



Child abuse as portrayed in Delia Owen's *where the crawdads sing*

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Abstract. Child abuse occurs when a child is hurt or abused by an adult. This can happen in various ways, impacting the child's body, cognition, and emotions. This study discusses the kind of child abuse and the impact of child abuse in Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing*. This study uses the child abuse theory by Christiane Sanderson and takes a psychological approach as it examines real-life phenomena. A qualitative approach is used as a method of research. The analysis reveals that Kya experiences physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, primarily inflicted by her father and further exacerbated by the abandonment of her parents and siblings. Kya endures physical abuse through beatings and threats from her father, emotional abuse through his dismissive and degrading behavior, and neglect as she is left to fend for herself in extreme poverty and isolation. These abuses have long-term effects on her physical and psychological health. Kya is malnourished because her parents abandoned her. Psychologically, she suffers from deep anxiety and a profound lack of trust as a result of repeated trauma and isolation. In conclusion, Kya's experiences with physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect emphasize the severe and lasting impacts of child abuse on an individual's physical and mental well-being. The novel highlights how these traumatic experiences shape Kya's interactions with family and society. Childhood traumatic experience that made Kya become the person who has anxiety.

Keywords: child abuse, impact of child abuse, psychological approach

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is a critical issue affecting children worldwide, where a child is harmed or mistreated by an adult in various ways, impacting their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. This abuse can severely impair children's development, their current and future academic performance, and their overall psychological health (Foster et al., 2017:54). Each child experiences the effects of child abuse differently due to individual variations in thinking and coping mechanisms. These variations can be influenced by several factors, including the child's age at the time of the abuse, their developmental stage, the severity of the violence experienced, and the nature of their relationship with the abuser.

According to the World Health Organization (2022), child abuse includes various forms of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect, affecting children under 18 years old. This abuse can be perpetrated by parents, caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers. It is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced violence in the past year, leading to severe and long-lasting impacts on their health and well-being.

Child abuse and neglect include all behaviors that hinder a child's optimal development, prompting questions about what constitutes optimal development for a child and which behaviors obstruct this development. Acts of violence against children leave deep, lasting imprints on their brains that can persist throughout their lives. Such behaviors are categorized as child abuse or malicious acts against children (Litaay, 2018:33). On the other hand, abuse and neglect specifically refer to behaviors that impede a child's growth and development. The effects of abuse and neglect on children can be profound and long-lasting, impacting their entire lives. Children who suffer physical abuse may experience injuries, chronic health problems, and developmental delays. Sexual abuse can lead to severe psychological issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Neglect and emotional abuse can result in attachment disorders, low self-esteem, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect include parental substance abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence, poverty, and social isolation. Children with disabilities and those in foster care are at higher risk. Family stressors, such as unemployment and lack of social support, also increase the likelihood of abuse and neglect (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015:37).

One novel that captures attention this way is *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens (2018). The novel portrays the various forms of abuse and neglect experienced by Kya, highlighting the long-term psychological and emotional impact of such experiences. The writer is interested in using *Where the Crawdads Sing* as the data source to analyze the child abuse depicted in the novel. This interest stems from the experiences of the main character, Kya, a young girl living in the marsh with her family. Over time, Kya is deprived of the love and care she deserves as the youngest child. She is abandoned by her mother, followed by her four older siblings, leaving her alone with her alcoholic father. From then on, Kya endures life with her abusive father. Maltreatment can influence the behavior of teenagers and adults, including their use of alcohol or drugs. Adults who were abused as children are significantly more likely to develop substance use disorders compared to those who were not abused (LeTendre & Reed, 2017:689). Given these circumstances, the writer is keen to delve deeper into the abusive behaviors experienced by Kya, who survived the child abuse by her family and society.

Based on the discussion above, the writer aims to conduct an analysis that focuses on the different sorts of child abuse that Kya experiences in *Where the Crawdads Sing*, as well as the impact of this abuse on her life. The study aims to find out what types of child abuse Kya experiences and how it impacts her in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. This analysis will use Christiane Sanderson's (2004), child abuse theory to create a full understanding of Kya's abuse and its deep psychological and physical impacts.

This study uses a psychological approach to literary works, psychology can be utilized to explore and explain human-related things and phenomena. "For some conscious artists, psychology may have tightened their sense of reality, sharpened their powers of

observation, or allowed them to fall into previously undiscovered patterns," (Warren Wellek in Wijaya 2020:6) Wellek and Warren's paradigm can be used to analyze a wide range of literary works, including those about child abuse, trauma, and psychological development. For example, their intrinsic method would entail a close reading of the text to examine how literary tropes are utilized to depict child abuse and its consequences for characters.

