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VICTIMIZATION RESPONSES: EVALUATING THE HETEROGENEOUS PSYCHIC IMPACTS OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY SYSTEM IN SELECT NOVELS OF JONATHAN FRANZEN

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Abstract: Being a highly weighed up topic in the field of Clinical Psychology, Dysfunctional Family System has started to extend its rippling effect into the boundaries of literature more than before. The unison of the subjects, Psychology and literature had attained its progressive advancement after its origin at Psychoanalysis, also with the growing rate of realistic writing in literature. Jonathan Franzen, Contemporary American Novelist, as an outcome of his unique realistic writing, has taken heed of the compelling necessity to introduce the theme of distorted and dysfunctional family systems in his novels efficiently. This Paper attempts to analyze and consciously present the range of heterogeneous psychic impacts and varied victimization responses that a dysfunctional family system precipitates in human lives taking Jonathan Franzen's characters 'Pip' and 'Patty' from his novels *Purity* and *Freedom* respectively. The differences in the responses from the selected victims from the novel are categorized and evaluated pertaining to its corresponding psychological theory evaluating the nature of realistic writing carried out by Franzen. There is also a great deal of emphasis laid on the legacies that a psychologically backed up literature brings forth to those clinical and scientific streams venturing to study Human behavior. Research in the above discussed perspective in literature would be of high significance in the aspect of leaving room for literature to aid the society by schematizing and aligning some of the puzzling areas of Human behavior with its traditional narrative teaching. Appreciative recognition, welcoming more realistic works without losing the aesthetic touch of art is the expected additional contribution of this Research.

Index Terms - Dysfunctional Family System, Realism, Aesthetics, Victimization Responses

I. INTRODUCTION

Every family has its own dark time with conflicts and issues but dysfunctional family differentiates itself from the former by long term destructive patterns like abuse or emotional neglect or guilt tripping targeted at any one individual of the family. The victims of the dysfunctional family systems get to deal and combat with the most adverse psychological problems for the rest of their lives. There are so many studies conducted in the field of clinical psychology focusing the victim's mental stability after enduring dysfunction in the family system. Literature, on the other hand, has never failed to feature dysfunctional family systems in its fabric from the beginning. Some prominent dysfunctional families to be noted in literature are Eugene O' Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and William Faulkner's *I Lay Dying*. But Jonathan Franzen has discussed the same issue with better clarity and reality in his novels. Among numerous psychological issues that Jonathan Franzen, by his realistic writing, has thrown light on, Dysfunctional Family System and its impacts had been the major one drawing increased attention from the readers. This Research is assigned to study the relevance and further, the extent of realistic portrayal in Jonathan Franzen's works *Purity* and *Freedom* (taking the characters Pip and Patty respectively) with the widely accepted and used psychological theories in Clinics, inclusive of evaluation in the range of psychic impacts of dysfunctional family systems and the corresponding varied victimization responses of the Dysfunctional Family roles.

In the novel *Purity*, the character Pip is introduced as the daughter of an anonymous father and an emotionally detached mother. Throughout the novel, she is set up to face unmet financial needs in her life where she struggles to manage even her educational expenses. Though she tries to discover the truth behind which her father was, she is continuously rejected by her mother in the matter. This leaves Pip deprived of the necessary nurture and emotional connection that a child must receive from parents. The story also shows traces of abuses faced by pip's mother on her maternal life which becomes the causative factor for her resentment. This reflects in the relationship that she has with her daughter Pip. The abusive maternal life of Pip's mother made her inefficient in the aspect of being a mentally and emotionally supportive mother to her daughter. When the very fact of absent father itself is detrimental for Pip's well-being, her mother's resentment and detachment seems to be the tip of the iceberg.

In the novel *Freedom*, the character Patty is sketched as a skilled basket ball player with high competitive spirit born to a Lawyer (father) and Professional Democrat (mother). Patty grew up in the family with continuous belittling by her own father and

siblings. Her physical boundaries were never considered and respected that she didn't enjoy any of her family gatherings. It was always patty charged to make compromises with her siblings in the family, having no space for her own. The denial for her needs by her parents went to a higher degree that even when she was raped by Ethan, a son of their family friend, they still chose not to react to it just to maintain the relationship between the families. Patty had a hard time pondering over the way she is always neglected and never considered which is clearly explained in the lines

“Even when she thinks of people who are oppressed around the world and victims of injustice, and how they must feel, her mind goes back to that hour.... such as injustice of an oldest daughter having to share a room and not being given” (Franzen, 2021 p. 39).

