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SENSITIZING CHAOS OF FAMILY DYSFUNCTION IN IAN MCEWAN'S
"THE CEMENT GARDEN"

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to decipher social and psychological anxieties of the children through characters in Ian McEwan's novel "The Cement Garden" (1978). The story revolves around the life of four siblings who are socially isolated. The story depicts children's survival struggle due to the sudden death of their parents. Out of concern from the unknown frightening society, the traumatised siblings decide to bury their mother in the basement. The paper examines how McEwan uses the dysfunctional family unit to explore themes of social alienation, emotional isolation, trauma and violence. The paper highlights the ways in which the family exacerbates the character's sense of loneliness and disconnection from the society. Through the lenses of the psychological theory of Trauma by Cathy Caruth, a detailed analysis of major characters' experiences of trauma and violence, the paper explores the impact of these experiences on their health and mental-wellbeing. The paper also examines how the characters attempt to cope up with their traumatic experiences through various defence mechanisms, and how these defence mechanism impact their emotional and behavioural development. Furthermore, the paper analyses the repercussions of the family's dysfunction on characters' emotional and psychological development, and how this manifest in their relationships with others. The research sheds light on the relevance of family dysfunction and social alienation to contemporary society, and the ways in which McEwan's novel provides insight into these complicated subjects.

Keywords: Trauma, Deprivation, Family Dysfunction, Psychological Impact

Introduction

Postmodern literature probes into the complexities of human experiences, shedding light on the deep impact of various socio-cultural factors on individuals' lives. In postmodern human life, it is necessary to focus on children as they are the essential pillar of society. In today's fast changing world, shaping young minds is both an honour and a big responsibility. When we talk about children's development it's not only restricted to knowledge and skills but also shaping their values, attitudes and perspectives. Guiding young minds is a vital and significant work as it includes moulding the next generation. It requires understanding their specific needs, providing appropriate direction, and nurturing their potential. However, in the current global scenario,

conditioning young brains has become increasingly difficult, with several complex problems emerging worldwide. One particularly disturbing situation is the impact of parental loss on young children, it adds another degree of complication, demanding specialised attention and assistance. The loss of a Caring parent, as well as the absence of support from elders or surviving parents, can cause trauma in children. Due to this children may experience alienation, depression, social existence, economic instability, disruption of family.

Thus, a large amount of postmodern literary texts has addressed many themes through different novels that turn around the narratives of children. These works are primarily intended to present the transformation of human socio-cultural after World War Two. For the best depiction of the scenario, authors like Ian McEwan mentioned about the children's loss of innocence, alienation and the impact of parental absence. The portrayal of children's trauma is frequently studied within this literary framework, revealing the significant influence of dysfunctional family dynamics on their lives. The story of "*The Cement Garden*" examines the consequences of familial abnormality and trauma on characters, by focusing on the darker sides of their lives.

Such human experiences find one of their best expression in literature. Family dysfunction has long been a subject of literary interest, providing insights into the complexities and challenges that can occur within the dynamics of a troubled family. "*The Cement Garden*" by Ian McEwan digs into the unsettling realm of familial dysfunction, exposing the complex web of connections and its repercussions. Children are the pillars of the future human society. If they are not given the security, sense of belonging then problems like trauma, isolation, alienation is seen. This research paper aims to sensitively examine the chaos of family breakdown in "*The Cement Garden*" with a focus on how it affects children's social and emotional anxieties.

The research is set with numerous objectives in order to discover the multifaceted subtle aspects of family disruption portrayed in "*The Cement Garden*" and their impact on children's social and psychological well-being. The study is an endeavour to unveil the specific agitation experienced by children in dysfunctional family settings depicted in the story. The thrust of the research is to shed light on the ways in which family dysfunction shapes children's perception of themselves and their interactions with others in society. The novel depicts the consequences of trauma in their behaviour by forming Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) challenges of four siblings called Jack, Julie, Tom and Sue after their mother's death. The work will investigate the underlying factors and mechanism that contribute to the development of social and psychological anxieties in children within the context of unstable family. The research intends to study and suggest potential solution to the problem of children who struggle with social and psychological issues in dysfunctional family settings, which Ian McEwan tries to highlight through his writings. This study attempts to increase our knowledge of the intricate interactions between family dynamics and children's well-being by compassionately examining the chaos of family breakdown in "*The Cement Garden*" and its effects on young minds social and psychological worries. This research would provide insightful information that will help guide treatments and support systems for children's who are growing up in troubled family, ultimately promoting their resilience and well-being.