Child Abuse

The four types of child abuse include physical abuse, mental abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse (Sanderson, 2004:34-35)

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse can occur through various means, including beating, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, drowning, and smothering. Truly stating a fictitious illness can also cause harm.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse happens when children's emotional development is negatively impacted by inappropriate treatment. Such poor emotional treatment can have serious consequences if it continues because the child may feel worthless, unwanted, unsuitable, or unappreciated.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of children can start at any age, from a few weeks old (there are babies with sexually transmitted diseases) to 18 years old. While figures vary, it is believed that the age group most in danger is five to twelve years old, while younger children are increasingly being utilized in the creation of child pornography.

Child Neglect

Neglect is a child's physical or psychological needs that can negatively impact their health and development over time. Parents or guardians may not be able to provide adequate food, shelter, clothes, physical safety, or medical care for their children.

However, in this study, the researcher only identified three types of child abuse in the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*: physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect.

Impact of Child Abuse

The impact of child abuse suffered by the character makes children more sensitive to their abuser's anger and fear of those around them as this sensitivity can help them identify threats quickly and potentially avoid further abuse.

Child abuse can have significant physical impacts, including malnutrition. Malnutrition occurs when the nutrients needed to support the growth and development of children are not met, often due to the consumption of unhealthy and unbalanced food. This lack of proper nutrition can be a direct consequence of neglect, a form of child abuse, where caregivers fail to provide adequate food, or it can result from the overall neglectful environment in which the child is raised. The psychological impact is the deep anxiety experienced by the main character. Anxiety disorders are characterized by extreme and continuing fear, anxiety, and or avoidance of perceived dangers in either the exterior (for example, social interactions) or internal (for example, physical sensations) environment. Panic attacks, which are a form of sudden fear response, can also be associated with anxiety disorders (Craske et al., 2017:1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher uses previous studies from “*Child Abuse in Rowell’s Eleanor & Park*” written by Bella Melviana Wijaya (2020). Although still discussed by using the same topic but different theories. The second one is with the same discussion about child abuse entitled, *Psychological Effect of Child Sexual Abuse in Eishes Chayil’s Hush* written by Ullyl Izzaty Aldyillah (2023). The study discusses the same topic and the same theory but with a different focus. The third study is entitled “*Child Abuse in the 20th Century as Reflected by Shekiba in The Pearl That Broke Its Shell Novel*” by Jihan Ainiyah Firdaus (2021) This study may cover similar types of abuse but within a different societal structure and family dynamics and use a different theoretical framework or focus on different aspects of abuse. Explores child abuse in the context of Afghan culture, with its unique traditions, norms, and gender roles.

METHOD

This research is descriptive qualitative research, which is defined as research that is closely related to the use of words narratively in order to describe and analyze the data of research (Creswell, 2014). This research aims to understand the context of a problem or issue related to the study of literature. Therefore, a descriptive qualitative research design was used to conduct this study because the data collected are in the form of words and sentences rather than numbers, which is a suitable method to analyze data narratively. This method is used to analyze child abuse in Delia Owen's *Where the Crawdads Sing*. The study focuses on the main character's experience with child abuse. It can be used to analyze the data in this study because the novel focuses on the characters, their emotional reactions, and their thoughts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Kind of Child Abuse Suffered by Kya in *Where the Crawdads Sing*

There are four types of child abuse, namely physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and child neglect. This novel tells that Kya experienced three types of child abuse from childhood to her teenage years, this was done by her parents and people close to her, such as receiving a hit from her father and also becoming her father's vent when he was angry. In this chapter, researchers will explain further how Kya received abuse from those closest to her.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse typically happens in isolated, low-frequency episodes and is frequently accompanied by frustration and anger directed at the child (Hansen & Sedlar, 2014:151). In 1952, Kya was a 7-year-old girl, she received physical abuse from her father and has become the most vulnerable victim of the abuse cycle. Her fear and abandonment get worse during her childhood and dependent on her family for safety and care. It can be read as follows:

“After Ma left, over the next few weeks, Kya’s oldest brother and two sisters drifted away too, as if by example. They had endured Pa’s red-faced rages, which started as shouts, then escalated into fist-slugs, or backhanded punches, until one by one, they disappeared. They were nearly grown anyway. And later, just as she forgot their ages, she couldn’t remember their real names, only that they were called Missy, Murph, and Mandy. On her porch

mattress, Kya found a small pile of socks left by her sisters.” (Owens,2018: 17)

The quotation above, means when Pa got angry starting with screaming and then being punched or hit on the back, Pa not only abused Kya but also all her siblings so that one by one they left their father and home. It can be seen the sentence “Pa’s red-faced rages, which started as shouts, then escalated into fist-slugs, or backhanded punches”.

