



# Deciphering one's Personality with symbols of Self in *Eleanor and Park*:

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## ABSTRACT

Deciphering one's personality with symbols and self begins with the introduction to Alfred Adler and the tenets of Adlerian theory. *Eleanor and Park* is analysed in accordance with Adlerian theory. The paper focuses on how Eleanor's personality influences her narrowing down of social circle and how she tackles her disoriented familial life.

Children often tend to blame their parents, their past experiences or childhood trauma for their behavioral pattern. But this paper is to prove otherwise and to throw light on the other side of the coin that how they play this blame game to justify their actions.

## Introduction:

The word 'family' is one of the most loosely defined terms in English. For some it is a little nest filled with love, for others it is an extended place with all the kith and kin whereas for few it is simply a comfort zone. Familial structure is not the same for all. It is vastly different but they all function under the same realm that is love and commitment. Family is either tied by blood or chosen by love. Whatever the case may be a family is a safe space to share happiness and divide sorrow with.

All families are not alike. A family is not a bed of roses for all. For some it is filled with prickles and thorns. There comes the concept of "dysfunctional family" where care, love and bond are replaced with neglect, hatred and abuse respectively. In these family systems, children's emotional needs are unmet because the parents'

needs are extensively prioritised. The root cause of dysfunction in a family may vary from physical abuse, emotional abuse, alcoholism, affairs and so on. But the effect it causes in a child is one and the same: childhood trauma.

Deprived of a happy family and a healthy environment, children from dysfunctional families struggle to grow into secure adults. They develop low self-esteem, lack of confidence, trust issues, reserved nature, isolating themselves from a social group etc. This is due to the lack of love they get from their parents, their basic needs are not fulfilled, denied of the primary care giver's attention, controlling parent and witnessing or living in an unhealthy atmosphere.

The disorientation in the family dynamics is said to have a long-lasting impact on children. There is always a part of them which carries tormenting memories with them. A person's experience in his early childhood largely influences the type of person he becomes in future. A person's state of mind and body condition goes hand in hand. If a child lives in a happy and care-free environment, he will grow into a healthy adult. On the contrary, if a child lives in a sad and depressing surrounding, he will grow into an insecure adult.

Childhood is a period of vigour and vitality. It is a phase of life where one doesn't have to worry about anything. It is a stage of innocence. But what if childhood is not a duck soup, what if the burden is too heavy to handle, it eventually would turn the child's life topsy-turvy. All the bad memories will be etched in the child's heart forever.

### Rainbow Rowell:

Rainbow Rowell was born on February 24, 1973 at Nebraska, United States. She is known for her Young Adult, Contemporary fiction and New-adult fiction. She lives with her husband and two sons. Before starting her writing career, she was a columnist and ad copywriter from 1995 to 2012 at the Omaha World Herald. When she was working for an ad agency, she wrote "*Attachments*" as a past time, which became her first published novel later.

In 2011, a contemporary romantic comedy was published, which deals about a company's IT boy who falls in love with a woman whose email he has been constantly monitoring. The novel has been listed as one of the outstanding debuts that year by Kirkus Reviews. In 2012, Rowell published her first young adult novel, *Eleanor and Park*. In 2013, she wrote *Fangirl*, which is her next young adult novel. Both *Eleanor and Park* and *Fangirl*

were named by the New York Times as the best young adult fiction of the year. Later, *Eleanor and park* received some negative attention from a parents' group at a Minnesota high school claiming it to be profane for which Rowell gave a clear-cut explanation.

In January 2014, Rowell signed a two- book deal with First Second, an American publisher of graphic novels. *Landline*, a contemporary adult novel, dealing about a marriage in trouble, was published on July 8, 2014 which is Rowell's fourth novel. After *Fangirl*, Rowell created a trilogy of books based on the fictional books from *Fangirl*. Its sequel came up in the year 2015, which is set as the eighth book in the series. It is notably influenced from the Harry Potter series by JK Rowling. Her recent novels, *WaywardSon* published in the year 2019 and her 2021 book *Any Way the Wind Blows* are also Simon Snow books.

