



Unyielding Bonds: The Role of Motherhood in Jaycee Dugard's Survival Narrative *A Stolen Life*

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of single motherhood in A Stolen Life by Jaycee Dugard, framing motherhood as an act of survival, resilience, and reclamation of agency. Dugard's memoir, while narrating the trauma of abduction and captivity, simultaneously foregrounds the transformative power of maternal identity. Motherhood becomes not merely a biological role but a means of endurance, where nurturing her children enables Dugard to resist dehumanization and sustain her will to live. The study examines how the text portrays single motherhood under conditions of extreme constraint, redefining it as both a burden and a source of empowerment. Through the lens of survival, the paper argues that Dugard's narrative shifts the discourse on motherhood from conventional domestic ideals to a radical act of self-preservation and resilience against systemic violence. Ultimately, Dugard's memoir reframes single motherhood as a narrative of strength, where survival is inseparable from maternal responsibility. The memoir displaces conventional depictions of motherhood as domestic sanctuary, instead portraying it as a crucible of endurance where love becomes indistinguishable from survival. In this way, Dugard's testimony situates single motherhood within the broader discourse of trauma and feminist life-writing, foregrounding maternal agency as a transformative force that resists erasure. Ultimately, A Stolen Life renders motherhood not as a passive condition but as a radical act of survival that binds memory, identity, and the will to live. This piece of work brings the soothing, comforting and the unsettling side of motherhood through three strands. The first strand bespeaks the motherhood as survival the second strand bespeaks the paradox of motherhood, and the third strand bespeaks the burden of motherhood in captivity.

Keywords: motherhood, survival, trauma, captivity, resilience, empowerment

Motherhood has long been represented in literature and life writing as a space of care, sacrifice, and continuity. Yet in contexts of trauma and captivity, it assumes a deeper dimension becoming not only a role but a strategy of survival. Jaycee Dugard's memoir *A Stolen Life* (2011) offers a powerful testimony to this dynamic, where the experience of single motherhood is inextricably bound to resilience and the will to endure under oppressive circumstances. Abducted at the age of eleven and held in captivity for eighteen

years, Dugard narrates how becoming a mother in isolation and coercion paradoxically provided her with strength, purpose, and the motivation to resist psychological annihilation. This study situates Dugard's narrative within the broader discourse of motherhood, trauma, and survival, examining how maternal responsibility is redefined in the absence of social and familial support. Unlike conventional depictions of motherhood within stable domestic settings, Dugard's memoir highlights a radical form



of maternal agency where nurturing her children was not merely an obligation but a lifeline anchoring her humanity. Through this lens, motherhood emerges as both burden and empowerment, revealing its capacity to transform suffering into endurance and silence into testimony. By reading *A Stolen Life* as a narrative of survival through motherhood, the paper underscores the intersection of trauma, gender, and resilience, and rethinks single motherhood as a site of both vulnerability and strength.

Dugard openly acknowledges that the presence of her daughters gave her the will to endure captivity. Reflecting on her maternal bond, she notes, "I live for them. They are the reason I am still here" (*A Stolen Life*, 172). This powerful declaration highlights how motherhood, despite its traumatic origins, transformed into a source of resilience. While captivity isolated Dugard from family and society, her relationship with her daughters provided the emotional connection she needed to resist despair. Judith Herman suggests that individuals who have endured prolonged abuse often create new meanings and form attachments that help them survive and cope with their traumatic experiences.

In her work, Herman emphasizes that survivors of chronic trauma, such as ongoing abuse, frequently undergo profound changes in their sense of identity and relationships. These adaptations can be seen as efforts to find meaning and connection in the aftermath of sustained trauma. Dugard's motherhood exemplifies this adaptive capacity, showing how maternal love can become a life-sustaining force. Motherhood as burden at the same time, Dugard's narrative does not romanticize her maternal role. Raising two children in captivity without medical care, social support, or freedom was an immense burden. Dugard vividly recounts living under a constant sense of dread juggling the fear of her captor's unpredictable behaviour while striving to safeguard her daughters and wrestling with the scars of her own trauma. Dugard's account exposes the compounded pressures of single motherhood, especially when motherhood is coerced and unsupported. Despite the hardships, Dugard's role as a mother also allowed her to reclaim a sense of agency. Captivity stripped her of freedom and autonomy, but in nurturing her children she regained

some measure of control. Through caregiving, she made daily choices that mattered, even in an environment dominated by her abuser. Dori Laub's notion of survival through relational bonds resonates here: "The act of bearing witness to oneself through others is the essential aspect of surviving trauma" (Laub 85). By witnessing herself in her daughters, Dugard found a renewed sense of identity and purpose.

