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Attachment Styles and Psychological Development of Jaron Eckbert in Jennifer A. Nielsen's *The Runaway King*

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ABSTRACT

Attachment theory explains how individuals establish, maintain, and respond to emotional bonds throughout life. This study aims to analyze the attachment styles portrayed by Jaron Eckbert in *The Runaway King* novel by Jennifer A. Nielsen, including their causes and development throughout the narrative. The study applies John Bowlby's attachment theory, which explains how early relational experiences influence later interpersonal behavior. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method because it provides a flexible and in-depth framework to analyze complex character like Jaron Eckbert. Each datum represents a single instance of attachment-related behavior identified through the character's monologues, dialogues, and interactions. The findings reveal 83 instances of attachment-related behaviors, consisting of 35 disorganized attachments, 23 secure attachments, 14 avoidant attachments, and 11 anxious attachments, with disorganized attachment emerging as the dominant pattern and anxious attachment as the least. The findings further indicate that Jaron's attachment styles are shaped by emotional distance, traumatic experiences, and unstable relational environments. Ultimately, the study concludes that Jaron's attachment behavior is not static but oscillates between different attachment styles before gradually developing toward greater emotional security. This study contributes to literary psychological criticism by demonstrating that attachment styles in literary characters are dynamic and context-dependent rather than fixed personality traits.

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1. Introduction

Attachment theory explains how individuals make and break emotional bonds (Holmes, 2001, p. 61). Bowlby (1982, p. 126), who is considered to be the father of attachment theory, argued that attachment behaviors are instinctive, and evolve because they increase a person's ability to survive. This theory identifies several attachment styles, including secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment (Lu, 2024, p. 185). Each style reflects different patterns of trust, dependency, and emotional regulation. Due to its ability to explain both emotional and behavioral patterns, attachment theory serves as an effective analytical framework for examining human psychology and interactions.

In literary work, a character is a person that readers interpret as having moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities represented through their distinctive dialogue and action (Abrams & Harpham, 2013, p. 48). Furthermore, according to Mollinger (1981, p. 12), characters mirror humans' types, emotions and conflicts. Therefore, just like it is used to analyze real-life issues, attachment theory becomes a suitable tool to explore how characters form relationships, respond to challenges, and develop throughout the story.

The character this study focuses on is Jaron Eckbert, the main protagonist of *The Runaway King* novel, the second installment of *The Ascendance Series* by Jennifer A. Nielsen. The novel follows Jaron as the newly crowned king of Carthya, who must navigate political instability, threats of war, and the challenge of gaining the trust of his people and advisors. Beyond these external conflicts, Jaron also carries the psychological burden of childhood trauma, emotional distance from his family, repeated life-threatening experiences, and the overwhelming responsibility of ruling at a young age. These experiences shape his interactions with others and make him a compelling character for examining how attachment patterns are formed, maintained, and transformed throughout the narrative.

Prior studies have offered valuable insights into John Bowlby's theory of attachment, later developed by Mary Ainsworth, and its application in various media, from novels to films. Rengganis (2023) analyzes Jack's psychological development in the movie *Tree of Life* using Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and John Bowlby's attachment theory. The findings reveal that Jack experiences 6 psychosocial stages, with identity versus role confusion as the most dominant stage as well as four attachment styles: secure, anxious-preoccupied, avoidant-dismissive, and disorganized attachment. Additionally, Marlina (2024) examines parent-child attachment relationship and its influence on Colin's character development in *The Secret Garden* novel. The findings show that Colin develops an avoidant attachment style due to factors such as an emotionally distant father, parental rejection, lack of caregiver presence, and insensitive parenting. These studies demonstrate that attachment theory is useful for explaining character behavior and personality development. However, previous research primarily identifies the dominant attachment style of a character or examines attachment within a specific relationship. Little attention has been given to the dynamic coexistence and transformation of multiple attachment styles within a single literary character as the narrative progresses. Therefore, this study extends previous research by examining not only the attachment styles portrayed by Jaron Eckbert, but also the factors contributing to their formation and the ways these attachment styles develop throughout the novel.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the attachment styles portrayed by the character Jaron Eckbert in *The Runaway King* novel by Jennifer A. Nielsen?
2. What factors cause the formation of Jaron Eckbert's attachment styles in the novel?
3. How do Jaron Eckbert's attachment styles shift and develop throughout the novel?