Some of the major themes Rowell employs in her novels are family dynamics, facing lives obstacles, coming of age, love, identity crisis and teen angst. Rowell uses simple diction yet conveys strong social message to the readers. She brings in vivid descriptions through her vibrant use of literary devices like imagery and metaphors. She seems to have been greatly influenced by the magical world which is clearly seen in her novels.

### Eleanor and Park:

*Eleanor and Park*, revolves around the story of two teenagers as the title of the novel suggests. At the beginning, the readers are first introduced to Park. He is half-Korean and is an outcast at school. He prefers alone time, reading comics and listening to musicover making new friends. He is bullied by his peers from time to time. One day, Eleanor Douglas enters Park's bus as well as his life. From then on, his life takes an entirely different journey.

Similar to Park, Eleanor's attire and personality is a sizeable contributing factor for her being ridiculed. She is large in stature, dresses in boy's fashion and has red hair. As no one allows her to sit beside them in the bus, she occupies an empty seat near Park. Initially Park doesn't like her, but gradually develops a soft corner for her. The only difference between them is that Park comes from a loving family whereas Eleanor's family is disoriented. Eventually their friendship grows stronger. They start spending time reading comic books together and listen to mix-tapes during their bus travel. As their relationship blooms, Park gets enraged of the uncouth sexual messages that are written anonymously on Eleanor's notebooks on a regular basis. They decide to unravel the person behind this.

Eleanor is restricted from consorting with boys. Therefore, in the pretext of meeting her friend Tina, she visits Park in the evenings. They do their homework and have dinner together. One day she goes out with Park and on her return, finds her stepdad having ransacked her belongings and also scribbled in it. Eleanor finds the handwriting to be similar to what's in her notebooks. This makes Eleanor run away from home.

With Park's help, Eleanor travels to St. Paul to stay in her uncle's house. Park gets a promise from Eleanor to stay in touch with him through letters and calls. But when he returns to Omaha, Eleanor doesn't read his letters for several months. At the end of the novel when Park gets a postcard from Eleanor, he seems to have moved on. The message in the postcard is not revealed to the readers but it just says the message consisted only of three words. The novel can be best analyzed using the tenets of Adlerian theory in order to identify the underlying reasons that are responsible for the protagonist's behaviour.

### The Self-Consistent Personality Structure Develops Into A Person's Style Of Life:

Judgements of a person greatly depends on certain cues which are known as "symbols of self". Like all symbols which denotes some connotative meaning, symbols of self also are visible signs of something invisible. The person through these symbols of self tries to disclose certain personality traits of him to others which he wants others to associate him with but he cannot express them directly. One of the common symbols of self includes "clothing". Down the line, people have understood the importance of personal appearance and how it is a chief indicator in others judging him.

Excessive interest in clothing denotes a person's unfavorable self-concept. On the flip side, a derisive attitude towards clothes depicted by careless grooming, ignoring the prevalent styles, and dressing poorly when better clothes can be afforded are some of the indicators of unfavorable self-concept again. The latter is displayed by the protagonist, Eleanor throughout the novel.

"Not just new-but big and awkward. With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly" (7). This is the description of Eleanor when she first gets inside the bus. The other kids didn't want to sit near her only because of her attire than anything else. When she steps inside the bus, a girl seated in the first row's expression can be best describe this, "The new girl took a deep breath and stepped further down the aisle. Nobody would look at her. The girl exactly looked like the sort of person this would happen to" (7).

This was not just for one day, but was the scenario every other day. This clearly shows that she didn't care a bit for her appearance and she never tried to change it as well. Sometimes she even came dressed in the same outfit she wore the previous day. There was no single soul who didn't feel weird or comment about her personality. Even Park felt awkward seeing her appearance, "Jesus, was she weird. Today she was dressed like a Christmas tree, with all this stuff pinned to her clothes, shapes cut out of fabric, ribbon ..." (24).

Being poorly or inappropriately dressed can make a person feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. This would eventually affect the judgements of others as well as his level of social acceptance. The person develops, shielding, evasive attitude towards social activities. He also acquires a strong and fearful distaste for prominence and leadership roles. As a result, he withdraws from any situation he might have to be in the spotlight.

