

‘Separation-Individuation’ in *The Children’s Train*

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to examine Viola Ardone’s *The Children’s Train* in the context of ‘separation-individuation’ theory that typifies how a child separates from the mother and gradually develops a distinct self-identity as an individual. The paper extends the scope of the theory for its application in literary research, specifically pertaining to the protagonist Amerigo’s transition from an appalling boyhood to a more successful adulthood, portraying this as a painful journey of separation from his mother.

Keywords: *The Children’s Train*, Viola Ardone, Mother, Identity, Separation, Individuation

1. Introduction

Self-identity is a construct entwined with an uncanny sense of loss. The merry oblivion of childhood keeps us warm under the protective veil of maternal love and care. The search for self-identity rips this veil and necessitates a departure from the mother. Maturing from childhood towards individual self-identity is indeed a painful yet inescapable journey.

The Children’s Train (2019) is a historical Italian novel written by Viola Ardone that was translated by Clarissa Botsford and released as a film in 2024 after being co-written by Christina Comencini. Set in the World War-II torn Italy, the narrative captures the agony of a

child's separation from his mother and his emotional journey of realising his self-identity.

Just as the nation is ready to restructure and redefine itself as a new entity, Amerigo, a young Italian boy of about eight, leaves his single mother. Amerigo boards '*Treno dei Bambini*', or the Children's Train, that both literally and symbolically transports him to a realm that would experientially alter his identity.

2. Literature Review/ Research Gap

There are a considerable number of reviews and blogs related to the on-screen adaptation of the novel. However, despite the novel's compelling narrative and historical significance, there is a noticeable lack of sufficient research papers and dissertations on *The Children's Train*. This gap in academic literature suggests that the novel has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Also, it was observed that research with respect to the application of the psychological theory of 'separation individuation' in literature is significantly restricted.

Therefore, in light of the above, this research paper seeks to contribute towards building a critical repository for the work with reference to the given theory.

3. Theoretical Framework: 'Separation Individuation'

This study derives a critical model from the 'separation-individuation' theory, postulated by Margaret Mahler. The theory describes key phases in a child's psychological development from infancy to early childhood, focusing primarily on the first three years of life. Mahler described it as a "psychological birth" that unfolds over several phases (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1977).

In psychology, the theory primarily describes the key developmental stages in infants, but it can also be applied in literature to understand the character transition of the protagonists, particularly in ‘coming of age’ works such as *The Children’s Train*.

To sketch a narrow outline, the theory describes three primary stages. Infants during the ‘Normal Autistic Stage’ (0-1 month) identify more wholly with their mother/ caregiver and are not aware of their existence independent of their mother. Considering that the infants perceive themselves as a part of the mother, they appear to remain in their own shell and appear markedly uninterested in external stimuli.

In the subsequent stage, that is, the ‘Normal Symbiotic Stage’ (1-5 months), the infant begins to acknowledge the mother (or caregiver) as a distinct entity. During this phase, the infant perceives the mother as the main source of fulfilment of needs that are both physiological and psychological fulfilment and comfort. The “availability” and “ability” of the mother to respond to the infant become crucial to the psychological development of the infant that would imprint and charter the course of behaviour later in life.

During the final phase, ‘Separation-Individuation Stage’ (5-24 months) the infant undergoes two overlapping processes, namely ‘separation’ and ‘individuation’. ‘Separation’ involves the infant’s developing an understanding of the “boundaries” between themselves and the mother. ‘Individuation’ in this context indicates the development of a sense of self-identity. The ‘separation-individuation’ phase is further sub-divided into four ‘sub-stages’ outlined as follows.

- (a) **Differentiation/Hatching** (5-9 months): During this phase the infant begins to develop motor skills and begins to ‘separate’ more swiftly than before after learning to crawl and move around. The infant’s ‘internal focus’ with its orientation towards the mother shifts as the infant begins to perceive the external world’. During this

phase, the infant begins to “discover” the mother on a physical plane while learning to register her as an objective entity and begins to observe her in terms of aspects such as her ‘features’, ‘touch’ or ‘smell’ etc. Though the mother is still the most significant source of fulfilment, the infant begins to grow out of their ‘symbiotic unity’. To quote Lapsley and Stey : “... in the differentiation phase, the infant is alert to events, objects and persons and so begins to “hatch” from the symbiotic orbit with his or her caregiver.” (Lapsley and Stey,1)

