

Traumatic Bonding and Intermittent Reinforcement in Anita Brookner's *Providence*

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This paper examines the role of traumatic bonding in Anita Brookner's novel *Providence*. Through the perspective of traumatic bonding theory, this paper explores the true nature of the relationship between Kitty Maule and Maurice Bishop. The paper analyzes the intermittent cycles of affection and neglect that characterize their interactions, highlighting how Bishop's emotional detachment and sporadic gestures of warmth create a power imbalance that traps Kitty in a cycle of idealization and disillusionment. Drawing on the work of Dutton and Painter (1981) on traumatic bonding, the paper explores how Kitty's emotional dependence on Maurice mirrors the patterns found in emotionally abusive relationships, revealing how the traumatic bond between Kitty and Bishop shapes her journey toward self-growth.

Keywords: traumatic bonding, Anita Brookner, intermittent reinforcement, power imbalance

Introduction

Anita Brookner occupies a distinct position in British literature, known for her profound psychological insights and her ability to bridge the domains of art scholarship and fiction. Her fiction is distinguished by its penetrating psychological monologue, focusing on the interior lives of intellectually astute yet emotionally isolated women. Brookner's protagonists, often described as "lonely sensitive women betrayed by their unrealistic notions of love and marriage," navigate a world where their intelligence and sensitivity are perpetually at odds with a sense of dissatisfaction and an emotional stasis that precludes meaningful change.

With elegant and precise prose, *Providence* details a timid woman's unsuccessful journey to build a new life for herself. As the granddaughter of French-Russian immigrants and daughter of a late English father, Kitty Maule, 29 years old, hides her French heritage, and obsessively pursues assimilation into English society. Her obsession with Maurice Bishop—a dashing but emotionally elusive colleague—mixed her personal desire with her quest for cultural validation, "the ideal England she longed to inhabit". Her relentless internal monologues reveal paralyzing self-doubt, while Bishop's intermittent warmth and withdrawal enact cycles of hope and despair. The ending—where Bishop abandons Kitty for her student left Kitty's long-term delusion crushed.

Literature Review and Research Methodology

Scholars have analyzed *Providence*, shedding light on the exploration of exile, dislocation, and self-deception and existential alienation, focusing on the psychological complexity of Kitty Maule. Robert Hosmer Jr. (1993) identifies Kitty's experience of exile, arguing that her cultural hybridity and separation from her French heritage create a perpetual longing for a permanent home and stable self-identity. Kitty's oscillation between London and Dulwich symbolizes this existential wandering. Henrik Specht (2001) deepens this analysis by examining Kitty's moral self-deception. He argues that Kitty's misreading of both Bishop and Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* is emotional rather than intellectual, as she consistently overlooks Bishop's duplicity and idealizes him to avoid confronting painful truths about her relationship with Bishop.

Wang Shouren (2003) argues that in *Providence*, Anita Brookner portrays the intellectual woman's profound dislocation within a patriarchal society through Kitty Maule's self-deceptive pursuit of romantic fulfillment. The novel deconstructs traditional romantic narratives, revealing how professional women remain emotionally vulnerable and socially marginalized. Brookner uses Kitty's unrequited love and ultimate disillusionment to critique the constraints of gender expectations and the illusion of autonomy in personal relationships. Peta Mayer (2021) introduces an intertextual and aesthetic reading, positioning Brookner's use of *Adolphe* to authors like Jane Austen as key rhetorical strategies.

Despite existing analyses, there is a notable absence of studies that explicitly apply traumatic bonding theory to the relationship between Kitty and Bishop. This paper will synthesize a textual analysis with this theoretical framework. By examining the narrative through this specific lens, this study aims to illuminate the true nature of their relationship, reframing it as a form of traumatic bonding rather than a conventional romantic attachment. This paper employs a methodology that integrates theoretical analysis with close textual interpretation. The primary theoretical framework utilized is traumatic bonding theory, which is applied to analyze the traits, behaviors, and cognitive patterns of the characters. A close reading of the novel *Providence* is performed to identify key behavioral and emotional patterns within the characters' dialogues and actions, which are then interpreted through the lens of this specific theoretical framework.

Traumatic Bonding Theory

Dutton and Painter (1981) have proposed a theory of "traumatic bonding," whereby powerful emotional attachments are seen to develop from two features of abusive relationships: power imbalances and intermittent reinforcement. Traumatic bonding refers to the strong emotional attachment that develop between an individual and an abuser in an unhealthy, manipulative, or abusive relationship. In *Providence*, the relationship between Kitty and Bishop is an example of traumatic bonding. Their bond can be analyzed on several levels, including Kitty Maule's idealization of Maurice Bishop as the representation of England, which stands for power imbalance between them; and the intermittency of warmth and neglect for Bishop treating Kitty.