In her memoir *A Stolen Life* (2011), Jaycee Dugard recounts the eighteen years she spent in captivity after being abducted at the age of eleven by Phillip and Nancy Garrido. While her narrative confronts readers with the brutality of sexual violence, captivity, and psychological control, an equally striking dimension of her memoir is the theme of single motherhood. Dugard gave birth to her first daughter at fourteen and her second at seventeen, both conceived through rape. Yet, despite the traumatic circumstances, motherhood emerges as the central force that sustains her will to live. Through her daughters, Dugard finds purpose, identity, and resilience, embodying the paradox of motherhood as both a reminder of trauma and a source of empowerment.

This paper examines the theme of single motherhood in Jaycee Dugard's memoir *A Stolen Life* (2011), highlighting its dual role as both a burden and a source of resilience. Abducted at eleven and forced into motherhood through repeated sexual violence, Dugard narrates how raising her two daughters became her primary means of survival during eighteen years of captivity. While her maternal role was shaped by coercion and isolation, it offered her purpose, identity, and agency in otherwise dehumanizing conditions. This analysis situates Dugard's experience within feminist and trauma theory, particularly Judith Herman's framework of resilience and Adrienne Rich's critique of institutional motherhood. Dugard's memoir demonstrates that single motherhood, though born of violence, functions as a site of empowerment and healing. Her testimony challenges conventional perceptions of motherhood and emphasizes the need to recognize maternal resilience as a powerful survival strategy in trauma narratives.

Motherhood as a Beacon of Survival renders out Dugard repeatedly emphasizing that her daughters



were her primary source of strength during captivity. She reflects, "I live for them. They are the reason I am still here" (*A Stolen Life*, 172). This statement encapsulates how maternal love transformed into a life-preserving force. Trauma scholars observe that individuals subjected to prolonged abuse often discover new sources of meaning, inner strengths, beliefs, or perspectives. These emergent sources help them bear circumstances that would otherwise feel unbearable. Such meaning-making equips survivors to endure and persevere through severe, sustained trauma. For Dugard, her children became this meaning. Her maternal role gave her life structure and direction. In an environment stripped of autonomy, Dugard found purpose in feeding, teaching, and comforting her daughters. While Garrido's abuse and surveillance defined her existence, her relationship with her children created a private world of care that resisted his control. Thus, motherhood operated as an act of defiance, an insistence that life could still be nurtured within captivity.

The paradox of motherhood is the second defining attribute to hold this piece of work in bringing the paradoxical elements of motherhood. Perhaps the most poignant aspect of Dugard's memoir is the paradoxical nature of her motherhood. On one hand, her daughters embodied the violence inflicted upon her. On the other hand, they were her reason to endure. Dugard acknowledges this tension, describing her daughters as both "the hardest and the best part of her captivity" (203). This duality highlights the complexity of maternal identity under trauma: it is not purely empowering or oppressive but a combination of both. By embracing this paradox, Dugard resists simplistic representations of motherhood. Her story challenges the cultural idealization of mothers as either self-sacrificing figures or tragic victims. Instead, she presents motherhood as a lived reality marked by contradiction, resilience, and profound emotional depth.

Dugard's role as a mother is central. Her daughters become her purpose, motivation, and a way to reclaim identity. Motherhood serves as both burden and empowerment. In her memoir *A Stolen Life* (2011), Jaycee Dugard recounts the eighteen years she spent in captivity after being abducted at the age of eleven by Phillip and Nancy Garrido. While

her narrative confronts readers with the brutality of sexual violence, captivity, and psychological control, an equally striking dimension of her memoir is the theme of single motherhood. Dugard gave birth to her first daughter at fourteen and her second at seventeen, both conceived through rape. Yet, despite the traumatic circumstances, as Judith Herman notes, survivors of long-term captivity "develop the capacity to find meaning in the midst of suffering" (Herman 96). For Dugard, that meaning was found in raising her children, who provided her with the strength to persist when she might otherwise have given up. The Burden of Single Motherhood in Captivity Unlike traditional narratives of motherhood, Dugard's experience was shaped by isolation and control. She was forced to raise her daughters without external support, medical care, or social connection, making her situation uniquely burdensome. Dugard reflects on the struggle of shielding her children from Garrido's unpredictable and violent outbursts. She describes feeling a relentless pressure to protect them, even when it endangered her own well-being.