This can be witnessed during Eleanor's English classes. She was adept in reading poetry and excelled in Literature, but never spoke a word during classes as she didn't want to gain attention from others. Her English professor, MrStessman tried hard to make her speak in every class by asking her questions and making her read and recite poems. He kept trying to draw her out as she was his new favorite target. But she maintained her stance and participated in class only whenever necessary.

### Style Of Life Is Molded By People's Creative Power:

Adler believed that each person has the liberty to create his own style of life. Eventually, each person is responsible for who they are and how they behave. Individual's creative power positions them in control of their own lives.

Park seems to exhibit this tenet at a larger basis. Like Eleanor, he also is a prey to his classmate's taunts. He is usually teased upon for his mixed identity. For instance, his friend Cal once makes a harsh comment on him stating that, "Your people come from the jungle" (31). Despite of all the ridiculous judgements passed upon, Park continues to be himself. He likes to wear makeup. This love for makeup may have gotten into Park because of his mother as she runs a parlor at home. She also tests by applying lipstick samples on him when he was in kindergarten as a trial. But whatever the reason maybe he loves to be pampered and groomed.

One morning he took his mother's onyx eyeliner to the bathroom and put it on. He looked messier than his mom, but he thought that would look better on him and more masculine. His dad noticed this at breakfast and

was provoked, “Like hell it isn’t, Go wash your face, Park”. Park wasn’t swayed away by his dad’s comments. He stuck to his whims and fancies, “Plenty of guys wear makeup” (223).

Park’s mother supported him in his choices and understood he has his own right to live by his own terms. After getting inside the bus, Park was mocked at, for his girlish appearance. But he didn’t pay heed towards it, “You tell me Park all grown up now, almost man, make own decisions. So let him make own decisions. Let him go” (224).

Just like Park, Eleanor also doesn’t settle for other’s comments and satire. She lives by her own choice. She never dresses girly. She always wears boy’s clothes and mismatched outfits. Her financial status may seem as a justification for this. But she doesn’t take a step to change which proves that she likes to dress in such a manner. When she is first introduced to the readers, she is pictured as, “She had a plaid shirt, a man’s shirt, with half a dozen of weird necklaces hanging around her neck and scarves wrapped around her wrists” (7).

Park’s mother also makes a remark, “Park, do you want to look like girl? Is that what this about? Eleanor dress like boy. You look like girl?” (226).

#### Personality Is Unified And Self-Consistent:

Through this element, Adler stresses on the belief that every individual is unique and indivisible. Apart from Eleanor’s personality, her thoughts and views on a particular subject matter makes her stand out from others. To illustrate, once during her English class, Mr Stessman asked her opinion on the great tragedy, Romeo and Juliet especially about their deaths at the end. She responds back that she neither feels sad for their deaths nor believes in their love at first sight. She further adds that the play survived all these years only because of Shakespeare being a great writer, “It’s Shakespeare making fun of love” (45).

Mr Stessman is astounded with her answer. Though he has difference of opinion with what Eleanor had said, he appreciates her for breaking new ground.

Another incident which makes Eleanor’s thinking outside the box is her remark on X-Men after reading the comic which Park lent her. Both Park and Eleanor agreed about everything important and argued about everything else. Like, she questions as of why X-Men needs another girl telepath and replies back that it’s all sexism. After hearing this Park’s eyes widens. Both argued over the observation and Eleanor won the argument

with her valid points, “The girls are all so stereotypically girly and passive. Half of them just think really hard.

Like that’s their superpower, thinking. And Shadowcat’s power is even worse-she disappears” (65).

#### It’s Dangerous To Believe That One’s Past Determines His Future:

This is one of the most important aspects of Adlerian theory. Park belongs to a close-knit and loving family. But Eleanor’s is a completely different scenario. Her mother and father are separated. Her biological father now has a family of his own. Her mother remarried a man named Richie. Now it’s Eleanor’s stepfather Richie who has gained complete autonomy over the house. He is not only dominant but alcoholic and abusive as well. Once he went bananas at Eleanor and started shouting at her in filthy language. He didn’t want Eleanor to stay in their home anymore. To ease the situation, Eleanor’s mother sent her to one of their distant family friend’s place, the Hickmans. She stayed there for a year almost like an orphan. She didn’t have any access to her mother or siblings as her mother was not able to contact her because Richie on purpose didn’t pay the telephone bill. Also, she was not treated cordially by her relatives. The Hickmans thought of her as a burden and didn’t want her in their house. Eleanor came to know this and she tried to be even less trouble, “She never turned on the TV or asked to use the phone. She never asked for seconds at dinner. She never asked Tammy and Mr Hickman for anything ... She was glad that they didn’t know her birthday” (36).

