

Analysis of Borderline Personality Disorder in the Protagonist of *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper aims to explore the main character's experience with Borderline Personality Disorder, stemming from distressing events in their past. The research seeks to analyze the underlying causes of the character's unstable personality and the resulting impact on their life. Borderline Personality Disorder is a psychological condition that often arises due to unstable relationships, experiences of physical or sexual abuse, and other traumatic events in life. The novel chosen for this research is *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow, published in 2016. To provide a theoretical foundation for this study and to examine the protagonist's life in the context of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), the researcher has adopted Linehan's (1993) Biosocial Theory of BPD. This theory is utilized to explore the portrayal of BPD in the main character of the novel. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, using textual evidence from the novel to support the analysis. Additionally, the method of character analysis has been applied, guided by Barnet's (1988) model, to comprehensively examine the protagonist's traits and better understand the causes and consequences of her disorder. The study concludes that due to BPD, the protagonist experiences significant psychological distress, including anxiety, nervousness, loneliness, mood swings, suicidal ideation, and self-harming behavior.

KEY WORDS:

Borderline Personality Disorder, Loneliness, Stress, Self-Harm, Mental Health, Protagonist

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Introduction

The writer of the novel *Girl in Pieces* is Kathleen Glasgow. She is an American novelist. She lives in Arizona. Kathleen Glasgow wrote many other novels, but the novel *Girl in Pieces* is her debut novel, which was the best-selling novel in the New York Times. Her debut novel, *Girl in Pieces*, was published in 2016. This novel by Kathleen Glasgow is her best-known novel as it is one of the influential and personal novels that talk about the important subject of a character's suffering and how to make a new life out of that suffering and pain.

This term paper aims to discuss borderline personality disorder in the main character and focuses on its consequences on the character's personality in her later life. There are many reasons for a person to be in a state of personality disorder, and such a disorder breaks the person's personality completely. Therefore, this term paper

aims to analyze the causes of borderline personality disorder and its effects on the protagonist of the novel *Girl in Pieces* written by Kathleen Glasgow.

The novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow is a heartbreaking novel about a girl who undergoes traumatic events in her life. The protagonist of this novel is Charlie Davis, who is a depressed character. During her early life, she encountered many events which were the reasons behind her emotionally unstable personality. Borderline personality disorder, which is also known as emotionally unstable personality disorder, is a kind of personality disorder. This disorder was described by Robert Knight in the 1940's. This disorder is caused as a result of environmental influences such as emotional, physical or sexual abuse or a child who is neglected by his parents. This disorder is the result of traumatic events in life which leave negative impacts on the person. When the traumatic events or personal experiences are left unresolved, it results in borderline personality disorder, where the person finds it difficult to get rid of the past memories of his/her life. People suffering from this disorder have in them the fear of being alone, feelings of emptiness, anger, anxiety and mood swings. Moreover, people suffering from this disorder usually have suicidal thoughts, and most of the time, they even self-harm their selves when they feel sad or upset as a result of the painful memories of past events or experiences in their lives. Such people have unstable relationships, which are for short time periods. People with such disorders feel alone and empty, which makes them depressed. (Chad et al., [2020](#))

According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, Borderline personality disorder is caused as a result of mental unsoundness in the frame of mind, conflicts in personal relationships and self-destruction, which causes serious suffering and discomfort. Apart from this, it also affects the social interaction of that particular individual. A person suffering from this type of disorder is usually involved in self-harming, feels insecurity in relationships, changes of mood swings, suicidal thoughts and feelings of loneliness and emptiness. (VandenBos, [2015](#))

