



Single Parenthood and Social Inclusion in Nick Hornby's *About a Boy*: A Study through the Lens of Attachment Theory

Fathi Muthu Zuhara M

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Ram Nallamani Yadava College of Arts and Science, Tenkasi
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu*



Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL3-Nov25-ES-055

Subject: English

Received : 09.08.2025

Accepted : 18.08.2025

Published : 27.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si3.25.Nov055

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Parenting and a child's early attachment style with their parents play a key role in shaping their self-image, identity, thinking process, attitude, and way of handling their relationships and life. Much like the roots of a tree, it serves as the foundation that ultimately shapes their mindset and life. This paper explains how a child's attachment to their parents plays a crucial role in their life. It psychoanalyses the protagonist Marcus, in the novel 'About a Boy' by Nick Hornby, by employing the Theory of Attachment by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. It articulates Marcus's drastic change from exhibiting the signs of anxious attachment when he was raised by his depressed single mother, Fiona, resulting his social exclusion, to a more mature and confident one when he forms a secure bond with Will, which ultimately enabled greater social inclusion and emotional growth.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, attachment style, parenting, social inclusion, depression, emotional growth, self-image.

Nick Peter John Hornby is a British writer who is best known for his memoir *Fever Pitch* (1992) and novels *A Long Way Down* (2005) and *High Fidelity* (1995). The novel *About a Boy* (1998) presents the emotional and social struggle of a twelve-year-old boy named Marcus, who is being brought up by a depressed single mother, Fiona.

For a child, their entire world comprises of two: first, it is their home, and then it is their school. That is, parents and friends. A child's perspective about

the world is shaped by their home environment, and their attitude in handling life and maintaining relationships with others depends entirely on the type of attachment style they have with their parents.

The Theory of Attachment is a joint work by the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby and the American-Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth in 1958. This attachment theory describes the crucial role it plays in the development of a child's psyche based on the emotional and physical support that is



provided by the caregivers in early childhood. Initially, this theory is of three types:

- Secure attachment
- Anxious attachment
- Avoidant attachment

The fourth type was introduced in 1986 as Disorganised or Disoriented attachment by the American psychologist Mary Main and Judith Solomon.

A child with secure attachment had caregivers who were consistent in fulfilling his physical or emotional needs. As a result, he has a positive self-image and maturely handles problems. On the other hand, a child with an anxious attachment style had inconsistent responsiveness from his caregivers, which led to heightened anxiety and uncertainty in relationships. This makes him to view himself as unworthy of love and others as unreliable. An avoidant attachment results from caregivers who are emotionally unavailable or dismissive of the child's needs. It fosters a sense of self-reliance and emotional suppression. Lastly, disorganized attachment style, this style often results from trauma or inconsistent caregiving. Children with this attachment style experience caregivers as both a source of comfort and fear. This style creates a fragmented sense of self and unpredictable expectations of others in the child's mind.

Marcus was subjected to experience two worlds: one before his parents' separation and the one after it. At the beginning of the novel itself, the author has clearly portrayed his situation. He has to witness his mother's breakup, the heated argument with her new boyfriend and her severe depression, without having the maturity to comprehend the subcontext, Marcus becomes emotionally confused. He has no caregiver other than his emotionally unstable mother, and when she herself is emotionally overwhelmed, young Marcus is forced to take care of himself as well as his mother. As a result, his emotional and physical needs are not often met, and thus, he receives inconsistent caregiving, the main cause for the formation of anxious attachment style. Being a child himself with zero knowledge of the world, isolated, he tried his best to protect his mother from

being hurt or worried even more. In this process, he started to lose his identity and authenticity, and began to show interest in the likes of his mother, though he disliked them. This can be evident in his interest in classical music, as that is his mother's favourite. Witnessing Fiona's severe depression and suicide attempt made Marcus to lose trust in her. He felt fear of abandonment, a sign of anxious attachment style, as he had no one to rely on except her. This is evident in the scene where Marcus tries his best to make Will marry Fiona, believing that, even though one died, he would have one more to rely on. Instead of experiencing security, love, and protection under his mother's care, Marcus became the source of it. Instead of receiving the comfort and care, he becomes the caregiver. This made him feel isolated in the world. He is constantly anxious and shy as he lacks secure emotional base. In the first half of the novel, Marcus is in constant search for belonging. He is socially excluded as he is not aware of the current trend of children's interest to fit into their group. So, he is often bullied at school. But, he doesn't dare to disclose it to his mother as he doesn't want to burden her with more worry. Thus, adopting the preferences of elders and trying to act like an adult to safeguard his mother made him look different and strange. He understood that his strangeness made him stand out and become an outcast. Without having peace both at home and school, Marcus is always anxious. It is well pictured in this novel where he often sings unconsciously whenever he feels nervous. Thus, this shows that Marcus, when he is under the care of Fiona, experienced anxious attachment style.

The character Will, on the other hand, is completely contradictory to Fiona. He is cool, confident, and well off. Marcus's distrust of others began to fade with Will's company. In the scenario where Marcus accidentally killed a Duck in a park, Will is the first person who took a stand for him. His instant protection over Marcus's safety, allowed him to feel a safer zone, to open up his mind and to express all his bottled emotions and feelings. Gradually, Marcus began to have a bond with Will. In spite of knowing Will's disinterest in him, Marcus



willingly opened up to Will, expressing his emotional vulnerability. He allowed his facade of being a strong kid to fall in front of Will, because he felt safety, care, and genuine love from him. This ensures him of the idea that he is having a strong backup, a home where he can run back to when he feels emotionally threatened. Will understood Marcus in ways Fiona couldn't. This is illustrated in the scene of giving a Christmas present. She had gifted a sheet of music to play piano, a hobby, which he abandoned ages ago. Will helped Marcus in all the way, including teaching him the current trends and about love in a way a teenager could understand. Moreover, in all the circumstances, Will offered guidance and new insights to Marcus instead of blaming or pointing out his flaws. Thus, having a steady figure to hold him up whenever he falls, Marcus became confident, and more mature.

Thus, it clearly shows that a child's early attachment style with his parents shapes his mindset, attitude, and self-image. With Fiona, Marcus experienced anxious attachment style, and so he was always shy, anxious, and socially excluded. But, with Will, Marcus experienced secure attachment style, so he became confident, mature and developed a positive self-image. Hence, this paper asserts that a child raised by an emotionally unstable single parent

often mirrors that instability, developing insecure attachments that lead to emotional vulnerability and social exclusion – underscoring the need for consistent emotional and physical support to foster secure attachment and healthy development.

Works Cited

Primary Source

1. "About a Boy by Nick Hornby Plot Summary | LitCharts." LitCharts, share.google/H3rYdyaQuYNXfUz5t.

Secondary Sources

1. Contributors to Wikimedia projects. "Nick Hornby." Wikipedia, 4 July 2025, share.google/2shmrvgVH5uFWRBKd.
2. Understanding the 4 Attachment Styles| Relational Psych. Share.google/slrET1UOTsLZXmly9.
3. Team. "Disorganized Attachment Style: Everything You Need to Know." Attachment Project, 3 June 2025, www.attachmentproject.com/blog/disorganized-attachment.
4. Zuhara, Fathi Muthu. "Psychoanalysis in Surfacing By Margaret Atwood." Cape Comorin International Journal, vol. V, no. II, July 2023, capecomorinjournal.org.in/Acharya_IJELS_Curr entissuse-view?Id=20.