

Examining Abuse as a Manifestation of Maternal Ambivalence in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

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Abstract

The institution of Motherhood, as is propagated by traditional philosophical discourse, has been challenged by feminist scholars during the last few decades. As a result, Maternal Ambivalence and its manifestations have carved out a niche in scholarly discussion as an inevitable and integral part of the maternal experience. This research article carries out a thematic analysis of the selected work of contemporary fiction using Sarah LaChance Adams' theory of Maternal Ambivalence. The research engages with Lionel Shriver's We Need to Talk About Kevin, which depicts an abusive relationship between mother and child, analyzing how narratives like this negotiate the construction of cultural perceptions of motherhood, as well as the reigning societal expectations of mothers. By examining fictional accounts, the paper explores the symbolic and metaphorical representations of abuse between mother and child in literature, uncovering the deeper psychological and socio-cultural implications embedded within the text. Drawing on theories from motherhood studies using Brown and Clarke's model of textual analysis, the paper investigates the interplay of power in the patriarchy as well as the existence of maternal identity in the status quo, thus illustrating how literary representations of abuse contribute to broader discourses on women's roles and societal norms. It critically examines how the author navigates the labyrinth of maternal emotions, societal pressures, and mental health crises through their narrative, offering insights into the ways literature both reflects and challenges prevailing cultural ideologies. It discerns abuse, as a manifestation of the ambivalent maternal experience, exploring the phenomenon under study in the delimited contemporary fiction. It engages with the normative perception of motherhood, and challenges it by providing evidence from the

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fiction under study, proving that a mother is a flawed human, who when overridden by her ambivalence, can harm the child under her care.

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1. Introduction

The image of a woman maltreating a child is reprehensible. The traditional roles assigned to a woman of a carer and nurturer are in complete contradiction to that of an abuser. Ancient civilizations were always cautious around their goddesses as these female deities were perceived as creators as well as destroyers. They were revered for their abilities and were surrounded by mystery because of their power to wield life or death. With the evolution of society these ferocious beings were tamed by patriarchy and converted into benign female archetypes. Contemporary women are denied an expression of their aggression, hence when a mother abuses her child physically, emotionally or psychologically, she is treated as an anomaly and is ostracised. The terrible female characters like Judith or Lady Macbeth or the murderous Medea were subjects of literature but the purpose was to teach women a lesson, to provide them with an example of what will happen to them if they do not conform to the role assigned to them of a loving, sacrificing mother. Women as Virginia N. Wilking concludes were no longer treated as the feisty beings with will and emotion but as mere “victims: first held hostage by dragons later imprisoned in modern doll houses” (Wilking, 1990, p.143). Though Medea’s killing of her children is a very violent act, abusing the child should not be surprising considering the prevalence of violent and aggressive tendencies among women throughout history.

Child abuse has become one of the topics of mainstream scholarly discourse over the past half a century, however it does not mean that it is a new phenomenon: Lloyd deMause points out that “the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awake, the further back one goes... more likely children are to be killed, beaten, abandoned or abused” (deMause, 1995, p.1). In the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations infanticide was rampant and very differently defined. Children up to several years of age were considered infants and they were maltreated or sacrificed due to various reasons. Women did not have much autonomy and mothers would get rid of the illegitimate child to