According to the American Psychiatric Association ([2013](#)), in DSM-5, it is stated that borderline personality disorder is diagnosed if there are conflicts in interpersonal relations, frequent changes in mood swings, anger, stress and chronic feelings of emptiness. Such individuals have no control over their emotions and find it difficult to fight the pain and stress (Spitzer et al., [1994](#)). Permatasari ([2020](#)) also stated that people affected by borderline personality disorder are mostly in a different state of mind. They usually show changes in behavior, and they display several changes in mood, actions and self-image. Therefore, in the novel *Girl in Pieces*, the protagonist, Charlie, also suffers from many painful events in her life. The events which caused her to live a life full of sorrow and pain include the death of her father and the memories of her friend Ellis. Not only this, she also bears the pain of her mother, who kicked her out of the house after her father's death. Two major people in her life: her father, who is dead, and her friend Ellis, who is also in critical condition because of self-harming and ignorance by her mother, affected her personality by making her suffer from pain, anger, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and major self-destruction. Thus, the aim of this paper is to highlight the painful events of her life which were responsible for Charlie's borderline personality disorder and its effects on Charlie's personality.

Literature Review

Hermawan ([2018](#)) wrote a thesis on two novels, *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow and *It's a Kind of Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini. The purpose of the author was to analyze how the authors of both novels have portrayed their protagonists. The second purpose of this study was to determine the intentions of the authors in portraying the main characters of the selected novels. For this purpose, the author did online and library research to get more information about the selected novels. Moreover, to analyze the portrayal of the protagonists of the selected novels, the author has used the approach of formalism in order to study in detail the features of selected literary texts and to explore biographical, historical and cultural contexts in the selected novels. The research concluded that the purpose behind the portrayal of the protagonists of the selected novels was to make people aware of the mental issues both characters suffered and to make them better understand such mental illnesses, which are harmful in many ways.

Theoretical Framework

Borderline personality disorder has been discussed as a major disorder in the protagonists of several literary works written by different authors. In the same way, the novel that I have chosen for my term paper is *Girl in Pieces*. In this particular novel, the main focus will be on the protagonist, Charlie Davis. The borderline personality disorder, which is also known as the emotionally unstable personality disorder of the main character, will be analyzed in the light of the Biosocial Theory of Borderline personality disorder proposed by Marsha Linehan.

The Biosocial Theory of Borderline personality disorder was proposed by Marsha Linehan in [1993](#). This theory describes personality disorders, mental disorders and disabilities as physically determined personality traits responding to environmental stimuli. According to Linehan's Biosocial theory, borderline personality disorder is a disorder of emotional- regulation which is caused as a result of biological irregularities which are united with dysfunctional environments. (Linehan, [1993](#))

According to this theory, the key factor of Borderline personality disorder is emotion dysregulation. Emotion dysregulation is actually the incapability or the powerlessness of a person to cope with negative emotions such as distress, grief, sorrow, unhappiness and anger. This may include any kind of argument with someone which makes you distressed and unhappy. Negative emotions can be the result of any kind of past traumatic incidents or events which make an individual suffer from pain, stress and unhappiness. Linehan further said that emotion dysregulation is caused by an invalidating environment. People who are part of such an environment think that they are being neglected, and they also believe that their actions, thoughts, and feelings have no significance for others. They feel their selves to be neglected. Such kinds of feelings and emotions can cause them to self-harm or self-destruct their selves. Furthermore, this theory also claims that individuals who suffer from this disorder have a high amount of persistent hyperarousal in them. Persistent hyperarousal in individuals occurs when the individual overthink about his/her past experiences or traumatic events, leading to self-destructive behaviour, pressure, stress and feelings of loneliness. (Linehan, [1993](#))

Furthermore, Linehan ([1993](#)) stated that the causes of Borderline personality disorder include social or family causes and biological causes. In Social or family causes, the major influence is the early family environment, which is called the "invalidating environment". In such environments, the individuals are not given much attention or are punished by their parents. As a result, such individuals lose control of themselves and easily become victims of sadness and discomfort. The second cause of borderline personality disorder includes biological causes. The biological causes are further divided into emotional vulnerability and difficulty in controlling emotions. Emotional vulnerability is observed in individuals who are extremely physically sensitive to emotions. When such individuals are triggered by emotions then as a result of the reaction in the body is very strong and deep, and the individual takes a long time to get back to the normal state again. The second biological cause is the difficulty in modulating emotions, which an individual finds difficult to not respond in reaction to strong emotions even if the act is damaging. Such individuals find it difficult to feel good in reaction to strong emotions. All these causes contribute to borderline personality disorder of an individual.