- (b) **Practicing** (9-14 months): During this phase, the child ‘separates’ from the mother after learning to walk at an increasingly fast pace. Even though the child begins to discover the world around, she still feels a deep sense of unity with the mother. The mother’s emotional responses to different external situations are imbibed by the child. Moreover, the mother’s ability to comfort the child in moments of pain, alarm, or anxiety become crucial to the child’s further development.
- (c) **Rapprochement** (14-24 months): This is a crucial point in the development of a child’s sense of self. During this phase, the child struggles with the desire to achieve independence from the mother’s identity but is also fearful of being abandoned by the mother. Thus, this is a significant stage that further includes three sub- stages:
- (i) Beginning: The child keeps coming back to the mother to share her experiences and excitement and is thrilled by the sense of ‘self-hood’ that brings a sense of power.
 - (ii) Crisis: Gradually, after developing a sense of the self, the child recognizes her limits as opposed to the desire to be ‘self-sufficient’ and ‘powerful’. Paradoxically, the child has to make the choice between being physically and emotionally close to the mother or to separate from her and grow alone as an entity independent and distinct from the mother. During this phase, the child feels emotionally restless,

helpless and unstable and typically throws “temper tantrums” in order to seek attention and emotional comfort from the mother.

- (iii) Solution: This phase brings resolution as the child begins to bring a balance between the two choices. The process is aided by the development of the super-ego as well as language skills. This is a crucial phase, because if the issue remains improperly resolved, it may lead to extreme behaviour such as excessive clinging in the child.

- (d) **Consolidation**(24+ months): This is the last stage of the child’s psychological development and identity formation. Thus, the child consolidates her identity. The child also grows increasingly comfortable with physical separation from the mother, because she has formed a “mental image” of the mother and is also conscious of the fact that she would return to the mother after intervals of separation(Object Constancy).

Mahler’s theory focused primarily on the development among infants. However, similar development is understandably scattered and phased out in later years of a child’s life. In 1979, Blos referred to “Adolescence” as the “second phase of separation-individuation” and put forth the idea that an adolescent must “disengage” or “transcend” the “internalized representations” of the mother or caregiver imprinted during the infant-hood period. This becomes necessary to establish self-identity that is distinct. After going through individuation, the adolescent matures with a sense of psychological independence. In 1980, Josselson suggested that Mahler’s infancy phases are recapitulated during adolescent separation-individuation.

It is clear that separation-individuation can be understood as key developmental phases skewed and scattered more specifically around the infant-hood and adolescence in an individual's life. The theory, however, is not limited only to this perspective and is much wider in scope. To quote Karpel:

Separation-individuation is a fundamental organizing principle of human growth that has implications for adaptive functioning across the lifespan. In its most general sense individuation refers to a process "by which a person becomes increasingly differentiated from a past or present relational context" (Karpel, 1976, p. 66).

The concept is also closely linked with theories of attachment and family systems, and describing it only in terms of specific developmental phases would be an understatement. With respect to its application in literature, 'separation- individuation' can be analysed as a dialectic of pain and assertion. While 'individuation' gives birth to a psychologically differentiated individual; it cannot occur without the agony of 'separation' from the mother. Like individuals, the characters of literary works are influenced by the process of 'separation-individuation'. The 'life-experience' and relationships of people are significantly determined and influenced by the fusion of their identity with that of their mother. The degree to which an individual differentiates and transcends from the parental communion also determines the course of further associations in the general journey of life. The theory thus becomes relevant for analysing specific literary characters as well as general human development.

4. Narrative Analysis: *The Children's Train*

The narrative of *The Children's Train* presents the two aspects that shape the journey from childhood to adulthood on a rather conflicting note: a mother's proximity and the child's identity. Consequently, the child's steps towards realising self-identity inevitably involves

moving away from the maternal identity. As the young protagonist, Amerigo treads towards realisations of his own self-identity, he paradoxically moves away from the mesh of blissful union with his mother.