2. Literature Review

Literature has long been an inseparable part of human life, serving as a medium through which individuals express and interpret their experiences. Boas in Irene (2015, p. 74) explains that literature is the product of human imagination, thoughts, emotions, feelings, ideas, and expressions. It is an element of culture used to express human thought and ideas (Eripuddin, 2017, p. 1). As Kurniawan and Mustofa (2024, p. 185) state, "In essence, literature is an intricate dance between words and meaning, weaving together the threads of storytelling, artistic expression, and intellectual exploration."

Furthermore, literature as an interpretative art form often reflects human intricacies, including how individuals perceive, record, and reconstruct memories and time (Fitriyah & Cahyani, 2024, p. 279). Beyond being a reflection of physical reality, literature is structured to produce something more (Kasmawati & Rahayu, 2025, p. 2). It presents both external events and the inner world of human consciousness, offering insight into identity, relationships, and personal development.

Psychology of literature examines the reciprocal relationship between literary studies and psychological inquiry. According to Hawa in Nurjaman et al. (2022, p. 272), psychology

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plays a crucial part in analyzing literature as it focuses on the psychological point of view, be it from the elements of the author, character, and reader. The psychological difficulties of modern existence are often reflected in contemporary literature, which frequently portrays fractured identities, emotional pain, and existential quandaries (Suardi et al., 2026, p. 20).

2.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was first developed by John Bowlby as a framework to explain how and why humans form emotional connection. Holmes (2001, p. 61) explains that the theory centers on the processes of making and breaking affectional bonds. As Bowlby (1982, p. 126) states, attachment behaviors are instinctive and evolutionary in nature, developing because they enhance an individual's chances of survival.

A central concept in Bowlby's theory is the Internal Working Model (IWM), which refers to the mental representations individuals develop through repeated interactions with their caregivers. They function as cognitive maps that organize and process information, enabling individuals to anticipate how attachment-related goals can be achieved (Bowlby, 1982, p. 126). Positive caregiving experiences generally produce internal working models characterized by confidence and trust, whereas inconsistent, neglectful, or frightening caregiving may result in negative expectations toward both oneself and others. As a result, individuals often carry these internalized beliefs into later relationships, affecting how they interpret social interactions and regulate emotional responses.

Although Bowlby emphasized the lasting influence of early attachment experiences, contemporary attachment research suggests that attachment patterns should not be understood as entirely fixed. Instead, attachment demonstrates both stability and plasticity across the lifespan. Early attachment experiences establish the foundation of an individual's internal working model, yet subsequent relational experiences may reinforce, modify, or gradually reshape these patterns (Burkhart & Borelli, 2017, p. 6). Likewise, Zhang et al. (2022, p. 1090) argue that attachment styles continue influencing relationship satisfaction and interpersonal functioning throughout adulthood while remaining responsive to meaningful social experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant to literary analysis because fictional characters often undergo significant emotional and relational changes that may alter how attachment behaviors are expressed.

Therefore, this study adopts Bowlby's attachment theory as the primary analytical framework to examine Jaron Eckbert's interpersonal relationships in *The Runaway King*. Rather than treating attachment styles as static personality traits, this study views them as dynamic relational patterns that are shaped by early experiences while continuously developing through changing social and emotional contexts. Such a perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of Jaron's attachment behaviors throughout the narrative.

2.2 Attachment Styles

According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, early experiences with caregivers influence how we establish and maintain close relationships as adults. These enduring patterns, known as attachment styles, impact how perceive closeness, our capacity to trust others, and how we cope with conflict (Reddy & Pullot, 2024, p. 282). There are 4 known attachment styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment (Lu, 2024, p. 185).

1. Secure Attachment

Secure attachment develops when caregivers are consistently responsive and emotionally available. As adults, securely attached individuals tend to feel comfortable with

intimacy and autonomy simultaneously. They demonstrate great communication and conflict-resolution skills, feel at ease with both intimacy as well as independence, and possess strong emotional regulation skills (Sharma & Kaushik, 2024, p.2338).

2. Anxious Attachment

Anxious attachment, sometimes referred to as anxious-preoccupied attachment, emerges from inconsistent caregiving. This creates an insecurity that often means their environment is explored with trepidation instead of excitement. Anxious individuals may fear abandonment, crave reassurance, and exhibit dependency in relationships (Baruah & Sutar, 2024, p. 450).

