



Dreams as the Language of Emotional Neglect: A Freudian Reading of David Small's *Stitches*

Sharunydevi P., Reshmi K.

Abstract: This research focuses on the dreams depicted in David Small's graphic autobiography, *Stitches*, to explain the long-term psychological impacts of child emotional neglect and the ways to overcome them. The primary objective is to comprehend all types of emotional damage caused by neglect, particularly how these wounds are portrayed through the graphic novel's style. Emotional neglect is not merely an abstract conceptualization but rather a condition that has been discussed and analyzed in Small's life, characterized by specific traits such as the silent treatment, no acknowledgment, and an extended interval of emotional dormancy, among others, which manifest as manifestations of such neglect. A qualitative, interpretive approach is employed in the research, analyzing selected dream sequences in the memoir in accordance with Sigmund Freud's dream work and wish fulfillment theories. This study employs an analytical framework based on Freud's notions of displacement and symbolic transformation to examine how Small's unconscious mind transforms fear, anger, and longing into visual metaphors. Through illustrations, this study examines the mechanisms of the protagonist's psychological development, which is affected by the suppression of emotions. The study ultimately maintains that the primary reason for analyzing *Stitches* is that the autobiography demonstrates that emotional neglect often produces unarticulated psychological effects, and that comic book stories possess the power to reveal such invisible injuries. This research, which utilizes dream interpretation as a means of visualizing the unconscious, highlights the similarity between *Stitches* and the metamorphosis of voiceless pain into a readable and self-healing narrative.

Key Words: Emotional Neglect, Dreams, Suppression, Resilience, Childhood Maltreatment

Nomenclature:

CEN: Childhood Emotional Neglect

PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

I. INTRODUCTION

Every child born into this world is a pure spirit; it is their parents or guardians who determine whether they will be good or bad. We have entered the era of Generation Z, and we rely heavily on mobile phones; our daily lives would be in total shambles without them.

One must ask what happens to a child who relies on their parents, yet does not feel loved, cared for, appreciated, or validated. This research answers this question through a Graphic memoir. A memoir is the author's life story, retold as a valid account, focusing on a specific event or time period. The authors appear to be very concerned with their emotions and thoughts, providing numerous details to support their viewpoint. Likewise, *Stitches* presents David, an American author best known for his children's books. David was awarded finalist status for the National Book Award for his book *Stitches*. Readers have recognized his work for its poetic quality and contemplation of life's joys and sorrows, which are difficult to express.

Childhood maltreatment is commonly described as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and physical or emotional neglect by a parent, caregiver or other adult, with all kinds of abuse resulting from acts of commission, and neglect from acts of omission [5]. Compared to physical and sexual abuse and neglect, emotional abuse and neglect have received comparatively less attention from society and research. Certain facets of emotional abuse, such as constant swearing, yelling, criticism or humiliation of a child, are easily noticeable. Still, others, such as unrealistic expectations or unreasonable demands on the child, or unfair treatment because of specific characteristics (e.g., physical disability, or appearance), are not consistently recognised [5]. These less obvious aspects of emotional abuse can sometimes result from the experiences of parents, guardians, teachers, and others during childhood, but they can still inadvertently hurt the child. Emotional neglect, generally referred to as not catering to the emotional needs of the child (like not expressing any feelings while interacting with the child), has been, and still is, a challenging issue to recognize and measure, since numerous parents or caregivers find it very difficult to create a warm and safe environment for their little ones when dealing with relationship conflicts, mental health issues or addiction issues. In his narrative, the person emerges into a gaping hole stuffed with emotional deprivation and neglectful parenting after the impacts of adverse child experiences.

Childhood emotional neglect (CEN), a subtype of Childhood Maltreatment, occurs when a child's basic emotional needs are not met, their distress is not acknowledged, and their social and emotional development is ignored. There are four types of child abuse: Physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect. The World Health Organization defines child maltreatment as: Violence against children includes all forms of violence against people under 18 years of age. For infants and younger children, violence mainly involves child maltreatment (i.e. physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect) at the hands of parents and

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other authority figures. Boys and girls are at equal risk of physical and emotional abuse and neglect, and girls are at greater risk of sexual abuse. As children reach adolescence, peer violence and intimate partner violence, in addition to child maltreatment, become highly prevalent [11]. Neglect is a unique and particularly prevalent form of harm within the broad definition of child maltreatment.