The story unravels the deep yet complex nuances of mother's love in the backdrop of a nation's crumbling esteem and eventual redefinition. The plot also exposes how the Second World War led to devastation to life and property that ensued into a trail of a severe socio-economic crisis in Italy. Soaring unemployment and rising inflation left several poor families in utterly wretched conditions, especially in the southern part of the country. It was fortunately followed by a period of the "Italian economic miracle" that witnessed rapid economic recovery supported to an extent by the aid from the United States. In spite of the awe-inspiring successes, particularly in northern Italy, the growth left the land marred by glaring regional disparities in the southern part of Italy.

The situation prompted government intervention and led to several socio-economic initiatives, such as the establishment of the Southern Development Fund. In league with similar efforts, a program called '*Treno dei Bambini*' (Children's Train) was launched to address the issue of poverty and growing social inequality in southern Italy. It aimed to provide relief to poor and orphaned children hailing from southern Italy by sending them to north Italy through a train, after which families in north volunteered to host their stay with them for a few months usually during the summer. The train was thus a symbol of hope for better future prospects of the poor children. Their experience in the north was supposed to be a signpost of a dream of advancement in their lives.

In this historical context, the novel places its plot. Amerigo lives with his poor, single mother in Naples in South Italy. His father has gone to America apparently in a quest for better prospects and his mother is convinced he would return home fulfilled. The country

means more than nationality to their family and, in fact, floats like a ray of hope, which is apparent from the fact that ‘Amerigo’ means ‘America’ which, so to say, is not just a country but a promising land of ‘hope’. Much like the land, the little young boy is a living ray of hope for his mother who loves him dearly and deeply yet who remains too engaged to express it.

After having lost her first-born, who was just three years older than Amerigo, Antonietta begins to cherish Amerigo even more. He is her only possession whom she dearly loves. However, the trials of her wretched and paltry existence render Antonietta too cold to express the warmth and affection her son craves. The routine of grappling with poverty and hunger leave her occupied with efforts to prevent starvation. Her brave efforts to help herself and her son survive, but make her appear cold and distant to Amerigo. Though his mother wants him to receive proper schooling yet, she remains preoccupied with the struggle to survive and prefers that he pick up a ‘trade skill’ that would enable them to sustain. They work together to make ends meet by doing odd jobs like ‘collecting rags’ from the neighbourhood and ‘sewing’. There is no place for ambitions or higher aspirations of life in their regular ritual to survive.

Their miserable state of existence cannot drain hope from Amerigo’s eyes. Right from the start of the book, he seems to have an urge to make a mark for himself and carve out his own identity. He has an uncanny habit of observing people’s shoes, an object that comes to associate with his own sense of identity:

I’ve never had a pair of shoes of my own; I wear other people’s shoes and they always hurt. Mamma says I don’t walk straight but it is not my fault; it’s other people’s shoes that are the problem. They are the shape of the feet that wore them before me. They’ve taken on their habits, walked on other streets, played other games. By the time they get to me, what do they know about the way I

walk, or where I want to go? They need to get used to me little by little; but then my feet grow, the shoes too get small for me, and we are back to square one. (*The Children's Train*,1)

Amerigo pleads to his mother to buy him a pair of 'new shoes' but she goes on postponing the proposition for obvious reasons. Their life takes a new turn when Antonietta comes to know about 'The Children's Train'. She is faced with the tough choice of letting her son go. She loved him too dearly to let him go, but the prospects of his better life led her to make the toughest decision of her life and enrolls Amerigo to board 'The Children's Train'. After he enlists, Amerigo finally gets what he desired: a pair of new shoes. However, he hugs his mother and pleads that she not let him go away. His tears don't deter Antonietta from her resolve and she remains determined to let him go, for his 'own good'.

The train acts as a liminal threshold between the contrasting planes of north and south. Like Amerigo, other local children from the south board the train in the hope of meeting their 'temporary foster parents', most of who are communists. Muddled and confused over whether the train genuinely would deliver them the promise they seek; the children grow apprehensive. Disturbing thoughts such as them being deported to concentration camps, cross their mind, but the utter penury of poverty and the hope of overcoming it keeps them going on. Just as the train leaves the station the children begin to take off their woollen garments and throw them out of the windows towards their family members, reasoning that they would get 'new ones' replenished by their so-called families in the north. It seems ironic that the love of their own family drives them away in search of a 'new family' in a sheer effort to alleviate the wretched condition of their loved ones. Like almost everyone else, Amerigo pulls out his coat and flings it towards his mother. The memory of his mother fills his mind after the train departs, and he clings on to an apple that

she gives him to eat on the way in case he gets hungry. Amerigo cannot eat it as it reminds him of her.