3. Avoidant Attachment

Avoidant attachment develops when caregivers are emotionally distant, rejecting, or unresponsive. In response, a child turns away from the caregiver to minimize distress, acting as if rejecting or keeping distance (Alfalathi et al., 2025, p. 71). Therefore, as they grow older, avoidant individuals tend to value independence over intimacy, often maintaining emotional distance in relationships. They may appear self-reliant and detached, but this independence often masks discomfort with vulnerability. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (as cited in Reddy & Pullot, 2024, p. 283), avoidant attachment is associated with deactivating emotional strategies, in which individuals suppress attachment-related distress rather than openly addressing it.

4. Disorganized Attachment

Disorganized attachment was later identified by Main and Solomon and is often linked to traumatic, abusive, or frightening caregiving experiences (Reddy & Pullot, 2024, p. 283). Children with this style may display contradictory behaviors, such as approaching a caregiver and then abruptly withdrawing. In adulthood, disorganized (or fearful-avoidant) attached individuals struggle with conflicting desires for both closeness and independence within relationships (Sharma & Kaushik, 2024, p.2339). Their dread of intimacy may cause them to push people away, but when they need emotional connection, they may pull them back in (Baruah & Sutar, 2024, p. 451).

2.3 Character and Characterization

Characters are figures in narrative or dramatic texts who are interpreted by readers as having particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities inferred from what they say and do (Abrams, 2009, p. 42). According to Kirszner and Mandell (2017, p. 235), a character is a fictional depiction of a person, often presented with psychological realism. On the other hand, characterization refers to the way an author presents and develops those characters.

3. Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze Jaron Eckbert's character from the novel *The Runaway King* by Jennifer A. Nielsen. Qualitative research is designed to understand how people perceive their surroundings (Ugwu & Eze, 2023, p. 20). As Zhafiira and Suardi (2025, p. 74) describe, instead of depending solely on numerical data, the qualitative method examines social processes through the meanings, experiences, and interactions of individuals. It emphasizes the importance of comprehending experiences and perspectives in context, making it particularly effective for analyzing complex psychological and social dynamics.

The source of data in this research is *The Runaway King* novel by Jennifer A. Nielsen, published on March 1st, 2013. It is the second installment of *The Ascendence Series.* Data

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analysis is carried out after information is obtained through the selected instrument, which will then be used to answer research problems. The analysis used in this study is Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

A coding sheet was developed based on Bowlby's attachment theory to systematically identify attachment-related behaviors. During the data condensation stage, the researcher read the novel repeatedly and assigned codes to each attachment-related behavior according to the indicators presented in Table 1. The coded data were then organized into categories (data display) before being interpreted to examine Jaron's attachment styles, their causes, and their development throughout the narrative. Finally, conclusions were drawn by comparing the findings with Bowlby's attachment theory and supporting attachment literature. To enhance analytical credibility, the coding criteria and data classification were continuously cross-checked with established attachment theory literature to ensure consistency throughout the analysis.

Table 1
Coding Criteria for Attachment Styles

Code	Attachment Styles	Indicators
S	Secure	Trusts others, seeks support, expresses emotions openly
A	Anxious	Fear of abandonment, reassurance seeking, sensitivity to rejection
AV	Avoidant	Self-reliance, emotional distancing, avoidance of dependence
D	Disorganized	Contradictory behavior, approaching then rejecting others, fear and closeness simultaneously

The application of this coding framework and analytical procedure provides a systematic basis for examining Jaron Eckbert's attachment styles, their underlying causes, and their development throughout *The Runaway King.*

4. Discussion

This study analyzes Jaron Eckbert's attachment in *The Runaway King* novel using John Bowlby's attachment theory. Specifically, the study examines the attachment styles portrayed by the protagonist, the factors contributing to their formation, and their development throughout the narrative.

4.1 Jaron Eckbert's Attachment Styles

In this section, the researcher will analyze the 4 styles of attachment that are found in Jaron Eckbert's character in *The Runaway King* novel by Jennifer A. Nielsen using John Bowlby's attachment theory. The 4 attachment styles include: secure, anxious, avoidant and disorganized attachment.

Table 2
Distribution of Jaron Eckbert's Attachment Styles

Attachment Styles	Frequency	Percentage
Secure	23	27.7%
Anxious	11	13.3%
Avoidant	14	16.9%
Disorganized	35	42.1%
Total	83	100%

The analysis identified 83 data of attachment-related behaviors portrayed by Jaron Eckbert throughout *The Runaway King*. As presented in Table 2, disorganized attachment appears most frequently with 35 instances (42.1%), followed by secure attachment with 23 instances (27.7%), avoidant attachment with 14 instances (16.9%), and anxious attachment with 11 instances (13.3%). These findings indicate that Jaron does not consistently display a single attachment style; instead, his attachment behaviors fluctuate depending on the interpersonal context and the people with whom he interacts. This supports the view that attachment patterns influence how individuals perceive trust, closeness, and emotional security (Reddy & Pullot, 2024, p. 282), while also suggesting that literary characters may express multiple attachment styles simultaneously.