A psychoanalytic approach helps in understanding and dealing with cerebral issues including trauma and alienation. This technique provides a greater insight of the mental complexities of the character's experience by studying their unconscious motivations, desires and repressed memories. This study will look at the emotional problems, defence mechanism and internal conflicts that the children encounter in "*The Cement Garden*" and how they cope up with the damage caused by familial disintegration through the perspective of psychoanalysis. Loss of a parent has a tremendous impact on a child's growth and inner well-being. It has far-reaching consequences, affecting many elements of their lives, including as identity formation, emotional control, economic instability and social existence. The absence of parental figures or the disintegration of parental roles in "*The Cement Garden*" contributes to the children's trauma, alienation, and issues with their own sense of self. The study intends to provide insights into how parental loss influence and individual's development within a fragmented family system by analysing the character's experience.

As suggested by the American psychological Association (APA), trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical

symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.

Cathy Caruth's Trauma theory is a well-known concept in the fields of psychoanalysis and literary studies that aims to understand the psychological and emotional impact of traumatic experiences on individuals. Her books named "*Trauma: Exploration in Memory*" (1995), and "*Unclaimed Experience*" (1996) explains that in a traumatic person changes in behaviour, eating habits, insomnia, abnormal sexual behaviour, etc can be seen. To cope up with the aftershocks of trauma, such altered behavioural patterns are adopted. The concept of silence and denial play crucial role in understanding how individuals and communities cope with and respond to traumatic experiences. Caruth argues that "trauma explores various modes of domination and is thus met with various modes of silencing and denial" in 'Listening to trauma: Conversations with leaders in the theory and treatment of catastrophic experience'. "*The Cement Garden*" by Ian McEwan explores silence and denial through the four afflicted character's : Julie, Jack, Sue, and Tom. The story delves into the depth of dark concepts like brutality, psychic anxieties, sibling relationships, and incest.

The story takes place after World War Two in Western metropolitan neighbourhood. The novel delves into trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the lives of four siblings who have experienced the death of their father, followed by the death of their mother. The plot of the novel describes the various methods used by four siblings to suppress their trauma. The narrative begins with the narrator Jack assisting his father in laying a new layer of cement in their backyard. He characterise himself as a lazy, undisciplined, unhygienic pervert. Except for his mother, Jack does not have a decent relationship with his family. He regards his father as unimportant in the narrative, claiming that the father's part of the story was inserted to justify the massive amount of cement available in the cellar:

He was frail, irascible, obsessive man with yellowish hands and face. I am only including the little story of his death to explain how my sisters and I came to have such a large quantity of cement at our disposal. (McEwan 9)

Despite, the fact that Jack's father is a heart attack survivor, he does not care about his father's ill health when he carries and mixes a huge amount of cement. Jack makes the least amount of effort to assist his father. Instead, he makes an excuse for bathroom and masturbates while fantasising about his sisters. When he returns finds his father on the floor. Despite the fact that he is aware that his father may require medical assistance, he moves slowly approaching him and shows no rush to assist him medically. He does not even mourn for his father's death, rather he is relieved. His mother look after the entire household after father's death. As a result, she becomes ill and is confined to her room, while the children take on household responsibilities to help and manage the family. She died due to this sickness, the children mourn her death for a short period. They make an effort to hide the fact of their mother's death, because they were afraid of foster care. So they decided to bury their mother in the cellar with the remaining cement. The two eldest Julie and Jack soon take the roles of mother and father in the family. But they couldn't fit in the role as they are young and inexperienced. During this time, Julie and Jack have developed an incestuous relationship with each other. Julie also has a lover named Derek who is the only person pays frequent visits to their home. Jack is insecure about Derek because he believes Julie loves Derek more than him. Knowing the fact that Sue and Tom, also like Derek makes him insecure. Julie is seen to have an emotional and physical attraction to Jack as the novel progresses. Derek discovers the secret in the cellar and learns about Julie and Jack's incestuous relationship. The story comes to a halt, however, when the vehicles with sirens and swift feet take over the house.

