

# Child Abuse in Meg Elison's Find Layla

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# Child Abuse in Meg Alison's *Find Layla*

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## ABSTRACT 17

This study discusses child abuse in Meg Alison's *Find Layla*. The purpose of this study is to describe the forms, character objectification, causes and effects of child abuse experienced by Layla and Andy. The research method used is descriptive qualitative method. This study uses a psychological approach. The psychoanalysis is used to evaluate the characters in the novel. Sue & Chamberline's four domains of child abuse causes are used in this study. Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory is used to analyze in what ways the abuser objectifies the child. Joyce Shannon's theory of violence against children is also used in this study to determine the impact of child abuse in the novel. There are four forms of violence experienced by Layla and Andy: neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse and sexual abuse. Darlene's objectification of the child abuse is shown by treating her child as an object. It is found that there are two ways that Darlene objectifies her child, namely violability and denial of subjectivity. There are three causes of Darlene's child abuse: divorce, past childhood experiences, and mental illness. The impact of child abuse experienced by Layla and Andy is physical and psychological. The physical impact of child abuse experienced by Layla and Andy is malnutrition. The psychological impact experienced by Layla is anxiety disorder and Andy has post traumatic stress disorder. Andy also experience difficulties in language and speech.

**Keywords:** *abuse, objectification, violence, trauma, disorder*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION 8

Child abuse or maltreatment is defined by the World Health Organization as any form of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, or exploitation for any reason that results in actual or possible harm affecting a child's well-being, ability to survive, growth, or dignity in context of an attachment of responsibility, trust, or authority (Babakhanlou, 2019). Recently, cases of child abuse are common, whether physical, sexual, emotional abuse, or neglect of children. In various media, both news in newspapers, news on television or other online media often report incidents of child abuse. Most child abuse occurs in the child's own home. Child abuse can also occur within the family environment and even the perpetrators are the closest people. Child abuse can be classified into numerous forms depending on which body part is target. There are four types of child abuse: neglect, psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Children who are neglected do not receive adequate attention from adults. Emotional abuse harms children's psychology and leads to despair, anxiety, and stress later in life. Physical abuse is referred to as the purposeful use of physical force on a child that causes or threatens physical injury. Any sexual act performed or attempted (but not complete), sexual contact with, or exploitation (i.e., noncontact sexual interaction) of a child by a caregiver or parent.

Child maltreatment is a type of adverse childhood experience, which includes exposure to family mental health problems, incarceration, substance abuse, parental separation/divorce, poverty, bullying, racial discrimination, and separation from immigrant parents (Portwood et al., 2021). However, it must be emphasized that while certain factors are often present among families where maltreatment occurs, this does not mean that the presence of these factors will always result in

child abuse and neglect. Factors that cause child abuse can also be interconnect, such as divorce, which can cause stress and depression in single parents, leading to the parents' desire to harm their children. Child abuse, in all of its forms, has a negative impact on children's development, current and future scholastic performance, emotional and psychological well-being (Foster et al., 2017). The impact of abuse on each child is different. The outcomes for each child can vary greatly and are influenced by a number of factors. Including the child's age and developmental condition at the time of the maltreatment; the type, frequency, duration, and severity of the maltreatment; and the child's relationship with the abuser.

Child abuse is one issue that can be explored in the novel that is written by Meg Elison entitled *Find Layla*. It tells the story of Layla Bailey, who aspires to be a scientist. She has been caring for her brother since she is eight years old, living in an uneasy, run-down apartment that has suffered from the same neglect that she and her brother, Andy, have. Their mother, who is usually out of the house, abandons them. Layla is tormented at school for her unkempt appearance and poor personal hygiene, and things worsen after Andy gets taken away by Child Protective Services, prompting her to upload a video she take at home for a school biome project. Layla attempts to exist on her own terms when the video goes viral.