Child neglect can have significant short- and long-term consequences. In the short term, neglect can lead to neurological and psychological issues. Neurologically, neglected children often exhibit underdeveloped areas of the brain responsible for emotions and cognition. Neglect can also result in emotional issues, such as low self-confidence and negative self-image. It can contribute to the development of psychological disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders [10]. The present research provides a detailed investigation of the unintentional portrayals of emotional suffering through Small's dreams. The dream sequence's imagery is connected to the negative impacts of empathic failure and the final self-reconstitution through art, drawing on Freud's Interpretation of Dreams.

A. Objectives

- i. To examine how David Small's dream sequences reflect emotional neglect during childhood
- ii. To investigate how dreams serve as a coping strategy that externalizes suppressed trauma
- iii. To investigate how *Stitches* clarifies identity reconstruction following emotional deprivation, highlighting the healing potential of art and psychoanalysis in mending the broken self.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sigmund Freud's work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2014) [1], serves as the theoretical framework for this research, portraying dreams as the unconscious mind's unrevealed manifestations. Freud was convinced that dreams were the masked fulfilments of suppressed cravings that the conscious self thus uncrossed. In the dream work, the desire is distorted through condensation and symbolic expression. At the same time, the whole process acts as a protective disguise for that which is forbidden or painful, allowing it to come up in non-threatening disguises that the dreamer's waking ego can tolerate, even though they are not aware of them. In addition, Freud's separation of dreaming content into manifest and latent provides a very convenient and practical conceptual flashlight for dream interpretation. The latent dream, which reveals the dreamer's emotional truth, shows the dreamer's need to be seen and loved, even when their parents ignore them. The manifest dream, or, in other words, what David remembers, is simply the outermost narrative. Hence, Freud's model opens the way for a comprehensive examination of how neglect's psychic language is constructed through dreams. A Freudian approach allows a researcher to see *Stitches* not just as a trauma memoir but also as an artistic representation of the unconscious struggle to cope with emotional pain.

III. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative interpretive approach to investigate how dreams in David Small's *Stitches* (2009)

depict emotional neglect. To understand how the author's subconscious experiences are reflected in dream sequences, the research examines both textual and visual components.

The research methodology involves a close examination of the memoir's written and visual components. To reveal their hidden meanings, panels, pictures, and storylines that show nightmares, dreams, or otherworldly visions are examined. The researcher examined the relationship between text and illustration and how Small's dreamscapes express repressed guilt, fear, and a desire for emotional connection.

IV. ANALYSIS

Human feelings are a key factor in the way we react, decide, and experience our overall happiness. "Emotional regulation" is the term used to describe the skill of managing our emotions, including the emotions we feel, when we think them, and how we show or feel them. Emotional regulation, as stated by McRae & Gross (2020) [6], focuses on people's attempts to influence emotions, defined as time-limited, situationally bound, and valenced (positive or negative) states. Compared with historical predecessors, ER is broader, as it is not limited to the down-regulation of negative emotions (fear, anxiety, stress) but also encompasses up- and down-regulation of positive and negative emotions in accordance with regulation-related goals. ER involves both internal and external actions to initiate, increase, maintain, decrease, or transform both positive and negative emotions in response to changing demands of emotion-evoking situations. Although often used to refer to a person's behaviours following distressing emotions, ER also includes emotion generation, i.e., how emotion occurs (Iwakabe et al., 2023) [4]. Dream contents, including negative emotions (e.g., anxiety and fear), are more frequent than positive ones, and they are often related to waking-life experiences [9]. Here's how dreams acts as an emotional regulator in the novel *Stitches*.

The phrase "grandmother's house" evoked many happy and enjoyable memories of childhood. Kamala Das, in her poem "My Grandmother's House," offers a poignant and intimate meditation on the poet's deceased grandmother and the unwavering love she experienced as a young girl. She compares her lonely life now to "begging now at strangers' doors" in contrast to the warmth of that past [3]. In contrast to it, this memoir, *Stitches*, shows a further instance of his experiences of cruelty at his grandmother's home. She snorted, "You don't like it? Then don't eat it! I'm not sleepy! I want to see mama! I want to say good night to Papa John! (Small 2009, p.90). She becomes enraged by this and takes him upstairs to wash his hands in hot water (Small 2009, p.91 on the left) [1]. This action demonstrates that his dreams mirror his behaviours. The researcher may examine this memoir using Freud's theory of dreams, as presented in Chapter VI [1]. Condensation is a crucial "dream-work" mechanism in Sigmund Freud's theory of dream interpretation, in which several latent dream-thoughts, emotions, or memories are condensed into a single, condensed image, idea, or symbol in the dream's manifest content. According to this, in his dream, Papa John carried him in his arms,





