



Sacred Attachment between Young Adult Girl and Her Maternal Grandmother: A Study of Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi*

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Abstract

Family attachment is the introductory need for every existent, the attachment among the family members shape the family bonds which bring the relationship more comfortable and everlasting. According to the young adult girls, they feel more attached to their parents as well as their maternal relatives. Though the young adult girls being over protected by the elders, they frequently feel more comfortable with generational gap relatives such as aunts, grandmothers and relatives. Despite the pressures of intergenerational gap, granddaughters and maternal grandmothers have pure attachment and produce emotional bonds.

The study emphasizes on the relationship between the maternal grandmother and granddaughter in Melina Marchetta's debut young adult novel, *Looking for Alibrandi*. The protagonist Josephine Alibrandi had a profound emotional attachment with her maternal grandmother Katia Alibrandi. Though they have argued over ridiculous matters, still Josephine was emotionally connected with Katia. Their difference of opinions never weakened their relationship, yet it strengthened their emotional bond. Compared to parents, grandparents also have a deeper emotional connection with their young adult school going children. Thus the maternal grandparents act as second parents to their grandchildren and provide needful care.

Keywords: attachment, family dynamics, grandmother, granddaughter, single mother, young adult and relationship issues

“Families are the compass that guide us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter.” (Brad Henry). Family refers to the emotional circle of members who can provide emotional support to each other. Attachment with the family members may vary from person to person and individuals are primarily attached to their maternal relatives. Grandparents play a crucial role in

their grandchildren's life. Though the generational gap distanced grandparents from their grandchildren, excessive care, emotional connection, valuable source of information about the family origin and grandparents' efforts to make contact with the grandchildren strengthen the attachment despite disagreements.



Maternal grandmother and granddaughter relationship is one of the significant forms of relationship which nurtures granddaughter's identity. This relationship is recognised as important for emotional security and intergenerational continuity within the family system. Adolescent young girls always quest for their individual identity and independence rather than familial identity. In contrast grandparents always stick to the familial identity and are thinking it would be mandatory for every individual. Though they are willing to adapt to the new updated lifestyle, they still hold the traditional and cultural values.

From the perspective of the family attachment theme, young people usually establish strong emotional bonds not only with their parents but also with close members of the maternal family. In families, older relatives, especially grandmothers, play a significant role in the emotional development of adolescents. Grandparents' life experience, empathy and presence allow them to offer guidance that differs from parental guidance. In households headed by single mothers, this intergenerational support network can become especially important. Within these contexts, maternal grandmothers may assume an influential caregiving role, providing stability, advice and emotional comfort throughout a child's upbringing.

The study examines the sacred attachment between a grandmother and her granddaughter in the young adult novel *Looking for Alibrandi*, written by one of the recognised Australian novelists, Melina Marchetta. She belongs to Italian immigrant descendants and deals with mixed themes such as immigration, family dynamics, Italian culture, relationship issues and resilience. Her notable works are *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Saving Francesca trilogy*, *On the Jellicoe Road* to name a few.

The narrative of the novel *Looking for Alibrandi* centres on the relational bond between the teenage protagonist Josephine Alibrandi and her Italian immigrant grandmother Katia Alibrandi. Josephine is portrayed as a young woman growing up in Sydney with an Italian cultural background. Josephine was raised by her mother, Christina Alibrandi, while her

father, Michael Andretti, remains largely absent during her early life. Christina was in a relationship with Michael in her teenage years and got pregnant. Unaware of her situation, Michael moved to Adelaide for his barrister study. As Francesco was not the biological father of Christina and her unmarried pregnancy triggered her unloving father Francesco to harm her both verbally and physically. Katia's affair and guilt made her nonchalant while Christina was being harmed. Christina could not have an emotional connection with her mother since her childhood days and Christina thought her mother was unsupportive.

On the other hand, Christina has to leave Josephine in Katia's home because it was nearer to Josephine's school and it would be easy for Christina to work efficiently without the fear of Josephine's protection. It foregrounds the intricate emotional and psychological bond that often exists between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren, arguing that maternal grandmothers frequently occupy a role of profound influence, functioning as secondary maternal figures. It also analyzes within the conceptual framework of attachment with family members, asserting that secure attachments are not confined to primary caregivers alone but extend meaningfully to maternal relatives who provide consistent emotional support.

The study aims to demonstrate the importance of maternal grandmothers, particularly in single-parent contexts. Grandmothers may function as pivotal attachment figures, shaping the social influence and emotional stability of their grandchildren. The objectives of the study are threefold: the first is to critically analyze the interactions between Josephine Alibrandi and her maternal grandmother, Katia Alibrandi. The second is to interrogate the implications of the grandmother's guidance on Josephine's adolescent identity formation and mutual understanding with each other's opinions. The third is to explore how Marchetta's narrative renders the maternal grandmother both a stabilizing and transformative figure within a culturally specific familial milieu.

