

Of Memory, Malignant Motherhood and Misery: A Critical Study of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

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Article Received: 02/6/2022,

Article Accepted: 10/06/2022,

Published online: 12/07/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.7.06

Abstract:

Memory induces happiness, memory constructs faith, memory hurts, memory pains, memory bullies, and memory blames- memory affects diversely to both individual and collective pulses. Lionel Shriver's award winning novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, however, presents an entirely distinct scenario, where the memory of motherhood haunts a mother. Stepping outside the taboo of motherhood and the happiness, coming out of it, Shriver, in her novel, shows what happens if a mother hates her son. The traumatic presentation of the memory of the motherhood reveals both the failure of the upbringing of her son and the negative by-product of such treatment- the construction of a psychopathic school shooter in Kevin. In view of this, the paper analyzes the role of memory constructed out of an unforgettable motherhood experience and how it affects the lives which are intertwined. This also offers an opportunity to introspect the psychological standpoints of the readers in general and the concerned character in particular.

Keywords: Malignant motherhood, School Shooting, Trauma, Memory

The memory of motherhood is one of the most cherished memories of every woman. This is something that cannot be expressed in any physical form. From the birth of a child till death separates the mother and the child; the mother-child relationship is considered the most valued association ever. Whatever situation arises, a mother gives top priority to her child, and the memory of motherhood is precious to her. The mother-child relationship is diversely portrayed in literature, and as a result, various shades of this relationship come to the forefront. Incidentally, almost all of them celebrate the concept of motherhood and the pleasure allied with it. However, there are some extraordinary cases where the taboo of motherhood is reconstructed. One example is Lionel Shriver's award-winning novel. *We Need to Talk about Kevin*.

The novel is unique in many ways. It portrays the unusual scenario where the memory of motherhood haunts a mother. Stepping outside the taboo of motherhood and the happiness out of it, Shriver, in her novel, shows what happens if a mother hates her son. The disturbing presentation of the memory of motherhood divulges both the failure of the upbringing of her son and the harmful byproduct of such treatment- the construction of a psychopathic school shooter in Kevin. Because of this, the paper analyzes the role of memory constructed out of an

unforgettable motherhood experience and how it affects intertwined lives. This also offers an opportunity to introspect the psychological standpoints of the readers in general and the concerned characters in particular.

The memory of Malignant Motherhood

The novel *We Need to Talk about Kevin* depicts the growth of a young boy Kevin, whose mother has hated him since before his birth. To Eva, Kevin is an unwanted son who came to the world accidentally to ruin her successful career as a tourist guide. As a result, Kevin never gets his gypsy mother's full attention, who thinks "Kevin was hard to love in the same manner that it was hard to eat well in Moscow, find a cheap place to stay in London, or locate a commercial Laundromat in Bangkok" (266). She even blames baby Kevin for being the reason for her confinement into their house to babysit him. Eva's impatience towards her son, her judgmental nature towards Kevin (like she thinks that baby Kevin intentionally does not learn the toilet training), her consideration of Kevin's every action as *jihad* towards her, and her distrust towards him even without any actual proof in specific incidents (like his sister Celia's loss of an eye in an accident, the disappearance of Celia's pet shrew, the sexual harassment complaint against the drama teacher which ends her teaching career), her infliction of physical punishments to Kevin (once she throws him halfway across the hall and thus in this process Kevin breaks his arm)- all these have a definite role in Kevin's negative growth. It "weakens the self-structure (of Kevin), and only cruelty appears to give him a thrill and vitality." (Valdrè 155). The school massacre, which happens later, thus had its roots long back, and in this process, the role of Eva Khatchadourian can't be ignored; throughout the novel, Eva tries to fathom if it is her lack of feeling towards her son that makes Kevin a widely hated school shooter.

Kevin, as a consequence, turns into a problem kid: complex, snubbing, exceptionally intricate, and vehement towards his mother. A baby Kevin refuses his mother's milk; he posits a total non-cooperation to her mother's child-training, and in Eva's view, he does all this deliberately. Through the actions like "throwing all his toys out of the playpen, and then he screams, and he will not stop screaming until they are all back, and then he throws them out again" (122), he announces his 'evil' presence and the natural tyrannical form of hostility to his mother. He also displays a strong antipathy against the things his mother loves. For example, when Eva constructs a private room papered with maps and decorated with exotic masks, she finds out that "it not simply invaded but vandalized by Kevin, its fantasy of other places forever disfigured and smeared with paint" (Thornham 12). Kevin also plays a passive role in destroying his mother's business with his virus collection. He flirts with his mother's emotion and temper effortlessly (like, to annoy his mom, Kevin masturbates in front of her keeping the bathroom door open) and thus destroys her mental peace. Her vulnerability to Kevin reflects her admission when she says, "he frightened me, and I was desperate not to set him off...I never feel protected anymore" (48). Kevin's babyhood exploits towards his mother reflect in his childhood and adolescence acts of destruction or manipulation to terminate something dear to somebody (like he destroys and influences to destroy the favorite tea set of a girl in K.G.). His ways of torturing his younger sister Celia showcase the extreme form of sibling rivalry

where the meek, soft-natured Celia always remains at the receiving end. These episodes elucidate Kevin's growth, characterized by a destructive inner project, ultimately leading him to the final massacre.