91

103

[Fig.1: Left: p. 91 His Grandmother's Cruelty on David and Right: p.103 Emotional Neglect that Reflects in his Dreams in Several Panels. Adapted from Stitches: A Memoir by David Small, Copyright @ 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company]

Waved goodbye to everyone David saw during the day and placed him in the small black coffin with a crucifix hanging over it (Figure a, p. 103 on the right). In the following panel, everyone, including his parents and the doctor he feared most, surrounds the coffin. "Now both of them were angry with me. That little room felt as close as a coffin. He was a Durn little fool" (Small 2009, p.102-104) [1] and his grandmother cried, "That's right. He needed to learn" (Small 2009, p.106) [1], which, as a result of emotional neglect, symbolizes fear of punishment, death, silence, and multiple figures united into one symbolic symbol to convey how David's father, mother, and grandmother scarred him for life.

A happy relationship depends on effective communication. It allows people to express their needs, feelings, and vulnerabilities and get empathy and validation in return. Everyone shares their innermost thoughts and feelings with their loved ones. What if these communication breakdowns occur, especially in an extended family setting? In the novel *Stitches*, there is no chance for communication. David's mother's personal form of language could be slamming the kitchen cupboards, insistent coughing, or moving the forks. They don't even convey their thoughts during dining and could be visualised (Figure b, p. 187 on the left) [1]. From childhood itself, he has used drawing as a way to divert himself. It depicts his emotional negligence, and the world is filled with drawings. These actions demonstrate how poorly the family communicates. The nature of a child will lead them

to reach out to a caregiver during times of distress or uncertainty. The emotional bond established through these interactions is the basis for either secure or insecure attachment. Here in this novel, *Stitches* David's mother uses harsh words to show her coldness and unaffectionate towards him. His mother ranted, "Doctors cost money and money is something. That is in short supply in this house" (Small 2009, p. 122) [1]. These words manifest that they consider him a burden to the family. The above figure could be evidenced by his mother explicitly declining to finance his medical treatment, citing financial limitations, while concurrently indulging in extravagant purchases of cars and furniture. This action illustrates how emotional neglect in a child, as supported by Freud's dream theory, can result in a dreams.

Bats often symbolise emotional demise. According to Sarah Merron, holding a special place in various cultures as symbols of transformation, luck, power, true sight, and rebirth. Like any totem animal that thrives in darkness, the bat can also symbolize your fear of the unknown [8]. According to Freud's dream theory, as presented in Chapter III, the researcher examined this memoir. This chapter outlines Freud's primary argument that dreams function to satisfy repressed desires. Freud contends that through a process known as distortion, a wish, typically a suppressed desire from the unconscious mind, is fulfilled in a dream. He explains his idea with examples from literature and personal experiences [1].



[Fig.2: Left: p.187 Family Lack of Communication and Emotional Neglect and Right: p.198 Bat Symbolizes his Suppressed Desires to his mom. Adapted from *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small, Copyright @ 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company]

The figure above demonstrates how dreams function as a means of expressing and alleviating feelings. Here, the umbrella serves in for David's mother, the rain for his illness, and the young bat for David himself (figure b p.198 on the right) [1]. He is terrified and seeking shelter from the rain and cold when the rain starts, running to his mother (the umbrella) for cover, yet it is quickly struck by lightning and left unprotected. With the umbrella, symbolising his mother, David shows how desperately he wants his mother to love him and treat him as a mother should, protecting him from the world. But he doesn't feel safe or supported by her. The rain overtakes him, and the umbrella is broken. This dream emphasises how emotional repression occurs when there is a lack of communication within the family, employing Freud's dream-as-wish-fulfilment theory. As we can see, this psychic vulnerability persists in his waking life.

