

## **Mother, Father, Lover: A creative look at how relationships with influence future intimate relationships by Musawenkosi Khanyile**

### **Abstract**

Inspired by the Object Relations perspective in Psychology, which posits that humans are relationship-seeking beings whose early relationships with primary caregivers' influence future relationships, this paper demonstrates through the use of poetry how early relationships with parents shape future intimate relationships. The poetry used focuses on the dynamics in three different kinds of relationships, namely the relationship with the mother, the father, and ultimately the lover. These dynamics are observed in tandem to demonstrate how the way we function in intimate relationships is impacted by our past experiences from our relationships with parents.

What do the poet and the psychologist have in common? They both believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the power of words. It is easy to see how poets embrace the power of words, because poetry is the art of gathering words. Psychology, on the other hand, is embedded in the belief that words have the power to heal. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, realized that patients who came to see him were able to cure themselves by talking. This came to be known as the talking-cure, or what Freud's colleague, Joseph Breuer, famously referred to as catharsis. Even to date, Psychologists do not prescribe medication, but instead facilitate a non-judgmental space that allows patients to freely talk themselves out of emotional pain. Words, for both poetry and psychology, are powerful.

I became a poet first before I became a Clinical Psychologist. I chose poetry as an adolescent in Grade 8. Life chose psychology for me after I had finished matric and didn't know what to do next. Now when I reflect, it is probably my passion for words that made me fall in love with psychology. When I learned that healing in psychotherapy is attained through words, a part of me that had fallen in love with poetry in previous years and was already accustomed to the idea of healing itself through words, resonated with this. A

couple of years ago I stood in front of Grade 10 and 11 learners during a Career Guidance Day outlining what psychology is. My attention had been drawn to a learner who asked questions enthusiastically and seemed interested in what I was saying. It was only after she had asked how psychologists treat patients and I had explained to her the basics of psychotherapy, that I began to see disappointment sit on her face. I thereby deduced that she belonged to a group of those who underestimate the power of words, those who choose a different path to poets and psychologists.

I have begun by outlining a common ground for both poetry and psychology since this essay seeks to bring these together in exploring relationships. This essay seeks to demonstrate, through the use of poetry and ideas borrowed from psychology, how early relationships with primary caregivers' influence future intimate relationships. It is no surprise that psychology, a field that has dedicated itself in understanding human behaviour, has studied relationships extensively. It is also no surprise that poetry, an art form through which people observe and narrate the intricacies of life, has given people a platform to celebrate relationships, mourn them and also preserve memories associated with them. Poetry became an outlet for me to release the negative emotions emanating from strained relationships, as well as the reservoir of memories associated with these relationships. Psychology helped me connect the dots, to understand the dynamics of relationships, particularly how relationships with parents become templates for future ones, and also to process the emotional trauma caused by failed relationships.

One of the greatest shifts in the field of psychology was the idea that human beings are object-seeking, instead of pleasure-seeking. Perhaps the term "object-seeking" is a bit confusing, now that it is never used to refer to human beings. Contrary to the common usage of the word, in this case "object" means the other, or if you like, another human being. The idea that human beings are object-seeking, or rather relationship-seeking, falls under what has come to be known as Object Relations Theories. Freud argued that human beings were driven by the need to reduce tension, which inadvertently led to pleasure. Humans, therefore, were seen as pleasure-seeking beings. This was until William Fairbairn came into the picture, a

Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst writing in seclusion from the popular psychoanalytic community, was the first one to propound the idea that human beings are not motivated by pleasure, but rather by the desire to build relationships with one another. It is this idea that has him lauded by Otto Kernberg as “the most radical proponent of an object relations model” (11). Like any other new idea, the suggestion that human beings are driven by the need to build relationships with one another was warmly embraced by some and rejected by others. Edward Khantzian’s assertion that “pleasure is momentary and not unimportant, but human connection and the comfort we derive from each other is more sustaining and lasting” (276), epitomizes the echoes of those who warmly embraced Fairbairn’s idea. It is noteworthy that Fairbairn did not completely disregard the notion of pleasure but emphasized human connection as the ultimate goal. If human beings are driven by the desire to build relationships with one another, what happens then when this desire is met with rejection? According to Fairbairn, that’s where you should start when seeking to understand human pain. Fairbairn believed that many problems arise early in childhood, specifically from mother-infant relationships.

Human beings, it would seem, learn everything, including how to function in relationships. Our knowledge of how to love is imprinted in our minds as early as infancy. John Bowlby, arguably inspired by what Fairbairn had theorized, went on to study the attachment behaviour of infants. What he found culminated in his theory of attachment, popularly known as Attachment Theory. At the heart of this theory is the argument that individuals, based on their early interactions with their primary caregivers, particularly mothers, develop a mental representation of their caregivers, which later shapes their relationships. Jude Cassidy puts this more clearly when she writes that “according to Bowlby, based on the experiences with the mother, the child develops a mental representation (Bowlby calls this a representational model, or an internal working model [IWM] of the mother” (123). This mental representation of the mother shapes how the individual will function in future relationships, including intimate ones. Michal Einav notes that “it appears that children internalize and later apply the interactional models of self

and other exemplified in their relationship with their parents to their own expectations about intimate relationships” (426).