Both the Families brought in by Jonathan in his two selected novels matches the pattern of a Dysfunctional Family system where the chosen characters of the stories finds it hard to stay in harmony with the functioning of the family system for long term. There is a constant instability running through the families.

2. METHOD

Since it is very clear from the selected works of Jonathan Franzen that he has employed the theme of Dysfunctional Family Systems in his works deliberately, it would be more appropriate to study the extent of his realistic writing in the subject under a psychological lens as it deals much with human behavior. Therefore Psychological criticism is the chosen method of research in this paper.

Psychological criticism in Literature refers to study of an Author or the characters in his works based on a psychological theory. It is the inner motives behind the action of the character or the author that has the most importance in psychological criticism rather than the action itself. Psychological criticism helps one to understand a literary text at a deeper level.

When a work or author is claimed to be realistic in writing, it is mandatory that there is a factor of 'reality' or 'realness' in the characters or in sequence of events presented in the work. The nature of reality in the works pertaining to realism could be evaluated with various benchmarks. For a psychologically backed up piece of art or work has the factor of 'reality' more embedded in it since it deals with the inner motives or at least the 'experienced truth' of Human behavior. So analyzing the nature of a literature work, within a framework of a Psychological theory that is widely accepted by psychologists, used in clinical science for medical purpose could be the most appropriate significant method to investigate its realistic nature.

3. RESEARCH & INFERENCES

For a better clarity in research, it is classified into two sections. First section deals with the dysfunction in the parenting styles portrayed in the chosen novels. In other words, the first section research is focused on the causative factors for Family Dysfunction on the basis of Diana Baumrind's Parenting Styles. Second section deals with the categorization of the victims and studying the aftermath of victimization. In other words, it deals with the effects of the Dysfunctional Family System on the basis of Virginia Satir's dysfunctional family roles. The Third section deals with evaluating the extent of 'reality' in Jonathan's works with the degree of relevance in between the effects of fictitious dysfunctional family systems of Jonathan Franzen and the scientifically regarded dysfunction in a family.

3.1 CAUSES FOR FAMILY DYSFUNCTION

The attempt to study the causes for family dysfunction could be regarded as the measure directly proportionate to studying the nature of parenting styles involved inside the family as far as Jonathan Franzen's work is concerned. As Jonathan's works, deals highly with the psychological issues revolving around families. Though there are multiple origins of dysfunctions in a family, Jonathan particularly gives attention to the issue of varying Parenting styles. Parenting styles in the novels *Purity* and *freedom* could be clearly understood and studied with the application of the most commonly used four different types of parenting styles in Psychology which was a derivation from the work of Diana Baumrind, a developmental psychologist from the University of California in 1960s. According to Baumrind's Parenting style theory, there are four types of Parenting Styles. They are 1. Authoritative 2. Authoritarian 3. Permissive 4. Neglectful.

Pamela Li in her article, '4 Types of Parenting Styles and Their Effects on the Child', elaborated the effects of each parenting style. She primarily outlines the four types of parenting style as follows

- a. Authoritative Parenting Style -highly demanding &highly responsive.
- b. Authoritarian Parenting Style- highly demanding &low responsive
- c. Permissive Parenting Style -Low demanding & highly responsive
- d. Neglectful Parenting Style - Low demanding & highly responsive

In the novel, *Purity*, Pip's mother seems to be a mentally unstable woman, with "Chronic Depression"(Franzen, 2015 p. 4). She had a traumatic marital life, facing all kinds of abuses caused by her "dangerous" (Franzen, 2015 p. 33) husband.

"He abused her physically, but he was very cunning about inflicting pain without leaving serious marks on her, and he was even more abusive psychologically." (Franzen 2015, p. 33)

This drastically impacted pip's mother that she decided to leave and never reveal her husband to pip (despite multiple efforts by pip to know it)in order to protect pip " I did to protect you"(Franzen, 2015 p.33) from him. This decision of Pip's mother left pip with a childhood devoid of fatherly figure and also full of financial crisis. Mentally unstable mother and an absent father made the parenting style portrayed by franzen to be categorized under Neglectful Parenting Style where there is nothing significant taking place emotionally or materialistically in the family to support pip.

