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TRANSACTIONING DECISIONS THROUGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: A READING OF
IF I STAY BY GAYLE FORMAN

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ABSTRACT

Decision making is very instinctive and fundamental to all living beings. Every moment in our life we make several decisions and through decisions we sustain. The very concept of life is also a decision for living. However, decision making is not a simple task, it is a complex process. It involves cognition, circumstantial considerations and the restricted play of emotions. Here in this paper we will discuss how making a decision is borne from the consideration of varying emotions and through Emotional Intelligence (EI). And for such discussion, we have undertaken a popular young adult fiction, *If I Stay* (2009) by Gayle Forman. We will use close reading and psychoanalytic approach to show how Mia, the protagonist of the novel, makes probably the most difficult decision in her life, to choose life over death. This research is modeled on the recent studies on Decision Theory that give importance to the role of emotions in decision making process rather than the role of rationality. It will discuss how EI turns to be an important asset for the decision makers. This paper will undertake the task of evaluating the various components of Emotional Intelligence present in Mia which enables her to take such a demanding decision. It will find how Mia, while making a decision, confirms to the five components of Emotional Intelligence as stated by D. Goleman (1998) – self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, motivation and empathy. In short, this paper finds that Emotional Intelligence of Mia works as a boon to help her take such a challenging decision.

Key words: Emotional Intelligence, Psychoanalytic approach, Decision Theory, Close reading

1. Introduction

Gayle Forman's *If I Stay* (2009) is the story of Mia Hall, a 17-year-old cellist who finds herself in a comatose state after a catastrophic car accident of her family. Mia is the only member of her family to survive, but, undergoes an out-of-body experience which enables her to watch the happenings around her. The book oscillates between the present and past of Mia's life through a series of flashbacks. Mia finds herself trapped to make a difficult decision – whether to follow her family in death or to live the life of an orphan for the people who are waiting for her to return from her comatose state. The challenging rather fascinating account of Mia incites much attention of the readers and scholars.

Studies on *If I Stay* held by Wahyuni, et.al., (2017) and Ernawati and Thoyibi (2019) deal exclusively with the emotions of love. Wahyuni, et.al employ the psychological approach to analyze the role of love and hope for the accomplishment of Mia's dream to become a cellist. Ernawati and Thoyibi use love to be an important tool to overcome the potential crisis of Mia, the emotional turbulence and trauma. The study by Nasution (2018), however, seeks to discuss another aspect of the novel, the psychological journey of Mia, both during the catastrophic accident and the aftermath, and the subsequent conflicts – external and internal that Mia undergoes. Further, she argues that the conflict occurs because Mia doesn't have any rewarding choice to make. She has to make an emotionally demanding decision – choosing life over death. The effects of emotional and psychological trauma of Mia and other characters are evaluated by Ebi (2020). She argues how the characters are 'psychologically affected by the loss and separation of family, and also aching for love.' Upon the consideration of Mia's emotional and psychological crisis and trauma Christine and Widyastuti (2017) have undertaken a psychoanalytic study and embark on Mia's decision-making process on whether to choose life or death. This research discusses the two models of the process of decision making– the normative model (based on logic and reasoning) and descriptive model (based on identity and unconscious emotion). Specifically, it scrutinizes the descriptive model that ascribes to Mia while making decisions for her life.

The above studies, in a way or other, concern with the varying emotional and psychological aspects of the central character, Mia. As it happens with Christine and Widyastuti, they throw light on the psychological process of decision making at the backdrop of varying emotions of Mia. However, this study leaves a room to give insight into the proper handling of those emotions, especially how Mia manages with the emotions. Without judicious management of emotions, at the time of crisis, Mia could not have reached a decision as far as her life is concerned. So, an attempt is made here to explore how Mia exhibits Emotional Intelligence (EI) to postulate towards making a decision.

