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## Exploring Attachment Styles and Family Dynamics in ‘Our Nana Was a Nutcase’: A Psychological Analysis

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### **Abstract:**

The paper explores the complexities of family dynamics through the lens of attachment theory. *Our Nana Was a Nutcase* is a beautiful and heartwarming tale that delves into the life of a multigenerational family, unravelling the impact of early childhood experiences on adult relationships. Through the characters’ interactions, the author skillfully illustrates the various attachment styles and their influence on an individual's emotional connections. As the narrative unfolds, the readers contemplate the significance of secure attachments and the lasting effects of early relationships (mainly between a carer and a child) on one’s sense of belonging and identity. The novel offers a poignant portrayal of human attachment and resilience, with a backdrop of humour and tenderness, compelling readers to reflect on the profound influence of family bonds.

**Keywords:** Attachment styles, foundational, separation anxiety, parental warmth and mutism.

### **Introduction:**

*Our Nana Was a Nutcase* is a beautiful and heartwarming tale about growing up, becoming older, and respecting one’s grandparents no matter how crazy they seem. The novel is a masterpiece that combines humour and heartbreak movingly. The story follows a family of four siblings living with their grandfather, a retired Army surgeon. The parents, who work

as diplomats, leave the children with their grandfather to raise them. Nana's military precision and love for his grandchildren make education entertaining. However, Nana starts showing signs of illness, losing balance, and struggling to recognise his grandchildren. The nostalgia of Nana and the touchy relationship between Nana and the grandchildren will remain the midpoint of the thought in this paper.

Attachment theory is a psychological framework that delves into the dynamics of relationships, bonds and connections between individuals. It is a “powerful and transformative tool that can help unlock the secrets of relationships, heal past wounds and create more fulfilling connections with others” (Charles7). Childhood experiences with attachment figures profoundly impact a person’s development trajectory, internal working models of others, the environment and themselves. A fundamental part of child development is establishing a foundational level of trust with parents. Being confident in oneself and others is essential for human growth as trust expands beyond a child's initial relationship with parents or other primary carers to a more extensive social network full of advantages. White and Hughes opine that “the caregiver-child relationship is a unique source of emotional security, enabling the child to explore the world safe in the knowledge that there is a warm and loving haven to which he or she can return.” (White & Hughes7)

The novel opens with much commotion in Empress Noor Jahan, a Boeing 747- in mid-flight and the chant of three hundred passengers crying in unison, “Dum lagake haisha! Jor lagake hai-sha!” (Lal 1). All the passengers are ready to welcome an extra passenger into the world. A woman is having a baby. The childbirth occurs not in a typical setting but instead on a flight. The little passenger is delivered by her own Nana, a retired surgeon from the Army, in the plane “heading into Mumbai from London” (1). That small child- the narrator of the novel-was born twenty-one years ago, introduces herself as Avantika Jumbo Singh, better known as ‘General Gosling’ and tells how she came into this world with a cheerful face, sunflower smile “and free air tickets for life!” (2)

The heartbreaking experience of dumping the children by their parents, one by one, with Nana, subdues their spirits and cheerfulness, leading to separation anxiety. As per UNICEF, “Separation anxiety is seen with many children and is most common between the ages of 6 months and 3 years. Young babies and toddlers can become anxious when their parent or primary caregiver leaves their sight.” The mother-child connection is an unspoken relationship between the child and its primary caregiver. It is the driving force behind a

behaviour pattern that lasts the child's entire life. Sudhir Kakkar, a leading figure in cultural psychology, advocates the same idea and writes,

“The first months of human life are a period of wordless oblivion, which is of root significance for individual development. At once timeless and fleeting, infancy is the foundation for all later psychological experiences. Moreover, the nature of an individual's first relationship—with his mother—profoundly influences the quality and ‘dynamics’ of social relations throughout his life.” (61)

It would be beneficial to look at attachment theory to understand the idea of attachment and separation anxiety better. When considering attachment, the first association that springs to mind is the bond that a newborn has with his or her mother. When someone meets a baby's requirements, the baby develops a connection to that person. John Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1991) research served as the foundation for Attachment Theory and explained the formation of bonds between an infant and a caregiver. Attachment theory suggests that attachment is the cornerstone of a child's early emotional development and safeguards him from threats in the outside world. The different attachment styles are secure attachment, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment and disorganized attachment style. The bonding of a child with his caregiver sets the tone for how he will relate to others throughout his life and determines his attachment style.

