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The Thread of Parental Love as an Intricate Design in the Internal Working Model of the Select Characters in Karen Kingsbury's Novel *Oceans Apart*

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The Thread of Parental Love as an Intricate Design in the Internal Working Model of the Select Characters in Karen Kingsbury's Novel *Oceans Apart*

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I. INTRODUCTION

As one travels on the road of love, there is a longing for the best love that can possibly never be fathomed. This love transcends inferior emotions and rests safely in a haven on achieving the purpose behind love, the area where goodness and loving kindness abounds in the surreal. The novel *Oceans Apart* teaches the story of love where separation is reminiscent of an untold story of love... where pain ruled the body and motherly passion lead to the pre-sketched bequeathal of blessings on the only child.

Travelling on the portmanteau of relationships, there's a wondrous escapade replenished with beautiful insights of love. It is the love of the mother with her only son.

Kiahna left her assets to her only son Max Riley. The bequeathal of blessings includes the request for the search of her biological father Connor. The novel *Oceans Apart* narrates an exclusive account of the relationship of Kiahna and Connor with Max. In regard to the justification of Kiahna and Connor, to consider Max as their son, it could not be true. Connor is married to his pretty wife Michele and they have a loving relationship, where God has give them two beautiful daughters. The eldest daughter in her young childhood year of age ten in America, is aware of her parents' relationship in society. They are a respectable couple and it is their loving relationship with each other that

holds them through difficult times; (when the request for the custody of Max is made). The child secures a home in the custodial battle in the home of the Connors; while this story is in the pages discussed in *Oceans Apart*, the loving relationship of the mother Kiahna with her son Max is related in lesser expense. The following pages discuss the accumulation of inherent patterns of the child Max. The paper is gathered on the basis of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

Max knows that he is safe at Ramey's house but when he observes Ramey bringing him food to "eat in the TV room", his "funny feeling got worse. Ramey never let him eat in the TV room" (OA 28). While Max ponders over the change, he silently drifts through the two movies Ramey had put on for him.

Soon Max begins to expect his mother's call and wonders if Ramey's phone call is the reason behind the delay. He went to Ramey and "tapped her on the shoulder" (OA 28). Here are a few lines: "Yes, Max? Do you need another movie?" she used her whisper voice. 'No.' Max whispered back. 'I need my mom. See?' He pointed out the window. 'See how dark it's out there, Ramey? That's when my mommy's supposed to call, only what if she can't call because you're on the phone?' (OA 28). Max leaves Ramey trying to understand the reason behind the newness of the particular day, and he reasons within himself with the only logical explanation: how could my mother call if Ramey is constantly talking on the phone? Max's in-built coping methods are strongly embedded in his 'attachment behavioral system', and it activates his need to manage the complex situation. He begins to talk to his dog: "Hey, Buddy, wake up." ... Buddy lifted one eyelid, then the other. Max put his face up close against Buddy's nose and waited until the dog licked his cheek. Then Max put his fingers on either side of Buddy's wet nose. 'I'm telling you, Buddy... something's funny here' " (OA 28). Kingsbury's portrayal of a child's observation and understanding is amusing and yet it creates awareness about a child's actions. Hurlock writes how "a social hazard of early childhood is the use of imaginary companions and pets to compensate for lack

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of real companions. Having an imaginary companion is a temporary solution to the lonely-child problem" (146). Max uses the situation of loneliness to explore the territory of friendship and discover the possibilities of conversation with a pet dog. It correlates with the 'Strange Situation' implemented by the child developmentalist, Ainsworth, to examine child behavior. Joey has been in this habit but it is presented only during extreme situations. However, when 'anxiety' and an unfamiliar situation confront his perception of the familiar, he is stimulated to act likewise. Ramey, however, did not bombard Max about his mother. She waits for the right time. Max seems too restless by the way his mother had forgotten to call him and it was only the next day that Ramey explained the truth.