Perhaps what all this means is that if one wants to understand their inability to maintain relationships, they should reflect on their childhood relationships as an attempt to locate the origin of their shortcomings. This is probably why Psychologists are renowned for asking individuals to describe their relationships with parents, even if those individuals are only seeking help regarding problems they are facing in their current relationships with their intimate partners. In Robert Berold’s poem, entitled “Visit to my mother”, we see a hilarious opinion held by the speaker regarding the tendency of psychologists to link people’s present problems to their upbringing, or more specifically, their parents:

“Why did you go into psychotherapy?” he asks me. We’d started talking about this yesterday when he fetched me from the airport. My mother answers “Therapy is when you pay a lot of money to someone to tell you that you had bad parents.” (57)

I have already described poetry as an outlet that I have used since adolescence to release the negative emotions caused by failed relationships, and also to store memories associated with these relationships. Perhaps my writing poetry has been, similar to how psychotherapy commonly unfolds, an attempt to trace the origin of my struggles with relationships in childhood. The following original poems demonstrate my attempts at tracing the origin of my challenges with intimate relationships by reflecting on my relationships with my parents, and also on the difficulties that I have faced in my past intimate relationships. I begin with the poem entitled “Reflections”, which can be viewed as a synopsis of these difficulties, and then proceed to poems falling under the respective themes of “Mother”, “Father”, and “Lover”.

### “Reflections”

In grade 8, my hand landed on the delicate parts of a classmate.  
This did not look anything like me:  
a well-behaved boy who always wore neatly  
and performed well in class.  
She reported me.

One teacher said I needed to cut down on cheese.  
Back home there was only my father-  
a man who lived within himself.  
We turned the house into separate homes;  
our hearts never came out of our rooms.  
We met briefly on our coincidental walks to the kitchen.  
Also in the lounge when soccer was playing on TV.  
That is the only time we ever spoke.  
Even when we drove a distance  
we listened to the humming of the engine.  
I learned to store his voice within me for the silent days  
like ants store food ahead of winter.  
Mom had gone to live in a rural area,  
in a house that dad built on the conviction that men  
should retire away from the restlessness of the township.  
She'd taken my younger siblings with her.  
I was in primary school.  
Mom raised me with a loud voice and a short temper.  
I remember her pressing me against the ground,  
hitting me with all the energy she possessed.  
I remember swinging back and forth  
from loving to hating to tolerating her.  
A part of me was happy when she left.  
Now she calls to complain that I never call.  
I grew up in solitude.  
Learned to enjoy silence.  
Got used to keeping myself to myself.  
Found poetry in high school and hid myself there.  
Girls came and went.  
Relationships slipped through my hands.  
I couldn't hold them long enough.  
Maybe because I never learned to share myself.  
Maybe because of mom and dad and silence.  
The psychologist in Hilton asked me:  
*who then taught you affection?*  
and then scribbled down a note when I couldn't answer.  
That was the last time I saw her.

“Mother”

Dad built a house in a rural area.  
He didn't want to die in a township,  
he thought his soul wouldn't find peace  
in such an unsettled place.  
You left to stay in this house.  
I was in primary school.  
Now many years have passed.  
You are worried that you left  
even where you should have stayed.  
We have a sad relationship;  
we starve of each other for months  
and when you can no longer bear it,  
you call for what seems like reassurance.  
My heart feels heavy inside my chest  
when after months  
you call to ask if I still love you.

“Mother II”

I should have known that I could never run away from you  
You visit me now in the guise of a lover  
In her beautiful eyes I see you  
Through her soft touch I'm forgiving you.

“Father”

Your love was like road signs.  
I only read your face to understand  
when to stop  
where to go.  
We did not need a voice to love;  
love was quiet and enough.  
Things have changed:  
now you want to speak more

like a man desperate to leave something behind  
before he goes.  
Your thirst for conversation  
draws you out of your room.  
Sometimes I want to shut you out  
even if it hurts.  
Sometimes I want to avenge  
all the silent years.

“*Lover: this is why I fail at love*”

Love is wanting to hold.  
Relationships are arms we hold each other with.  
I am a man without limbs.

“*The wandering man*”

*For T*

My love poems always sound like obituaries,  
always mourning someone that got away.  
I told you this before you gave me your heart  
but took care to not make it sound like a warning.  
I am haunted by our memories:  
Our long drives to beautiful landscapes  
listening to James Bay;  
my morning and late night drives  
to and from you.  
I am haunted by your smile  
and your innocent-looking thumb-sucking  
like a 5 year old.  
I could have opened up my arms  
to shelter you forever  
but I'm a hopeless wandering man.  
My heart is a hotel room up the stairs.  
They're always walking up and down  
looking for a home.

These poems demonstrate a pattern of struggles in relationships, beginning in childhood. If a psychologist studied these poems, they would probably argue that the hopeless view of the speaker as “a man without limbs” who cannot hold relationships, originates from him being raised by a mother with “a loud voice and a short temper” and also by an emotionally distant father who “lived within himself”. These poems illustrate the growth of an individual from a boy who endures the short temper of his mother and learns to live with the silence of his father to a man who is now struggling with intimate relationships, but is somehow hopeful that current relationships may heal the wounds of past relationships; that the wounds of being raised by non-affectionate parents can potentially be healed by an affectionate lover, evident in the line, “Through her soft touch I’m forgiving you”, from the poem entitled, “Mother II”. This hope is consistent with the argument in psychology that negative emotions from past unstable relationships can be replaced by positive emotions from stable relationships characterized by love. In the above poems there is a pattern of failure to hold relationships, where the speaker feels that his heart is “the hotel room up the stairs” where lovers are “always walking up and down looking for a home”. The idea of a heart that is vacant, where lovers do not stay long enough, corresponds with the idea of a mother who “left” even where she “should have stayed”. In these poems there is a link between difficulties in early relationships with parents and difficulties occurring in intimate relationships at a later stage. In other words, there is a common ground between what we see in these poems, and what has been argued in psychology, specifically by Fairbairn and Bowlby.

### **Works Cited**

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