These four children, Gosling and her siblings, Duckling and the twins Dingaling and Dumpling, could never forgive their parents for abandoning them in the Shadow House at Mahaparbatpur in Himachal Pradesh. Avantika was merely four when her parents left her in Shadow House. She says:

I was four when Duckling joined me and remember that she cried a lot and Nana walked around with her on his shoulder for a long time, patting her curls and singing to her in his deep bass comfort voice. Dumpling and Dingaling too were upset when Mama and Papa eventually drove away- they were barely a year old. I was seven at the time, Duckling was four and between us, we tried to pick up and console these two screaming, heartbroken, terrified babies and smothered them with hugs and kisses. (Lal7)

As foreign service personnel, the parents frequently relocate to far-flung locations across the globe, uprooting their lives and leaving their children behind. The constant upheaval and uncertainty of this lifestyle take a significant toll on children, leading to anxiety.

Separation anxiety in children due to neglect or absence of caregivers leads to Separation Anxiety Disorder, which is a permanent state where “a child has a fear of being lost from their family or of something, bad occurring to a family member if he or she is not with the person” (Stanford Children’s Health). Childhood separation anxiety can have devastating consequences in the life of a child; sometimes, this anxiety becomes persistent and can interfere with establishing connections with others. “Separation Anxiety Disorder is characterized by unrealistic and excessive anxiety upon separation or anticipation of separation from major attachment figures” (Eisen and Schaefer 14). Later in the novel, children become vulnerable and feel similar anxiety when Nana suffers from dementia. They also develop insecure attachment styles with their parents, wherein they find it challenging to build trust with their parents.

During the initial stage of dumping the children one by one, Nana was responsive to the needs of the children and provided comfort when they were distressed or when they missed their parents. Conversely, he follows strict military rules during their daily routines. He wakes them up with Colonel Bogey March and marches with his military boots on, playing his golden trumpet and singing, “Hitler! He only had one ball...!Goering ! Had two, but very small...” (Lal11). Children would laugh but could not remain angry with him for long. The writer calls him a ‘Nutcase’ who behaves unpredictably and erratically. Nana’s devotion to his family, his kind, patient ways of teaching the kids life lessons, his dedication to his work and his cars, his impeccable sense of humour and his innovative ways of instilling self-confidence in his grandchildren make him exceptional.

Life at the Shadow House changes one day when Nana takes the wrong turn while taking the kids off to school, and a few days later, he pays the domestic servants twice. These are the first signs of dementia in him. Also, he gives the twins a monthly allowance twice in one month. He begins to lose track of his meals; he will have lunch but cannot recall it and wants another serving. Things start to get worse when he tries to administer a tetanus shot to a hospitalised girl again after forgetting to do it the last time.

The parents are eternally absent from the lives of their children and Nana. Children will connect with their parents twice a week through the virtual platform. Their conversation is a “sort of eighteenth-century conversation which faltered quickly” (20). The parents have never tried to bridge the gap with their children, And the children, on the other hand, have never experienced the warmth of their relationship with their parents, so they are always at a

loss for words. It is a relief to immediately end the Skype calls, just like they have done for their parents. The children exhibit "selective mutism" or irrational fear of the dialogues with their parents. They reserve their feelings and joy for Nana and Shabby Aunt and display anger and fear towards their parents.

"Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder in which a person who is otherwise capable of speech becomes unable to speak when exposed to specific situations, specific places, or to specific people, one or multiple of which serving as triggers. This is caused by the freeze response." (Wikipedia n.pag)

Children feel nothing for them except for a slow burn of anger and resentment. It is difficult to avoid this anger. Morita, Director of the Empowerment Centre, which offers professional training sessions on the prevention of child abuse and other human rights issues, said, "Over years of counselling, I have realised that anger is the "mask" behind which hides the real "cause". If the mask slips even slightly or falls off the face, the real emotion- loneliness, sorrow, fear, regret, anxiety about abandonment dependency- behind the mask is exposed." (Anger is simply a Mask140)

Gosling and Duckling also mask many emotions of abandonment and pain behind their anger. The only choice they have is their nutcase Nana and no one else. The children, especially Gosling and Duckling, have anger and resentment for the parents like glowing coal. "In adolescence, the expression of anger takes on an even more explicit form. Although the strength of the emotion does not diminish, it normally takes oral expression. In almost all cases, the anger is directed to attracting attention or obtaining some desired thing" (Sharma and Sharma 139). However, the elder girls release their anger and resentment through tears. Children with negative experiences will avoid people and display fear and anger towards them; holding simple conversations with others can also be difficult for them.

The children display an 'avoidant attachment style' as they seem always pulling away emotionally from their parents, putting up walls or withdrawing. It stems from their childhood when their parents were unresponsive to their emotional needs. As a result, they become over-reliant on themselves. Later in the novel, they also decide to shift Nana to the Rainbow Villa as they feel self-reliant, but they risk not only Nana's life but also their own amidst nature's havoc. They constantly avoid their parents, but deep down, they also long for them. There is always a void of emotional language in their communication.

The avoidant attachment style, also known as dismissive-avoidant attachment, is characterised by a tendency to distance oneself from others emotionally. Individuals with this attachment style tend to downplay the importance of close relationships and often avoid emotional intimacy. They may appear self-sufficient and independent, preferring to rely on themselves rather than others. (Charles34)

Parental warmth and loving touch lead to more adult happiness when the child grows up. However, the children here lack their parents' loving warmth except for Nana's love. "Research shows that holding babies and continuing to show our love and affection to our children through physical touch throughout their childhood is an important part of their development and well-being" (Scott n.pag). A caregiver needs to use physical touch as a means of showing love. Nana does everything he can to give all the children a secure childhood and a wonderful life ahead. He gives them all unconditional love and care and nurtures them in a way that redefines the meaning of grandparenting.

Nana has dementia, and at this crucial time when his children ought to be with him, his grandchildren and Shabby Aunty surround him. "Nana has several tiny brain strokes over a period of time- they are called mini-strokes" (Lal72). The lives of the children change after Nana's dementia, and its emotional toll is compounded for them when they realise their haven is dismantled. Leave the teenage girls apart; the twins are too young or immature to grasp the mental and behavioural changes they see in Nana. They experience grief, trauma and fear of the unknown. However, they still want to be with him no matter what. "He was our nutcase Nana and we had to be with him and. ...well...frankly we had no one else. We just had to be there" (90). The children are terrified that Nana might succumb to this terrible illness and forget who they are and everything. He likes them sometimes, and at other times, they appear to be strangers to him.

Nana battles with a variety of issues, including rambling, forgetfulness, melancholy, and difficulty while eating, as well as persistent questions concerning Shabby Aunty. His character shifts from being a rigid military man to someone who is entirely reliant on others. He starts to give unsteady salutes and will gobble his meal rather than consume it. He no longer identifies with his home, which he has ruled for years. The Shadow House becomes a strained space due to the shadow of dementia; everything in their small universe changes except for their affection for one another.

Mama reduces Nana to a mere object to be taken care of while deciding to shift him to a nursing home outside Delhi.

A home where they look after old people with his condition; I've checked its website and done a bit of research and it looks very comfortable. It's air- conditioned of course, with a pool, spa, putting green, clinic 24- hour medical help on call, hospital, theatre full service and so on. He should be very happy there. He'll have lots of company of his own kind. I've seen the brochure--- it seems quite beautiful. (Lal117)

Mama resolves to transfer Nana to an elderly residence while enrolling the children in the boarding school of Mahaparbatpur. She speaks as though she wants the best for her kids. Also, she no longer requires the services of the Chakrams and Neerameerabais, who have raised them since childhood, and lastly, selling the Shadow house to a multinational chain of hotels. Dumpling feels the same rage that has been pelting inside her since childhood for the mother. "“You only want to dump us all!” Dumpling suddenly wailed. You don't love us at all. You just want to dump us on garbage heap and have parties in Paris! We hate you!” (121).