After the train stops, the children part from each other and leave for their respective homes. This is when Amerigo meets Derna, his 'new mother'. She reminds him of his own mother, for much like her, Derna remains cold, distant and inexpressive. Amerigo clings to his apple and yearns to go back to his mother. In spite of all the comfort that wealth provides, his only comfort is the memory of his mother. Amerigo begins to thaw towards Derna only after she takes him to the wheat field and promises to send him back after they ripen. Derna sends him to a school where he makes new friends, some of whom belong to the south. Amerigo begins to understand her after he gets to know about how her finance, a communist leader, was brutally murdered. Derna remains committed to him even after his death and leads a lonely life. Her only solace is her cousin's warm family who stays in close vicinity. She introduces Amerigo to her cousin Rosa; her husband Alcide; and their children as she believes a proper family set up would facilitate his upbringing. Her belief proves right when Amerigo makes friends with Alcide who teaches Amerigo to play the violin. Amerigo discovers his own passion for the violin the two begin to grow closer as Alcide nurtures Amerigo's talent. They develop a bond with each other over these lessons and Amerigo acknowledges that he wants to grow up and play the violin. His life in the north ushers new doors of self-discovery that Amerigo sought earnestly. But when he gets a little glimpse of higher aspirations and begins to dream about the things he wants in life, it is time to go back.

Amerigo bids farewell to his well-wishers with a heavy heart. The small stint in the north draws him closer to Derna, his 'new mother' whose memory had seeped into his heart. Alcide makes a violin with his own hands and gifts it to Amerigo. He believes that Amerigo would grow up and join an orchestra.

The train is set to take the children back to their home in the south. The children board the train with mixed feelings. Like Amerigo, they seem happy about reuniting with their family, but their stay in the north alters their life forever. Amerigo returns home with his 'new shoes' and new sense of self-identity. But everything back home stays the way it was. He shows Antonietta the violin and shares his dream about joining the orchestra with her. But she is convinced a passion like playing the violin is reserved only for the 'rich' and urges him to get back to rag picking. Amerigo is shocked when he discovers Antonietta has pledged his violin for money and is heart-broken when he learns she has kept Derna's letters away from him. In retaliation he accuses her of being a 'liar' and in response Antonietta slaps him. Hurt and angry, Amerigo takes the piercing decision to leave his mother. He boards the train that is bound north and reaches Derna. He grows up living away from his mother and finally joins an orchestra to become a renowned violinist. However, the memory of his mother continues to haunt him and he remains far from the sense of fulfilment without his mother's benediction and he returns home in search of his mother.

He could never attain what he sought without her sanction. For the path that he walked began with her and could not possibly end without her. Amerigo's quest began when he was one with his mother. They were one in their existence that was poor and wretched. He wanted to progress for them to have a better life. His desire was never his 'own' but 'theirs'. For they were both one. Little did he know that the journey for 'their' betterment would eventually rip him apart from her and give him an identity that was exclusively 'his'. Perhaps his mother knew, but could she hold him from his progress?

Amerigo's story mirrors the stories that we all live. The search for an identity or an identity being cast even without a voluntary exploration. Our birth brings us away from our Mother who lets us go and Be. Whatever we realise is so closely knit with our mothers. Their desires become ours, though we know not how. Their dreams we realise as our fate, faintly

aware that we were once one. Yet behind each individual identity lies an unknown act of maternal sacrifice.

