upon the entire family and its relations to the community. Therefore, insults to a family's honor must be avenged in kind or in material compensation" (qtd. in Ilkkaracan 2008: 182). The price that Maryam pays for her mistreatment is too heavy. Primarily she is rejected by her father and is banished from her home and homeland. However, she has to clear her father's name by undergoing a virginity test, and it is the only way to redeem the family honor.

As for the impact of this decision on Maryam's identity formation, it should be said that she loses all her trust in her father as an attachment figure, and she no longer cares to identify herself with her father. The sense of shame that starts in her in this phase is much related to her father's rejecting her as a daughter and not to the cultural constructs that condemn her for not being 'fit' in society (Erikson, 1968: 60). She does not feel herself guilty in this regard since she has done nothing to contaminate the chastity that is of great value in their culture, yet her innocence does not help her regain her value as a woman in this patriarchal society. Thus, she lives a role confusion through which she can hardly perceive why she is condemned although she has not lost her virginity, and why she cannot continue living with her family if she can prove her chastity.

Maryam, as a sixteen-year-old Iranian girl, experiences the most horrifying identity crisis in her teenage period while undergoing the virginity test. She is sent to the military hospital for the virginity test. She is so terrified in the middle of the soldiers who would touch her untouched body to prove that she is still a virgin. What Maryam experiences in this room is rape by her father's most trustworthy soldiers. After many years Maryam could still hear "the sound of saliva in the army doctor's mouth, his hands punching up inside her" (Crowther, 2006: 260). Thus, the rumor, which is not certified to be true, obscures Maryam's identity in her life cycle. The consequences of this crisis

can be seen in her adulthood period, too. In the early days of her marriage in Britain, her husband Edward tries to

hold her up through her nightmares and tears, the places where she floundered and the past she could never fully share with him... When they were just married, the bleak moments wouldn't last long: a few hours before she would re-emerge, sweet and smiling, and he would hold her even closer. But it grew worse after the Revolution and her parents' deaths. Her collapses were less frequent, but deeper and darker. She would emerge from them in a daze, blank eyes wandering down to the garden, peering at him as if she scarcely knew him, flinching if he tried to touch her. Then finally it would pass. (Crowther, 2006: 31)

Maryam's attitudes in this period reveal her severe identity crises in London. Not only the loss of the familiar environment but also the loss of the family members makes her withdraw herself and get isolated and depressed. Her marriage with Edward brings a sense of commitment to Maryam, yet from her past experiences she has developed a sense of doubt in trusting people, so she hesitates to share all her bitter past experiences with Edward. As Erikson (1968) puts it, external doubt that is likely to be developed in childhood seems to be like a feeling that hidden prosecutors are chasing from behind (112). These secret prosecutions in Maryam's life are her bitter memories of past that continue all through her life. Besides, the virginity test and the rape trauma that she had lived in her adolescence were the factors that had created shame in her personality development, so she had preferred to repress the sexual abuse (Hellmich, 1995) instead of sharing it with anybody because remembering those unpleasant events would influence her identity development negatively.

In her adulthood period, in Britain

Maryam could scarcely bear to think about what had happened to her on the day in the barracks, how they had pulled her apart, and how she had learned to hide it away in the depths of her mind... the day in the barracks had somehow punched a black hole in her mind, and however hard she had tried to turn her back on it, it had still wreaked its havoc. (Crowther, 2006: 227-228)

Hellmich (1995) assures that the victims of abuse tend to deny the harassment and repress the bitter memories in order to protect their ego identity for a short time period (4). This is what exactly appears in the process of identity development in Maryam. All along her life, she represses this adolescence experience of rape, and she even does not share it with anybody since sharing this memory would mean losing her self-integrity. The trauma of this sexual abuse leads Maryam to develop a diffused identity through which she withdraws herself into a bizarre mood (Erikson, 1968: 132). This state of her identity perpetuates in her adolescence and adulthood periods.

To conclude, Maryam has experienced severe identity crises in her childhood and adolescence periods that resulted in her developing a "diffused identity" in the later stages of her life. Her inability to forgive herself as well as her father blocks her coming to terms with her Self (Pargament, 1997: 262) to form an achieved identity. As a result, in the face of any event or news that she

associates with her father, Maryam remembers her banishment, her repressed feelings toward him, the virginity test and the rape. She recalls how his banishing her and throwing her away like rubbish has hurt her soul all through these years (Crowther, 2006: 225). Thus, Maryam seems to be caught in a never ending vicious circle which she cannot escape.

**This study is a part of my PhD Dissertation.*

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