
PORTRAYAL OF FAMILIAL INTERRELATIONSHIPS IN JENNIFER
JOHNSTON'S NOVEL, *SHADOWS ON OUR SKIN*

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Abstract

The present research paper aims at studying the portrayal of familial interrelationships in the novel, Shadows on Our Skin by Jennifer Johnston. The researcher intends to apply the socio-cultural approach to interpret the familial interrelations portrayed in the novel. The researcher intends to study husband-wife relationships, sibling relationships, and relationships between parents and children. It is concluded that the familial interrelationships highly deteriorate.

Keywords: Family, Relationships, Culture, Society

The Rationale of the study:

Family relationships have become an important current issue in modern times. Family is one of the important parts of a community. The family has remained an important institution in the life of an individual. It is such a place that provides man stability, comfort, security, support, etc. It gives shape to the personality of the member of the family. The atmosphere of the place where the family lives affect the relationships in that family. At present, the family interrelationships are affected by many factors such as sociological, cultural, political, economic, etc. In the age of globalization, the structure of the family has drastically changed. However, the study of familial interrelationships in the context of a socio-cultural perspective is important to understand the actual relationships and reasons behind deterioration.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1) To study the familial interrelations portrayed in the novel.
- 2) To study husband-wife relationships, sibling relationships, and relationships between parents and children.

Hypothesis:

Jennifer Johnston's novel, *Shadows on Our Skin* reveals the deteriorated familial relationships.

Methodology:

The researcher will follow an interpretive and analytical method for studying the novel. The researcher applies the socio-cultural perspective for the interpretation of the novel.

About the Novel:

Shadows on Our Skin is one of the domestic novels by Jennifer Johnston published in the year 1977. Johnston depicts the tensions in a middle-class family in the novel. The novel narrates a story of a Catholic family of Logans during the times of the Civil War in Ireland. The novel exposes the terrific life experiences of the members of the family due to socio-cultural and political factors. There are four members in the family including parents and two young sons Mr. and Mrs. Logan, Brendan, and Joe respectively. Johnston has presented how the structure of a family gets deteriorated because of the social, cultural, and political tensions. The unnecessary and unwanted burden and pressure of expectations and one's intrusion in the life of the other destroy the whole life.

Familial Relationships: A Socio-cultural Approach

Family is the most important unit of society. It is formed of a group of people of the same inheritance by birth or marriage. It comprises parents and their children and other relatives grandparents and in-laws. Murli Desai, as referenced in Sonawat, defines the family as "a unit of two or more persons united by marriage, blood, adoption or consensual union, in general consulting a single household, interacting and communicating with each other" (178). To add more information, Burgess and Locks define family as "a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption, consisting single household, interacting and inter-communicating with each other in their respective social roles, husband and wife, mother and father, brother and sister, son and daughter, creating and maintaining a common culture" (81). Both these definitions focus on blood, marriage, and adoption. These members of the family are bound not only by blood relations but also by care, love, and mutual

understanding. It creates homogeneity within the family. The family performs various functions such as social, cultural, economic, biological, and psychological. The members of the family are tied by the various relationships between husband-wife, parent-children, the sibling, the grandparents-grandchildren, and in-laws. There are various factors that strengthen the family bonding among members. Good communication, mutual trust, and understanding, mutual love and respect, mutual adjustment and compromise, equality, etc. are the important factors to have sound and healthy relationships among the family members. However, due to marital disharmony, generation gap, self-interest, domination, intervention, and communication gap, the family relationships are disturbed.

Depiction of Familial Relationships in the Novel:

Jennifer Johnston has realistically presented familial relationships in her novel, *Shadows on Our Skin*. Each and every relationship explores familial turbulences.

Husband-Wife Relationship:

The success of the marital relationship depends upon mutual understanding, love, care, trust, adjustment, respect, etc. between both the partners. Roles and responsibilities are equally assigned to both of them for maintaining a healthy relationship. Any miscommunication and misunderstanding may spoil the marital relationship. In the present novel, Mr. Logan is presented as a sick, drunken, war-wounded, bedridden middle-aged man in the family. Due to his ill health, he cannot move, so he has to depend on others for help. His wife, Mrs. Logan, works in a shop and earns money to run her household. The relationship between them is not harmonious and healthy. Mr. Logan's views toward her wife are negative. He does not like the neglect of his wife. It hurts him so much. She does not look after him. He feels unhappy as nobody in the family understands him. There is no good communication between husband and wife. He thinks that his wife has destroyed him totally. He tells his son Joe, "your mother has me destroyed with her tongue, she's a bitter woman" (*SOUS*, 22). This remark reveals the disharmonious relationship between husband and wife.