avoid shame. Some mothers would abuse their children when their fathers refused to recognize their offspring as their own. This suggests that children did not have even basic rights and were largely at the whims of their fathers. The fathers would allow their children to be exploited sexually and it was not considered unjust as Aristotle said that a son is like a slave property of the father and one cannot be unjust to one's personal property; it is theirs to be used in whichever way. The Middle Ages though not a very child-friendly time, killing and abusing children was prohibited by the passing of some laws. The enforcement of these laws was lacking as the children were forced into labour so as to increase the family income. The financial crunch and poor living standards forced parents to mistreat their children, torture them or injure their children, turn them into beggars or to sell them off to make money. With the rise of protestants during the sixteenth century children's fate seemed to improve a little; previously the religious scholars had believed that children were born in God's image, a part of His soul to be protected and cared for. There was a downside to it as well. The religious dogma preached that the original sin was present in every child born, so the teachers and parents took extreme measures to whip the sin and evil out of the child's personality. Children's lot steadily improved during the Enlightenment era as philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated children being a "tabula rasa" and being born with an inner moral compass respectively. They believed in little to no interference by the parents and no constraints, and no disciplining. This philosophical shift however does not ensure that the world learnt its lesson and started treating children nicely. The stories of abuse in the private as well as societal realm continues. The 18th century novels written by English author Charles Dickens are representative of the plight of children. *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield* etc revolve around boys born in poor circumstances, mistreated by caregivers in asylums, orphanages or foster homes and forced into working in abusive environments. The situation was the same for the children in other parts of the civilized world. The slave trade in America is an example where the children of the slaves were forced into labour, tortured and sold off to owners without their parents' consent. The case of Mary Ellen played a pivotal role in ensuring that the world realizes that a child cannot be abused, mistreated or killed. In 1874 Mary Ellen's case was the beginning of acknowledging, questioning and confronting child abuse. It started a movement against child abuse and resulted in the foundation of "society for the prevention of cruelty to children". The phenomenon of child abuse gained momentum and

recognition where it started being studied in laboratories by Dr. C. Henry Kempe who titled it “The Battered Child Syndrome”. At present child abuse is being studied by various scholars and experts in numerous disciplines.

In spite of the awareness that exists about the phenomenon of child abuse, it continues to this day in varied forms across cultures, religions and ethnicities. There are organizations working and charters enforced on this issue, yet the children continue to suffer. The most representative definition of child abuse that the civilized society has agreed upon is “Child Abuse is defined as the physical, sexual, psychological abuse or neglect of a child by a parent or caregiver” (Damaskopoulou, 2023, p.3).

In addition to this definition, the scholars of the field have the impression that the abuse children face is usually perpetrated by a family member, in most cases the caregivers (Damaskopoulou, 2023, p.3). The socioeconomic conditions of the family is another factor which, researchers believe, contributes to child abuse. There are other factors involved in it and poverty alone is not a sufficient explanation or cause of abuse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Factors Governing Child Abuse

Like any other phenomenon related to human beings, child abuse is complex and complicated and is governed by a number of factors. Broadly speaking it can be categorized into factors related to parents and factors related to children.

2.1.1 Depression & Post-natal Depression

The American Psychiatric Association declared depression to be the most commonly prevalent type of mental disorder (McCoy and Keen, 2013, p.26) and identified low mood, insomnia, antisocial tendencies, lack of concentration and suicidal thoughts as its main symptoms. All these symptoms contribute to improper functioning and impaired judgement; hence it is quite evident that a parent suffering from depression would not be able to provide the child with optimum care and there is an increased risk of abuse at the hands of a depressed caregiver.

Mental illness is one of the many reasons leading to child abuse, and not all who maltreat children suffer from depression, however McCoy quotes

a study that shows that abusers tend to have certain personality traits: “feelings of inadequacy, impulsivity, violent tendencies, low self-esteem, immaturity, low frustration tolerance and anxiety” (McCoy and Keen, 2013, p.27). The upbringing of emotionally, psychologically and physically well children is a challenge that requires maximum effort by a stable mother therefore in case of mothers with unstable personalities or mood disorders the task seems herculean.

2.1.2 The Unprepared Mother

Young mothers, according to Dubowitz et al in their 2011 study, tend to be more abusive towards their children than mothers who were older and more formally educated. There is a lack of awareness and preparedness as to what needs to be done when one decides to bring a child into the world. Studies have shown that abusive mothers seem to be caught unaware of all that is required of them. They are not prepared for the physical and emotional burden that comes with choosing to be a mother.