Marsha Linehan also introduced the notion of self-harm in her book *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality* in [1993](#). Linehan was of the view that certain environmental impacts and biological vulnerabilities in individuals contribute to borderline personality disorder. This results in actions such as self-harm and non-suicidal behaviors. According to Linehan, the element of self-harming in individuals is due to childhood trauma or any other traumatic events which disturb one's life and personality. This is because traumatic events are such incidents which leave negative results on a person. Individuals who suffer from this disorder usually self-harm their selves, and the basic reason behind this painful act is that they live a life in which they feel lonely and depressed. Linehan's theory further claims that the process of invalidation mostly occurs when individuals are neglected, they are not given much importance, and their feelings and emotions are considered useless. Most of the cases of

Borderline personality disorder are seen in the individuals who have gone through any trauma or any experience that has left a strong impact on their lives. As a result, such individuals become depressed thinking about their painful memories of the past and find it difficult to cope with the situation. Such individuals are then involved in self-destruction or self-harming in order to get out of pain. (Linehan, [1993](#))

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a complex mental disorder which is described by persistent emotion dysregulation, unstable relations, imprudent behaviour, and suicidal thoughts, including self-harming. Moreover, this disorder is more common in women than in men (Atmaja, [2019](#)). A borderline personality disorder is a type of personality disorder which has a fixed pattern of inward experiences and external behaviour. The pattern continues for years and is mostly observed when that particular individual interacts. (Comer, [2010](#))

Linehan's ([1993](#)) **Biosocial Theory** of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) explains the condition as resulting from the interaction between biological vulnerability and an invalidating environment. Individuals with BPD are biologically predisposed to heightened emotional sensitivity, intense emotional reactivity, and difficulty regulating emotions. When these traits interact with an invalidating environment—where emotional experiences are dismissed, ignored, or punished—it creates a cycle of emotional dysregulation, self-doubt, and maladaptive coping behaviours, such as self-harm or interpersonal conflicts. This theory underpins **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)**, which focuses on addressing these challenges through skills training, validation, and balancing acceptance with change to support emotional and behavioral regulation.

People who are suffering from this disorder usually have a very changed behaviour as compared to those who are not the victims of this disorder. The reason behind this is that such people with this disorder are in panic situations because of the traumas or the unpleasant memories of the past. As a result, they feel alone, rejected and depressed. In such situations, they give more pain to their selves by self-harming and abusing their selves. In this way, they express their dissatisfaction, anger, and grief (Hamid, [2020](#)).

Methodology

This research is descriptive qualitative research. A qualitative research study is a study which examines non-numerical data. The data collected through qualitative research focuses on sentiments, thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. In the same way, in literature, the qualitative approach is used in order to get an in-depth and deep understanding of the text. Thus, for this particular research study, I have used a qualitative approach and has used the method of character analysis for this particular research. Koesmobroto differentiated between characters by dividing them into major and minor characters. Major characters play a vital role in the story, drama, or novel. At the same time, minor characters do not play a major role in the story, play, drama or novel. Major characters are called protagonists, and the minor characters are called antagonists (Handayani, [2017](#)). In simple terms, character analysis of any character is done in order to evaluate the specific traits of that particular character and the struggles experienced by the character in the story or any other literary text. For this term paper, I have done a character analysis of 'Charlie' who is the protagonist of the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow. For this purpose, I have focused on the main character's behavior, sufferings, feelings of pain, loneliness, anxiety and self-harming which all contributes in the borderline personality disorder of the protagonist. For character analysis, I used Barnet's model to analyze the main character of the selected novel. Barnet was of the view that character plays a very significant role in any literary work, including novels, plays, or dramas. Barnet's model of character analysis says that a character can be analyzed in four ways.