Disorganized attachment emerges as Jaron's predominant attachment style because his relationships are consistently characterized by contradictory emotional responses. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly seeks emotional closeness while simultaneously distancing himself from those he cares about. For example, when speaking to Mott, Jaron admits, *"I ask you to forgive who I am. It will never be easy to serve with me"* (Nielsen, 2013, p. 349), revealing both his desire for acceptance and his expectation that others will eventually reject him. Similarly, after Imogen leaves him, he reflects, *"Hurt—that was the effect I seemed to have on those closest to me"* (p. 352), demonstrating his tendency to associate intimacy with emotional pain. Rather than representing simple avoidance or anxiety, these conflicting behaviors reflect the instability characteristic of disorganized attachment.

Although disorganized attachment is dominant, secure attachment constitutes the second largest category. Jaron gradually develops trust toward individuals who consistently demonstrate loyalty. His statement, "*Amarinda is fully capable of making any necessary decisions*" (p. 87) shows that he trusts Amarinda's competence and can rely on her. T This indicates that in the passage above, Jaron exhibits secure attachment behaviors characterized by trust, interdependence, and relational stability.

Avoidant and anxious attachment appear less frequently but remain important in understanding Jaron's interpersonal behavior. Avoidant tendencies characterized by emotional self-reliance and reluctance to depend on others appear in his monologue, "*I never trust anyone to take care of me"* (p. 198). In contrast, anxious attachment is evident when Jaron fears losing meaningful relationships and becomes overly concerned with hurting those closest to him. Rather than functioning independently, these attachment styles often overlap with his disorganized attachment, revealing the complexity of his emotional responses across different situations.

Unlike previous literary studies that primarily identify a single dominant attachment style in a character, such as Marlina's (2024) analysis of Colin's avoidant attachment or Rengganis' (2023) classification of Jack's attachment patterns, the present study demonstrates that Jaron's attachment behaviors cannot be adequately explained by a fixed attachment category. Instead, his attachment styles oscillate throughout the narrative in response to changing relational experiences and emotional circumstances. This finding extends the application of Bowlby's attachment theory in literary criticism by suggesting that fictional characters may simultaneously exhibit multiple attachment styles that evolve according to the narrative context rather than remaining psychologically static.

4.2 Causes of Jaron Eckbert's Attachment Styles

Jaron Eckbert's attachment styles are primarily shaped by his early relational experiences and the environment in which he grows up. His emotionally distant relationship with his father, separation from his family, exposure to life-threatening situations, experiences of neglect in the orphanage, and the lack of support he receives after ascending the throne contribute to the formation of insecure attachment tendencies. According to Bowlby (1982, p.

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126), attachment experiences become internalized as mental representations that continue to influence interpersonal relationships throughout life. These adverse experiences shape Jaron's perception of trust, intimacy, and emotional security.

For instance, Jaron reflects that, *"My father wasn't an openly affectionate man. I knew he loved me, but he was never one to speak the words…"* (Nielsen, 2013, p. 111), illustrating the emotional distance that characterized their relationship. Likewise, he later admits, *"Had my father lived, he and I would never have come to a mutual understanding. We would always have found some way to disappoint each other"* (p. 46), suggesting that their relationship was marked by persistent emotional disconnect rather than mutual understanding.

Beyond his family environment, Jaron's attachment styles are also influenced by repeated traumatic experiences that reinforce feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. The monologue, *"Jaron's parents had attempted to send him to a boarding school where he might learn some much-needed manners, but after he'd escaped the ship bound for Bymar, pirates had attacked with the intention of bringing about Jaron's demise"* (p.14) showed that his parents thought he was a troubled kid and did not want anything to do with him, while the assassination attempt exposed him to life-threatening danger at an early age, contributing to an unstable sense of safety. Furthermore, his experiences at Mrs. Turbeldy's orphanage were marked by neglect and bullying, where older boys *"liked to tie us younger ones up in an attic and claim we weren't hungry for supper"* (p. 228). Such experiences deprived Jaron of consistent protection and emotional support during childhood, reinforcing negative expectations toward others. Together, these experiences suggest that Jaron's attachment styles are shaped not only by emotionally distant caregiving but also by repeated exposure to trauma and unstable environments during his formative years.