The writer found several studies that are relevant to the study. The first study discussed three main things, namely the causes of abuse, the impact of abuse, and the types of abuse that happened to Eleanor (Wijaya et al., 2020). The second study concentrated on the psychological problems of domestic abuse faced by Lily Bloom, the main female character in the novel (Bernice, 2023). The latter study used Hollenberg and Ragan's theory of child sexual abuse to identify and characterize the psychological impact experienced by the characters Devory and Gittel (Aldyllah, 2023). This study explores child abuse in the novel *Find Layla* by Meg Elison. The purpose of this study is to describe the forms, character objectification, causes and effects of child abuse experienced by Layla and Andy. The difference between this study and previous studies lies in the object, theory and focus of the study. The writer is interested in analysing the novel since the condition of Layla and Andy in the novel invite the writer to explore in detail the phenomenon, experience and anticipation toward the condition of children in general. That is why the writer will apply child abuse analysis in Meg Elison's *Find Layla*.

## 2. METHOD

The method used in this research is a qualitative descriptive method. This study uses Sigmund Freud's personality theory. This personality theory is relevant to this study because it aims to analyze the personality of characters who experience child abuse based on a psychoanalytic perspective. Sue & Chamberline's four domains of child abuse causes are used in this study. To analyze character objectification, the writer uses Martha Nussbaum's theory. Joyce Shannon's theory of child abuse is also used in this study to determine the impact of child abuse in the novel. The words, phrases, and dialogues from Meg Elison's novel *Find Layla*, which depicts child abuse, serve as the study's primary source of data. For this study, the primary research instrument is the researcher herself, with a novel providing data source.

The data are collected by capturing the narratives, dialogues, and actions of the novel's characters that reflect the idea of child abuse experienced by Layla and the influence of child abuse on Layla's personality in the form of quotations. The next is data classification. The collected data is classified into two categories: data relating to incidences of child abuse and data relating to the influence of child abuse on Layla's personality. Finally, it comes to the final stage of data collection, which is to enter the classified data into a table. This is done to make the data easier to interpret for analysis reasons. To analyze the research data, the following processes were carried out;

examining and characterizing data related to the formulated problem; interpreting and analyzing data based on the theory used; and determining the results of the analysis.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

There are several results of the analysis of the forms, character objectification, causes, and effects of child abuse in the novel. The following discussion will show all of them.

#### 3.1 Forms of Child Abuse

Child abuse is defined as any act or inability to act by a parent or caregiver that causes actual or potential injury to a child. It can occur in the child's home or in organizations, schools, or communities with whom the child interacts. *Find Layla* is a novel by Meg Elison that tells the story of Layla Bailey who lives in a dirty and shabby apartment. She and her younger brother are neglected by her mother, Darlene. Also experiences bullying by junior high school friends due to unkempt appearance and poor personal hygiene. In the novel, there are four types of child abuse experiences by the two main characters, Layla and her little brother, Andy. There is neglect, psychological abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

##### 3.1.1 Neglect

The most common type of child maltreatment is neglect. It is characterized as the caregiver's consistent inability to meet the child's physical, emotional, educational, and medical needs, which can result in developmental delay and bodily and psychological injury (Babakhanlou, 2019). Child neglect is abandoning a child who is hungry or unclean or who lacks adequate clothing, housing, supervision, or health care. This can be harmful to children and adolescents. Child neglect is experienced by the main character Layla Bailey where basic needs such as food are not fulfilled by Darlene, her mother.

Every morning when going to school Layla does not eat breakfast at home because there is nothing to eat. If Layla arrives at school early enough then she will get a free breakfast from the school. Therefore, every day she would always go to school early enough to get a free breakfast of a piece of toast. That morning Layla is eating at her school cafeteria and waiting for the two other students in front of her to finish talking and leave the cafeteria. After they pass through the cafeteria exit, Layla eats the rest of their toast. "After they're gone, I swipe their toast" (Elison, 2020:13). Although Layla has already eaten a portion of toast for her she is still hungry so eats the leftovers of her two schoolmates. This is because Layla's mother is rarely at home and hardly ever cooks and does not provide food stocks or prepare meals at home. So Layla rarely ate dinner, this causes Layla to feel very hungry the next morning. The incident is including in physical neglect where Layla's mother does not provide basic food needs for her child.