2.1.3 Dysfunctional Family Structure

A dysfunctional family structure tends to be one of the leading factors contributing to the maltreatment of children. A dysfunctional family is one in which there is little communication, inadequate show of affection, a general lack of togetherness which means that there are several factors at play leading to child abuse. Dysfunction can be of several types. A child raised by a single mother is more likely to be maltreated according to the data collected by National Centre for Child Abuse and Neglect (McCoy and Keen, 2013, p.30). This is especially prevalent in families where the mother, being a single parent, has to bear the financial load along with childcare

2.1.4 Lack of Social and Financial Support

There are various reasons for this correlation such as “extreme stress, unemployment, unstable housing, poor community support, dangerous environment and minimal access to healthcare” (McCoy and Keen, 2013, p.37). A mother coping with a variety of stress factors in her life will be an inadequate parent in most cases. In the economically stressful environment where a mother has to provide and care adds to the already precarious situation. Since the mother has to stay at home, with her frustration and stress piling up, the child who is in constant contact with the mother is more at risk than with a mother who works and is otherwise financially independent.

2.2 Types of Child Abuse & Neglect

2.2.1 Physical Abuse and its Consequences

Physical abuse is the most commonly acknowledged form of child abuse as the scars it leaves can be observed. According to some definitions the risk of harm in physical abuse is defined as

... any non-accidental physical injury to the child, and can include striking, kicking, burning or biting the child, or any action that results in the physical impairment of the child (McCoy and Keen, 2013, p.65)

Physical punishment carried out in order to discipline the child is not considered physical abuse in many parts of the world. For example, in the USA, legislation has allowed to carry out corporal punishment with a few conditions, as long as there is no bruising, fractures, head injuries by fall, or shaking or burns of any kind. Death is the ultimate form of child abuse. Other than affecting the body of a child, physical maltreatment has other consequences too.

2.2.2 Psychological and Emotional Abuse

This form of maltreatment includes both acts of abuse and the acts of omission that are known as neglect. In case of emotional neglect, the parent fails to fulfill the child's psychological or emotional requirements. They are unable to form a connection with the child who feels alone and isolated in their own home in the presence of the person who is supposed to take care of them. As far as psychological or emotional abuse is concerned it occurs when the caregiver damages the child's mental well-being intentionally and actively. A few examples are: ridiculing the child, passing derogatory remarks, calling them names or threatening to physically harm them. Unlike physical abuse, the evidence of which is prominent and is easy to determine, detecting psychological abuse is difficult. Emotionally abusive parents tend to ignore their child's emotional, psychological, educational needs and refuse to put their resources at the child's disposal for any of the child's needs.

2.3 The Archetypal Dark Mother in Literature

The Jungian Archetypes always have two sides so for the positive maternal archetype there is also the negative mother archetype, the dark mother, the devouring mother, the Kali in opposition to the Gaia. Carl Jung's archetypes are a result of continuous introspection of world literature and exploring the repeated myths which can be seen in human behaviour in all parts of the world. Each archetype has positive and

negative aspects to it, the ideal version and the shadow version of it. The positive aspect is the one that we show to the world and the negative aspects are those parts of our personality that we keep hidden.

Marion Woodman proposed the Death Mother archetype based on her personal and professional experience and described its presence at an individual as well as societal and cultural level. The Death Mother is the abusive mother. Sieff defines it as unleashing “cold, fierce, violent and corrosive power” (Sieff, 2009, p.178). The effects of the death mother are described “when Death Mother’s gaze is directed at us, it penetrates both psyche and body, turning us into stone. It kills hope. It cuts us dead. We collapse. Our life energy drains from us and we sink into chthonic darkness” (Sieff, 2009, p.178). The Death Mother is the shadow self of the Great Mother, the Virgin Mary, the very picture of fertility, nurturing, wise, all sacrificing and embracing. Carl Jung wrote about the three aspects of the mother archetype “... Her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgiastic emotionality and her stygian depth” (Kushner, 2016). The bad mothers in literature are several; Snow White’s stepmother, Cinderella’s stepmother, Circe or the woman whose gaze turns one to stone, Medusa. In the positive maternal archetype, life’s sap flows outwards to nourish and nurture children, in contrast in the negative maternal archetype, the life blood is directed towards the innermost darkest recesses of a woman’s being and is purely selfish. Dale M Kushner in her article for psychology today provides a very interesting perspective to understand the negative maternal archetype which provides an explanation of why ambivalent mothers are abusive in certain cases. Kushner sees these mothers as “women whose creativity has been stifled, the vital flow of their creative energies... ignored or rejected... these women may experience a fixed negativity that damages their ability to nurture” (Kushner, 2016).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Maternal Ambivalence and Abuse

