

CATALYSTS FOR SELF-RELIANCE IN *WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING* BY DELIA OWENS

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Abstract

This research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of self-reliance and its major causes, focusing on the concept proposed by Emerson and other related theories and concepts. The study employs a sociology of literature approach, which is well-suited to examine the social environment of the characters within the literary work. Additionally, the behaviorism perspective is utilized to analyze the behavioral phenomena that arise in relation to self-reliance. According to Savatagi, the causes of self-reliance include social, economic, political, and human agency factors, which set the boundaries for this analysis. Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* serves as the primary source for this qualitative descriptive study, with additional books and related publications as secondary sources. The findings indicate that Kya's self-reliance is primarily driven by unsupportive social conditions, which prevent her from becoming dependent on others. Instead, these conditions foster a perception of self-reliance that helps Kya develop into a strong, independent individual who does not rely on external help.

Keywords: *behaviorism; independence; self-reliance; sociology of literature*

1. Introduction

Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* is celebrated not only for its poignant themes of isolation, resilience, and nature's beauty, but also for its powerful portrayal of self-reliance and independence through its protagonist, Kya. Abandoned by her family at a young age, Kya grows up alone in the Carolina marshlands, where she learns to depend entirely on her own resourcefulness to survive. Her journey showcases the lengths to which she must go to meet her needs in an environment both breathtaking and unforgiving. Isolated from society and denied access to basic resources, Kya's story highlights her resilience as she forages for food, manages her household, and adapts to the natural world around her.

Owens' background as a wildlife scientist, with decades spent researching in Africa and a personal attachment to North Carolina's wilderness, deeply informs her portrayal of nature and survival in the novel. Co-author of three bestselling nonfiction works, including *Cry of the Kalahari*, Owens has won the John Burroughs Award for Nature Writing, and her work has been published in journals such as *Nature* and *The African Journal of Ecology* (Owens, 2020, p. 1). Her academic training—a zoology

degree from the University of Georgia and a Ph.D. in Animal Behavior—greatly influences her writing, blending scientific insight with lyrical depictions of the natural world. Growing up, Owens developed a reverence for nature, nurtured by summers spent hiking in the North Carolina mountains, and she learned to view nature as a lifelong companion. This deep affinity is reflected in her debut novel, set in the richly described Carolina coastal marshlands.

The theme of self-reliance in *Where the Crawdads Sing* also resonates with insights from scholars. Savatagi, Srinivas, and Payyappallimana (2022) argue that self-reliance often stems from individual choices shaped by various social, economic, and personal factors. Kya's social isolation and economic struggles, exacerbated by a lack of community support, serve as key motivators for her self-sufficiency. Her situation underscores the complex interplay between her choices and circumstances as she navigates a life of solitude, determinedly surviving and thriving despite overwhelming odds.

2. Literature Review

Literature should reflect the realities, values, and spirit of the society in which it is produced. He encouraged American writers to draw inspiration from their own culture and environment, advocating for literature that was authentically American. Literature should serve the intellectual and moral development of individuals and society as a whole. He sees literature as a means of educating and uplifting the spirit of the people. This aligns with the sociological perspective that literature can influence and shape societal norms and values. (Emerson, 1993)

The sociology of literature is a distinct field within sociology that examines the social and cultural contexts of literature. Scholars in this field analyze how literature reflects, shapes, and is influenced by social structures, institutions, and historical contexts. It explores questions about the role of literature in society, the social functions of literary works, and how literature interacts with broader social phenomena (Cuddon, 1998).

According to Laurenceon and Swingewood (1972: 11) in *Sociology of Literature*, Sociology is essentially the scientific, objective study of person in society, the study of social institutions and of social processes; it seeks to answer the question of how society is possible, how it works, why it persists. Further they argue that sociology, literature is preeminently concerned with human's social world, adaption to it, and desire to change in.