Dutton and Painter (1981) pointed out that there are two common structural features of traumatic bonding. The first feature is the existence of a power imbalance, wherein the maltreated person perceives him or herself to be subjugated to, or dominated by the other. The second is the intermittent nature of the abuse. In *Providence*, the power dynamics between Kitty and Bishop are imbalanced. Bishop represents an embodiment of English identity and social status to which Kitty, who is of mixed heritage and raised by her French grandparents,

desperately seeks to belong. Furthermore, their relationship is marked by a divergence in their spiritual beliefs: Bishop's profound faith contrasts with Kitty's non-belief and daily superstitions. This inherent power differential is compounded by Bishop's intermittent pattern of warmth and neglect toward Kitty.

The Intermittency of Warmth and Neglect between Kitty and Maurice

According to Dutton and Painter (1981), a key feature of traumatic bonding is the role of intermittent reinforcement, where the victim experiences brief moments of affection or connection, followed by long periods of neglect or indifference. In behavioral psychology, intermittent reinforcement refers to a schedule of reinforcement in which a response is reinforced only some of the time. This schedule is known for creating powerful and enduring behaviors that are highly resistant to extinction.

To analyze this cycle in *Providence*, it would be helpful to examine Maurice's sporadic emotional availability towards Kitty, alternating between affection and neglect and indifference, which profoundly impacts her sense of self-esteem and emotional independence. In the novel, Bishop's interactions with Kitty are elusive with ambiguity. Kitty describes Bishop as "... his vague, pleasant and somehow mysterious smile closed her out, while closing in something highly significant, something foreign to her" (Brookner, 1982, p. 26). Occasionally, he seems to show concern for her, offering her temporary moments of intimacy and understanding, but these are not consistent. He is often emotionally withdrawn, and there is an ambiguity in his treatment towards Kitty—he does not fully engage with her, and he maintains control over her emotions by intermittently providing small tokens of affection such as occasional dinner with kitty; some intimate chat with her and sending a greeting card from France. This push-pull dynamic keeps Kitty confused but attached to him with unrealistic fantasy.

The concept of intermittent reinforcement is a pivotal factor in understanding the persistence of Kitty's emotional attachment to Bishop. The unpredictable nature of receiving sporadic affection from Bishop prevents the extinction of her hope for a consistent emotional connection. This dynamic compels Kitty to remain in the relationship and pursue Bishop, notwithstanding the significant emotional neglect she endures. She harbors illusion for Bishop due to his ambiguity and never state the truth of their relationship which lured kitty to stay in the relationship. She regards that day when she first saw him as "the best moment of her life" (Brookner, 1982, p. 25). Bishop, "calls Kitty 'my dear,' Kitty catalogues it like a data bank. Darling. My dear. Kitty registered this, their usual exchange of endearments. She registered it every time" (Brookner, 1982, p. 54).

She becomes submissive, typing his notes and feeding him, knowing that she is 'useful' though not 'indispensable' to him, yet relishing opportunities to create a home for him, for them both, in her flat. Her fondest desire is "to be at one with him" (Brookner, 1982, p. 35). Kitty's yearning for validation, fueled by a deep-seated desire to be "worthy" of Bishop's affection, manifests in behaviors that paradoxically provoke his withdrawal. Her silent supplication and palpable emotional need create a palpable tension, which, in turn, triggers his instinctive avoidance. "Maurice, thought Kitty, will you not look in my direction? I am only here for your sake." Seeing him laughing with Professor Gault, "a tiny weary man," she reacts only with "I wish he would look at me like that" (Brookner, 1982, p. 43). Her main preoccupation was whether Maurice would ask her to go to France with him, because "She would be useful, she knew, could do all the boring things, while he got on with driving the car and getting from one place to another and being inspired by what he saw" (Brookner, 1982, p. 22).

A key feature of traumatic bonding is the cyclical pattern of hope and disillusionment experienced by the individual. Kitty's persistent hope for emotional reciprocity from Bishop remains, despite a consistent lack of evidence supporting such a possibility. Her emotional vulnerability and desire for connection perpetuate this cycle, as she continually re-engages with the hope of a deeper relationship, only to be repeatedly disappointed. This process is reinforced by a cognitive distortion where even the most minimal gestures from Bishop—such as a kind word or a brief glance—are magnified, fueling the belief that a more profound connection is attainable. The recurrent cycle of idealization and disillusionment within the relationship with Bishop perpetuates Kitty's emotional distress, leaving her in a perpetual state of instability and confusion. This cycle is a cornerstone of traumatic bonding, as Kitty's emotional attachment is maintained by both her unrealistic expectations and the minimal, intermittent emotional rewards she receives, which serve to reinforce her hope.