Sarah LaChance Adams in *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers & What a “Good” Mother Would Do* talks about “the ubiquity of maternal animosity” and how it is generally ignored or played down by scholars. An ambivalent mother feels herself being pulled in two opposite directions. She feels her desires and ambitions working against herself when they are not in favour of their children’s wellbeing. At this juncture, a mother experiences the urge to harm and to protect her child at the same time. LaChance Adams

discusses the instance where maternal ambivalence is at its extreme in three parts, the mutuality, the conflict and the ambiguous intersubjectivity. She explains that mothers do not always relish the sacrifices and self-effacement that is expected of motherhood. A mother might desire an existence that is at odds with maternal duties. The child's age and his needs along with the absence of any other caretaker, determines the mother-child relationship. Even if the mother wants to care for the child, she loses her anatomical integrity, her movement is restricted, her work time is ridden with mom guilt, there is negligible intellectual stimulation and hardly any time available for self-care. This lack of agency moves the mother to an unstable place, the greater her despair and frustration, the greater is the manifestation of it. The physical and emotional abuse carried out by ambivalent mothers is an example of this phenomenon. Sarah LaChance Adams has quoted mothers from various walks of life who were driven to different extremes when going through this phase. This conflict starts at the conception of the child and continues throughout the child's growing up years leaving the mother feeling like "a husk of her former self" (LaChance Adams, 2014, p.35). The ambivalent mothers, as LaChance Adams reports, feel the urge to shake the baby to make it go quiet or to throw it out of the window when the crying gets unbearable. A mother narrates the manifestation of her ambivalence

I have felt many times over the years that I was capable of hurting him... I have spanked him, yanked him, grabbed him too hard... I have managed to stay on this side of this line (LaChance Adams, 2014, p.35)

The mother declares that though she has hit the child but never crossed the line, what LaChance Adams reveals here is that a mother, particularly an ambivalent mother can easily cross over to the dark side and abuse her child physically, psychologically and emotionally.

4. The Ambivalent Mother in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*

We Need to Talk About Kevin is a skeptical contribution to the feminist discourse on motherhood. It provides a rare insight into all institutions of power in the post-modern world. It challenges the traditionally acceptable combination of motherhood and femininity, suggesting that the notion that women are essentially functional and able primary caregivers. Shriver's complex narrative takes an epistolary format. Eva, Kevin's mother, writes letters to her husband Franklin. Kevin killed nine people in a school

shooting at the age of fifteen. The letters are an effort by Eva to reflect upon the events of her life that lead up to “that Thursday” as she refers to the fateful day of the shooting. She revisits her former self who decided to become a mother, the reluctance she felt and the unprecedented hostility that she harboured for her son even when he was “the size of a pea”. In her letters, Eva refers to the violent acts committed by Kevin though there is a mystery and ambiguity around the account of these instances. As the letters continue to reveal the plot the readers find out that Eva and Franklin had a little girl Celia who along with Franklin was killed by Kevin on the day he went on the shooting rampage. The novel challenges the notion that women are born with an innate maternal instinct and that it comes naturally to all women. In spite of the bleak subject matter, the novel is quite popular indicating that Shriver has painted a multidimensional, multi-layered portrait of motherhood which is instructive to many and hence well-received. It challenges the archetype of the ideal mother and shatters the myth that all women can be and therefore should be good mothers.