In the novel *Freedom*, Patty struggles with parents who continuously “enjoyed inflicting” (Franzen, 2021 p. 33) by making fun of her in front of her siblings. The whole family “amused tormenting patty, teasing about certain factual errors she’d made many years earlier” (Franzen, 2021 p. 34). No one in the family was “respectful of her Physical boundaries” (Franzen, 2021 p. 35). Though she was a skilled player, she was never recognized as her siblings were supported by her parents. Achievements by patty meant nothing to her parents. Every negative aspect of the family was balanced out by burdening and torturing Patty. The act of Patty’s Parents isolating and torturing patty makes it a clear evidence to get this parenting style added under Authoritarian Parenting style where it was expected more and given less.

Based on the nature of Parenting Styles outlined above, Pip’s mother followed Neglectful Parenting Style and Patty’s Parents followed Authoritarian Parenting style. Both of these parenting styles have got their own varied adverse effects on the characters.

3.2 VICTIMIZATION AND ITS CATEGORIZATION

In order to categorize Jonathan’s dysfunctional family to a dysfunctional family medically regarded, on the basis of scientific background, the most widely accepted dysfunctional family roles by psychologists over years, built in the foundation of Virginia Satir’s family therapy is taken into account. The dysfunctional roles discussed in the theory include A. The Hero –one who tends to be increasingly perfect and excelling, denying the underlying imperfections of the family. B. The Scapegoat – One who identify the dysfunction in the family and reflects on it but unconsciously seen as the problematic one by rest of the family members. C. The Lost Child –One who is continually disregarded and never considered, having no significant place in the family. D. The Mascot – One who is occupied to relieve family tension and conflicts through humor due to high functioning anxiety behind. E. The Enabler –One who acts as the subordinate of the parent enabling the unhealthy behavior of the family. F. The Golden Child –One who is regarded as ‘favorite’ by the parents and is projected upon with all positive qualities.

The extent of realism in the portrayal of Dysfunctional Family roles by Jonathan is also studied with a cross analysis between the theoretical characteristics and its relevance in the sketched characters ‘Pip’ and ‘Patty’ by Jonathan. Based on the sequence of events penned in the novel, the character of Pip could be referred as ‘the lost child’ and the character of Patty as ‘the scapegoat child’.

According to various Dysfunctional Family roles in the field of clinical psychology, the lost child always feels isolated and neglected by the family. The unmet financial and emotional needs of Pip by her parents in the novel made her a lost child. The theory suggests that lost children of Dysfunctional families create their own self defeating belief systems among which two important belief systems are taken for the purpose of studying, the character Pip.

a. “Grown lost children form what is called omnipotence guilt, the belief that they have the power to do anything and the guilt because they cannot” (Davis, 2020)

Pip in the novel continues to have false hopes that she herself can help her mentally unstable mother to attain her normality. Added to the issue, is that Pip considers helping her mother recover from mental illness at the cost of her own mental health. Her belief that she has power to do anything, an outcome of her lost child syndrome was the reason for her to have unattainable goals. There was also anger and frustration caused in Pip because of her inability to attain her unachievable goals. This nature of pip is clearly shown in the novel by Jonathan.

“... she loved her mother. Pitied her; suffered with her; warmed to the sound of her voice; felt an unsettling kind of nonsexual attraction to her body; was solicitous even of her mouth chemistry; wished her greater happiness; hated upsetting her; found her dear; This was the massive block of granite at the center of her life, the source of all anger...” (Franzen, 2015 p. 5)

b. “Another harmful belief is that people are too unreliable, unstable and fragile for them to depend on them. As children, these lost adults were faced with grown-ups in their family who could not be relied upon to meet their physical and emotional needs. So it makes sense they would believe this in adulthood” (Davis, 2020)

The absence of basic needs met by Pip’s parents, made it very hard for her to trust people. The sole reason for her inability to trust people relies in the very fact that her mother did not choose to reveal the truth about her father, when she needed to. Standing alone, unable to pay her university tuition fee of \$130,000 has left her mind with scars that she never chose to trust anyone. “Because I don’t trust people, pip said” (Franzen, 2015 p. 21); “I don’t trust people, Pip’s face was growing hot” (Franzen, 2015 p. 22)

Patty, in the novel *Freedom* could be regarded as scapegoated child because of the negative projections made her Dysfunctional family. Unlike Purity, it was not only the lack of emotional nurture or care, rather it was purposeful neglecting of private space, for Patty like burdening her with adult responsibilities, compromises and targeting shame and blame projections by singling out from the whole family. The theory of Dysfunctional Family roles suggests few vital outcomes of the scapegoated child which are selectively chosen to cross analyze with Jonathan’s character Patty.