The memory of such disturbing motherhood adversely affects both the mother and the son. Since memory is an ever-growing process, the antipathy which started growing between them after Kevin's birth takes a malignant form and rescinds everything on the way. The memory inflicts psychic wounds on both of them. As a result, the mother blames her son for it and the son, on the other hand, releases everything in the form of the parricides and the massacre. He kills eleven people, including his father and his sister, in his rampage, shooting spree.

The memory of Trauma and Construction of Psyche

The novel is a perfect example of how trauma's memory works in the psyche's construction. The scar of such memory remains in both mother and son and leaves a profound rooted impact on their individuality. In the case of Kevin, the memory of his mother's indifference towards him plays a decisive role in his self-centered, alienated nature. With every passing day, Kevin becomes lonelier than before. "He's never known what to do with himself...his day is agreeably regimented from breakfast to lights out" (193). Ironically, the only thing which interests him during this time is the news of school shootings happening all over the country. He not only follows the minute details of those horrifying rampages but also displays his authoritative expertise in matters that frequently come out through his detailed analytical discussions with his parents.

The role of traumatic memory in the lives of school shooters is ideally assessed by Jack Levin and Eric Madfis in their research paper "Mass Murder at School and Cumulative Strain: A Sequential Model." In that paper, while illustrating the "genesis of mass murder" committed by youths at their schools, the authors point out five successive stages: the chronic strain, the uncontrolled strain, the acute strain, the planning stage, and the massacre. According to Levin and Madfis,

Long-term frustrations (chronic strains) experienced early in life or in adolescence lead to social isolation, and the resultant lack of pro-social support systems (uncontrolled pressure) in turn allows a short-term adverse event (acute strain), be it natural or imagined, to be particularly devastating. As such, the critical stress initiates a planning stage, wherein a mass killing is fantasized about as a masculine solution to regain lost feelings of control. Actions are taken to ensure the fantasy can become a reality. The planning process concludes in a massacre facilitated by weapons that enable mass destruction in schoolrooms and campuses, where students are closely packed together (1227).

In the case of Kevin in the novel, chronic, uncontrolled, and acute strain have ample abundance, which rises from his association and enigmatic relationship with his mother. Such was the impact of the earlier three stages on his psyche that the planning stage and the massacre appear inevitable.

However, it is also interesting to see, along with the negative influence of Eva, how the role of memories related to the suburban lives with their empty ideals, the open concept of a 'happy American Family,' the dull banality of routine life, changes Kevin's perception of life, which are also responsible for creating a gulf between the family and the individual. Shriver's analysis of such a scenario is aptly assessed by Dana Rocco, Kevin's class teacher and a future victim, who points at this vital aspect, providing significant insights into the inner stories of the school massacre. In a parents-teacher meeting before the killings, Rocco suggests to Eva that youths like Kevin have a strong antipathy against affluence and prosperity of the nation in general and the family in particular. She comments, "Maybe he is mad that this is as good as it gets...The country's very prosperity has become a burden, a dead end. Everything works...so it must often seem to young people that they're not needed. In a sense, it's as if there's nothing more to do except tear it apart" (391).

The memories of Eva and Kevin also have an inevitable linkage with various forms of isolation, which play a dominant role in their growth. Though Kevin is free from any direct identifiable ethnic, social, or cultural marginalization (unlike his mother Eva, whose Armenian root constantly pricks her not to assimilate herself into American culture), he confines himself in an unsocial barrier where even his family members are prohibited from entering, and he considers them as trespassers. From Eva's enigmatic narrative, it is very doubtful to decide for the readers whether this exile is forcefully imposed on Kevin or is self-inflicted; the growing apathy against everything is, without a doubt, an essential byproduct of such isolation.

For Kevin, also there is a constant attempt at attaining hyper-masculine ideals of vehemence, reckless bravery, and "cool" emotional detachment, which the other accurate life school shooters showcase. This is another effect of the collective memory of his contemporary time, which contributes heavily to constructing the distorted psyche of the concerned character. The façade of school shooters like Kevin "therefore straddles an uneasy divide between individual identity and cultural constructions of adolescent masculinity. It simultaneously reveals and sublets hidden emotional conflicts, functioning as the manly, cool, and ultimately empty "face" of individual trauma."(Phipps 101) Kevin Khatchadourian's psyche also prospered with this unholy combination of viciousness (which brings out psychopathic excess) and emotional indifferences (which is the way of showcasing the "coolness"). Zizek links this to Martin Heidegger's theorization of "replacement," (2) emphasizing that coolness is aimed at providing a social impression of a particular subjective orientation: a 'cool' person does everything with an air of indifference or inner distance" (Zizek 896). Kevin's fascination to attain this stature of "coolness" is one of the significant reasons of what he becomes.