The criticism directed at the novel is due to the less than pleasant depiction of motherhood. However, it is unrealistic to expect literary texts to present only that which is ordinary and mundane and shun the extraordinary. Though the contemporary world claims that women in general and mothers in particular are allowed to complain persistently about the troubles of motherhood, it is only a recent development and in many cases a privilege not many have. Shriver herself is not a mother so her writing about the pitfalls of motherhood cannot be considered whining about it. Shriver presented us with Eva who is a very successful entrepreneur, widely travelled and wealthy. Her ambivalence towards motherhood starts right from the moment she starts pondering the big question. To be a mother or not to be a mother. She is afraid of losing her freedom and her fears do come true. While pondering whether to procreate or not the questions she asks herself, the way she handles the problem at hand goes to show her reluctance, she believed that “a child was loud, messy, constraining and ungrateful” (Shriver, 2005, p.19) but in the very next instant she wonders if she should have a child because “if I got pregnant something would happen” (Shriver, 2005, p.19). For Eva, having the child is “turning the page” (Shriver, 2005, p.19), or the next logical step. Money is not a constraint as she has a company which is doing very well and if she has a child “It would be a relief to find something of consequence to spend it on” (Shriver, 2005, p.20). After arguing and

parading all the reasons for having and not having a child in typical new age fashion Eva brings out the big guns and declares that having a child would at least help answer the big question “the existential dilemma” (Shriver, 2005, p.21). Eva decides to have a child on a whim, based on a fantasy, as she calls “Motherhood... a foreign country” where she would actually travel to find “a different life not a different airport” (Shriver, 2005, p.22). What is missing in all these musings is the maternal urge and it is wise for a woman like Eva to accept the lack of innate maternal instinct or urge to procreate. The idea of ‘choice’ as presented by Shriver seems perverse. It is not the biology that is urging Eva to procreate but a host of social and cultural variables that govern her decision. The way Eva dissects motherhood, it is surprising that any woman opts to become a mother at all. Eva lists ten reasons for not becoming a parent and they all are valid enough to let one assume that becoming a mother is not something women - at least successful, happy, independent women - are naturally inclined to. According to Eva, becoming a mother would make you lead a life of “dementing boredom” (Shriver, 2005, p.30), since it makes one take decisions which may be against their personal interests. Women with children are isolated to the private sphere and suffer from “social demotion” and “worthless social life” (Shriver, 2005, p.30). She goes on to wonder about what makes women jump off the cliff when foolproof contraceptives are available. She has been waiting for the “overriding urge” and “maternal heat” to be “drowned by the hormonal imperative” (Shriver, 2005, p.31). Eva laments her unnatural maternal self, calling it a “chemical deficiency” which upon her insistence on becoming a mother has turned into a “flaw of Shakespearean proportions”. Eva even considers the questions from a philosophical standpoint; she questions the commonly held belief that a child brings purpose and meaning to life and wonders “if there is no reason to live without a child how could there be with one”. Lionel Shriver portrays through Eva that the maternal experience is not natural, it's constructed and performed. Her ambivalence towards the idea of motherhood is clear from the way she sways between convincing herself and then making lists about ways in which she will lose meaning. Eva dreads being “the jumping off place” (Shriver, 2005, p.37) for her child and dreads the “horror of being left” (Shriver, 2005, p.37). She declares that she is “terrified of having a child” (Shriver, 2005, p.37). Yet in spite of all the “unattractiveness” and “insurmountability” (Shriver, 2005, p.37) of the task, she signs up for it.

As soon as Eva decides to try and conceive a child her disgust towards the very idea of carrying a child becomes apparent. She sees her body in a new light and shudders at what she sees. She compares her breast to “udders on cows or the swinging distentions on lactating hounds” (Shriver, 2005, p.60). The vagina “achieved an obscenity of a different sort” (Shriver, 2005, p.61). In fact everything that once she celebrated as her beauty and sexuality she comes to realize is crucial to motherhood. The whole system is designed in a way so that women want men to find them attractive using the paraphernalia which is then used to give birth to their own replacement. For Eva, carrying a child was like being part of a biological experiment and not by choice. She resented it so much that she compared being pregnant to having cancer. Her reaction on discovering that she is pregnant is a tell-tale sign and the doctor’s disapproval of her reaction shows how once a woman becomes pregnant, her body, her reactions, her thoughts, everything is public property. There is a prescription and the mother is to follow it to the letter. Eva’s agency is taken away by the pregnancy. She felt “victimized like some princess by an organism the size of a pea” (Shriver, 2005, p.65).