Though the deaths of both parents do not come as a shock to the children, they are more concerned about their economic insecurity and social existence. This forces the children to bury their mother in the cellar without informing society. As social beings with socially acceptable norms and practices of sharing key life events with society, such a scenario is uncommon in the human community. The family's separation from society is seen by the mother's secret burial. The cultural and societal variables presented in this narrative have had such an impact on the family that the children have no sense of living together in a society. They acquire a profound

disconnection from society. According to Jack's story, the family never had any visits, either friends or relatives. Even the kids did not bring their friends home. Disconnection from the society can be easily seen:

No one ever came to visit us. Neither my mother nor my father when he was alive had any real friends outside the family. They were both only children, and all my grand-parents were dead. My mother had distant relatives in Ireland whom she had not seen since she was a child. Tom had a couple of friends he sometimes played with in the street, but we never let him bring them into the house. There was not even a milkman in our road now. As far as I could remember, the last people to visit the house had been the ambulance men who took my father away. (McEwan 23)

The children isolated themselves from the outside world after the demise of their parents. They feel imprisoned in the circumstance and exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms through various behavioural patterns.

Lack of parental attention, proper conditioning and guidance, family disconnection cause Jack to develop sexual emotions for his sisters. He longs to check his sisters' private parts and masturbates while envisioning his sisters. He narrates to the readers that, "upstairs, aware of his impatience, I worked on myself rapidly. As usual, the image before me was Julie's hand between Sue's legs (McEwan, 18)." However, Jack adored his mother and mourned over her death, the emotional disconnect is clearly visible in their act while covering up her body the children could not stop giggling. Although, the tragedy of her death manifested in him as blankness, and he saw any woman on the street as his mother being alive. The impact of trauma initially seen in his behaviour as isolation as he resisted going out and spending time with his siblings. As he mentioned :

As I walked home my blankness returned, and significance drained from the event of my day. I went straight upstairs to my bedroom, and although I did not meet or hear anyone, I knew the others were in. I took off all my clothes and lay under the sheet on my bed. (McEwan 76)

Most of the time, Jack would sleep, lie down in his bed, or masturbate, as he explains: "I woke in the late morning, masturbated and dozed off again. I had dreams, not exactly nightmares, but bad dreams that I struggled to wake out of (McEwan 85)." Due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder his sleep time had also changed, since he was now waking up at unusually late hours of the day. Jack admits that he didn't see the point in waking up. He'd also go down to the cellar and assume his mother was still alive and talking to him. Jack had nightmares of his mother staring at him from his room's recliner and telling him to stop while he continued to masturbate in front of her. Jack kept so much to himself that when Julie's boyfriend Derek came home, he felt uneasy. He explains his time spent with Derek, " I had a strange sensation of having been away several months and that many things had happened in my absence (McEwan 107)." Jack is similarly insecure about Derek and attempts to improve his unsanitary lifestyle in order to attract Julie's attention. Julie and Jack's friendship grows stronger, revealing their incestuous relationship. Derek discovers this awkward relationship between them and investigates Julie, to which she confesses as follows: "How long has this been going on?' I was glad I could not see him. 'Ages,' Julie said, 'ages and ages.' (McEwan 135)."