At school David felt a kind of isolation, which made him even more vulnerable. "Back in school, at first wildly self-conscious.... soon I learned...when you have no voice you don't exist" (Small 2009, p. 212) [1], it reveals how he feels inferior in the institution. These actions create low self-esteem which is evinced in his behaviour that he started to skip classes. He asserted, "Even among my old friends I felt invisible." A shadow flickering around the edges of every event. I began skipping classes" (Small 2009, pp. 213-214). This situation made David have sleepless nights (Figure c, p. 217 left) [1] indicates how he was struggling to accept the fact. The "Psychology of the Dream Processes" is covered in chapter VII of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

According to Freud, anxiety dreams represent a failure of the dream work to transform traumatic or anxious content into disguised wish fulfillment properly, even though his main idea is that dreams are wish fulfillments. In these situations, the "guarding of sleep" function breaks down because the anxiety becomes so intense that it wakes the dreamer [1]. David lives in his own mouth in this panel (Figure c, p. 127, on the left) [1]. When he arrives at the gutted, useless room, the scene symbolizes the loss of his voice, reflecting the physical destruction of a vital part of himself. David's loss of vocal cords, which left him unable to speak, is the most evident example of lost communication in this memoir. This emotional negligence left a psychological scar on David. As a result, his parents' indifference and neglect could be evidence that the emotion reflects his dream. David starts having recurrent dreams about a church after his operation. In his dream, David has an out-of-body experience and travels to a mansion, where he discovers a tiny door. As it gets smaller and smaller, he creeps inside until it opens out to a room that appears to have been hit by a bomb. David's mind seems to be represented by the room, a disorganised mess that appears to have been destroyed by a bomb. His family is the bomb. His life is a mansion. He remarked, "For a year, several nights a week, I had travelled the same route, through the same succession of rooms...narrowing passageways...and doors of diminishing size...emerging each time, with the sense of disbelief and despair, into that temple whose guts had been bombed (Small 2009, pp. 241-242) [1].



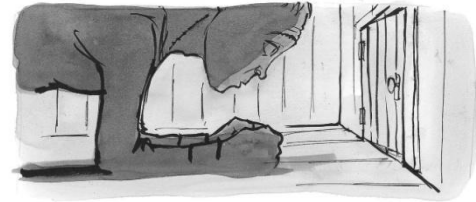
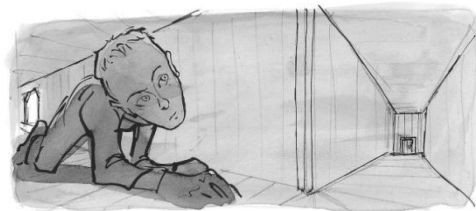
... A HOT, MOIST CAVERN, IN WHICH EVERYTHING I
THOUGHT, EVERY WORD THAT CAME INTO MY BRAIN, WAS
THUNDEROUSLY SHOUTED BACK AT ME.



I WAS SCARED TO GO UP TO BED, AFRAID THAT THE SCREAMING
IN MY HEAD WOULD BE HEARD BY THE FAMILY.



217



222

[Fig.3: Left: p. 217 David's Sleepless Nights and Right: p. 222 His Dream Leading to a Damaged Mind. Adapted from *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small, Copyright @ 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company]

David's choice of words is a metaphor for how his family's cruelty has damaged his mind. Due to his family's nature, what was once lovely had now become damaged and could be visualized in his dreams. David's dream imagery shifts from terrifying situations to creative activities as the story goes on. The psychologist validates David's inner experiences in *Stitches*, who also encourages him to utilize art to externalize his underlying concerns. The psychologist is the first adult to listen to David. Here, the psychiatrist in the graphic memoir is in rabbit form. According to Paige K. Parsons, rabbits have drawn people's attention for centuries. Rabbits are widely known for their prolific breeding, making them a symbol of fertility and abundance. Dreaming of a rabbit can signify growth, prosperity, and the potential for new beginnings. This interpretation aligns with the rabbit's natural reproductive capabilities and its association with springtime and renewal [7]. From the perspective of others in the coping sub-theory, the psychiatrist acts as a source of resilience for him. He treats him as a son and boasts about his artwork. His words, "Art became my home. Not only did it give me back my voice, but Art has given me everything I have wanted or needed since" (Small 2009, p.302) [1] revealing he withdrew from his inferiority complex. This resilience demonstrates how the rejected person can utilize coping mechanisms to support their professional expertise or other activities, thereby venting their emotions.