2. Decision making and EI

When it comes to decision making, we would like to raise two questions:

1. What is a decision?
2. What goes into making a decision?

Decision Theory, in a way, offers answers to these questions. According to Hansson (2005) a decision is a goal-directed behavior in the presence of options. Decision Theory also mentions that a cognitive process leads to making a decision. The recent studies, however, emphasizes the role of emotions in the decision-making process (Loewenstein and Lerner, 2003). Goleman (2005) has argued that our emotions play a much greater role in thought, decision-making and individual success. In addition, researches on perception of risk prove that people evaluate the risks and benefits of a given situation through their emotional response (Bruch and Feinberg, 2017). In short, the recent studies acknowledge the underlying significance of emotions and emotional responses to making a decision at any given situation.

The significance of emotions in decision making is also reflected in the decision-making models designed by various scholars. For instance, Khaneman and Tversky (1984) provide a dual model of decision making – normative and descriptive. The normative model deals with the rationality and the logic of decision making, while the descriptive model deals with the beliefs and preferences of an individual. Hansson (2005) too states that the decision-making process is studied through normative and descriptive decision theories. A normative decision theory is a theory about how decisions should be made, and a descriptive theory is a theory about how decisions are actually made (p. 6). This is further discussed by David H. Jonassen who while keeping the essence of the two models intact, also provides an alternative name to both the models. For him normative / prescriptive model 'assume(s) that decision makers are rational people' and that the decision makers 'should' take decision according to the 'norms or standards'. Alternatively, descriptive / naturalistic model believes that decisions are 'actually' influenced by 'unconscious drives and emotions', 'previous experiences' and 'personal identities', rather than being driven by 'rationality' alone. Moreover, rational thought is barely used while taking

emotionally complex decisions. What is frequently considered is the decisions' 'possible outcomes and the effects in the future', 'individual identity and the social expectations connected to that identity' (Jonassen, 2012).

Hess and Bacigalupo (2011) further elaborates that while making a decision, if the decision maker acknowledges his/her emotions, it helps in 'determining not only the motivations behind decisions but also the impact of those decisions on others'. Similarly, the decision makers who 'perceive and understand' their own emotions can effectively manage those in the 'decision-making process' (p.714). Being able to perceive and understand one's own emotion, manage those and being considerate to others emotions while taking a decision, brings into mind the concept of EI. EI, as defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) refers to one's ability to be aware of one's own feelings and feelings of others, to differentiate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and behavior. According to Goleman (1998), EI is referred to as knowing and using one's feeling in appropriate manner, motivating oneself and others effectively, and managing the relationships by exhibiting empathy and interacting smoothly to one another. Thus, it won't be wrong to say that being emotionally intelligent can make one a better decision maker. To quote, Hess and Bacigalupo (2011), 'the practical application of emotional intelligence skills and behaviors can enhance not only the outcome of a decision but also the processes associated with decision-making' (p. 719).

3. Discussion

3.1. The character Mia and EI

Mia as a character possesses the art of EI and continues to maintain it even when she is in the comatose state after the accident. Gayle Forman in *If I Stay* (2009) creates Mia as a character who exhibits EI. She is portrayed as a quiet and reserved teen in public who hates crowd. She loves to dress plain and simple which she feels is her trademark. She loves classical music, of which she keeps a 'pile' hidden under her bed as she feels it shouldn't be 'advertised'. But her world revolves around her parents, younger brother Teddy, her grandparents, her boyfriend Adam and best friend Kim, for whom she is very loving, caring and warm-hearted. She loves family-time, as she immediately says 'I'm in' to go on a trip with her family to visit family friends and her grandparents at the beginning of the novel. 'I'd actually rather go off with my family' she says, and this is another thing which she doesn't 'advertise' about her (p.8-9). She believes in love: 'I think I had this notion that love conquers all' (p. 23). She is very sensitive to others emotion. For instance, she always feels as if she had betrayed her parents as she chose classical music over rock: 'I have always wondered if Dad is disappointed that I didn't become rock chick' (p. 8). This is because her parents had a rock band in their youth, Adam too has a band named Shooting Star which is 'on an upward spiral.' But she could never become the 'rock chick' which she feels her parents wanted her to and 'wandered over to the cello in music class' in 'third grade' as 'it looked almost human' to her (p.8). It's already been ten years and she has never stopped. This shows her ability to manage confusing situations, the clarity of her mind while making decisions and her determination. She can never be influenced into doing something, if her desire is not into it.