Julie was prone to a normal emotional reaction as a result of her mother's trauma. Despite her grief at her mother's unexpected passing, Julie made quick efforts to keep the family together. It's odd to observe the siblings giggling as they cover their dead mother and carry her to the cellar. Julie, being the eldest sibling, took over the charge as a head of the family after her mother died. She planned to keep her mother's death a secret, with the purpose of keeping the siblings together in their own home and avoiding foster care. With Tom's increasing outbursts, Julie takes on the role of a mother figure for him, dealing with his impatient conduct with tolerance and care. She started taking care of her looks and clothes as stated by Jack "She spent a long time washing and brushing her hair and doing things to her eyes. She wore clothes I had never seen before, a silk blouse and a brown velvet skirt (McEwan 85)." Julie dated everyone who would buy her things. She used to go out most afternoons. When Jack questioned Julie, she would be ignorant so that he stopped questioning her at all. Julie was excessively concerned with her looks and beauty. She spent a long time getting ready, taking long baths, brushing her hair, and applying cosmetics to her eyes. Despite the fact that Derek is her boyfriend, she is unable to establish physical contact with him. Instead, she seduces Jack into an incestuous relationship with her.

Both Jack and Julie fool their psyches and seek comfort for their parental loss through an unapologetic incestuous relationship.

Sue was the only child who recommended that their mother should be given a proper funeral, but Jack assures her that if society finds out about their mother's death, they will be separated. Sue was depressed and puzzled after her mother's death. That reflects her PTSD later in the novel, when she spends the majority of her time in her room reading books and writing. After her mother died, she felt she had nothing to do but read books. She said :

'I like reading,' Sue said, 'and there's nothing else to do.' I said, 'There's all kinds of things to do,' simply to hear Sue say again that there was nothing to do. But she sucked her thin, pale lips into her mouth, the way women do after they put lipstick on their lips, and said, 'I don't feel like doing anything else.' (McEwan 97)

She also spent time writing in her notebook, which she only shared with Jack once. As the story progresses, it is clear that she is aware of Jack and Julie's incestuous relationship because she is not surprised when Derek screams and cries about it. However, Sue's defence mechanism against her trauma in her isolated life is reading and writing whole day. She is the only one among all of them who expresses herself in writing. It helps her in overcoming her traumatised perception.

Tom, is the youngest of all siblings and heartbroken by his mother's death. It is difficult to determine whether Tom understands the notion of death, but he is deeply disturbed and continues to scream at strange hours of the day. Because Tom is small and innocent, he cannot keep secrets, and he informs Derek about his mother's death as well as the cellar's secret. Tom saw Julie as a mother figure in his mother's absence and would weep loudly to get her attention. He also tries to engage Sue with him 'He lay on the floor clutching his head and screamed so loud that Sue came running out of her bedroom (McEwan 84).' Tom usually sits in Julie's lap and sleep off while sucking his thumb. It seems he is not living in the reality his mother's death and uses his sexuality to cope up with this trauma. He would frequently dress in girl's attire and goes out to play in Sue's skirt.

Conclusion

"The Cement Garden" by Ian McEwan proficiently depicts the nuances of family disintegration and its far-reaching consequences. The novel challenges readers to confront painful realities about the human condition through its exploration of taboo issues, psychological turmoil, and societal misdeeds. McEwan's work encourages us to focus on the enduring power of family dynamics and the enormous impact they have on our lives by sensitizing us to the instability within familial ties.

McEwan illustrates the dissolution of traditional household structures and the ramifications for individual identity and interpersonal interactions throughout the work. The characters' psychological entrapment within the dysfunctional family unit is mirrored by their isolation within the limits of their home, symbolised by the burial of their mother in the basement. This confinement exacerbates their internal conflicts, leading to a gradual erosion of boundaries between familial roles and the emergence of perverse desires and prohibited actions. The themes of incest, sexuality, and gender ambiguity in the novel provoke uncomfortable introspection and challenge societal norms. McEwan instigates readers to question the boundaries of familial love and loyalty, as the characters handle their complex desires and motivations. The psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by the siblings, Julie, Jack, Sue, and Tom, highlights the destructive power of suppressed desires and the consequences of denying one's authentic self. The characters' increasing detachment from societal norms contributes to a growing sense of unease and tension, as their actions become more extreme and morally ambiguous.

By sensitizing readers to the chaos and unsettling nature of family dysfunction, McEwan forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about the fragility of familial bonds. The author presents a thought-provoking exploration of the dark recesses of human nature, challenging conventional notions of morality and familial love. "The Cement Garden" is a cautionary story that reminds us of the significant influence that dysfunctional family dynamics can have on individuals and society as a whole.

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