The quotation below shows the physical abuse that Kya experiences from her father, as well as the resulting fear. In this quotation, Kya is afraid to take her father's boat into the swamp for fear of being physically punished by her father.

From there, she wandered to the lagoon, where early light caught the glimmer of hundreds of dragonfly wings. Oaks and thick brush encircled the water, darkening it cavelike, and she stopped as she eyed Pa’s boat drifting there on the line. If she took it into the marsh and he found out, he’d take his belt to her. Or the paddle he kept by the porch door; the “welcome bat,” Jodie had called it. (Owens, 2018:41)

These two tools represent the daily threat of a physical attack that Kya suffers. These two uses represent the regular threat of physical abuse around Kya. The threat of using the belt and paddle shows how brutal and cruel the punishment methods used by her father were. Jodie's mention of the “welcome bat” shows that this violence is part of the daily routine that all the children in the house have come to know and fear. Kya's fear of physical punishment from her father shows the profound impact of this abuse on her daily life. She had to be constantly cautious and lived in constant fear of her father's anger and physical violence. This fear affected her behavior and shaped how she interacted with the world around her, always trying to avoid triggering her father's anger. This is proven by the sentence “If she took it into the marsh and he found out, he'd take his belt to her. Or the paddle he kept by the porch door; the 'welcome bat,' Jodie had called it” explains her father's two abuse tools: the belt and the paddle, which Jodie refers to as the 'welcome bat.

Another example of physical abuse experienced by Kya is that her father always hit not only Kya and all her siblings but even her mother as well. “Pa had beat all of them, mostly when he was drunk. He’d be all right for a few days at a time—they would eat chicken stew together; once they flew a kite on the beach. Then: drink, shout, hit.” (Owens, 2018:63). This sentence proves that Pa’s repeatedly physical abuse, particularly when fueled by alcohol, shows that their father is unpredictable and dangerous, adding another layer of insecurity and pain to Kya's existence. The father, who is expecting to protect and support the family, became a source of worry and pain.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse can be done by isolating a child, limiting their social contact, and ignoring their need for caring and love. Neglecting to pay attention or even threatening them is also considered emotional abuse. Emotional abuse, unlike physical abuse, does not cause visible injuries. Child abuse can be difficult to identify and typically occurs behind closed doors, leaving only the child's self-esteem to suffer (Dure and Sites, 2015:19). Kya and her brother also get emotionally abused by Pa.

"They washed their dishes fast, then ran out the door toward the marsh, he in the lead. But just then Pa shouted and hobbled toward them. Impossibly lean, his frame seemed to flop about from poor gravity. His molars yellow as an old dog's teeth. Kya looked up at Jodie."

"We can run. Hide in the mossy place."

"It's okay. It'll be okay," he said. (Owens, 2018:17)

In the quotation above it describes a situation when Kya experiences deep fear of her father, so she feels the need to hide. Jodie's response, "It's okay. It'll be okay," reflects an attempt to calm Kya down, even though he may also feel the same fear. Kya's fear of her father is not only due to physical abuse but also due to the emotional abuse she is experiencing. The fear of hiding in a "mossy place" highlights how much of an emotional influence their father has on Kya and Jodie's daily lives. This situation shows that in addition to physical abuse, emotional abuse also plays a significant role in Kya's experience.

This quotation below shows another type of emotional abuse Kya receives from her father. In this scene, Kya's father returns home drunk and, the next morning hurts her with harsh and demeaning words.

On the evening of the fourth day, Pa showed up with a bottle and sprawled across his bed. Walking into the kitchen the next morning, he hollered,

"Whar's ev'body got to?"

"I don't know," she said, not looking at him.

"Ya don't know much as a cur-dawg.

Useless as tits on a boar hog." (Owens, 2018:19)

In the quotation, Kya's father returns home drunk and the next morning he abuses Kya with harsh and demeaning words. The phrase "You don't know much as a cur-dawg." "Useless as tits on a boar hog" was a clear insult to Kya, comparing her to a useless wild dog and using harsh and vulgar similes to degrade her. This verbal abuse is not only offensive, but it also demonstrates her father's desire to lower Kya's self-esteem and confidence. Kya's response of just saying "I don't know" without looking at her father implies that she has grown used to the abuse and may feel powerless to speak out. The lack of response is one of the long-term consequences of emotional abuse, as victims frequently believe it is worthless to fight back or speak up.