Power Imbalance between Kitty and Bishop

Dutton and Painter (1981) argued that another fact facilitates forming traumatic bonding is the existence of a power imbalance, wherein the maltreated person perceives him or herself to be subjugated to, or dominated by, the other. Attachment to a person or group larger or stronger than the self can increase feelings of personal power (Lion, 1977) but can also create a microcosm in which the subordinate individual feels powerless. The power imbalance between Kitty and Bishop moves forward the traumatic bonding between them.

When the book opens, the author introduces Kitty as "Kitty Maule is difficult to place" (Brookner, 1982, p. 1). As the daughter of a migrant family, she experiences a sense of social displacement and struggles to integrate into the mainstream society of England. Conversely, Bishop is a native Englishman from an upper-class background, a distinguished professor, and rumored to be a future Oxford don. Kitty perceives Bishop as a figure who represents an escape from her internal insecurities. She comes to believe that winning Bishop's affection is synonymous with her successful assimilation into English society, a perception that is evident in the dialogue that follows. "I function well on one sphere only, but all the others must be thought through, every day. Perhaps I will graft myself onto something native here, make a unity somehow. I can learn. I can understand" (Brookner, 1982, p. 51).

She idealizes him, seeing him as "the unfettered man, the mythic hero, the deliverer" (Brookner, 1982, p. 71). Kitty realized her subjugation to Bishop and understands that she must make a change to her life as she said "I must grow up, she thought. I must stop being so humble. I can make decisions and initiate actions like anyone else. ... If I want to do something I do not have to wait for permission. ... But I must act, she thought" (Brookner, 1982, p. 72). Her fault of pursuing growth is mistakenly placed on pursuing Bishop rather than focusing on herself.

The power between Kitty and Bishop is characterized by a significant imbalance. Bishop maintains an emotionally distant and indifferent posture toward Kitty's affections, while she is consistently relegated to the position of seeking his approval. This asymmetrical relationship fosters a profound sense of helplessness and powerlessness in Kitty, as her emotional state becomes contingent upon someone who cannot provide a stable foundation of support. Furthermore, Kitty's sense of self-worth becomes inextricably linked to her perception of Bishop. She internalizes the belief that his affection is a commodity to be earned, thereby tying her value to the relationship's success. This distorted sense of self-worth makes it difficult for her to assert her needs or

recognize the emotionally detrimental nature of the bond. Consequently, she becomes trapped in a perpetual cycle of seeking validation from an individual who is incapable of providing it. She describes Bishop as someone "finer, large, better than she was, his insights nobler, his whole fabric superior" (Brookner, 1982, p. 12).

The power imbalance between Kitty and Bishop was also demonstrated in the following monologues of Kitty when she and Bishop were visiting a cathedral in French. She unconsciously compares their relationship as Kings and beggar maids. "Although kings have married beggar maids and peers' daughters eloped with garage mechanics, the fact that gossip columnists get so excited when this happens stresses both the news value and the rarity of such an event" (Brookner, 1982, p. 159). She believes that "the key to Maurice was his belief in the divine will"—but "in her own soul she found nothing" (Brookner, 1982, p. 27). Kitty realized her the imbalance power dynamics between her and Bishop. She realized "I want to be totally unreasonable, totally unfair, very demanding, and very beautiful..... I want to be half of a recognized couple. I want a future away from this place. I want Maurice" (Brookner, 1982, pp. 59-60).

Kitty viewed Bishop as a savior to her life. He will save her from her unbearable life and solitude. "Maurice's choice would be spared the humiliations that lie in wait for the unclaimed woman. ... Ah! thought Kitty with anguish, the white wedding, the flowers. How can it be me? How could it be me?" (Brookner, 1982, p. 71). She is always alarmed at his silences, for it is then that he is "locked up in his private world, allowing her no access" (Brookner, 1982, p. 55). She imagines that at these times, Maurice is morally occupied with purity, grandeur, the absolute.

Conclusion

The dynamic between Kitty and Bishop provides a powerful examination of traumatic bonding. Kitty's emotional dependency on Bishop, in the face of his indifference, and the intermittent reinforcement she receives in their interactions, reflect the pattern of a traumatic bond. This imbalanced power dynamic keeps Kitty bound to a relationship that is unfulfilling and detrimental. Her persistent pursuit of a future with Bishop, despite his emotional detachment, exemplifies this struggle. Her inability to break free from the cycle of hope and disillusionment impedes her emotional independence. Despite her romantic fantasy ultimately failing, the text details Kitty's sustained process of self-exploration. This journey leads to a critical awareness of her own passivity and a burgeoning desire to assert control over her life. This realization represents a pivotal moment of character transformation, signifying her shift toward the possibility of a more independent future.

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