

Portrayal of *Alter Ego* in Ellen Hopkins's *Identical* (2008)

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to consider and explore the portrayal of alter ego in Ellen Hopkins's well known American novel, *Identical*, published in 2008. It is famous among the teenage and young adult audience. Ellen Hopkins presents the teenage struggle with mental illness, drug addiction, prostitution and their fight against the exploitation. The present novel is the best example of exploration of the term 'Alter Ego' in the light of psychological disorders like Dissociative Identity Disorder.

Key words: Alter Ego, Child Abuse, Neglect, Personality, Dissociative Identity Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

In psychology, the term alter ego is used to refer a second self, which is a distinct from person's core or original personality. A person with alter ego may lead a dual life. The term alter ego is firstly used by the Roman scholar, Cicero, in first century. Later on, in the nineteenth century, it is used to explore the different behaviour of any person in particular circumstances. Behaviour of core personality and his alter ego may be opposite to each other or it will be different from each other. The notion of alter ego is used in the literary analysis of various works, to show dual and opposite personalities of one person. In Robert Stevenson's thriller, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), the character of Dr. Jekyll and Edward Hyde are the alter egos of each other. They represent good and evil natures, which exist within an individual. In the context of dissociative identity disorder, certain people develop an alternate personality, which have distinct temperaments or characteristics, it also roles as confident of the core person.

I

Identical is an account of downfall of a middle class American family. Kaeleigh is the central character. Due to her parents' abuse and neglect, depression and anxiety, she gets dissociated at extreme level and splits into other personality. She splits into the personality of her twin sister, Raeanne, who was dead in the car accident. Ellen Hopkins presents the chapters in the novel with the name of Kaeleigh and her alter personality, Raeanne in their alternative point of view. As Ellen Hopkins is

famous for her writing in free verse, she uses the same technique to describe the present novel. Like the experimental novels, she uses various sadistic images of broken hearts, liquor bottles with the significance of the relevant episodes and incidents in the novel.

The setting of the novel is in the California. The novel starts with the appearance of broken family with lots of troubles and top secrets. The episode of car accident in the past is one of the major events, which results in the tragedy of the whole family. As Raeanne dies in the accident and Kaeleigh gets dissociated and develops her alter ego. Both of the personalities (Kaeleigh and Raeanne) express their point of view regarding the events in the novel. The behaviour of their parents is the reason to the dissociation and split personality of Kaeleigh. Mr. Raymond, the father of Kaeleigh, is district court judge, who is deeply addicted to alcohol and fails to fulfil his moral responsibilities regarding his family. Kay, the mother of Kaeleigh, is a politician who mostly keeps travel due to her political work and stays away from home. Kaeleigh is the neglected girl who grows up without a proper nurture of her parents. The neglect, extreme and continuous sexual and physical abuse by own father push her in a dark reality of life. Kaeleigh's parents have the immense involvement in the process of dissociation and development of dissociative identity disorder in Kaeleigh.

Kay, Kaeleigh's mother neglects the physical as well as emotional needs of her daughters and her husband. It results that, her twin daughters always

wait for her love and care where as her husband ultimately and unconsciously finds an alternate for his need of love and affection. Such kind of neglect by Kaeleigh's mother is a typical of emotional and psychological abuse. As the cultural and medical anthropologist, Dr. Jill E. Korbin points out the nature of child abuse, in his book, *Child Abuse and Neglect: Cross-Cultural Perspective*. According to him, if parents become unsuccessful to perform their moral and prime duty (to fulfil basic emotional and physical needs of child) to their children, it may result in the mental disorder in their children. As various psychiatrists argue that the proper nurture plays an important role in the physical as well as mental and emotional development of a child, Ellen Hopkins gives the account of the family in which the husband and wife are not able to provide proper attention to their twin daughters. It results that there is no suitable attachment in them. Parents have provided her materialistic happiness but they forgot that love is more important to the happiness. Only materialistic provision for children is not sufficient. It is necessary that the parents should spare time for them and share their views and opinions with them. The above statement of Kaeleigh proves the lack of emotional attachment and affection of her parents towards her. At the end of the statement, she asks the question ironically that her life is not so bad. But in the reality she wants to convey that her life is thirsty for love and care of her parents.