In the play, novel or any other literary text, the four ways to analyze the character include what the character is saying, what the character is doing or how the character acts, what other characters are saying about the specific character, and the last point is what others are doing in the specific literary work (Barnet, [1988](#)). All these aspects of the protagonist are examined in detail using the method of character analysis following Barnet's four ways of

analyzing the protagonist of the novel *Girl in Pieces*. Barnet's model of character analysis emphasizes that a character in any literary work—be it a novel, play, or drama—can be understood through four key aspects. First, by examining what the character says, we gain insight into their thoughts, emotions, and motivations through their dialogue and inner monologues. Second, by observing what the character does or how they act, we learn about their personality, values, and responses to circumstances. Third, by considering what other characters say about the specific character, these aspects of Barnet can help see how they are perceived within the narrative, which can provide contrasting or corroborative perspectives. Lastly, by analyzing what others do in relation to the character, we understand the dynamics of the character's relationships and the role they play within the broader context of the story. Together, these four ways provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing a character's traits, behaviours, and significance in literary work. Thus, in this paper, the character of the protagonist undergoing borderline personality disorder is analyzed using Linehan's Biosocial theory of BPD and Barnet's model of character analysis.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the reasons behind the main character's suffering from borderline personality disorder in the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow.
2. To investigate the effects of borderline personality disorder on the protagonist of the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow.

Research Questions

1. What are the reasons behind the borderline personality disorder of the main character in the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow?
2. What are the effects of borderline personality disorder on the life of the main character of the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow?

Statement of the Problem

The novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow delves into the life of Charlie Davis, a young girl grappling with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) as a result of traumatic events and emotional turmoil in her past. This study aims to investigate the underlying causes of Charlie's emotional instability and analyze the profound consequences of BPD on her personality and overall life. Emotional instability and personality disorders, such as BPD, are pressing issues that demand attention due to their prevalence and impact on individuals navigating traumatic experiences in their everyday lives. By employing a detailed character analysis of Charlie, this research seeks to uncover the factors contributing to her psychological struggles and explore how these experiences shape her identity and life trajectory.

Significance of the study

This paper is significant in a way that from the character of Charlie, one can easily get the lesson that although one suffers from pain and hardships in life, he/she should not surrender to his/her problems, pain, sufferings, and hardships. This is because, in this way, the person becomes the enemy of his own self; where he disconnects himself from the charms and the beauty of life. In this particular novel, the same happened with Charlie, as her past traumatic events did not let her move forward. As a result, she became a victim of borderline personality disorder, which affected her personality in many negative ways. So, one can get benefit from this research in a way that the solution to the problems is not to remember the painful events, instead, one should focus on the goals and move forward because thinking about the past and the painful events only adds to the pain, as was the case with Charlie. Furthermore, this research paper may also enrich the knowledge of readers about the novel because this research can also be used as referential material for future researchers who are interested in doing research on the some other literary content. Moreover, it is also expected that this research may enhance the reader's knowledge about both literature and psychology as this also has its significance in understanding in detail the psychological issue of

borderline personality disorder, which is addressed in relation to the protagonist of the novel *Girl in Pieces*. This is because most people are unaware of such psychological problems so, this study may help the readers know the causes and effects of this disorder in a more detailed manner.

Analysis

The features of behaviours, intellect, and emotional patterns that are developed from natural and environmental factors contribute to the development of personality. Personality includes our moods, attitudes and sentiments, thoughts and ideas and is mostly observed when a person interacts with the other person. It generally comprises of behavioral features which are both intrinsic and learnt. Such behavioural characteristics make one person different from the other. There are different kinds of personality disorders, but the one which is discussed in this paper with reference to the main character of the novel *Girl in Pieces* by Kathleen Glasgow is borderline personality disorder, which is also known as emotionally unstable personality disorder.

Borderline Personality Disorder as Observed in Charlie's Character

Distressing events in life become the reason for a person to feel sad and distressed. Sometimes, a person's own personal experiences become the major cause for a person to be depressed, sad and hopeless. Charlie, who is the protagonist of the novel *Girl in Pieces*, is a character who experienced many sad and traumatic incidents in her life, which affected her personality in a negative way. Textual evidence is taken from the novel to support this claim.