After the incident that Kya goes through during the day at school she feels like crying when she remembers it. "She was as near to tears as she had been the whole day" (Owens, 2018:32). It can be seen from the sentence describing a painful experience Kya had at school. After a day at school, Kya feels close to tears when she remembers the incident. The words, "She was as close to tears as she had been the whole day" illustrate Kya's sadness throughout the day. The experience of being bullied by her classmates had a profound emotional impact. They insult her with insulting names like "MISS Catherine Danielle Clark!" and "Where have you been, marsh hen?" "Where's your hat, swamp rat?" (Owens 2018:31) The terms "marsh hen" and "swamp rat" show disgust for Kya's life in a swamp, which makes her feel isolated and distinct from the other students. These remarks were a kind of emotional abuse from her friends and added to the psychological pressure Kya was already under at home.

Child Neglect

Neglecting or not meeting a child's emotional needs might be a contributing factor. Moreover, the quotation below shows that Kya is experiencing child neglect by her parents.

“He banged the front door open against the wall and walked through the sitting room to his bedroom in three strides, without calling her or looking in the kitchen. That was normal. She heard him putting his case on the floor, pulling out drawers. He’d notice the fresh bedding, the clean floor for sure. If not his eyes, his nose would catch the difference.” (Owens, 2018:52)

The quotation above shows the form of neglect Kya experienced from her parents, particularly her father. From the line "He banged the front door against the wall and walked through the sitting room to his bedroom in three strides, not calling her or looking in the kitchen." "That was normal" shows that Kya's father often ignored her. Her father shows her little care or affection, not even checking in or contacting her when he returns home. These activities are becoming "normal" for Kya, implying that neglect is part of her everyday routine. The line shows Kya's experience with not just physical and verbal abuse, but also significant neglect from her father. Lack of parental care and involvement can be as harmful as other forms of abuse, causing profound feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The quotation below shows that Kya is a little girl who is still 10 years old and has to survive alone because, Pa did not come home for two full months, and Kya cannot depend on anyone except herself.

In the winter of 1956, when Kya was ten, Pa came hobbling to the shack less and less often. Weeks passed with no whiskey bottle on the floor, no body sprawled on the bed, no Monday money. She kept expecting to see him limping through the trees, toting his poke. One full moon, then another had passed since she’d seen him. (Owens, 2018:69)

It shows the neglect and how Kya has to depend on herself to survive and tells a situation in which Kya is living without help or support from her father. Her father came home less and less regularly, and he eventually stopped showing up for months. During this time, Kya had to deal with not just physical neglect, but also feelings of loneliness and fear. Her father's presence meant no money for the essentials and no leader figure, even if he was frequently a source of fear and violence. However, he was away leaving Kya completely alone and without support.

The quotation below also explains that Kya survives living alone at home after her father's left, and eating food as it is to survive. Kya has to rely on very limited resources and learn how to survive on her own in a harsh environment.

“And there would be no Monday money. She’d stretched the last few dollars for weeks, surviving on grits, boiled mussels, and the occasional remnant egg from the rangy hens. The only remaining supplies were a few matches, a nubbin of soap, and a handful of grits. A fistful of Blue Tips wouldn’t make a winter. Without them she couldn’t boil the grits, which she fixed for herself, the gulls, and the chickens”. (Owens, 2018:70)

She wants to state that she does not have enough money to survive on grits, boiled mussels, and the occasional remnant egg from the rangy hens. The only remaining supplies were a few matches, a nubbin of soap, and a handful of grits proven by the

sentence "There would be no Monday money." This demonstrates Kya's starving and suffering. She no longer receives money from her father and must rely on homemade meals like grits, boiled mussels, and leftover eggs from pet chickens and also from the sentence "A fistful of Blue Tips wouldn't make a winter. Without them, she couldn't boil the grits, which she fixes for herself, the gulls, and the chickens." This description demonstrates how Kya makes the most use of her resources while yet experiencing severe poverty. The few remaining products, such as soap, matchsticks, and grits, demonstrate how limited her supplies are. Kya's fear about not having enough matches to survive through the winter demonstrates how precarious her circumstances are. Without matches, she will be unable to cook her primary food, grits. It can be seen how Kya learns to survive in exceedingly challenging and dangerous situations. She endures hunger, loneliness, and fear of the future without the help of others.