Freud explains the relationship between dream content and dreams thoughts in Chapter VI of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where the "dream-work" that converts latent thoughts into symbolic "picture-writing" is introduced. Freud discusses how symbols can be both more universal (e.g., a house signifying a person) and individualised (through association) [1]. The psychiatric hospital where David's grandma passed away is the last central structure we see in *Stitches*. As the location where the worst of David's relatives

wound up, it symbolizes all of his darkest anxieties. The structure is also large and imposing when David sees it in his last dream; from a distance, one may easily mistake it for a castle. However, it is ancient and dreary, much like the boarding house and the temple (Figure d, p.324) [1]. Even in his dreams, David will not enter the structure once he recognizes it. His subconscious is now powerful enough to oppose it, even if it is a visual depiction of everything he fears. Since his family is the source of all of his anxieties, we might see buildings as a representation of his family structure and his final decision to stay out of the mental institution as a reluctance to call this place home.



[Fig.4: p. 324 His Mom Leading his Way to the Insane Asylum. Adapted from *Stitches: A Memoir* by David Small, Copyright @ 2009 by W.W. Norton & Company]

One interesting point is that David refused to enter that space, which indicates that the



emotional abandonment he experienced as a child no longer tormented him, as he was able to find a way outside of it. Even after a few years, he continued to have this recurrent dream that showed the psychological damage caused by emotional neglect by emphasizing Freud's theory.

V. DISCUSSION

The study's findings suggest that dream images are not merely an enhancement of the story but rather a necessary psychological means of expression and coding of the emotional neglect David Small experienced in *Stitches* during his early years. The memoir regards dreams as metaphors, the unconscious mind of David working through the emotional shortcomings of his upbringing, which he cannot express in any other way in his conscious life. Freud's dream-work mechanisms, including condensation and symbolic representation, provide a valuable lens for examining these dreams as manifestations of unexpressed trauma. Right from the very start, the researcher was able to see through the mist formed by different interpretations of neglect, rather than the other way around; he gained a deeper understanding of his relationship with his mother. He was becoming clearer and more transparent about the mother's influence when he dreamed of lightness in the dark and became disturbed, as if by a spider weaving its web around him. The application of Freud's dream-work theory to the analysis of *Stitches* uncovers the same issues of childhood emotional neglect as earlier literary and psychological frameworks, but also goes even further. The so-called behavioural and attachment models, which emphasize symptoms such as withdrawal, low self-esteem, poor attachment patterns, or disturbed identity, have been the dominant approaches in neglect research. Neglected children do not utilize the hidden symbolic processes their minds are adept at, which are often reflected in the theories of neglect, as these theories do not encompass their effects. However, Freud's dream-work uncovers these hidden mechanisms.

VI. CONCLUSION

David Small's *Stitches* represents a childhood of emotional neglect, as embodied in memories and psychic architecture, which dreams influence most strongly. David's dream life transformed his unconscious years of fear, silence, and maternal withdrawal into powerful dream images, which the researcher can interpret through the mechanisms of condensation and symbolic representation in Freud's theory of dreams. Instead of simply rehashing past pain, these dreams do a major reorganizing, turning scattered emotional experiences into symbolic stories. Furthermore, the mental component not only accompanies but also actively participates in the graphic memoir format. Like dream work, *Stitches'* visuals are fragmented, cryptic, compressed, and highly indirectly powerful. The story, through the use of silent panels, stunning visuals, and minimal dialogues, opens up the dream structure and, at the same time, emphasizes the lack of feeling that marks David's early years. In addition, Freud's theory not only gives a psychological explanation of the dream sequence but also indicates that the visual autobiography is a new form of communication that surpasses the linguistic barriers.

Ultimately, the research suggests that *Stitches* is a multifaceted representation of the transformation and revelation of the core feeling of neglect, rather than being merely a narrative of pain. The understanding of the artwork is not only an insight into the child's subconscious fight with identity and understanding, but also an application of Freud's dream theory. Visual arts, however, still make more explicit what remains unspoken. Together, they show that the trauma of unloved children is not only in the memory and behaviour but in the very core of the symbolism of dreams and images as well.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

Some of the cited references are outdated and are noted explicitly as [1] and [2]. However, these works remain significant for the current study, as they are pioneering in their fields.

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- **Author's Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed equally to all participating individuals.

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