II

The original personality of Kaeleigh creates split personality of Raeanne. Splitting is one of the major acts in dissociative identity disorder. Kathy Broadly, a trauma therapist, gives details of splitting, as:

Splitting is an amazing coping skill, once highly adaptive in traumatic situations and originally a life-and sanity- saving strategy, eventually causes great disturbances in a person's life. Over the course of time, the depth of pain, the volume of emotionally laden memories and experiences, the constant conflict between too many opposing needs, the hidden loss of original self, and the chaos of having many separate selves all become too overwhelming to manage.

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[disorder-from-separated-splitting-to-safe-solidity/">disorder-from-separated-splitting-to-safe-solidity/](#))

Kaeleigh subconsciously tries to cope up with the stress and the feelings of guilt due to the severe sexual abuse by her father. Since earlier she has been feeling the lack of emotional and physical intimacy. Regular sexual exploitation by her father and his appeal to keep this secret and the trauma of the death of her twin sister in a car accident, results in traumatic situation. She is unable to bear what is happening and hence her personality creates alter ego to escape from the reality. She is helpless and hopeless in the matter of her sexual abuse. It is much difficult for her to handle it; she also can not reveal it to anyone. Due to such usual suffering, she develops the feeling of guilt that she has taken the place of her mother in the life of her father. On the other hand, it creates the long lasting depression.

Raeanne has different views on the same problem of sexual abuse by her father. As per Raeanne's point of view, her father gives all kind of love and affection to only Kaeleigh. He spends his nights with her, he shares his bed with her; but he ignores Raeanne. In the reality, Mr. Raymond spends his nights with Kaeleigh as he loves her like his wife and develops sexual relations with her. Automatically he develops a sort of relation with Kaeleigh. When Kaeleigh is altered in the character of Raeanne, she expects same kind of affection and sex from her father. She considers wrong opinion, that sex is the only base of the emotional attachment. As her father has the sexual relations with Kaeleigh, Raeanne hates Kaeleigh and always seeks to fulfil her emotional needs in the form of sexual relations to others. No doubt, Kaeleigh and Raeanne share one body alternately but have opposite perspectives about the sexual abuse by their father. The personality of Kaeleigh is very much afraid, nervous and feels guilty for her sexual abuse by her father whereas Raeanne feels the lack of her father's attachment to her and wants to develop sexual relations with him as a way to sentimental attachment to him. To cope up the stress, Raeanne develops her sexual relations with her friends. She feels meaningless and hopeless, as her father does not give much attention to her. She does not get parental love from her father, so she thinks that if father is sexually attracted, at least he will consider her. Raeanne's sexual behaviour is

closely associated with Sigmund Freud's views on sexual development of human being. According to him, various conflicts that occur at different developmental stages create psycho-sexual impact on an individual. It is the outcome of improper emotional development. Raeanne's sexual deeds are the products of unconscious forces exist within her mind.

The character of Kaeleigh and Raeanne alternately control the same body at different times. At home, in the company of her father, the personality of Kaeleigh controls the body, which is coward, helpless and lacks the self-esteem. Whereas the personality of Raeanne which is more confident, fearless and bold controls the body outside the house in the company of her friends with whom she is sexually engaged. In reality, Raeanne is dead in a car accident. It is Kaeleigh who, unconsciously creates alter personality of Raeanne due to abuse and depression. Raeanne lives in the mind of Kaeleigh and appears as a secondary personality with her own point of view and consciousness. As alter plays various roles and as per the role play psychiatrists classify alters in various types. An alternate personality of Raeanne is a Dead Alter. Kaeleigh sees car accident in which her twin sister is dead. This memory is stored in her subconscious mind. Hence, she develops a dead alter (Raeanne) to restrain the experience.

Original personality and Host personality are two primary kinds of the personality. A person with dissociative identity disorder includes original and host personality in him or herself. In the case of Kaeleigh and Raeanne, the personality of Kaeleigh is the original personality which is also called as birth personality as Kaeleigh appears since her birth (before the creation of multiplicity). Since the death of Raeanne in the car accident, the original personality of Kaeleigh has created two alternate host personalities (Kaeleigh and Raeanne) which alternately control the body. Whenever the personality of Kaeleigh controls the body, it becomes host personality and whenever Raeanne controls, it becomes host of the body.