At this point, another important observation comes to the forefront: trauma memory may transfer. Herzog observes: "The mind of a child develops reflecting the reality of her parents and that which they must fight against . . . What remains un-metabolized often becomes

fertile material for transmission and a new enactment” (299). In Kevin’s case also, he is a victim of his mother’s transmitted trauma, the trauma of seeing her Armenian family members butchered by the Turks. Her son aptly inherits his bloody and troubling past, Eva; it differently restructures Kevin’s self and eventually distorts the “capacity to modulate aggression.” (Herzog 299)

Kevin’s and other school shooters’ actions can be best understood from the psychoanalytic theorization of aggression, where his childhood memory plays a distinct role. In *Civilisation and its Discontent* (1929), Sigmund Freud argues that “a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment” (24). In every child’s psychic growth, there are presences of sadistic primitive impulses that help form his superego. Valdrè identifies this as “original natural violence,” which is essential and “present in every human being and necessary for his/her survival,” which is “an integral part of the life instinct and self-preservation” (Valdrè 151). However, such aggression remains latent in most cases because of the adaptive response of the child from his caregiver (in most cases, it is the mother). The point Kevin described in the novel does not follow this conventional pattern because of the incoherent relationship between him and his caregiver (his mother, Eva). For Kevin, the sadistic primitive impulses remain independent and continuously find outlets in sadism and hatred through his destructive solid urge. His childhood memory with his mother actively prompts the process, and it alarmingly increases with his age, and finally, in his daylong massacre, it gets the ultimate outlet.

The memory of Trauma and Narrative Technique

However, the difficult part for an author in reflecting on a character's memory is the mode of narration. In elucidating traumatic memory, the task is more challenging because of the emotional linkage and the pain involved in the particular memory. Here, Lionel Shriver adopts a very ‘old school’ epistolary technique while penning the novel. This novel's epistolary form provides a mesmerizing and great read as it continuously hints at the after-effects of a dreadful crime and a family’s dysfunction. Eva’s letters to her estranged husband, Franklin, enunciate her perplexity and distress over Kevin’s actions, as well as her worries and queries: whether her utter indifference towards her son is responsible for what he grows into.

The first-person narrative of the novel also plays various vital roles. Eva's non-chronological and perplexing history pertinently justifies the inner turmoil of the characters concerned. The book's full description is thus exclusively dependent upon the narrator's memory. The author of “The cradle will rock: New cinema” aptly points out that “the shifts from the present to the past... are jumbled with the non-chronology of memory... Kevin’s big, violent moment is left until the end, but the bloody fact of it infects everything that comes before” (106). Eva's narrative's fast-paced nature also assists in inducing the dramatic revelation.

Another exciting feature of the novel's narrative is that though it maintains Eva's viewpoint throughout, it is splintered and intensified enough to allow skepticism to unbalance (Gilbey 44). Ryan Gilbey, in his essay "Seeing red: A great cast is offset by overkill in this horror story," brings the instance of Eva's violence against Kevin (When she throws the infant Kevin against a wall, he bears the injury of a broken arm without crying) to justify his point. Gilbey raises a very pertinent question here which conjectures the enigmatic nature of the narrative to a great extent: "How likely is it that a child could sustain such an injury without crying unless his eerie composure was an invention of the woman who hurt him? Either we believe that Eva is delusional, or we accept that Kevin terrorized her from the day he was born" (44). This cryptic nature of the narrative is undeniably an exceptional literary technique adopted by Shriver, which offers her the scope to heighten the novel's intensity while dealing with such a serious topic. So clearly, there is a dichotomy between what Eva recollects in her memory and what she wants to tell her readers.

The memory also has a significant say in the process of the murderer's character construction and in creating the imprint of the actual murder episode. Through her narrative, Eva presents various aspects of Kevin's nascent psychopathy and emphasizes his friendlessness and lack of allure. Thus, the "overall picture she develops is of an immensely dislikable and unpopular boy" (Phipps 107).

To conclude, it can be said that in her novel, Shriver has indeed created a mysterious world with the memory of a desolate indifferent mother and her criminal son. On the one hand, it haunts the concerned characters to a great extent. The startling, unforgettable episodes which depict the darker aspects of the taboo of motherhood are indeed thought-provoking to the readers. And on the other hand, readers come across how memory constructs the psyche and individuality of characters. The paper also tries to introspect how beautifully the author can use the instrument of memory in a novel.

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