So, it is this Mia, already endowed with EI, who faces an accident along with her family members on that obnoxious trip on which she had gone at the beginning of the novel. Her entire family dies – parents, on the spot, and Teddy at the hospital. She is critically injured and is taken to Trauma care on a comatose state. The force of the accident and its result is so devastating that it renders Mia to experience an out-of-body experience. An out-of-body experience (OBE) is a sensation of consciousness leaving one's body. It is a dissociative episode, generally reported by people who've had a near-death experience (Raypole, 2019). Mia, in her out-of-body state, visualizes everything which her actual body cant at the given situation – the bodies of her parents, paramedics working on her body to keep her alive and carrying her to the hospital, she being operated for long hours, the arrival of her grandparents, relatives, Kim and Adam to the hospital, Adam trying to break into her ICU, Teddy's death etc. It is in this state, she understands that '*She's running the show,*' (p. 31) as told by a nurse to her grandparents when they came to visit her in the ICU. It is in this state that she realizes it's upon her whether to stay or not; to decide whether to live the life of an orphan, or die leaving behind Adam and others: as annunciated by Hansson (2005), she is goal-directed along with options (life or death). Everything ends in the beginning and Mia has to find a beginning from this end.

3.2. Mia's decision-making process through EI

Mia definitely comes to a decision at the end of the novel, and her decision is to live. This section will deal with how the trait of being emotionally intelligent acted as a boon for Mia to come into terms with life as it is and decide to live. While inspecting the text by doing a close reading, we will use psychoanalytic approach to show the working of Mia's mind while making the decision and thereby validating each component of EI, postulated by D. Goleman in his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (1998):

- Self-awareness – it is associated with the ability to know one's internal state, preferences, resources, and intuitions
- Self-regulation – the ability to manage one's internal states, impulses, and resources.
- Social skills – the ability to induce desirable response in others.
- Motivation – the emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals.
- Empathy – the ability of being aware of other's feelings, needs and concerns.

Here we will show how all these components operate together and helped Mia even in an unconscious state to choose life over death. Mia gives an account of the accident in a very matter-of-fact way – the car shattering into pieces, the various deafening noises produced during the collision of their car to the truck, finding her father's brain scattered on the road, her mother's dead body looking like a zombie etc. She had completely detached her emotions from the traumatic event, just as her mind has detached itself from her body. The Freudian concept of the 'defense mechanism of dissociation' (Barry, 2012) is working here to save her from the intense trauma which she is facing. Anxiety rushes in only when she remembers about Teddy. She begins a fanatic search only to find her own severely injured body in a ditch. The first component of EI, self-awareness gradually steps in now. She realizes that something grave has happened to her family, nothing will be same again; her present out-of-body state is also very confusing to her. She could be, panicking, crying, raving at the loss, instead she chooses to be calm and listen to the music coming from the radio of the car thrown somewhere, and she chooses to forget about finding Teddy to keep her sanity intact. She, somehow, can bear the grief of her parents' death but not of Teddy, nor can she see him in a critically injured state as she herself is in. The defense mechanism of avoidance steps in here, along with the second component of EI, self-regulation.

A series of unpleasant self-awareness will follow henceforth which Mia will always try to tackle by remembering instances from her past, using defense mechanisms like repression, avoidance, procrastination etc. From now on she will use her past in the form of flashbacks to help her achieve self-regulation along with motivation, the other component of EI. She tries to avoid, rather forgetting about her present complex fears and anxiety by remembering her past trivial fears and nervousness. She also tries to self-soothe and motivate her by remembering her parents' advice during such occasions. For instance, when her wounded body is carried over to the Trauma care over helicopter, in order to avoid her present situation, she dwindles into the memory of Kim's first helicopter ride, followed by the fond memory of her first date with Adam. When a nurse pesters her to 'hang on' she remembers the jitters which she got during her first cello performance. She had asked her father how to get over jitters which he had replied saying: 'you don't, you just work through it. You just hang in there' (p.13-14). While being operated, she remembers how she was accompanied by her grandpa to San Francisco for her audition to get into The Julliard School – which was a very challenging task for her. The remembrance of her audition to get into Julliard, while being operated, can't be ignored as a coincidence. It brings with it the anticipated dream of a better future. Cello is next to everything for her, and her getting the acceptance letter into Julliard is a dream which she was passionately waiting for before her accident. Her subconscious mind is trying to signal her that though everything is lost, but she still has cello to keep her spirits up. If playing cello and getting into Julliard can't be a motivation to fight for her life, what else can be? After the operation, in order to avoid thinking about her present situation, she again gets back into her memories with Adam and Kim. She is aware of the complexities and unpleasantness of the present situation; if she will allow her emotions to take a surge, it will be very difficult on her part to keep her cool and regulate herself and keep her motivation strong.