There is no right time to tell a child that his mother would never come back. However, when the moment came for Max to know the death of his mother, he seems contradicted and unbelieving. He loved his mother and she was his safe-haven and "caregiver" (Rynereson 247) who created security and a firm stronghold of positive manifestations. Her demise however stirs a negative sketch in his mind. He "jerked back hard and fast and shook his head" (OA 30). He knows that Ramey would never lie to him, but the truth is hard to accept. The reality that his mother would never be with him dawns on him and like other children bereaved of their parents he consumes the loss little by little. Since Pagan in Tyler's novel *The Amateur Marriage* is only three years old, he is taken in by his grandparents and he could not respond to bereavement in the same way; for Max in Kingsbury's novel *Oceans Apart*, his beloved mother who had loved him dearly and had "kissed him good-bye yesterday morning" (OA 30) could not just die. The absence of Pagan's mother was a part of reality and the reason to 'cope' had not existed except for his withdrawn behavior. His grandparents become his immediate 'caregivers.' Max's first reply to Ramey however is " 'No, Ramey ... you're wrong.' He backed up and ran quick into the bathroom and shut the door. Then he pressed his back against it so no one could get inside" (OA 30). Child developmentalists observe that: "Children who turn to themselves for safety are in fact, in the context of their experience, reacting logically to defend themselves from fear" (Aldgate 78). This is similar to Max's condition. Max fights the shock of his life with the only familiar way; he hides himself from the world till everything becomes clear.

The 'caregivers' -- Kiahna and Ramey have brought up Max very 'securely', where there is no need for him to feel 'negative' towards adults; 'caregivers' taking care of 'securely attached children,' have "responded to and often preempted their stress or fear. These children will turn to adults for safety because they have learned from their experiences of 'care-giving' that adults can be trusted" (Aldgate 78). Although Max has

learned to trust Ramey, he feels 'insecure' and runs to the bathroom and encounters another flashback of his mother. It is his conversations with his mother about planes. He begins to think about the possibilities of an accident: "What if something bad happened to her airplane? Like maybe the wings fell off, or a door blew open? Or the pilot landed in the water?" (OA 31). He also remembers asking his mother about the doors of airplanes: " 'If someone opens the door, what happens? You can't open the door when the plane's flying Max. It isn't possible' " (31). With these memories flashing past him he "peeked out at Ramey and he was all of a sudden afraid to ask. He stutters asking her: "Ramey, did ... did something bad happen to her airplane? " (OA 31); 'fear' has a hold on him but his attempt to face reality when he opens the door points out that he trusts her enough to confront the truth.

The revelation of events puts Max in an intricate spot. He begins to think and when Ramey is careful in explaining the truth about his mother, Max's question about planes helps him come to terms with the truth: that his mother had died and he could not see her again. His thoughts about planes have been pondered over, again and again.

Max supposed many things except death. His immediate reactions are conveyed through the following lines: "But Mommy knows how to swim, Ramey. Maybe she's swimming back to the island ... is she swimming Ramey? Is she?" (OA 32). Difficult moments in a child's world arise when the sense of 'security' is 'threatened.' When Max understands the fact that his mother would never come back home and take care of him, he is devastated: "Max couldn't run or move or even breathe. His mom was dead? Her plane landed in the ocean, and now she was in heaven? His legs crumpled under, and he fell to his hands and knees. 'No Ramey! She can't go. Not without me...' " (OA 33). The words of a seven-year old are desperate and frantic for consolation. Max became sorrowful. His primary 'caregiver' was dead and he was all alone in the world. Child developmentalists present their opinions on particular attachment behaviors: "children learn to incorporate themselves, through the internal working model, expectations and beliefs about their own and other people's behavior. The internal working model creates for the child a sense of self, other people, and the relationship between self and others" (Aldgate 79). Max has absorbed, observed and analyzed the people closest to him and finds himself discovering his sense of self-worth and how much he is valued.