Emerson's approach to literature is more philosophical and literary than sociological, his ideas on individualism, nonconformity, and the relationship between the individual and society can provide valuable perspectives for sociologists and scholars interested in examining how literature reflects and influences social and cultural aspects of human life.

Self-reliance emphasizes the idea that individuals should follow their inner guidance and not conform to societal norms or the expectations of others. It encourages to cultivate self-trust and self-confidence, and to avoid relying on external authorities for validation.

Crane et al. (2015) states that self-reliance means living a more self-reliant, sustainable lifestyle with pure freedom by learning from leading experts inside self-reliance mastery. Being injured is one thing, but being injured and not knowing how to take care of it yourself is another. Self-sufficiency refers to an individual's capacity

to rely on their own skills, assets, and discernment to make choices and carry out actions. It implies a state of independence and self-reliance, wherein one isn't heavily reliant on external forces, viewpoints, or aid.

According to Savatagi, Srinivas, and Payyappallimana (2022), in the context of the health system, self-reliance is about the decisions made at the individual level. These decisions are caused by various social, economic, political, and human factors. However, historical perspectives on self-reliance revealed that it is predominantly viewed from a resource availability perspective, which reflects a narrow understanding and application of a complex social construct. Hence, there is a need to expand our analytical understanding of the systemic underpinning of self-reliance in health policy and systems practice. Kloppers (2019) advises against looking consistently outside for security and relying on others to accept us for who we are. When we can accept ourselves as unique and practice non-judgment, we can find security from inner sources.

3. Research Method

The research design is the strategic plan that guides the entire research process, defining the methods, data collection techniques, and procedures for analyzing and interpreting data in a structured and systematic way (Cresswell, 2014). This study employs a qualitative research methodology, chosen for its suitability in exploring the complexities and subtleties of human experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth examination of the research topic, providing rich insights that quantitative methods might not capture. Through this approach, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, capturing both the depth and context of participants' perspectives and lived experiences.

4. Discussion

The first cause is when Kya is abandoned by all of her family in the Marsh (the marshlands or swamps of the North Carolina coast where much of the story is set). This matter is surely related to the condition in the quotation below:

When Kya ran to the porch, she saw her mother in a long brown skirt, kick pleats nipping at her ankles, as she walked down the sandy lane in high heels. The stubby-nosed shoes were fake alligator skin. Her only going-out pair. Kya wanted to holler out but knew not to rouse Pa, so opened the door and stood on the brick-'n'-board steps. From there she saw the blue train case Ma carried. Usually, with the confidence of a pup, Kya knew her mother would return with meat wrapped in greasy brown paper or with a chicken, head dangling down. But she never wore the gator heels, never took a case. (Owens, 2018 : 11)

As stated in the above quotation, at one point, Kya realizes that something is wrong with Ma. She observes an anomaly regarding the woman who gave birth to her, namely, Ma is seen wearing gator heels and carrying a case.

The absence of familiar routines and the unexpected elements, such as the blue train case and the alligator skin heels, adds complexity to the theme of abandonment within the story.

MA DIDN'T COME BACK that day. No one spoke of it. Least of all Pa. Stinking of fish and drum likker, he clanked pot lids. "Whar's supper?" Eyes downcast, the brothers and sisters shrugged. Pa dog-cussed, then limp-stepped out, back into the woods. There had been fights before; Ma had even left a time or two, but she always came back, scooping up whoever would be cuddled. The two older sisters cooked a supper of red beans and cornbread, but no one sat to eat at the table, as they would have with Ma. Each dipped beans from the pot, flopped cornbread on top, and wandered off to eat on their floor mattresses or the faded sofa. Kya couldn't eat. She sat on the porch steps, looking down the lane. Tall for her age, bone skinny, she had deep-tanned skin and straight hair, black and thick as crow wings. (Owens, 2018 :14)

In the quoted passage, it becomes evident that Ma has indeed abandoned Kya and her siblings in the Marsh. Kya and the others begin to reminisce about the days when Ma is still present, recalling how she would share jokes, fill their days with laughter, and prepare delicious meals. At that tender age, Kya struggles to comprehend why Ma chooses to leave; she is genuinely unaware of the reasons behind the abandonment.