There is a performativity around being pregnant, being a mother. Eva ‘performed’ pregnancy. She turned white on finding that she is pregnant with Kevin but then she put on her mask and got ready to “assemble” into “glowing mother to be” (Shriver, 2005, p.63), dressed accordingly prepared dinner “aggressively nutritious” (Shriver, 2005, p.63) and acted all demure and chaste. Pregnancy as Eva actually sees it is an invasion. Her description of pregnancy and childbirth echoes Simone De Beauvoir’s declaration that a pregnant woman is “life’s passive instrument” “the prey of species” (Shriver, 2005, p.513 & p.515). Eva resents the constraint and control that her husband, her doctor and everyone else exerts or tries to exert on her pregnant body. There is a protectiveness at display here not towards Eva but towards the unborn child. Eva challenges this focus on the wellbeing of the fetus while ignoring the desires and wellbeing of the one carrying it. Eva is aware of her ambivalence towards her unborn child which she hoped would go away with time but “this conflicted sensation grew only sharper and therefore more secret” (Shriver, 2005, p.66). She knows of her conflict with the unborn child but hopes that it would turn into mutuality and intersubjectivity when she actually holds the child in her hands but as she writes to her husband in retrospect it only developed and she has to keep it a secret at times even from herself because that is not how good mothers feel. She is however unable to hide this from the

one who is at the receiving end of this contradictory feeling. Kevin knows it and confronts his mother “you never wanted to have me, did you” (Shriver, 2005, p.67). When confronted Eva comes clean and her assertion provides an insight into ambivalent motherhood as being “stuck in the same few rooms with Lego” (Shriver, 2005, p.68). Eva found it difficult to form an attachment to the only other occupant of the room. She was imprisoned, trying to connect with a son which she assumed would come naturally. Eva recalls how pregnancy is portrayed in horror movies as “infestation, as colonization by stealth” (Shriver, 2005, p.69). Nature films, where the salmon swim upstream at the cost of their life to safeguard their species, made Eva angry. She was not ready to be a mother although the prescription told her that it is the most natural thing but Eva battled with the “idea of Kevin” the entire time she was “pregnant with Kevin” and the battle continues till the “Thursday”. Eva’s ambivalence manifests into abuse in the most subtle form. She regrets her decision to become a mother at various levels, for instance she resisted pushing the baby out. She despised the entire process of childbirth regarding it as animalistic, humiliating and she regretted putting herself through this abuse when she could have been in France. For the final push she focused on the “loathing” she felt for what she had become and was forcing herself to go through. She had to sacrifice her agency, her self and her body to get a baby she ‘hated’ and that brings her no “hope” “story” “content” but “unwieldiness” “embarrassment” and a “rumbling subterranean tremor quaking through the very ocean floor of who I thought I was” (Shriver, 2005, p.89-90). Giving birth to Kevin reminded her of her “limitations with suffering and defeat”. It is apparent that when a mother has such strong feelings of “hatred” as she herself calls it, the child is bound to gauge it even when the mother tries to bake cookies, sing nursery rhymes and gives up her job for the child. The hatred, the resentment seeps into conversations, gestures, tone, body language, eye movement etc. Eva had high expectations of motherhood and when Kevin was placed on her breast she waited to be “transformed”, “transported”, in short, for a “revelation”. On the contrary she felt, the “first stirrings... of boredom” (Shriver, 2005, p.97). Kevin sensed his mother’s feelings and rejected the breast. Eva is shocked at her relief when the nurse takes away the child. She felt like a failure right from the beginning. She wanted to give him “the milk of human kindness” (Shriver, 2005, p.102) but he refused to latch, and she took it not as a refusal to take the mother feed but the mother herself because Kevin at some level “had found me [Eva] out” (Shriver, 2005, p.102). He sensed his mother’s rejection and lack of