This protective instinct came at a personal cost, forcing her to put their safety above her own recovery. Her dual role as survivor and protector illustrates the compounded pressures of single motherhood in captivity. Feminist scholar Adrienne Rich's notion of "the institution of motherhood" as both oppressive and empowering resonates here, while Dugard's motherhood was imposed upon her through violence, it simultaneously became a site of resistance and strength. Reclaiming Identity through Maternal Agency Motherhood also functioned as a means of reclaiming Dugard's stolen self. Having lost her childhood and autonomy to her captor, Dugard regained a sense of agency through caregiving. Her maternal role allowed her to exercise choice and responsibility, however limited, in a situation where she had little control over her own body. In this way, Dugard embodies what trauma theorist Dori Laub describes as "the imperative to survive through relation" (Laub 85). By forming a protective and nurturing bond with her daughters, she constructed a new identity that transcended victimhood. Her motherhood, though forced, became the foundation upon which she rebuilt her selfhood after her eventual rescue. Social Implications of



Dugard's Story Dugard's narrative also highlights the broader social implications of single motherhood in contexts of sexual violence. Her story disrupts conventional cultural understandings of motherhood as solely celebratory, showing instead its complex entanglement with trauma, isolation, and resilience. Dugard's testimony urges society to rethink how survivors who become mothers through abuse are perceived and supported. Too often, their maternal roles are stigmatized or silenced; however, as Dugard's memoir demonstrates, single motherhood in such contexts must be recognized as a profound act of survival. Jaycee Dugard's *A Stolen Life* underscores the paradoxical nature of single motherhood in captivity. While her daughters were a daily reminder of her trauma, they also became the very reason she survived. Motherhood provided Dugard with purpose, agency, and resilience, transforming her victimhood into a role that gave her life meaning even in the darkest conditions. By foregrounding this theme, Dugard's memoir not only deepens our understanding of trauma narratives but also calls for broader recognition of single motherhood as an act of courage, strength, and survival.

Burden of motherhood is the third entity that depicts motherhood as a source of strength and also stresses its burdens in captivity. Unlike women who mother within communities, Dugard had no access to medical care, emotional support, or social resources. She shouldered the immense responsibility of protecting her children from Garrido's instability and abuse. Dugard recalls the constant anxiety of ensuring her daughters' safety, saying she "had to stay strong so they wouldn't see how scared I was" (Dugard 188). Dugard's story magnifies this reality to an extreme. However, Dugard does not present motherhood in idealized terms. Raising children in confinement was fraught with fear, anxiety, and exhaustion. She lacked medical care, social support, and freedom of choice, shouldering the immense responsibility of protecting her daughters from Garrido's unpredictable behaviour. Dugard recalls how she hid her fear from her daughters, writing, "I had to stay strong so they wouldn't see how scared I was" (188). This reflects the double weight of her maternal role: surviving her own trauma while

simultaneously ensuring her children's safety. Dugard's account magnifies this reality; she became a single mother in the most hostile circumstances imaginable. Her motherhood is not a story of societal support but of solitary struggle.

In *A Stolen Life*, motherhood operates as a paradoxical theme: it is both a reminder of the violence inflicted upon Dugard and the reason she survived it. Her daughters became a light in her captivity, transforming her role from powerless victim to resilient mother. By foregrounding the theme of motherhood, Dugard complicates conventional narratives of trauma, illustrating how even in situations of coercion and confinement, maternal instinct can function as a profound site of strength and agency. Motherhood in *A Stolen Life* Jaycee Dugard's *A Stolen Life* (2011) is often read as a testimony of captivity and resilience, but at its heart lies the complex theme of motherhood. Abducted at eleven years old and subjected to sexual violence by Phillip Garrido, Dugard became a mother at fourteen and again at seventeen. Her two daughters were conceived under coercion, yet they became her sole reason for survival and her deepest emotional anchor. Dugard's portrayal of motherhood moves beyond sentimentality; it highlights both the struggles of raising children in captivity and the empowerment she derived from her maternal role.

Motherhood in *A Stolen Life* is not a simple narrative of joy or despair; it is a layered theme that reveals both the burdens and blessings of maternal identity under coercion. Dugard's daughters gave her strength to survive, even as their existence constantly reminded her of the violence that produced them. By writing about her motherhood, Dugard reclaims agency over her story and demonstrates how maternal instinct can transform captivity into a site of survival. Her testimony challenges conventional depictions of motherhood, urging readers to recognize it as a complex, paradoxical, and deeply empowering force in the face of trauma.

Motherhood in Jaycee Dugard's *A Stolen Life* emerges as a central theme that redefines survival in captivity. Forced into motherhood through violence, Dugard nevertheless transformed her maternal role into a source of strength, a burden she carried



with courage, and a space for reclaiming agency. Her daughters became the foundation upon which she resisted despair and reconstructed identity. By foregrounding the paradox of maternal love, Dugard complicates traditional understandings of motherhood and trauma, showing how maternal instinct can simultaneously embody suffering and hope. Her testimony underscores the need to recognize single motherhood not only as a personal struggle but also as a powerful survival strategy in narratives of trauma. In *A Stolen Life*, motherhood is not an incidental detail of Dugard's captivity it is the very heart of her survival.

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