

# Impact of Childhood Trauma on Individuals with Disabilities in Paolo Giordano's *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*

B. Rashma<sup>1,\*</sup>

## Abstract

People with disabilities are often considered as deviants rather than inmates by society. They encounter a wide range of challenges and barriers like social stigma, discrimination, negative attitudes and limited accessibility which make them feel disconnected and hinder their capacity to engage fully in society. People usually view them as beneficiaries of charity, healthcare and social protection. In Paolo Giordano's *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* (2008) the protagonists Alice and Mattia navigate the challenging transition from childhood to adulthood marked by traumatic experiences and emotional impairment. Focusing on characters with physical and cognitive disabilities this paper examines how childhood and early adulthood traumas persist into later life. The novel known for its themes of trauma and loneliness sheds light on the enduring impact of disability-related experiences.

## Keywords

Trauma, discrimination, social stigma, physical disability, cognitive disability, loneliness, emotional impairment.

<sup>1</sup> PG & Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli – 620020

Trauma usually brings forth the images of significant occurrences like tragic accidents, natural disasters or physical abuse. However, less obvious factors like emotional abuse or neglect can also contribute to negative childhood experiences which result in serious disorders and nightmares when they grow up. That is why it is more important to find the warning signals of Repressed Childhood Trauma. Children with Adverse Childhood Experiences typically have lasting impacts during their adulthood.

Any circumstance that a child believes is risky, overwhelming or exceedingly terrifying by putting them into those positions can lead to childhood trauma. Children who have experienced trauma feel terrified and helpless in ways that are beyond their ability to handle emotionally and cognitively. All of these incidents have the potential to cause emotional and psychological trauma symptoms and they can all follow children far into adulthood. In Paolo Giordano's *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* the protagonists Alice and Mattia, tagged as misfits endure unpleasant experiences and incidents imposed by the people around them which leaves them as a damaged spirit with haunted childhood memories.

*The Solitude of Prime Numbers* (2008) is a heart-wrenching tale of the misfits with physical and cognitive disabilities. Penned by the contemporary Italian writer Paolo Giordano, this novel attracted the readers globally and sold more than one million copies in Italy. Furthermore it has been translated into thirty-five languages. Paolo Giordano, born in 1982 in Turin, is a contemporary Italian novelist and a short story writer. Giordano got his Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from the University of Turin in 2010. When he first started writing he

produced a number of short stories, most of which have childhood themes. His debut book *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (translated as *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*) was published in 2008. It was an immediate and huge hit for him as a writer.

As mentioned in the article by Integrative Life Center about the Signs of Repressed Childhood Trauma in Adults, it clearly brings out the ten adverse childhood experiences resulting in inability to function properly as an adult. The adverse childhood experiences listed in the article are as follows: Physical abuse, Verbal abuse, Sexual abuse, Physical neglect, Emotional neglect, Alcoholic parent(s), Victim(s) of domestic abuse, Family member(s) with mental illness, The disappearance of parent(s) whether through divorce abandonment or death and Family member in prison. The narrative of the novel revolves around two mental disorders – anorexia and self-harm which are not directly mentioned but they have key implications for the development of the novel's action.

In a nutshell, *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* depicts how the protagonists Alice and Mattia are exposed to traumatic situations during their childhood and early adulthood and how this repressed childhood trauma haunts them in later life forms the subject of the story. The relationship between Alice and Mattia is similar to a prime number that never really fits with another; it can only be divided by one or by itself. As "primes," Alice and Mattia are misfits who appear fated to be alone.

Mattia is the typical young genius or a child prodigy who connects with numbers more easily than people. He's an antisocial person who can't look someone in the eye or let go of his own guilt. His sole relationship in life is with geometric

shapes and mathematical patterns, which leads him to employ some rather strange metaphors: kissing turns into "a banal sequence of vectors," (Giordano 127) people wave their hands "as if imitating the shape of an ellipsoid," (Giordano 160) and the word "anelastic" (Giordano 206) appears in his mind when his legs tremble.

Alice is seven years old when the novel begins. Her father can be best described as a domineering personality. Despite her lack of skill in skiing he forces Alice to become a champion in the sport. One morning at ski lessons, Alice gets distracted and loses sight of her classmates. She falls off a cliff by accident, seriously hurting herself since she is scared and can't find her way around on her own. Due to this incident Alice lives with a physical impairment (limp) for the rest of her life.

