

**The Psychology of Foster Care Trauma and Identity Formation in Sally
Hepworth's *Darling Girls***

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Abstract:

This paper aims to provide a compelling exploration of childhood trauma and its influence on identity formation. The novel portrays the lives of three foster children who eventually become sisters through shared experiences with the deep psychological scars experienced at their foster home, which continue to affect their adulthood. The relationship between foster care trauma and personal identity is examined through a psychological lens. The study analyses how emotional neglect, manipulation and insecurity shape the protagonist's self-perception, interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging. The novel demonstrates individuals' capacity to reconstruct their identities through resilience, friendship, and confronting painful memories.

Keywords: Foster care trauma, childhood, adulthood, personal identity.

Introduction:

Darling Girls by Sally Hepworth portrays three women whose childhoods were spent in a foster home, a trauma that continues to influence and shape their adulthoods. Through the characters of Jessica, Norah, and Alicia, Hepworth examines the intricate relationship between trauma, memory and selfhood. All three characters mentioned above were in a typical position, fighting to forget their past and live in the present.

The main purpose of foster care is to aid children with safety and stability. However, foster care is designed to protect and support vulnerable children, but that was not the case for the foster sisters in this novel, *Darling Girls*. They faced emotional abuse, manipulation, and isolation from the outside world frequently. They struggled with self-esteem, trust and a

sense of belonging. These adversities play a major role in the development of identity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and their place in society.

In *Darling Girls*, trauma is a prominent theme revealed through the characters. The characters are affected less by society than by their foster mother. Miss Fairchild is the foster caregiver responsible for the orphaned children. From the outside, it appears to be a home for orphaned children, but left unnoticed are the sufferings and mental trauma the children undergo. In order to make the children believe and mingle with Miss Fairchild, she showers them with umpteen sweet words. She tries to pour her manipulative affection on them to get their attention. Miss Fairchild threatens and subjugates them with her fabricated love.

Miss Fairchild told Jessica, "I'll keep you afloat. You trust me, don't you?" (Hepworth 37). These words from Miss Fairchild may instil confidence in Jessica, but on the other hand, they compel her to trust Miss Fairchild, as she has no other option. "Just as Jessica reached out for her, the last of her breath disappearing from her chest, Miss Fairchild stepped away" (Hepworth 37). Jessica trusted Miss Fairchild completely, yet she was betrayed. She jumped into the swimming pool, trusting Miss Fairchild would help and save her, but she was violated. This incident turned out to be a traumatic event in Jessica's life, in which her trust was broken. This would affect Jessica's relationship with people and personal security: she was left only with a traumatic memory that would influence her for the entire life. "While Jessica's trauma primarily emerges through betrayal and broken trust, Alicia experiences emotional neglect and humiliation that shape her sense of self".

Alicia was put into foster care by her granny; her experience at Wild Meadows shows how emotional abuse in foster care is inevitable. She is a small girl with a good appetite. When she finds that the provided food was not sufficient, she asks Miss Fairchild, "May I have some more rice, please?" (Hepworth 75). Her request is not met with care but with humiliation. Miss Fairchild humiliated her with words like "overfeeding, childhood-obesity epidemic" (Hepworth 75); these words made her feel uncomfortable. Alicia was rejected for her normal needs; this turned into emotional trauma and rejection. The psychological trauma is more apparent when Alicia utters these lines: "It was a scary feeling, being shunned by an adult who was responsible for your care" (Hepworth 75). Alicia was trying to adjust to foster care, but the prevailing situation made her uncomfortable. "Unlike Alicia, Norah's trauma is rooted in repeated displacement and instability".

"It was a scary feeling, being shunned by an adult who was responsible for your care" (Hepworth 76). This line shows that rejection by a caregiver creates emotional insecurity and affects Alicia's self-worth. Hepworth suggests that repeated emotional rejection during childhood can influence the development of personal identity. According to Judith Herman, trauma disrupts a child's sense of safety and trust. The silence of Jessica and Norah before Alicia's request suggests their need to avoid criticism. This reflects the psychological effects

of living in a controlling foster environment, where children regulate their behaviour out of fear and emotional humiliation rather than confidence and attention. Through the character of Alicia, Hepworth illustrates that foster care trauma has enduring psychological consequences that shape identity well into adulthood.