Andy, Layla's younger brother also experiences neglect by Darlene. Apart from food, clothing is also one of the basic needs that parents must fulfill. Bette, the mother of Layla's friend Kristi, based on Mona Monroe's statement, a nurse who works at Andy's elementary school, says that Andy came to school dirty and tired and Monroe has even caught him eating from the trash once a week. Based on that sentence, Andy experiences physical neglect where his mother does not provide clean clothes and proper food.

To fulfill the basic need to eat Layla and Andy are driven by the unconscious mind to immediately fulfill their needs without regard to moral and social propriety. This shows Layla and Andy are influenced by their id. According to Freud the id is driven by the pleasure principle, which seeks to immediately satisfy all wants, desires and needs (Boag, 2014). The id is the primary

personality system that exists from birth. This id follows the “pleasure principle”, which is a fundamental tenet of existence whose objective is to remove or minimize tension. Tension in daily existence causes discomfort and agony, and when this tension is relieve, there is a sense of comfort and happiness. Tension, such as hunger and thirst, can be lessen or abolish by engaging in impulsive motor activity in order to accomplish objects of hunger and thirst.

Layla also wears dirty clothes and shows poor hygiene as a sign of child neglect. Layla went to school with re-glued shoes, jeans that she has not been washing for a month, a dirty flannel shirt, and messy hair. In this case Darlene does not pay attention to her child’s hygiene, this is because Darlene does not give Layla quarters to do laundry. To do the laundry Layla does it herself without her mother’s help, which makes her skip school. This shows that Darlene is not doing her role as a mother properly such as doing housework and paying attention to the needs of her children. Furthermore, when Kristi’s mother, Bette, who is looking for dirty clothes for the laundry, finds Layla’s torn t-shirt and training bra to wash while Layla is bathing in her house. Bette also says that there are some things that Layla’s mother may not have taught her about hygiene. When she sees Layla’s clothes that are no longer fit to wear, Bette realizes that there is something wrong with Layla’s mother or realizes that Layla has been abandoned by her mother.

Apart from food and clothing, the next basic need is shelter. Darlene is unable to provide a proper place to live for her children, this is not due to financial conditions but because Layla says that there is something wrong with Darlene. So that makes her not care about the condition of her two children, including not being able to provide a decent place to live for them. It is explaine in the novel that Andy is sitting on something dry but surrounded by waterlogged garbage. He sits on a shopping bag that contains something lumpy. “He’s sitting on something dry, but surrounded by waterlogged junk” (Elison, 2020:33). Andy does not understand that the house he lives in is actually unhealthy. In their home there is mold growing on Andy's dresser, as well as maggots and gnats in the refrigerator. Layla also says that her house is gradually falling apart. When the door broke, Layla's mother says that she did not allow the workers to enter until the kitchen is clean. Then the kitchen and refrigerator are damage, the bathroom sink also damage which cause the carpet to flood. This is physical neglect because Darlene did not provide a healthy place for her child to live.

### 3.1.2 Psychological Abuse

A set of intentional verbal or behavioral actions or inactions that send a message to a child that he or she is worthless, imperfect, unlovable, undesirable, endangered, or solely valuable for meeting the needs of others is defines as child psychological abuse. Psychological abuse includes withholding emotional support, isolating or intimidating a child. A caregiver may engage in non-physical behaviors with a child that put them at risk for emotional injury. This is known as psychological abuse (Kimber & MacMillan, 2017). Layla experiences psychological abuse when Darlene criticizes and blames Andy because the sofa she usually uses smells. In fact, the sofa smells because of the fault of Darlene who sometimes sits there for nine days without moving. The criticism make by Darlene in a harsh and excessive manner is certainly includes in psychological abuse because it can have a negative impact on children. The incident is categorizes as verbal psychological abuse because Darlene indirectly told her daughters that they are disappointing with her criticism.