III

The portrayal of Kaeleigh is depicted as weak, nervous and anxious, as she becomes the victim of the exploitation, lack of love and care. On

the other hand, the personality of Raeanne is depicted stronger than Kaeleigh. Kaeleigh develops the personality of Raeanne in herself subconsciously to fulfil her unconscious desires. She wants to behave freely as her mentality is dominated by the abusive treatment given by the father. Under the control of Raeanne's alter; she behaves strong, careless and brave girl; who, for the sake of drugs and affection, shares herself sexually with her friends. Though, she lacks the intimacy and affection by her parents, she fulfils her suppressed desires by developing the physical relationship with her friends. As Raeanne is an alter ego of Kaeleigh, they contain different nature of each other. The major difference is that, Kaeleigh wants to free from sexual abuse of her father and Raeanne wants to fulfil her lack of affection by developing the sexual relations with friends. Both of them try to fulfil their suppressed wishes.

The present novel can be analysed under the light of certain theories related to the psychology and sociology. Pierre Janet, the famous French philosopher and psychiatrist, presents the *theory of dissociation*, in which he tries to define various causes of 'dissociation'. According to him, dissociation is the process which allows a person with mental disorder to convert their perception and awareness in a way that they may detach from the pressure or stress they have. In accordance to this theory, Kaeleigh's dissociation allows her to change her mind set. Due to the dissociation, she creates alternate personality, which has completely different attitude regarding the traumatic condition of Kaeleigh. As Raeanne is alternate personality, she is detached from the stress and sexual abuse which Kaeleigh has. Regarding the sexual relationship, both personalities have different opinions.

Kaeleigh's parental detachment is one of the traumatic conditions, which results in her dissociation and development of her dissociative identity disorder. It is very much related to *theory of betrayal trauma*, presented by an American psychiatrist, Jennifer Freyd. It is about the attachment of child towards his/her parents. According to Jennifer Freyd, if the parents or caretaker abuse the child, then the emotional needs of the child will be demolished and it will create the conflict in the mind of child regarding the traumatic

situation, which is initiated by parents. Child always depends on parents for emotional needs; if parents themselves abuses child, it will be their betrayal against their moral duty. In the context of Kaeleigh her father and mother both abuse her in different ways, which results in the terrible distress of Kaeleigh.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the absolute results of dissociative identity disorder. Along with the creation of multiplicity in personality it includes nightmares, flashback episodes and frightening thoughts. The personality of Kaeleigh shows the indications of PTSD in her behaviour due to certain uncontrollable bloodcurdling reflection. Jan Van Dijk, the eminent behavioural scientist, in his book, *The Basics of Personality Disorder*, gives the causes of post-traumatic stress disorder. According to him, rape, sexual assault or torture, severe abuse, serious accidents (vehicle accidents) and natural disasters are the prime causes of it. According to different psychologists and psychiatrics, people with anti-social personality are the oblique source of the creation of much stressful phenomenon in the life of victim of dissociative identity disorder. In this regard, Michael Gelder, Paul Harrison and Philip Cowen in their *Shorter Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry* explain the anti-social nature of people. Kaeleigh's lack of parental love in her early years and Ty's shameful and disgraceful treatment given to Raeanne are some of the examples of anti-social or psychopathic personality.

IV

The author focuses the importance of family institution for the proper development of the children. The above optimism of Kaeleigh is much significant in a way that it reveals her unconscious repressed needs of emotional bondage with parents in her childhood. In the novel, first time she seems to be hopeful and positive towards her life. In the very last chapter: *And I'll Be Watching* the personality of Raeanne reveals her support to Kaeleigh with the bond of care in themselves. The novel ends with her following comment which has the huge significance. As a stronger and caretaking person, Raeanne wants to maintain herself, inside the personality of Kaeleigh. Ellen Hopkins ends her novel in a very optimistic and remarkable tone. Indirectly, she gives

the message that unusual psychological problem can be cured by parental love, care and proper behaviour of people around the victims.

Ellen Hopkins delivers various possible phenomena of demolition of family institution, which may result in the tragedy of family members. As she has presented the alter personalities of twin sisters who are nothing but the victims of demolition of family. She deliberately focuses the strong tensions and problems raised within the middle class American families. The destruction of family institution becomes the major reason for the psychological devastation of generation. On the other hand various kinds of psychological disorders enclose them under the fractured state of mentality. Ellen Hopkins's present novel, *Identical*, is the fine example of moral, psychological and sexual destruction of the generation along with the post-modern corrupt ethical values in human life. She gives the account of two generations to illustrate her subject of sex, abuse of alcohol and drugs, child pornography, prostitution, pre-marital sex and other troubles in the teenage and adult age in human life. She significantly tries to present the profound connection between various states of human psychology and the situation in which they face throughout their life. She also endeavours to confirm that healthy psychological development of any human being is fundamentally associated with the treatment he/she gets from their parents and society.

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