The second cause after Kya has been abandoned by all of her family in the Marsh is the fact that she has to live alone in the Marsh with no one accompanying her. This matter is surely related to the condition in the quotation below:

Every morning she woke early, still listening for the clatter of Ma's busy cooking. Ma's favorite breakfast had been scrambled eggs from her own hens, ripe red tomatoes sliced, and cornbread fritters made by pouring a mixture of cornmeal, water, and salt onto grease so hot the concoction bubbled up, the edges frying into crispy lace. Ma said you weren't really frying something unless you could hear it crackling from the next room, and all her life Kya had heard those fritters popping in grease when she woke. Smelled the blue, hot-corn smoke. But now the kitchen was silent, cold, and Kya slipped from her porch bed and stole to the lagoon. (Owens, 2018: 35)

In that quotation above, the author describes Kya's morning routine and the absence of her mother, Ma. Every day, Kya eagerly wakes up early, hoping to hear the familiar sounds of her mother's bustling cooking in the kitchen. Ma's preferred breakfast consists of scrambled eggs sourced from their own hens, freshly sliced ripe red tomatoes, and cornbread fritters.

It is part of depicting Kya's survival and the challenges she faces after being abandoned by her family. The detailed description of her morning routine, especially the absence of her mother, Ma, highlights the loneliness and solitude Kya experiences in her daily life. The shift from the comforting sounds and smells of her mother's cooking to the cold and silent kitchen underscores the emotional and practical struggles Kya endures as she navigates the challenges of living alone.

That night, arms folded under her head, she lay on her porch bed, a slight smile on her face. Her family had abandoned her to survive a swamp, but here was someone who came on his own, leaving gifts for her in the forest. Uncertainty lingered, but the more she thought about

it, the less likely it seemed the boy meant her harm. It didn't fit that anyone who liked birds would be mean. (Owens, 2018 : 87)

The quotation above explains that the mention of Kya's family having abandoned her to survive in the swamp reinforces the theme of isolation and self-reliance that runs throughout the novel. It highlights the resilience of Kya as she copes with being left alone to navigate the complexities of the marsh.

The quotation introduces a new character, described as "someone who comes on her own, leaving gifts for her in the forest." This mysterious person seems to have a positive impact on Kya's life, and the gifts left for her create an air of curiosity and wonder.

But just as her collection grew, so did her loneliness. A pain as large as her heart lived in her chest. Nothing eased it. Not the gulls, not a splendid sunset, not the rarest of shells. Months turned into a year. The lonely became larger than she could hold. She wished for someone's voice, presence, touch, but wished more to protect her heart. Months passed into another year. Then another. (Owens, 2018 : 129)

By the quotation above, the author describes the growing loneliness experienced by the protagonist, Kya, as her collection of shells expands. As Kya's shell collection grows, her loneliness also increases. The author uses vivid language to convey the emotional impact of this loneliness, describing it as a pain as large as Kya's heart that resides in her chest. This suggests a profound and visceral sense of isolation.

Kya's desire for someone's voice, presence, and touch reflects her longing for human connection. However, the conflicting wish to protect her heart suggests that Kya fears the potential hurt or abandonment that may come with opening herself up to others. This is connected to the theme of self-reliance. Kya's growing loneliness and the persistent pain she feels highlight her reliance on herself for emotional well-being. Despite her attempts to find solace in nature and distractions like collecting shells, the passage suggests that she is largely dependent on her own resilience to cope with isolation.