When Darlene says that Layla in her mind says that the sofa smells of pee because Darlene has not moves from it for nine days last month. Layla says it only in her mind but she did not say it directly because Layla is afraid of the consequences she would get if she says it directly. It shows

Layla making a decision by considering the reality and ethics of not replying to her mother's criticism. This includes in the ego according to Freud. Ego works to operate according to the principle of reality, looking for realistic ways to satisfy the demands of the id, delaying satisfaction to avoid negative consequences. The realism principle, on which the ego is based, aspires to realistically and socially acceptable means to sate the id's needs. Before choosing to act on or ignore impulses, the reality principle assesses the advantages and disadvantages of a course of action. The ego is structural, instructed, and has a synthetic personality unlike the id (Boag, 2014).

Psychological abuse experiences by is also show when Darlene saying that Layla is "a lazy, dirty little teenage brat" (Elison, 2020:54). Whereas Layla's dirty condition is cause by her mother's neglect. This of course affects Layla's self-esteem because her mother says this in front of Bette, Kristi's mother. Psychological abuse refers to a pattern of behavior that harms a child's emotional growth or sense of self-worth in the context of child abuse. This includes inattentive treatment and angry behavior toward the child, and it is also known as emotional abuse. The word uses by Darlene is also a word of ridicule. She says it to mock or insult Layla. She also makes her feelings hurt because she did not want to look dirty but circumstances make her unable to do anything.

By not considering the existence of her children, Darlene is also psychologically abusive. Layla says that living with her mother is like living with a stranger. Her mother hardly ever looks at her and calls her by name. Sometimes she calls Andy with the word 'kiddo' as children do which means all children are the same. Since Darlene does not pay attention to Layla by hardly ever looking at her or calling her by name, this constitutes psychological abuse. By using the word 'kiddo' instead of 'son' or 'kids' which she uses for Andy also shows that there is no affection or closeness between mother and child.

### 3.1.3 Physical Abuse

Physical abuse defines as any physical injury to a child causes by a parent, caregiver, or anyone else responsible for the child, and can include punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap, or other object), burning, or any other physical harm. Physical abuse is experiences by Layla Bailey as the main character. Layla is remembering her past when she wakes up to hear her mother screaming. She immediately ran to find out what is going on when just crossing the threshold, a heart-shaped box hit Layla's face. Leaving a small wound on her forehead. "The top of the box left a tiny cut in my forehead" (Elison, 2020:43). Darlene did this because she lost the chocolate she get on Valentine's Day and thought Layla take it. Although it only left a small wound, it is still a physical abuse because Darlene throws something at Layla intentionally and consciously.

### 3.1.4 Sexual Abuse

Any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is exploits to sexually stimulate the perpetrator or an observer is consider child sexual abuse. Layla is sexually abuse by her schoolmate Jane Chase. One day Jane pinch Layla's nipples and tells everyone that Layla has nothing under her sweater. This shows that Jane Chase commit two types of sexual abuse against Layla, namely touching and not touching. This is includes because apart from touching the private area Jane also abuse Layla's physical appearance. When Jane pinch Layla's nipples, it is consider as touching sexual harassment and when she tells everyone that Layla has nothing under her sweater, it is considere as non-touching or verbal sexual harassment. In the data, Jane Chase commit these acts intentionally and wanted to humiliate Layla.