enthusiasm for him. Though Eva tried really hard to form a bond with her son, the harder she tried, the more she realized how terrible she is at it. One can hardly blame Kevin for rejecting his mother when the mother describes him as “a singular very cunning individual” (Shriver, 2005, p.103). All of this ambivalence manifests itself in Eva’s behaviour towards Kevin. She complains about Kevin incessantly, blames him for crying, for having “unusually sharp features” for being shrewd. Her description of Kevin’s crying provides an insight into her perception of her child. She treated him as an equal, an adversary who cries out of rage and wrath directed at her. Kevin was “hell in a handbasket” and she was stuck with him all day because being the mother she is supposed to give up her work and stay with the baby. Though she tries to perform “the maternal tableau” (Shriver, 2005, p.109) to perfection, she resents it. She has no space left for herself, she stays home all day with an insatiable baby brilliantly hiding her true feelings about being a mother and keeps on telling herself that “I am supposed to love this” (Shriver, 2005, p.109), while fighting with the “baffling despair of new motherhood” (Shriver, 2005, p.114). This ambivalent feeling does not wear off with the passage of time and Eva “keeps waiting for the emotional payoff” (Shriver, 2005, p.121) which was eluding her. The prescriptive motherhood does not allow her to express her feelings. She is told by the nanny that she is not supposed to feel this way. Eva’s breaking point comes when the Irish nanny quits. She lets Kevin cry, does not change his diaper, does not give him milk; instead she stands next to his crib with her elbows on the rails and hands under the chin watching the child cry his lungs out. The menacing words that leave her mouth send shivers down one’s spine: in a callous, bitter tone she addresses her son as “little shit” (Shriver, 2005, p.125) accusing him of “ruining her life” (Shriver, 2005, p.125) and she speaks, using an “insipid falsetto the experts commend” (Shriver, 2005, p.125). She compares her son to some beast locked in a zoo. She knows that children understand speech long before they start speaking, yet she continues, telling Kevin how she wishes he was never born because “Mummy’s life sucks now... rather than listen to you screech for one more minute there are some days that Mummy would jump off the Brooklyn Bridge” (Shriver, 2005, p.125).

Eva’s commitment to motherhood had been a “toe in the water” (Shriver, 2005, p.141). All through Kevin’s growing years she waits for Kevin to prove that he is worthy of her love, her commitment. But Kevin has “proven defective” and Eva being the manufacturer takes the blame. She admits that she never liked her son very much. She could not stand having

him around. Yet she does everything for him; makes healthy meals for him, bakes cookies, hand paints books, makes toys, changes his diapers several times a day even when he is five years old. She would lug a diaper bag to his nursery to change him. However, there were instances when she refused to change his dirty diaper and Kevin would stay in the soiled diaper till it leaked and messed up the couch. Eva ended up throwing Kevin across the room breaking his arm. She disassociates herself from her identity as a mother and always refers to her mother self in third person as if she is talking about someone else “Mommer, a virtuous alter ego, a pleasingly plump maternal icon” (Shriver, 2005, p.215). She tried to be a good mother but trying is not being a good mother as she herself confesses. When she broke Kevin’s arm, it was the only time where she felt there was “an unmediated confluence between what I felt and what I did” (Shriver, 2005, p.232).

Eva was never on Kevin’s side; she grudged his presence right from the point of conception. Kevin was always the villain in her mind. He was the one who drove all the nannies away. The playgroup he was part of, lost all the children mysteriously and the person running the centre had to shut it down. He broke a little girl’s china tea set and forced the other children to do it too. He was responsible for making Victoria, the little girl from his Montessori, scratch the scales off of her eczema till it bled. He tinkers with the neighbour’s kid’s bicycle until they have an accident. He says something damaging to one of his class fellows who was dancing without any care in the world and according to Eva, the girl left the dance floor with a diminished spirit. Eva further accused Kevin of burning her daughter Celia’s eyes with bleach causing severe damage. Celia lost an eye, her optic nerve was damaged beyond repair and one side of her face was permanently scarred. All these incidents, though Eva believes otherwise, could be explained away as there were always reasons for not blaming Kevin. Eva, however, insists loudly that she suspects Kevin for all these accidents and Kevin knows it. Eva’s ambivalence as a mother is manifested in abuse toward her son and Kevin’s personality is dark and twisted as a result of this dysfunctional bond between him and his mother. The readers get a rare insight into the little boy without a defence system when Kevin falls ill for about two weeks. He leaned on his mother for love and care, asked her for food, for his favourite clothes, allowed Eva to read books to him. He let on that he wanted his mother’s love; he missed it but he also knew how his mother really felt towards him. He goes back to his non-committal, sullen self, right after he gets well. There are