Like an orphan, I came here with no clothes. Like an orphan, I was wrapped in a bed sheet and left on the lawn of Regions Hospital in the freezing sleet and snow, blood seeping through the flowered sheet. (Glasgow, 2016, p. 13)

Following Barnet's model of character analysis, he says that to analyze a character, one should focus on what the character is saying. Throughout the novel, Charlie is herself narrating her story. The above lines are taken from the beginning of the novel when Charlie is narrating that she was found on the streets after her mother kicked her out of the house when her father died. When she was found on the streets homeless, she was taken to a hospital for her therapy sessions. After her father's death, she felt very alone because he was the one whom she loved so much. His father died because of the suicide. But after his death, she was not looked after by her mother; instead, she behaved with her very rudely and did not allow her to live with her in the same house. So, Charlie was living on the streets, and one day, she found herself in the Regions Hospital, where she attended therapy sessions in order to come out of the pain and suffering which became part of her personality.

At times, it is very difficult for a person to come out of past memories. As a result, the painful memories of the past poison the person slowly and make him/her feel depressed and weak. The same happened with Charlie. Her painful memories of the past did not let her live happily. When she was in the hospital, she remembered everything, like what happened in the past, how her friend suffered from pain, how her father died and how her mother treated her. The flashbacks of the past memories made her unhappy and dejected. The painful memories of the past did not let her live a peaceful life. All the time, she was in a state of suffering where she missed her father, her friend Ellis and even her mother's cruel behaviour towards her.

That's what was in my head in the attic when I took broken glass from my tender kit and began to cut myself into tiny pieces. I'd done it forever, for years, but now would be the last time. I'd go farther than Ellis had. Wouldn't fuck it up like Ellis had: I would die, not end up in some half-life. That time, I tried so hard to fucking die. But here I am. (Glasgow, 2016, p. 44)

According to the biosocial theory of Borderline personality disorder, past traumatic events, which can be in the form of social or family issues, become the cause of this disorder. In the case of Charlie, the traumatic events in the past left painful remarks on her personality, which was clearly visible when she cut her own self.

I cut it because I couldn't deal with it. It's as simple as that. The world becomes an ocean, the ocean washes over me, the sound of water is deafening, the water drowns my heart, and my panic becomes as large as planets. I need release; I need to hurt myself more than the world can hurt me, and then I can comfort myself. (Glasgow, 2016, p. 47)

My mother is alive, but she's a ghost, too, her sunken eyes watching me from a distance, her body very still. There are so many people who are never coming back. (Glasgow, 2016, p. 50)

The need to self-harm is a very common symptom of borderline personality disorder. Individuals who find it difficult to fight the pain usually become the victim of anxiety, stress and sadness. According to the biosocial theory Linehan, certain environmental factors, including past traumatic events in one's life, affect the behavioural patterns of an individual, which become the reason for self-destruction. In the above lines, it is stated that Charlie, the protagonist, remembers her dead father, mother, and Ellis all the time. All the time, her brain and mind were engaged with these painful memories of the past, and these painful memories of her loved ones did not let her live like a normal human being. Whenever she thinks about her mother, she addresses her with bad words because she treats her very badly. She harms her own self in anger in order to get some peace. Self-harming became a very common thing for Charlie as she thinks that now her loved ones are dead, so there is no reason for her to live because even her mother did not care for her. So, the mixture of pain and anger resulted in destroying her personality as she used to cut herself to get some relief. The old memories of her disturbing life and the uneasiness in her personality and behavior, which forced her to harm her own self, feel rejected and lonely and chronic feelings of sadness resulted in affecting her personality, which caused her to suffer from borderline personality disorder.