The Impacts of Child Abuse Toward Kya in *Where the Crawdads Sing*

Child abuse has been connected to a variety of psychosocial issues. Consequences may include anxiety, sadness, post-traumatic stress, cognitive distortions, somatic obsession, bulimia, substance misuse, and suicidality (Bigras, 2015:464) The researcher discovers that some impacts of child abuse can happen to children. In this novel, the impacts happen toward Kya such as her physical appearance like a malnourished child, becoming a person who is easily emotional like her father, becoming a child who is ignorant about her surroundings and lacks confidence in communicating with others and often puts herself down (low self-esteem) and has difficulty trusting others.

The physical impact of the abuse and neglect experienced by Kya, one of which is malnutrition that affects her growth and health, is proved in this quotation "Kya couldn't eat. She sat on the porch steps, looking down the lane. Tall for her age, bone skinny, she had deep-tanned skin and straight hair, black and thick as crow wings." (Owens, 2018:14). In addition "Kya couldn't eat" shows that Kya was often unable to eat, either because of stress or a lack of enough nutrition. This causes her to become "bone skinny," showing a lack of proper nutrients. "Tall for her age, bone skinny" implied that, while Kya grew tall for her age, nutritional problem caused her body to become extremely thin. This shows that her physical development was disrupted due to insufficient nutrition. Kya's physical appearance includes "deep-tanned skin and straight hair, black and thick as crow wings." Her darkly tanned skin is most likely due to her frequent outdoor activities without proper protection, and her black and thick hair demonstrated that, despite a lack of nutrition, some components of her health are sustained.

The physical impact of her father's child abuse affects Kya's emotions and mental health. It can be seen that the abuse Kya experienced from her father also affects her emotions, making her irritable and frustrated. "He lifted his hand and slapped Kya hard across the cheek. 'Shut up, ya prissy-pot crybaby! Git that silly-looking dress and fancy shoes off ya. Them's whorin' clothes.'" (Owens, 2018:197) Although these are her father's actions, the impact of the abuse may be observed in Kya's acute emotional responses to stress and anxiety. Kya's trauma and isolation led her to regard her survival over her surroundings, "She learned to live alone, as an animal does, without showing her feelings, without caring." (Owens, 2018:165) The sentence demonstrates how Kya learns to control her feelings and becomes less concerned (ignorant) about others.

The psychological impact experienced by Kya is anxiety. In addition to the physical impact, abuse and neglect also causes deep-seated anxiety in Kya. The traumatic

experiences of abuse and neglect caused Kya to experience ongoing anxiety, affecting the way she interacted with the world and people around her. Proves by the quotation below shows how Kya deals with distancing herself from future love and trust.

"From somewhere very deep, she made herself a promise never to trust or love anyone again " demonstrated Kya's determination to cut herself off from future love and trust. This was the result of recurrent trauma and abandonment which left her believing that the only way to protect herself was to never trust or love another person again. (Owens, 2018:127)

This is due to the continuous trauma and neglect she endured, which led her to believe that the only way to protect herself was to never trust or love another person again. Kya's experience with neglect since childhood has impacted her perspective on life and relationships. Although she has moments of warmth and concern, the deep trauma of her past makes it difficult for her to completely open up and believe that others will still be there for her. The sentence showed how tough it is for Kya to trust and accept love after being through so much grief and loss.

This also shows Kya experiences feelings of self-worth and trust issues due to neglect and insults, that said, "You said you loved me, but there is no such thing. There is no one on Earth you can count on." (Owens, 2018:127) This phrase describes Kya's feelings of neglect and betrayal, making it difficult for her to trust others again.

CONCLUSION

There are three kinds of child abuse portrayed in this novel that Kya suffers, Kya experiences physical abuse from her father which traumatizes her and causes long-term impacts on her health. This abuse involves not only blows but also constant threats of abuse, creating a fearful home environment. In addition to physical abuse, Kya also faces emotional abuse from those around her, including constant teasing and humiliation. This damages her self-esteem and makes her feel worthless and isolated. Kya is neglected by her mother, father, and siblings, who leave her alone to survive in the harsh environment. This neglect leads to poor nutrition, lack of emotional support, and inability to build healthy relationships with others. These experiences make it difficult for Kya to trust others and feel isolated. She often puts herself down and avoids social relationships, which is a sign of deep childhood trauma. There are two aspects of the impact of child abuse experienced by Kya, namely physical and psychological. The physical impact that Kya experienced led to serious malnutrition. This is shown through her physical description of being thin and malnourished, as well as her inability to obtain adequate and nutritious food. and the psychological impact experienced by Kya is deep anxiety. The traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect cause Kya to experience ongoing anxiety, affecting the way she interacts with the world and people around her.

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