Despite living in Australia for nearly four decades, Katia still followed the Italian lifestyle in her



house such as Italian furniture, food, clothes and way of living. Though Katia had bought everything for the house, she used minimal resources and protected her luxurious household things to show off her wealth to her Italian relatives. Present generation Josephine could not get the idea of living hard while having everything in the home as a show piece for the barely visiting relatives. This shows the evidence of the generational and ideological differences between Katia and Josephine. The differences of living expectations did not break bonds, instead creating a new acceptance of living together.

It gets on my nerves that she won't let me sit in the good living room where the air conditioner is. That room is reserved for visitors she hates but wants to impress with her good Italian furniture. The granddaughter she supposedly loves gets to sit in the boiling hot TV room on a torn sofa. (40)

Katia spent her life in Italy until she got married to Francesco in her teenage years. She did not have any exposure and awareness about the world outside Italy and didn't speak any other languages other than Italian. After coming to Australia, she had a language barrier to survive in the new environment where none was ready to become friends with immigrants and taught English. Fortunately, she had a friendship with an Australian police officer, Marcus Stanford and he taught her English. Katia's English was not perfect even after decades of living in Australia. Josephine wanted her grandmother to speak perfect English, but whenever Josephine tried to correct Katia's English pronunciation, Katia frustrated with Josephine, Katia considered the correction done by younger one like Josephine was disrespectful. Katia used to blame Christina for Josephine's mistakes and made Josephine hate Katia. "Just like your mother. Always wit no respect." (43)

Katia needed respect for her age, meanwhile Josephine wanted Katia to speak in correct English and express Josephine's skillful language knowledge to Katia. Though it was Josephine's good intention, Katia got angry due to the traditional fact that the younger generations should not raise their voice or correct the mistakes of the elders. If the youngsters do not respect elders, mothers of the young people should

get blame on behalf of the young people. Katia flustered, "That is Christina's fault because if she was a good mother, you would be a good daughter and granddaughter and respect me. But there is no respect left wit the youth of today." (44)

Throughout the story, Katia acts as an important confidante for Josephine as she encounters typical adolescent experiences, including friendships, romantic interests and disagreements with her granddaughter Josephine. Although generational differences occasionally lead to tension between them, these moments ultimately contribute to a deeper mutual understanding. Katia's willingness to share personal experiences and hidden aspects of her past strengthens their trust. Her constant affection and encouragement help Josephine manage emotional struggles, whether related to family expectations, personal identity, or social relationships. Initially Josephine did not want to stay in Katia's home due to Katia's strict and Italian behaviour, which did not suit Josephine. Later knowing about the struggles undergone by Katia from her birth till the date of her life, Josephine's perspective on Katia changed. Once Josephine thought Katia was a bad tempered old Italian woman. Soon after she understood the hardships gone through by Katia, which leads Josephine to accept the flaws of Katia as well as start to spend time with her as before.

When I hear Nonna Katia tell me about how life was forty-odd years ago, I find it hard to believe that she was just seventeen, my age now, when she was married and taken halfway across the world. But then again, Mama was just seventeen when she gave birth to me, so it makes me realize how young we youth of today really are. (93, 94)

The study is delimited to the maternal grandmother's interventions as manifestations of secure, intergenerational bonding that compensate for the emotional lacunae arising in single-parent households. The analysis considers not only explicit acts of caregiving and guidance but also the symbolic and affective dimensions of their relationship, including shared confidences, generational wisdom, and the transmission of cultural and familial identity.



The findings of this research underscore that Katia Alibrandi operates as both a stabilizing and empowering presence in Josephine's life. Her provision of unconditional love, empathetic guidance, and protective oversight allows Josephine to negotiate the multifaceted challenges of adolescence, including peer relationships, romantic inclinations, and the fraught dynamics with her mother. Moreover, moments of disagreement between Josephine and Katia do not weaken the relationship; rather, they serve as crucibles for mutual understanding, reinforcing the resilience and durability of their bond. In this way, the grandmother's presence mitigates the capacity of intergenerational attachment to foster resilience and psychosocial maturation.

In summation, *Looking for Alibrandi* presents the maternal grandmother-granddaughter relationship as a central axis of emotional and psychological support, revealing the indispensable role of extended family in adolescent development. Katia Alibrandi's function as caregiver, confidante and moral interlocutor illustrates how grandmothers can provide not merely supplementary care but foundational emotional scaffolding, particularly within single-parent households. This study proposes that attachment extends beyond the nuclear family, highlighting the intergenerational continuity of caregiving and its enduring impact on adolescent identity, well-being, and resilience. Marchetta's narrative thus offers a sophisticated exploration of familial bonds, positioning the maternal grandmother as both a stabilizing force and a transformative agent within the adolescent's life course.

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