The children fear that leaving their grandfather in the care of strangers will amount to neglect and "dumping." They think that they will be better able to take care of him. The mother thinks Nana will get better care in an assisted living facility. They feel that Mama has condemned Nana to death, and the flame of anger begins to burn again in Dumpling, causing turmoil in her life. Their suspicion of the nursing home and their parents have made them kidnap their Nana and situate their caring for him in the farmhouse (Rainbow villa), a task their family as a single unit has failed to do.

Mama has no feelings for this place because she barely has spent time in the Shadow house with Nana. She has no feelings for this place, and this is the reason “why she was so unconcerned about selling it now. She had no roots. For the four of us and Nana (and Shabby Aunty, too), Shadow House had been the only home we had known and loved” (125). It is not due to dementia; their small world is breaking, or their close family ties will deteriorate. Still, it is due to the diabolic decision of Mama, who is ruthless in deciding Nana's fate, thus driving him to the margins.

*Our Nana was a Nutcase* addresses the challenges by providing a realistic representation of an Indian family with children that reflects on their lives and makes significant changes to cope with the drastically changed conditions that the disease brings about. The key message from this novel is that, although dementia can make life



uncomfortable at first, it is possible to reestablish it with the help of family members and friends. Nana does not engage in solitary combat. Everyone, including the servants and children, begins to comprehend his condition; they acknowledge the truth of his illnesses and dysfunction. Thanks to the family's (all children) acceptance and unwavering love.

They all fight for Nana, and the battle waged by the twins to check Nana's memory is no less heroic. As Nana loses the drive to do anything, the grim reality of depression becomes palpable. Even the most basic tasks like sleeping, walking and speaking require herculean efforts on his part. One of the psychological symptoms of dementia is 'apathy', and "it is characterised with core features of diminished motivation, diminished initiative and interest, and blunting of emotions" (Hantke et al.). Nana loses his memory, sometimes looks blank, and goes into a downward spiral. The descent into the abyss is described in vivid detail. The twins help Nana to memorise every detail and express, "Nana's memories is totally kachara today. He didn't remember anything this morning. Who we were, we were, what seven minus from a hundred is....He keeps saying Shabby Aunt, shabby aunt, bas!" (Lal169).

As the novel progresses, the humour gives way to a grave exploration of the disease called dementia. Rarely does one come across a work that humorously and realistically depicts dementia and ageing while exposing society's flaws and demonstrating how normalcy is only a facade kept up by denial, deception, and deft fabrication. The book draws one in with its psychological depth and humour. It depicts the dynamics of dyads and the inner struggle of the children in the close-knit world of Mahaparatpur, which can be both incredibly supportive and maddeningly intrusive.

Practising empathy can foster a more encouraging and inclusive atmosphere in many facets of one's life. Mama develops empathy towards the novel's ending by actively listening and keeping an open mind. She goes beyond her bitter childhood experiences to comprehend those of her children, fostering a more welcoming atmosphere. She also recognises the children's perspective and how acceptance has helped them deal with Nana's dementia. Towards the novel's end, Mama hugs the girls, breaking the wall of anger and hostility; this time with love and warmth.

### **Conclusion:**

The Epilogue ends with reiterating the life-saving anthem of Nana, "dam lagake haisha," and leaving an indelible impression, underscoring the enduring relevance of

attachment theory in understanding human behaviour and relationships. The relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren and parents and their children can significantly impact the development of attachment styles. Conversely, if the relationship with parents is distant or inconsistent, it can potentially impact a child's attachment style, leading to feelings of insecurity or ambivalence. Parents can contribute to their children's healthy emotional growth and well-being by fostering, nurturing, and supportive relationships.

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