4.3 Development of Jaron Eckbert's Attachment Styles

Jaron's attachment styles develop dynamically throughout *The Runaway King*, reflecting the changing interpersonal and emotional circumstances he experiences as the narrative progresses. Burkhart and Borelli (2017, p. 6) argues that while attachment may be a constant influence on how one functions in life, the attachment bond takes on different forms across the lifespan. Therefore, it can be reasonably inferred that attachment styles are dynamic and ever-changing. This development can be observed through three broad stages: the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the narrative.

At the beginning of the novel, Jaron predominantly demonstrates insecure attachment behaviors, particularly anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment. As a newly crowned king, he struggles to trust those around him and constantly questions the loyalty of his advisors, fearing betrayal and political manipulation. His uncertainty regarding his position within the kingdom contributes to anxious attachment, while his tendency to conceal plans and refuse assistance reflects avoidant attachment. At the same time, he frequently distances himself from those he cares about in an attempt to protect them from danger, creating contradictory behaviors characteristic of disorganized attachment. During this stage, secure attachment appears only occasionally because Jaron has not yet established stable relationships that allow him to rely on others emotionally.

As the story progresses, Jaron gradually develops stronger secure attachment through positive relationships with individuals who consistently demonstrate loyalty and support, particularly Fink, whom he begins to regard as a younger brother. Nevertheless, this period is marked by increasing internal conflict as he struggles between trusting others and maintaining emotional distance. While he becomes more willing to accept companionship and support, he continues concealing his intentions whenever he believes doing so will protect those closest to

him. Consequently, disorganized attachment becomes increasingly prominent as secure and insecure attachment behaviors coexist throughout his interactions.

Toward the end of the novel, Jaron's attachment styles reach their greatest complexity before gradually moving toward greater emotional security. His relationships with Mott, Roden, and Amarinda increasingly reflect secure attachment as he learns to trust their loyalty, accept emotional support, and share responsibilities with them. However, this development is not linear. His relationship with Imogen illustrates how secure attachment can temporarily shift back into disorganized attachment when separation and emotional loss threaten an established bond. This oscillation demonstrates that Jaron's attachment development is characterized not by the replacement of one attachment style with another, but by the continuous interaction of multiple attachment patterns. Ultimately, secure attachment becomes more dominant as Jaron gains confidence in both himself and the people who remain beside him.

The chronological development of Jaron's attachment styles suggests that attachment should be understood as a dynamic relational process rather than a fixed psychological trait. Unlike previous literary studies that primarily identify a dominant attachment style, this study demonstrates that a fictional character may simultaneously exhibit multiple attachment styles that fluctuate according to changing relational contexts. This finding extends the application of Bowlby's attachment theory in literary criticism by highlighting the fluid and evolving nature of attachment within narrative character development.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that Jaron Eckbert demonstrates all four attachment styles proposed in Bowlby's attachment theory, namely secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment, with disorganized attachment emerging as the dominant pattern. Rather than displaying a single attachment style consistently, Jaron's interpersonal behaviors reflect a dynamic combination of attachment patterns that change according to his emotional experiences and relationships throughout the novel.

The findings further indicate that Jaron's attachment styles are shaped by emotionally distant caregiving, traumatic childhood experiences, and unstable relational environments, all of which influence his perception of trust, intimacy, and emotional security. As the narrative progresses, however, his attachment behaviors gradually shift toward greater emotional security through positive relational experiences, supporting Bowlby's view that attachment patterns continue to develop beyond childhood.

Overall, this study contributes to literary psychological criticism by demonstrating that literary characters may simultaneously exhibit multiple attachment styles that evolve according to changing relational contexts rather than representing fixed personality traits. By examining not only the attachment styles portrayed by Jaron Eckbert but also their causes and development, this study expands the application of attachment theory in literary analysis and offers a more comprehensive understanding of psychological complexity in fictional characters.

For future studies, the researcher suggests combining attachment theory with feminist or patriarchal perspectives, particularly in analyzing female characters in literary works. Such an approach may provide deeper insight into how attachment styles are shaped not only by caregivers and childhood experiences, but also by social structures and gender expectations. For example, avoidant tendencies such as extreme independence and emotional self-reliance may develop because patriarchal societies often undermine women's autonomy and force them to depend primarily on themselves.

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