5. Results and Discussion

- i. In the beginning of *The Children's Train*, Amerigo's identity is analogous to the 'Normal Symbiotic Stage' of infantile development. His single mother is the primary support system of his life and he depends upon her for the fulfilment of his needs. With her husband far away in America, and her firstborn's poignant demise, Antonietta's only source of attachment is Amerigo. She shares a deep bond with Amerigo. The narrative typically refers to the two of them as "we" and the two seem fused together symbiotically as one.
- ii. Even though Amerigo appears enmeshed with his mother, he displays an uncanny urge for self-identity right from the start. The opening discussion about Amerigo's desire for "new shoes" symbolically opens the paradox of 'separation' and 'individuation' right at the beginning of the novel.
- iii. Antonietta seems to love Amerigo as dearly as her life, yet she remains far from expressing the same to her son. She is introduced as a cold, quiet, unsmiling and a rather frigid mother. It is apparent that she is a good person with a tender heart who is benumbed by the agonising and wretched condition of her existence. She struggles to keep herself and her son alive, but their condition also keeps Amerigo away from maternal affection and warmth that he craves. Antonietta's distant demeanour and Amerigo's desire for self-identity, apart from the general condition of their regional trauma result in a psychological crisis in Amerigo's life.
- iv. The 'separation stage' is symbolically represented in the narrative at the point when Amerigo boards *The Children's Train* and physically moves away from his.

Amerigo misses his mother and regrets his decision to move away for the sake of “new shoes”. He pleads that she keep him with her. Antonietta too faces the agonising choice of letting her son go, but she painfully decides to let him leave for the sake of his further progress and advancement. Amerigo misses his mother very deeply. He clings to the ‘apple’ that she gave him as it serves as her memory. He begins to open up in his foster home only after Derna reassures him to send him back to his mother.

- v. The ‘individuation phase’ is apparent in the narrative after Amerigo moves to Derna’s house in northern Italy. He symbolically gets “new shoes”, begins going to a school and discovers his passion for the violin. Amerigo undergoes the “practicing phase” too as he learns to exist without his mother and gradually gets used to the ‘practice’.
- vi. The ‘rapprochement stage’ can be witnessed in the narrative after Amerigo returns home. Amerigo is now uneasy in his own house and fondly cherishes his passion for the violin. However, as the plot progresses, he seems to partially reconcile with his mother.
- vii. During the ‘beginning’ of the conflict, Amerigo is excited about sharing his experience, particularly his love for the violin, with his mother. However, her concern towards sustaining their existence and commitment to mundane survival keeps her from understanding his aspirations. She fails to understand his urge to differentiate and does not provide him the support he needs. Ignorant of the gravity of the situation, she puts him back to the odd job of rag-picking that, in a way, kept him glued to her own identity. Eventually, Amerigo begins to view his mother as a flesh-and-blood individual and becomes increasingly conscious of her flaws. Clearly, their communion and the sense of a common experience leaves

Amerigo and he becomes increasingly conscious of his needs that are separate and distinct from his mother. She is no longer the fulcrum of his existence or the support system he needed for fulfilling everything he craved and yearned for.

- viii. 'Crisis' intensifies in the plot when Antonietta pledges Amerigo's violin. He feels further cheated and betrayed after learning that she had concealed the letter that Derna wrote to him. The 'crisis' culminates as Amerigo decides to leave his mother and sets out on the voyage of self-discovery that he successfully fulfils after joining the orchestra as a renowned musician.
- ix. The narrative comes to a partial 'solution' when he resolves to visit his mother after years of separation. Having become a successful musician, he has fulfilled his aspirations and simultaneously undergone individuation.
- x. Towards the ending when Amerigo fails to meet Antonietta, it appears at a cursory glance that the story takes a direction diametrically opposite to the ultimate stage of 'Consolidation' and 'Object Constancy'. However, a deeper perusal conveys that while the two remain separated, Amerigo consolidates his "self-identity", while still expressing an attachment to the mother. Throughout his journey, Amerigo carries a maternal abstraction of his mother that continues to influence him unconsciously, displaying a poignant and abstract version of object constancy.

6. Conclusion

It is evident that Amerigo's transition is analogous to the stages of 'separation-individuation' theory. Amerigo feels symbiotically one with his mother initially; however, he displays the urge to differentiate right from the opening. He begins to "separate" from his mother gradually in phases, but the process intensifies after he boards "the children's train". While nurturing his passion for the violin, he travels on the road of self-discovery and successfully fulfils his journey. However, even after having realised his identity, he seems far

from being satiated without solace from his mother. It is noticeable that his achievements are actually the fulfilment of his mother's hopes of him. It is agonising that her own desires take her son away from her. Towards the end the narrative resembles the life and aspirations of all mothers and children. The story echoes the universal paradox of the painful choice of 'self-identify' verses 'maternal-identity'.

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