Norah, a child shaped by instability and introduced as a resilient but emotionally vulnerable child whose life had been unsettled by repeated moves and uncertainty. "You're lucky to be coming to this home" (Hepworth 48). Norah tried to reassure herself repeatedly that she was lucky to be placed at Wild Meadow. This reflects the mindset of every foster care child who was made to believe that it's better to get a place somewhere rather than to be in instability. On the other hand, this was Norah's seventh foster care placement: "It was her seventh foster placement" (Hepworth 48). This statement highlights the instability of Norah's childhood; frequent displacement between foster care would bring emotional disconnection and the possibility of losing a stable sense of identity. Jessica wanted to know the reason that made Norah arrive at Wild Meadows. Without any hesitation, she narrated what happened to her in the previous foster care: "I kicked my foster brother in the balls when he crawled into the bed with me." (Hepworth 50). This made Norah lose her faith in anyone, and she always carried a pocket knife with her. "After the experience she'd had, she had her pocketknife for backup all the time" (Hepworth 50). The traumas faced by Jessica, Alicia and Norah in their childhood left scars in their lives.

The transition from childhood to adulthood does not erase traumatic memories, instead left with scars. The three foster sisters were left with such childhood trauma that resurfaces in their adulthood. The psychological effects of an individual's childhood are deeply rooted, influencing emotions, behaviour and relationships. Children with such trauma in their childhood experience neglect, trust issues and instability in their adulthood. As a result, their adulthood becomes a continuation of their struggle to cope with the emotional consequences of childhood trauma. Caruth suggests that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but re-emerges later in repetitive and haunting ways.

When Ashleigh Patel, the investigating officer, called Jessica to investigate her about the murder that happened in Wild Meadows, she was reminded of her traumatic past. "Are you ready to talk about Wild Meadows?" (Hepworth 42). The officer was particularly interested in knowing about her childhood, which might help him to investigate the case better. Her inability to talk about her past shows the unresolved memories that influence her at present. "One thing to be said for having a horrific childhood is that pinpointing the happy parts is easy" (Hepworth 42). Jessica was not ready to be reminded about her childhood; she was compelled to be answered. The childhood trauma she faced in Wild Meadows was evident through her words. She was very specific about her happy days because she had only a limited number of happy moments.

When the investigation turned to Norah, she acknowledged her traumatic past: “I grew up in foster care. I’m comfortable with distressing” (Hepworth 20). Through this line, Norah expressed her mental turmoil, which she underwent in foster care. Instead of dwelling on her childhood trauma, she desensitised herself to it. Norah treats a relationship with more usefulness than an emotional connection.

Alicia's adulthood is profoundly shaped by her traumatic childhood, as she unconsciously accepts mistreatment because it feels "familiar – even comforting." Her decision to work with foster children stems from her own painful experiences, transforming personal suffering into empathy and service. The memories of Wild Meadows reveal that childhood trauma is not confined to the past but continues to influence identity, emotions and relationships in adulthood. "Alicia had learned to accept being poorly treated a long time ago. It felt familiar – even comforting. Like coming home." (Hepworth 22). This shows how childhood trauma shapes Alicia's adult life because she experienced neglect and abuse as a child; mistreatment becomes normal and familiar to her in adulthood. “If there was one thing foster kids needed, it was fight.” (Hepworth 23) This highlights Alicia's resilience; her traumatic childhood has made her strong and determined to protect vulnerable children.

Van der Kolk argues that the body retains traumatic memories, which explains why Jessica and Alicia continue to exhibit emotional and psychological consequences of their childhood experiences. Jessica, Norah and Alicia's stories show that childhood trauma does not simply stay in the past. It follows them into adulthood, shaping how they see themselves, how they relate to others, and how they deal with difficult emotions. What happened to them as children continues to affect the choices they make and the way they respond to the world around them. Even though the three women carry the pain of their past, they cope with it in different ways, which shows that trauma affects each person differently.

Jessica's difficulties show how fear, emotional uncertainty and the struggle to forget painful memories can stay with someone. Alicia, though she also suffers, uses her pain to become more compassionate and stronger, choosing to help children who are in trouble, even though she still feels the effects of her own past. Their stories show that trauma isn't something that goes away quickly or is easily forgotten. Instead, it stays with a person and changes how they feel and think about life.

The way these characters are portrayed shows that what happens in childhood can deeply affect a person as they grow up, but the stories also show that even though trauma can leave lasting effects, people can face their pain, change how they see themselves and find meaning beyond their suffering. Through Jessica and Alicia, the books show how trauma can be both harmful and change-making. They remind us that healing doesn't mean forgetting the past, but having the strength to live with it and keep going.

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