When Alice and Mattia meet for the first time, they show each other their scars: Mattia on his hand and Alice whose scar runs the length of her pelvis which she got from an accident during her ski training. Mattia's twin sister Michela has an intellectual/cognitive disability in the story and this makes them to be rejected by their classmates. Traumatic moments in the lives of the protagonists are the disappearance of Mattia's sister with severe cognitive disability and Alice's limp which she got from the accident. Not only the main characters have difficulties even the minor characters are also inflicted with pain and disability: for example, Alice's mother Fernanda is diagnosed with cancer, her father with progression of Alzheimer's disease and Michela who is mentally retarded.

As emotional abuse creates adverse reactions on the child, Mattia's parents used to make jokes about how he got more brains than his sister since he ate all the food in the womb, while his sister got none. They were kidding, but Mattia felt guilty about his sister all the time. Further, the disappearance of Michela turns Mattia's life upside down with lifelong guilt. In School, Mattia and Michela are isolated by their classmates and never get an opportunity to play with their peers and nobody invites them to any birthday parties. Tragedy occurs when Mattia finally receives an invitation to a birthday party. Fearing that the presence of his sister may spoil the celebration, Mattia abandons his sister in a park beside a tumultuous river, instructing her to wait a few hours until he returns. But when Mattia returns from the party to pick Michela up she disappears causing a lasting impact on Mattia's wellbeing. Many years later when Mattia unfurls this secret to Alice that he kept confidential from everyone, it becomes evident that the reason for the cuts in his bodies is an act of self-harm to overcome the guilt he gained through this incident. "Do you have to play video games with your little friend? Or were you planning on cutting your veins again?" (Giordano 54). This shows that guilt is one of the motivating factors for self-injurious behaviour.

Like guilt, physical disability brought on by an accident may also result in serious mental disorder. Alice's life drastically changes after her accident and that trauma persists into her adulthood. During adolescence she develops anorexia nervosa, a severe eating disorder that primarily affects young

women in their teens and early twenties. It is defined by a pathological fear of gaining weight, which leads to poor eating habits, malnutrition and typically extreme weight loss. This eating disorder later influences her marital life to a great extent. She faces multiple insults and discrimination at college and often humiliated by the boys as a cripple.

An altered perspective of one's own body is a common symptom of Body Image Disturbance (BID), which is associated with eating disorders. Alice's serious impairment of her leg significantly creates dissatisfaction about her own body fuelling the body image disturbance which is the causative agent of anorexia. This poor eating habit ruins her marital life as well. When Alice's mother was diagnosed with cancer, she gets emotional support through a doctor named Fabio Rovelli. Later she marries the same person in the story but the relationship doesn't last long. Their marital life falls apart because of Alice's barrenness. Due to anorexia Alice is unable to get pregnant which becomes the reason for her divorce. Deeply affected by the break up, Alice falls into severe depression ruining her entire life. Thus her childhood trauma continued and misled Alice's life throughout her adulthood.

Through the life of Mattia it is evident that guilt played a vital role in impacting the psychology of an individual. In his case, he assumes his guilt is telling him that he is not allowed to have any deep relationships in the future because he previously had one and damaged and rejected it and turned him as antisocial. To its contrast Alice, who is social, is destroyed by her own childhood trauma and eating disorder. After her fatal accident, Alice's identity is subject to a destructive transformation, a manifestation of which there is a rejection of one's own body, and in the end – her anorexia.

This study clearly depicts how the traumatic experiences in the lives of Mattia and Alice during their childhood resulted in serious mental disorders in their adulthood. The negative attitudes and discrimination of the people made the characters to feel them as outsiders and found comfort in loneliness. Despite the characters having feelings for each other, they lose hope in relationships because of their complex trauma history resisting them from developing a healthy attachment to a caregiver. Such characters cannot surpass the barriers that separate them. Hence *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* brings forth the message that the disabled people are more likely to be alone or at least in part because of ableism and social neglect.

## References

- [1] "A Review of Paolo Giordano's *The Solitude of Prime Numbers* (by Bethany)". Postcards From Purgatory, 10 Jan. 2015, <https://postcardsfrompurgatory.com/2015/01/10/a-review-of-paolo-giordanos-the-solitude-of-prime-numbers-by-bethany/>.
- [2] Giordano, Paolo. *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*. Pamela Dorman Books/Viking, 2010.

- [3] "Guilt May Fuel the Impulse to Injure Oneself". GoodTherapy, 12 Oct. 2012, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/guilt-may-fuel-the-impulse-to-injure-oneself-1012121/>
- [4] Maffi, Luciano, and Martino Lorenzo Fagnani .Disability and Tourism in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Italy. Routledge, 2021.
- [5] "What are the Signs of Repressed Childhood Trauma in Adults" . Integrative Life Center, 16 Aug. 2021, <https://integrativelifecenter.com/mental-health-treatment/signs-of-repressed-childhood-trauma-in-adults/>.