## 3.2 Character Objectification of Child Abuse

Objectification defines as seeing or treating people, usually women, as objects. In general, it is used as a derogatory phrase, connoting a way of speaking, thinking, and doing that the speaker deems offensive or socially unacceptable (Tarasenko-Struc, 2021). In the novel, it can be seen that Darlene is the perpetrator of objectification because she treats her child as an object. It is found that there are two ways that Darlene objectifies her children, namely violability and denial of subjectivity. Violability is the treatment of a person as having no boundaries of integrity or as something that is allowed to be broken down, destroyed and broken into. In the novel Layla suffers an injury on her forehead due to a box thrown by her mother. Darlene makes Layla an object that can be thrown which is included in objectification. Darlene objectifies with an action, namely a throw that makes Layla get hurt, this is also related to Layla's feelings of being ignored.

Furthermore, Darlene's way of objectifying is denial of subjectivity, which means treating someone as something whose experiences and feelings do not need to be taken into account. When Layla and Andy go in and out of the apartment through the window near the air conditioner because the door is broken and they are always afraid when they do that. Layla has even imagined herself falling a thousand times and the corner of the AC unit leaving scars on her body. This experience although Darlene knows about it she did not care about it even though it is dangerous for them to do and repeat. This shows that Darlene treats her children more like objects by ignoring their experiences of having to do dangerous things every day.

### **3.3 Causes of Child Abuse**

The first reason why Darlene commits child abuse is because she is a single parent. Darlene is divorced from Layla's father. This is explained when Layla tells when her father left but she does not really remember. Layla did not remember it either because there is no difference as her father is an army man who is rarely at home. The cause of Darlene's divorce is because she has an affair. This is evidenced by the fact that Andy is Layla's half-brother. Layla's father is Matthew Sean Bailey while Andy's father is Daniel Brian Wendel, this proves that they are siblings of one mother with different fathers. This divorce has a huge impact on Darlene's mental health, after the divorce Darlene stops leaving the house, stops talking and stops caring about the condition of her children.

In addition, the factor that makes Darlene to commit child abuse is her past childhood experience of being born in captivity. Captivity refers to a shelter for women and children who have experienced violence or neglect. This is based on Layla's statement in the data which also states that Andy is taken to captivity by people Andy has never seen before, which refers to Child Protective Service (CPS) officers. Child Protective Service (CPS) is the name of the agency in many states in the United States responsible for providing child protection, including responding to reports of child abuse or neglect. Born in captivity suggests that Darlene and Darlene's mother commit neglect or abuse so officers took them into captivity. Individuals with a history of childhood neglect and physical abuse have higher levels of anxious attachment styles in adulthood.

The final cause is Darlene's mental illness. In the novel there are several symptoms that indicate that Darlene has a mental illness, such as major changes in sleeping and eating, mood swings, excessive anger and neglect of personal care and hygiene. The major changes in sleep and eating that Darlene experiences are described when she does not eat for nine days and only lies or sleeps on the sofa. This can indicate that Darlene is suffering from depression. Depression is often accompanied by a lack of energy and an overwhelming sense of fatigue, which can be one of the most debilitating symptoms. Next is Darlene's change in mood which can be seen when she is scolding Layla because the nurse from Andy's school calls her while she is sleeping, Darlene even

swore. Then Layla tries to put out the fire of her mother's anger by saying that she do not know that day would be a bad day for her mother. Instantly Darlene's anger faded and says that it is a bad day for her. It shows the mood swings experiences by Darlene which is one of the signs of mental illness.

### 3.4 Impact of Child Abuse

Abuse or neglect can have relatively modest (bruises or cuts) or severe (broken bones, bleeding, or even death) immediate physical effects. The pain and suffering they give a child should not be undervalue, even though the physical symptoms can occasionally be transient (Shannon, 2009). The physical impact of child abuse experience by Layla and Andy is malnutrition. Child malnutrition is a condition that occurs when nutrients to support a child's growth and development are not fulfill due to eating unhealthy and unbalanced food. One of the symptoms of malnutrition is fatigue and low energy levels. This is evidenced when Bette, Kristi's mother, says that Layla looks like she has not been sleeping at all. The situation where Layla looks like she has not slept at all shows that she looks exhausted and has low energy levels. This is due to unfulfilled nutrition. Further symptoms of malnutrition exhaustion are also experience by Andy. Bette also share that according to Mona Monroe, the nurse at Andy's elementary school, Andy always came to school exhausted.