a. “... but typically very little the family scapegoat does is acknowledged or valued. Driven and often talented, perfectionists/achievers may develop great capabilities, but they tend to struggle with a harsh critic, a need for control and unrealistic standards for themselves and others.” (Hall, 2019)

Though Patty was a highly talented sports player, she was never appreciated for her strengths just as her artistic and capable sisters were appreciated by her parents. The unfair treatment given by her family on a continuous basis was internalized in her mind that she never felt good enough despite her successes which is clearly picturized by Jonathan in the following lines

“... she was usually one of the shorter players on the floor, which in a funny way reminded her of her position in her family”(Franzen, 2021 p. 38)

Being not validated by her own family, Patty developed the habit of searching validation from the places where she must not or cannot be validated.

b. “Unable to get their needs met or process their frustration in healthy way, they compensate for feelings of powerlessness through defiant behavior.” (Hall, 2019)

‘Normal’ love and attention seemed alien to Patty that resulted in her, despite her supportive husband (Walter), actively indulging in an extra marital affair with a person named Richard who never seemed to fully validate her. The impact of being scapegoated and not validated was so high in her that she was convinced that it is important for her to gain validation from the person that has nothing to do with her life instead of her own husband. Her unconventional way of seeking validation at the cost of her own marital life is evident through the following lines she speaks to Richard about her husband Walter.

“.. I have no interest in kissing Walter... Walter you never have to get tired of, because you don’t feel like kissing him. You can just be close to him forever.” (Franzen, 2021 p. 182)

3.3 INFERENCES

Besides being obvious that this research has taken a Psychological approach based on medically supported theories, to evaluate the factor of ‘reality’ in the work of Jonathan, it has also opened doors for displaying the distinctiveness among every psychological fiction writers. Proper alignment in the aspects of psychological sketching of characters undergoing victimization and also in the impact of victimization resembling the models of psychological theories stands as an evidence that Jonathan Franzen’s works are consciously constructed with strong understanding and expert knowledge in the discussed psychological topic. From the absence of controversies and mismatches in the fictitious Dysfunctional Family System and psychological theory supported Dysfunctional Family model, it is understandable that Jonathan has not just touched the stream of psychology rather he has woven the entire fabric of his fiction with every factual information of psychology.

The clarity in the effort of Jonathan trying to portray the nature of dysfunctional family system also relies in the clear difference he has made in both the characters Pip and Patty. Each character was described as different types of victims of Dysfunctional Family System and their aftermath of victimization is given with their corresponding heterogeneous differences.

All the factors of expert knowledge in the subject chosen, conscious construction of themes without being diluted in the inevitable aesthetic nature of fiction and clarity in the portrayal of issues and impacts makes the work more realistic. The inner motives of the characters, being the anchors of the direction of the narration by the author, make the work psychologically realistic.

In order to answer the question of aesthetic limitation in realistic writing pertaining to Jonathan’s works, there is requisite of taking in Aristotle’s *Catharsis*. There are every elements of tragedy that arouses the feeling of the readers, present in his work, instead of just the replication of a psychological theory. The novel, despite its clear employment of proven realistic writing, it has never lost its basic ‘art’ form to make the readers feel. Blake Morrison’s criticism about the novel *Freedom* has proven it through the following lines.

“All the elements of tragedy are present in *Freedom*: war, rage, grief, jealousy, hubris, vengeance, illicit passion. Lousy childhoods leave their impress, parental flaws are passed But the protagonists—Patty especially—are constantly making new discoveries about themselves: redemptive insights, lessons in the contradictoriness of the human heart. And bleak through the prospects look, the reader approaches the last pages with some hope that the tale won’t end in tragedy”

4. CONCLUSION

To have literature in evaluating Psychology and vice versa has brought an extending scope in the field of Psychological Literature. Likewise, inclusion of other thrust areas in literature would give rise to multiple hybrid varieties in literature, also helping to the study the nature and functions of ‘art’ in a more detailed manner. This research significantly aided in the aspect of bringing the factors of aesthetics and realism to a common framework which long remained, an ignored limitation of realistic writing. Emphasis on old form of novel writing is also laid but relevance of realism and aesthetics to that of today’s contemporary expressionism and formalism requires a lot more research. This work would function as a precursor for such research. It would also facilitate in-depth research enabling a good possibility to have multi-dimensional approach in the discourse of studying realistic text.

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