It is essential to develop healthy 'internal working models' in children "because it is the means by which children learn to develop a perception of their self worth, how much they are accepted by adults and how much they are loved" (Aldgate 79). Max's 'internal working model' is the result of the fervent endeavors of

Kiahna and Ramey who had made sure that Max had a well-balanced and healthy life: disciplined, good mannered, with play time and lots of 'love'. His capacity of absorbing the truth little by little and then suddenly taking it entirely rests on the knowledge that Ramey is close by. This is a silent reminder to grieve for a child's self-discovery of a parent's demise. The knowledge of permanent 'separation' for Max however, took a heavy toll on his personality. He is unable to escape from the truth. The 'loss' of his only 'care-giver' is a devastation too grievous to comprehend:

Ramey put her arm around him and sat him on the couch. She sat beside him and hugged him for a long time. They cried and cried together, and the more Max thought about it, the more true it felt. His mommy was dead. She really was. He knew, because a hole was in his heart now. A big hole where his mommy used to be. His whole self must've been filled with tears because they spilled out from his eyes without stopping. (OA 33)

Max's permanent 'separation' from his single parent mother occurred not when he was in school but when realization of his mother's death dawned on him. The news of her death was devastating to him.

Max had longed to have a father who could support him and his mother. The unexpected plane crash dashed his hopes to pieces and he undergoes "separation anxiety" (Goldberg 55), a reaction caused as a result of the knowledge of permanent 'separation' of the principal attachment figure. According to Bowlby: "Excessive separation anxiety is due to adverse family experiences – such as repeated threats of abandonment or rejection by parents – or to a parents' or sibling's illness or death for which the child feels responsible" (Goldberg 55). Max feels sad that he had not been there to help his mother escape. However, his short prayer to God is a significant attempt made on his part to accept and reconcile with the truth: "God, hi, it's Max ... Ramey says my mommy's with You now, so can You tell her something for me? ... Tell her I'm sorry I wasn't there when her plane landed in the water, because I would've helped her out. Me and her coulda swummed to the island and she wouldn't have to live in heaven" (OA 34). The possessiveness of a child towards the permanent attachment figure is presented to the readers in light of the gravity of the situation: Max has become an orphan.

At the news of the death of his mother, Max can think only according to his perception of life. Life worked only in the light of his mother, because she was an integral part of his life. She was the principal 'caregiver'. Max becomes very 'emotional' and the following lines represent Max's need for a 'caregiver':

His eyes got blurry and tears started coming down his face. More tears than he'd ever had in all his life.

How could Mommy be gone? Who would read to him and hug him now? Who would make him blueberry pancakes for breakfast and get him dressed in the morning and take him to the park for roller-skate lessons? Who would sing his special song about *I love you, Max, the most, I love to make you toast?* (OA 33)

Max's need for a 'care-giver' stems from his longing to be near his principal 'care-giver': his mother. His mother may have died, but his memories of her are vibrant. Pagan in Tyler's novel *The Amateur Marriage*, does not face the same gravity of situation. His grandparents take the role of mother and father, thereby substituting his need for immediate 'care-givers.' At the end of Kingsbury's *Oceans Apart*, Max's biological father Connor is located and given a chance to be a 'care-giver.' The family of Connor suffers when the truth about the brief affair is conveyed to them and they find it difficult to accept Max, because in doing so she accepts her husband's extra-marital affair with Kiahna.

When in bed at the home of his biological father Connor Evans, Max remembers his mother and wonders what the Evan's family thought about him. Max silently listened to the conversation the older daughter Elizabeth had with her mother.