So though she uses an ample amount of defense mechanisms, but somehow she manages to regulate herself every time, till, situations get more horrible and she realizes that even Teddy is no more.

Just before this final self-realization hits her and she loses her self-regulation and motivation for some time, a small incident shows her classic ability to empathize, another component of EI. In between all these incidents she comes to know about the truck driver, with whose truck their car had collided. Her relatives were talking about him, saying that he is left with 'some cuts and bruises' and is doing 'just fine'. Though, the reason of the accident is unknown, it is believed to be because of either snow or a deer, but somewhere he is also involved in it. Mia doesn't believe that he will be doing 'just fine': 'His life has changed irrevocably, too.' Mia understands what a survivor's guilt feels like. This made her empathize with the truck driver. If the crash wasn't his fault then he was present in 'the wrong place, at the wrong time.' His present in the truck and his bad luck had brought such a catastrophe over a family. How can he live with that guilt? Mia ponders. She even fantasizes of getting better, visiting him some day in future to 'relieve him of his burden, to reassure him that it's not his fault' (p. 44). Because of empathy, Mia is able to understand the situation of someone, who is the reason for her loss. Empathy makes her forgive him. Forgiveness begets letting go and redemption. Redemption, for Mia will be a step towards choosing life.

Teddy was more than a younger brother to her: 'Teddy was like half kid brother and half (her) own kid. (she'd) been babysitting him since he was a few weeks old' (p.28). When she realized that Teddy is no more, at first, she tried to save herself from the shock of this realization by avoiding thinking about it and rather thinking about the birth of Teddy. She was present at the birthing center with her mother. Her mother 'always said that it was because Teddy saw (her) first, and because (she) cut his cord, that somewhere deep down he thought (she) was his mother' (p. 56). She also remembers something substantial said by her mother in between the screams of labor pain: '*Don't be scared, she'd whisper. Women can handle the worst kind of pain. You'll find out one day*' (italics original) (p.55). The value of these words at that moment is definitely priceless. It is her mind's way of reminding and making her realize that she has the ability even to handle this. This time the self-realization was really hard; that she is the only one to survive that accident. Fate was 'unfair' even for Teddy. The tide of survival guilt drives her crazy: 'I'm only ten years older than him, but it's like I've already had so much more life. It is unfair. If one of us should have been left behind, if one of us should be given the opportunity for more life, it should be him' (p. 57). For the first time after the accident, this self-realization is beyond her ability to self-regulate, forget about motivation. Her mind, unable to cope, regresses into a child-like state. The defense mechanism of regression takes an upper hand and she wants to escape – from the pain, from her out-of-body state; she wants to scream until her throat hurts, shutter a window and bleed, pull her hair out; she is devastated, angry, broken, and guilty of being alive. She wants to feel some kind of physical pain so as to deviate her attention to some kind of pain which she can understand and thereby control. She wants to slap her 'lifeless body' (p. 57). For a moment she was almost on the verge of losing it, but again, interestingly, without doing all these, she chooses to sit down on a chair, close her eyes and concentrates; in short, self-regulates. The sudden surge of emotions in her mind had already shown its effect on her body. She is rushed to the operation theatre with multiple complications. She definitely returns alive, but eerie heaviness controls her mind and body now – motivation takes a back-seat, for some time at least.