Even after returning to her house, she was not happy. She lived in fear almost every day. Her mother was physically and mentally abused by Richie. Her mother didn’t want her painful life to affect her children. She tried to be a peacemaker at home bearing all the violence shown by Richie towards her. From childhood, Eleanor witnesses this. All these torments Eleanor. Eleanor along with her four siblings would gather together at night out of fear when they hear their mother shouting, “When it was worse than bedsprings, when it was shouting or crying, they’d huddle together, all five of them, on Eleanor’s bed” (27).

The worst of all is that Eleanor doesn’t even get to eat what she likes. Her mother makes scrumptious food for Richie as they didn’t have enough money to spend for all. She usually gets the left-overs or an entirely different meal, “She even made him a totally different dinner. The kids would get grilled cheese, and Richie would get steak” (26).

Above all Richie is not a person to live with safely. His true terrible nature is revealed only at the end of the novel. Eleanor gets lewd messages written in her notebooks all through these days. Eleanor and Park thinks those are written by someone in school. They kept constant watch on their classmates. Eleanor suspects one of her classmates, Tina, who always mocks her because of which she feels Tina would have written it out of hatred for Eleanor. But everything turns topsy-turvy when Eleanor finds it was not Tina who had written those messages but her stepdad, Richie. When Eleanor was out with Park for some time, Richie had scribbled filthy messages in all of her private belongings. She finds it written in the same handwriting as that of her notebooks. She immediately rushes off from her home and visits Park to convey this. Finally, they decide to leave to Eleanor's uncle's place, St. Paul for a safe and secure living.

Hence as Adlerian theory suggest one's past doesn't determine his future. This can be witnessed in Eleanor's life. From childhood, she knows not of true happiness. It was Park who made her understand how it feels like to love and to be loved. She had no one to rely on until then. Abusive stepdad, Helpless mother, Self-centred father, harassing peers and broken family were her only circle.

Eleanor worries about her life being chaotic and can never escape it. All her past trauma, haunt her with the addition of present disorder and disarray in the family. Although she faces hardships all through these years, she finally gets a safe space where she can lead a peaceful life. She goes to school without worries, bathes without fear, eats without regret and lives without complexities. It's all because she steps out of the fence and finds a better life for herself without dwelling in the past.

## Conclusion:

As Haruki Murakami says, "And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about" (Kafka on the Shore). Some keep nagging about their past and fail to take the next ladder in their life. Nobody has the ability to change their past but one can overcome it with willpower and determination. There is always a door which leads one to the right path after an adversity. It's in one's hands to make use of it wisely. This can happen only when one keeps his eyes wide awake and heart open. It's easier said than done. But nobody in this world has a totally blessed life with no worries, hardships and pain. Everyone on earth has their



own set of hurdles to face through. For some it is big and for some it is small. Everything lies in the lens one sees them with.

This research study is all about overcoming one's grave past experiences and trauma and rising above them through optimism and courage. Just as there being two sides to a coin, there are always two different perspectives to a problem. In this scenario, the first is staying behind with all the distressing memories and experiences of the childhood. The next is getting the better of their past and stepping ahead. If one follows the former, he is most likely to fail in life. He stays stagnant without any betterment throughout. Whereas if one follows the latter, he will make a difference in life, shedding away all his bad memories, seeking new opportunities and a new beginning. This research is to cast light on the most grounded approach to one's problems that is the latter, mentioned above with the help of Adlerian theory. Adler's views are mostly sanguine which gives one hope to succeed further in life. The very important point he makes is that one's past has nothing to do with one's present behaviour and state. Blaming one's past, childhood experiences and dysfunctional family dynamics won't do any good to the person at present and they are just mere excuses for their current substandard behaviour.

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