Emptiness can be considered as an aspect of grief and sorrow which follows the death of a loved one or is caused as a result of any other traumatic situation. Feelings of emptiness in one's life can be caused by many reasons, including the death of a close one, separation from someone very special, or ignorance or neglected behavior from family members. Sometimes, people feel they are alone, even if they are surrounded by many people. According to Linehan's theory, this is because he/she finds no meaning in life because of the invalidating environment or the social causes, which become the main reason. In the same way, in the novel, Charlie is in the hospital with other girls who are also involved in self-harming. Though she was with them, she was most of the time engaged in the memories and flashbacks of her father, friend and cruel mother. In that hospital, there were many other girls with whom she even made her friends, but the feeling of loneliness was with her for a long time as she says, "The outside of me is on fire, and the inside of me is empty, empty. I can't cut, but I need something taken away from me, I need relief" (Glasgow, 2016, p. 51). She wants nobody but only the ones whom she could never meet again. Their memories were making her sad and isolated as she was surrounded by many people around her, but still, she was feeling empty inside as she could not get rid of the traumas of her life. Emptiness or loneliness can make a person feel disappointed by the environment because they find something missing in their lives. The same was the case with Charlie, as she also wanted her loved ones to be back, and this made her distressed.

According to Linehan's biosocial theory of Borderline personality disorder, family causes are also responsible for destroying one's personality because the neglected attitude from the members can cause an individual to suffer from pain and agony, which contributes to developing borderline personality disorder. The same happened with Charlie; after she was discharged from the hospital, she was picked up by her mother, but unfortunately, her mother again refused to live with her. As she herself says, "I thought... I thought I was going home. With you" (Glasgow, 2016, p. 91). Charlie thought that now everything was fine, that her mother was happy with her, and that they would both live together. But she was actually wrong. Her mother still did not want to live with her and told her clearly that she would now go to Tucson and live in Mikey's apartment but not with her. This made her unhappy and sad again as in the novel she says, "So I don't want her to see me cry" (Glasgow, 2016, p. 92). Mother's refusal to live with Charlie again disturbed her from the inside. She was the girl who faced many hardships in her life, and when she was finally

discharged from the hospital, she again had to bear the pain of her mother, who was still not ready to let Charlie live with her in her home.

The death of Charlie's father and the painful memories of Ellis were the most traumatic events of her life, which totally changed her personality. The flashbacks of the past events in her mind and the cruel behavior of her mother, which forced her to live on the streets, made her suffer from a borderline personality disorder. As a result of this emotional instability in her personality, she suffered from pain over her dead father, her close friend and her mother's behavior. These painful happenings of her life resulted in self-destruction, where she cut herself. She finds herself completely alone both from inside and outside because her close relations are unstable. The feelings of loneliness and anxiety made her depressed at many stages of her life. But this is one side of the picture. Charlie fought her hardships and pain. She stepped towards her recovery by shifting to Tucson, where she found herself a job and worked hard to live a happy life.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that personality disorders are really very serious psychological issues that need to be controlled on time. In the novel *Girl in Pieces*, the main character develops borderline personality disorder. The cause of this was the traumatic events in her life and the unstable relations, which made her suffer from this impulsive behavior, emotion dysregulation and persistent hyperarousal, which contributed to making Charlie suffer from borderline personality disorder. Moreover, the invalidating environment and family causes were responsible for affecting Charlie's personality in negative ways, which include unhappiness, chronic feelings of emptiness, anger and self-harm. The character was truly sad and depressed as a result of the painful memories of her past. She suffered from pain, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness, and majorly, she self-destructed herself many times in order to get peace and satisfaction. All these characteristics of her personality made her emotionally unstable because it was very difficult for her to forget all the dreadful and painful events of the past, which disturbed her both internally and externally. But she did not lose hope; she stepped towards her recovery by controlling her own self and decided not to self-harm herself and to act upon her doctor's advice, which she did and began a new life with full strength and courage.

In Kathleen Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces*, the protagonist, Charlie Davis, exemplifies traits consistent with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) as conceptualized by Linehan's Biosocial Theory. Charlie experiences intense emotional sensitivity, overwhelming feelings of worthlessness, and struggles with self-regulation, often resorting to self-harm as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Her history of trauma, including abuse and neglect, reflects the invalidating environments that reinforce emotional dysregulation in individuals with BPD. The novel delves into Charlie's journey of navigating her intense emotions and forming meaningful connections, mirroring the core aspects of BPD, such as interpersonal instability and behavioral dysregulation, while also showcasing her path towards healing and resilience.

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