Layla and Andy also experience psychological impacts. Layla experience anxiety as a result of the child abuse perpetrated by their mother, Darlene. When Bette come to Layla's house and says that help would be coming Layla did not believe it. When Layla realizes that maybe help will not come to her anxiety arises and makes her breathing not like a normal human being. Breathing rapidly or hyperventilation is one of the symptoms of anxiety disorders. Anxiety or panic can produce hyperventilation, which is rapid or deep breathing. The next symptom of anxiety is trembling. When Layla sees twitter where Jane Chase shares a link to instagram showing a photo of Layla's face edit onto a 'wanted' poster and a milk carton. This make Layla's hands tremble so that she could not type properly. Because of Jane Chase's link on twitter it also makes Layla unable to breathe like a normal human being. The two symptoms are close together which shows Layla has an anxiety disorder.

Andy also experiences a psychological impact. Layla and Andy slept on the same bed because Andy often has nightmares. Nightmares are disturbing dreams associate with negative feelings, such as anxiety or waking fear. Andy often has nightmares due to anxiety and fear of abuse that would be commits by Darlene. Nightmares can occur for several reasons such as stress, anxiety, irregular sleep, medications, and mental health disorders. But perhaps the most commonly found cause is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The next psychological impact is learning difficulties, experiences by Andy. Unlike Layla who can remember and learn well, Andy has difficulty learning languages. This is shown when Andy says "Once this once. Once this once." which Layla correct "Just this once" (Elison, 2020:15). This shows that Andy has learning difficulties because the language use is everyday language that he should have understood at his current age. But Andy still makes some mistakes in speaking.

## 4. CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion the writer will show the conclusion of this research. After analyzing the forms of child abuse experiences by the two main characters, Layla and Andy, it is found that there are four types of child abuse experiences by them: neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse and sexual abuse. The first form is physical neglect where Darlene does not meet Layla and

Andy's basic needs such as food, clothing and proper shelter. Next is psychological neglect where Darlene withholds affection and attention for her children. The second is physical abuse only experiences by Layla when she is thrown with a box by Darlene which left a wound on her forehead. Third is psychological abuse where Darlene criticizes, humiliates, yells and calls the child names. The last is sexual harassment experiences by Layla by her schoolmate named Jane Chase who touched Layla's private area and humiliates her by making fun of her private parts.

The character objectification against child abuse commit by Darlene is because she treats her child as an object. It is found that there are two ways Darlene objectifies her child, namely violability and denial of subjectivity. There are three causes of Darlene's child abuse: divorce, past childhood experiences, and mental illness. The first reason why Darlene commits child abuse is because she is a single parent. The increase stress associate with the burden of family responsibilities and lack of support are thought to contribute to Darlene's risk as a single parent to abuse her child. The second factor that makes Darlene to commit child abuse is because she is born in captivity. In this case Darlene experiences neglect and justify the behavior so she did it to her children. The last cause is Darlene's mental illness.

There are three aspects of the impact of child abuse experiences by Layla and Andy, namely physical and psychological. The physical impact of child abuse experiences by Layla and Andy is malnutrition. The psychological impact experience by Layla is anxiety with symptoms of rapid breathing and trembling. In addition, Andy also experiences a psychological impact in the form of post traumatic stress disorder with symptoms of nightmares every night. Child abuse experiences by Andy also affected his brain development and cognitive abilities, causing him to have difficulty with speech and language. The child abuse experienced by Layla and Andy stops when the Child Protective Service brings them to captivity. Andy is brought by his biological father, who has been unknown to Layla and Andy because Darlene hides the fact that Andy is Layla's half-brother. Meanwhile, Layla stays in captivity because no one wants to adopt her. This is due to Layla's criminal record when she accidentally hurts Andy.

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