She tries to face her demons now. She, 'really think about the bitter things (she has) managed to ignore so far' that day' (p. 58). She starts to ponder over death: 'I'm not sure that I want to wake up' (p. 58). She even finds comfort in visualizing her funeral along with her family: 'To go down as a family. No one left behind' (p. 61). She realizes that 'dying is easy. Living is hard' (p. 62). A point comes when she almost seeps into it, but she 'jerks' herself out of it as she is not yet ready to go. This shows the ability of self-regulation and the emotional strength of Mia. She won't let anything happen to her, not even death, if she doesn't want it. She, taking her time to decide is a testimony of how much particular she is about contemplating every pros, cons and consequences before deciding something. Till now she has analyzed many things, even more is left to ponder. Survival guilt might be making her contemplate death, but she is quite aware that her choosing of death will definitely be very hard on her grandparents, Adam and Kim. Even her dead mother would be furious, she thinks. Death may be an easy choice for her, but she can't allow herself to be the cause of so many heartbreaks. She

cannot choose death yet. Her unwillingness to be the reason of grief for her loved one is acting as motivation here to continue the fight for her life. Here, empathy molds into motivation for her.

It's then she listens her grandpa saying her that he understands if she wishes to go, it's okay if she has to leave, though everyone, including him acutely wants her to stay. She felt relieved of the burden for the first time. Her grandpa's words were like gift for her. Though unconscious, Mia's character was strong enough to utilize social skill, the other component of EI, in her favor. Though choosing death is not the final decision of Mia, but at least she is given the right to choose death, without guilt. She was relieved of her burden, even without asking for it.

Emotions play an important role in decision making – 'not just strong emotions like anger and fear, but also the "faint whispers of emotions"' (Slovic et.al., 2004, p. 312). Before her knowledge of Teddy's death, she was looking forward to meeting Adam. She was positive that once Adam meets her all her problems will be solved. Even, her body was out of ventilator for some time. These were positive signs of her unconscious decision to live. But, after she realized that Teddy is really dead, her system had stealthily wanted to shut down. Though she has self-regulated, and is taking time to decide, but the decision is gradually turning negative. After her grandpas' intervention she is almost on the verge of choosing death. Kim's visit too had had a liberating effect on her, knowing that she too will move on. It is because of this she doesn't want Adam to meet her now. It's not that Adam has the ability to talk her out of contemplating death. It is because of the power of love, which Mia believes in. It is because, Mia knows, the very presence of Adam near her will make her think about her decision twice; and she is tired to think again. Adam gave a short visit at first and rushed out saying that he will be back. His visit leaves her '(a)gitated. Anxious. Awake' (p.74). She is getting more and more tired, as if she will be gone in a blink of eye, but she waits for Adam. Adam is, thus, her last motivation. Adam's final words, the words which made her wandering self-reconcile with her body, the words which made her live were nothing which she didn't know. Adams words were the words spoken by her alter ego. Those were the words which acknowledged the pain of the incident, accepted the fact that nothing in the world can alter it but still brought with it happy images from the future. Mia already knew these things; it's just Adam made her listen to them. Mia chooses life over death.

4. Findings

George (2000) stated that feelings are intricately bound up in the ways that people think, behave, and make decisions. In the discussion above we came to know the truth of this statement. Mia could choose life only because she didn't jump into a decision. She not only considered her emotions but also of others while deciding. She imagined the impact of her decision on others. She didn't give in to the calls of negative emotions like anxiety, fear, grief, anger – though they definitely acted as hindrances. Even during crisis, she managed to keep her cool. EI serves as a boon in her decision-making process.

EI components can always be applied to making a decision. Mia teaches us a few things as far as decision making is concerned:

- One should never take a decision when one is overwhelmed with any kind of emotions, be it positive or negative.
- One should never rush into a decision rather take time
- One should consider every aspect of a decision, especially its impact on oneself and on others
- One should believe in the power of forgiveness and letting go.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed how Mia takes a lifesaving decision and the process through which she reaches that decision. Her decision accounts for consideration of varying emotions that she undergoes at different phases of her journey. She as a character is quite sound to give each emotion a distinct space and never being overwhelmed by it. Thus, her decision embodies components of EI to the very core of it.

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