commentaries on the novel that blame Kevin as being intrinsically evil but it's obvious that the novel is about a mother who is ambivalent about becoming a mother, she rejects the child even when he was just an idea. She hated him because she had to have him for social, cultural, philosophical reasons and convinced herself in order to become a mother. Eva felt the urge to be a good mother to Kevin when she was away from him in Africa but she did nothing to fix the bond with her son. She treated Kevin as an equal, an adult whom she looked down upon, to prove to herself that she was or could be a good mother and believed that the problem lay with Kevin who she believed was evil incarnate, Eva chose to have another child: this decision seems spiteful as she does this to prove to Kevin that she can love a child that was not him. The battle of egos gets carried away and Kevin ends up killing his father, sister and a number of his class fellows to prove his mother right.

A key perspective in the novel is that everything is narrated by Eva. She was not cold towards Kevin, performed her role as a mother, did everything expected of her, everything other than loving her child unconditionally: she wanted Kevin to prove that he was worthy of her love. There is no insight into Kevin's thought process which results in every reader only getting Eva's version of the events and to side with her. The way she recalls the incidents where she shouted at Kevin, withdrew care and broke his arm, is how abusers generally recount the abusive episodes with a context meant to justify their actions. It is when the abusers blame the victims for making them commit the atrocities that Eva's journey through motherhood substantiates this point of view. If a baby cries while being held by his mother but calms down immediately when his father holds him, it cannot be on purpose as babies do not know how to play games. They are not old enough to be spiteful as Eva believed Kevin was. Kevin's inability to learn to speak and his delayed bathroom training is evidence that he is not growing up in a normal atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

We Need to Talk About Kevin is an effort at deconstructing normative, patriarchal and prescriptive motherhood challenging its main postulates that motherhood is essentially every woman's dream; it is natural and all mothers find joy in it and it is their life's true purpose. The novel has generated a lot of scholarship revolving around maternal subjectivity, blame and ambivalence. The bad mothering stemming from maternal ambivalence is a symptom of the prescription set by the patriarchal

institution of motherhood. The ambivalence experienced by Eva throughout her journey of motherhood along with the blame directed towards her by society and by herself are governed by the normative standards of patriarchal motherhood termed as “essentialism”, “naturalization” and “idealization” by Andrea O’Reilly. Eva is criticized because she displays a lack of the innate desire that she is supposed to cherish and cultivate. She projects distress, loss and sadness instead of the joy that is expected of her. Eva’s character provides evidence that the expectant mother can be ambivalent about her pregnancy and not all mothers are joyous and jubilant at the idea of bringing a life into the world and being responsible for its well-being. The novel exposes the sacredness around motherhood revealing mothers to be flawed human beings protective about their individuality and freedom. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* thus, not only challenges the patriarchal constructs but also exposes the source of this maternal ambivalence.

6. Recommendations

Scholars are in a unique position to make their contribution by decoding and untangling the complication inherent in the maternal experience as it occurs presently. Maternal ambivalence is inherent to the maternal experience when the mother’s subjectivity, her individuality, and her ambitions are in discord with her child’s needs. The manifestations of maternal ambivalence are detrimental to the well-being of both the mother and the child. This gives rise to a need to study avenues through which ambivalence can be survived and better yet, converted into something positive. This opens paths for further research to be conducted in the realm of transitioning from maternal ambivalence to maternal resilience. Maternal resilience emerges from the effort to resist and survive, the contradictory emotions and guilt that motherhood incites. Future researchers can study the evolution of maternal ambivalence to maternal resilience, tracing its trajectory which, in a few instances, even leads to the satisfaction and happiness that motherhood might bring.

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