The third will be the last factor arises when Kya is forsaken by her entire family in the Marsh, left to navigate its challenges alone. Despite the solitude and lack of companionship, she perseveres, striving to survive and maintain her own well-being. This matter is surely related to condition in the quotation below:

Ma used to soak wounds in salt water and pack them with mud mixed with all kinds of potions. There was no salt in the kitchen, so Kya limped into the woods toward a brackish slipstream so salty at low tide, its edges glistened with brilliant white crystals. She sat on the ground, soaking her foot in the marsh's brine, all the while moving her mouth: open, close, open, close, mocking yawns, chewing motions, anything to keep it from jamming up. After nearly an hour, the tide receded enough for her to dig a hole in the black mud with her fingers, and she eased her foot gently into the silky earth. The air was cool here, and eagle cries gave her bearing.

....

By late afternoon she was very hungry, so went back to the shack. Pa's room was still empty, and he probably wouldn't be home for hours. Playing poker and drinking whiskey kept a man busy most of the night. There were no grits, but rummaging around, she found an old greasy tin of Crisco shortening, dipped up a tiny bit of the white fat, and spread it on a soda cracker. Nibbled at first, then ate five more. (Owens, 2018: 34)

The passage begins with a mention of Kya getting a wound on her foot; Ma's traditional remedies for wounds involved soaking wounds in salt water and packing them with mud mixed with various potions. This excerpt can be interpreted as a part of survival in the context of the novel. Kya's actions demonstrate her resourcefulness and adaptability as she deals with a wound without access to conventional medical supplies. She utilizes her knowledge of nature and the environment around her to treat her injury, seeking out salt water and mud as makeshift remedies.

In the late afternoon, hunger gnaws at her, prompting a return to the shack. Her father's room remains vacant, a sign that he would not likely return for hours. Engrossed in poker and whiskey, he typically occupies himself through much of the night. Discovering an absence of grits, she searches around and comes across an aged, greasy tin of Crisco shortening. She scoops up a small portion of the white fat, spreading it on a soda cracker. Initially nibbling, she soon consumes five more.

She knew it wasn't Chase she mourned, but a life defined by rejections. As the sky and clouds struggled overhead, she said out loud, "I have to do life alone. But I knew this. I've known a long time that people don't stay. (Owens, 2018: 182)

The statement "I have to do life alone" reflects a sense of acceptance and acknowledgment of her self-reliance. The character seems to be coming to terms with the idea that she must navigate life on her own.

The quotation can be interpreted as part of the character's emotional and psychological survival. While it does not directly address physical survival aspects like obtaining food or shelter, it delves into the character's coping mechanisms and mindset in the face of emotional challenges. Survival extends beyond just the physical realm; it encompasses the ability to navigate and endure emotional hardships, loneliness, and the complexities of human relationships. In this passage, the character is confronting and accepting the idea that she may need to face life's challenges, including the transient nature of relationships, on her own. This acknowledgment and acceptance can be seen as a form of emotional resilience and survival.

Kya is completely developing a self-reliant mindset, understanding that she must rely on her own strength to navigate the emotional landscape of her life. This kind of emotional resilience and self-awareness contributes to the broader theme of survival in the novel, showing that survival involves not only external challenges but also internal ones related to emotional well-being and self-discovery.

5. Conclusion

In *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens portrays the development of self-reliance through Kya's journey, exploring the profound impact of abandonment and isolation. Kya's forced solitude after being abandoned by her family and shunned by

society drives her to become resilient and resourceful, facing physical and emotional challenges with remarkable independence. Her early experiences—like learning to find food, treat her injuries, and survive in the marshlands—showcase her adaptability and reliance on the natural world for support. Over time, Kya not only learns to survive on her own but also builds an emotional resilience that allows her to navigate the complexities of human relationships and solitude. The novel emphasizes that Kya's survival is as much about her emotional resilience as it is about her physical endurance. Despite her longing for connection, Kya learns to protect herself from the potential heartbreak of relationships, recognizing that she must ultimately rely on her own strength. Her journey illustrates how self-reliance is forged through enduring hardship and loss, yet it is also a path to self-discovery and personal growth. Owens' depiction of Kya's character highlights the multifaceted nature of survival, revealing that true self-reliance encompasses both practical and emotional resilience, especially when faced with a life marked by rejection and solitude.

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