Max's eyes are filled with tears when he learns that Connor's daughter Elizabeth and her mother Michele were talking about his mother. His confusion escalates when he realizes that both Elizabeth and Mrs Evans are not happy: "What he didn't understand was why? Why did they sound like they were mad at his mommy? If she and Mr Evans were friends, then that should mean they would like her better, not worse" (OA 157). At age ten, Elizabeth is confused about her father's relationship with Max's mother. Her frequent questions to her mother, points out her ability to speak out her mind and discuss the changes that are occurring within the family. She is able to question her father's relationship with Kiahna. She reasons that the mother of Max is not close to them. The only possible alternative Elizabeth could come up with is an affair. Her question to her mother "So you think they were just good friends? Max's mother and Daddy?" (OA 160) ignites suspicion and preoccupies her to rethink life in the family. Some changes are taking shape in her home and she wants to process the details according to her understanding and clarify them with a trustworthy adult - her mother. Elizabeth has not received specific answers to her questions and she is 'mentally' motivated to feel tense about the situation that is taking shape in her home.

Elizabeth wants to feel safe but the question of the identity of Max triggers her to feel 'anxious' and while Max struggles to survive the 'loss' of his principal 'care-giver,' Elizabeth fights to find the truth of her father's relationship with Max's mother. Elizabeth feels

frustrated: "The girl felt stiff and tensed, further proof of everything she'd guessed to be true about the boy's arrival. The girls were confused of course. Elizabeth the most because she was older, old enough to wonder why, if the boy's mother and father were such good friends, hadn't she been to the house once?" (OA 161). Max creeps into the giant bed and reaches out for the things Ramey has packed for him. He reads the letter and "dried his tears on his pajama sleeve" (OA 158). He begins to sing his mother's special song but he could not finish it. Here are Max's reasons for not singing his mother's special song: "Because he missed Mommy so much, that's why. Not just his heart and his hands and his feet missed her, but his eyes missed her, too. Because every time he wanted to see her, she was never there. He missed her so much he could almost feel her there beside him" (158). Max's memory of the last lines for his mother's song is identical to the title Kingsbury chooses for the novel "*When oceans we're apart, I'm right here in your heart*" (OA 158). Max's loneliness combats his desire to feel accepted by the Evan's family. He 'copes' with the situation and inherently feels attached to Connor Evans. Connor's affections and loving gestures like holding Max's hand, a gentle hold on his shoulder and letting him sleep next to him when the family had gone camping are vivid portrayals of Connor's feelings for Max.

The intention of 'threat', or safety issues will not hamper Max's budding relationship with Connor but the overall experience where Michele may have to play the role of primary 'caregiver' is a question left undisclosed. Aldgate points out that "A relationship with a significant adult outside a child's immediate family who offers consistent encouragement and support, and serves as a positive role model and advocate, is a factor associated with positive outcomes and the promotion of resilience" (153); for Max, the strangeness of being in the company of Mr Evans who is introduced as his mother's friend faded, and the possibility of becoming Max's legal father sank comfortably into the atmosphere. However, towards the end of the novel Michele Evans heals from the wounds inflicted by an unfaithful spouse and her attitude towards the orphaned child becomes positive. The adoption of Max begins with the hope that her relationship with her husband would heal and that they would start their roles as good role models for their children.

While the process of adoption is still in motion, Michele flies to Hawaii and brings Max and his dog back home. Her husband is devastated by his wife's intervention to say goodbye to Max, but he is surprised by the presence of a dog in the back yard. Soon Max appears and Connor's sadness disappears. Max's 'internal working model' undergoes a radical change. The conversations with his mother for a wonderful father incorporates a change in his 'internal working model';

expecting a principal father figure, not to replace his mother but to fill the empty space in his heart. His longing for a father even before his mother's death continues in wondrous expectancy and when this longing is fulfilled he does not grieve again (for his beloved mother). As a child, he can accept his dreams coming to reality. His experience or in better words, Kingsbury's novel attempt for enabling Max to rehearse his life with the Connors for a brief period, allows his 'internal working model' to function in a progressive manner, without having to encounter immediate change. His acceptance and observation of Connor's family into his 'internal working model' is reflective and provides insight on the intended 'family unit'.

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