Father-Son Relationship:

Parent-child relationships include father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, and mother-daughter relationships. This relationship is the most important relationship in the physical and psychological development of children. Good treatment, support, love, care, etc. decides the growth of a child. Any miscommunication, domination, intervention, generation gap, ideological differences, etc. may cause for deterioration of a parent-child relationship.

Mr. Logan is presented as a true patriot who fights for the freedom of his nation even though he is crippled. His wish is that his sons should work for the cause of freedom. He tells his son, Brendan stories of the heroes and tries to motivate him to join the republic movement and fight against the British army. He supports and stands by the side of his son. He says, "I'm with you son" (70). This shows the father's belief in the son. Both of them believe in violence. There is a strong bond between them. Brendan is impressed by his father's radical patriotism and joins the IRA movement. There is a deep influence of Mr. Logan on his personality of Brendan. But this radical patriotism of his father ruins his life. He confesses "they gave me a gun...It was the gun finished me off" (SOUS, 202). This shows that the self-interest and radical ideology of Mr. Logan destroy the life of his son.

On the contrary, the relationship between Mr. Logan and his younger son, Joe, is a love-hate relationship. It is Joe who takes care of his father when Brendan is away from home. He daily brings him wine and cigarettes taking a big risk of attack from the soldiers. Even though Joe hates his father, there is a feeling of sympathy for him. There is no healthy communication between them. Joe dislikes his father's sickness, smell, crying, and ideology. He wishes that his father should die as early as possible so he can get rid of him. This thinking about his own father suggests a broken relationship. This presents the disturbed father-son relationship.

Mother-Son Relationship:

Mrs. Logan is presented as a very strict and bossing-type mother. She shows more concern for her family than the freedom of the nation. For her, the well-being of the family is first priority. She is more worried about the security

and safety of her sons. She does not want her son Brendan to get involved in the republic movement or any trouble. This shows her deep concern for her son. She wishes that his son, Brendan is safe in London and should not return to Ireland because if he returns he will join unwanted people and his life will come in danger. She is more protective in this case. But the son is more aggressive; he does not listen to his mother and joins the republic movement against the wish of his mother. This shows that there is no control of the mother over the activities of the son.

Her relationship with Joe is very passionate. She is deeply attached to him. She is much worried about him. The constant vigilance of the mother on the activities of her son irritates him. So he tries to avoid her. Further, due to extreme worry, she does not allow Joe to go outside and play with other children. Her too much attention, care, and protection disturb Joe's life.

The Sibling Relationship:

The sibling relationship includes the brother-brother relationship, brother-sister relationship, and sister-sister relationship. Brendan and Joe share a common room. The siblings grow together and share everything in common. This kind of relationship is marked by a love-hate relationship. In the present novel, Joe and Brendan share a common room which is shown small and congested. Johnston shows that they face difficulty in adjusting to the room. It is like an intrusion in one's life. This is proven at the end of the novel when Brendan intervenes in the lovely relationship between Kathleen and Joe. Joe saves Brendan by hiding the gun from the soldiers. This act of Joe is out of his love for his brother. This shows a good tie between the two brothers. Here, he does not only save his brother's life but also his whole family from the clutches of the army. The friendship between Joe and Kathleen is destroyed by the arrival of his brother, Brendan. He does not like too much intervention in their friendship. They love the company of each other, but Brendan tries to make unnecessary interference between their friendships and spoil everything. Brendan betrays Joe by telling the secret of Kathleen to the police. However, their relationship comes to an end. It is totally distorted. This relationship is

marked by betrayal and jealousy. Brendan also becomes the cause of a spoiler in the lovely and pleasant relationship between Joe and his mother.

Conclusions:

The study of the novel, *Shadows on the Skin* shows that the relationships between the members of Logan's family are not harmonious and healthy. The family relations depicted in the novel are quite authentic and realistic. Jennifer Johnston has focused on middle-class families and explored the social, cultural, economical, psychological, and political issues prevalent in contemporary Irish society. The characters are life-like and the situations are realistic. The shadows of the adults fall on the lives of the children. Joe Logan falls victim to such dreadful shadows of his brother and father. The Civil War has not crippled only the life of Mr. Logan but the complete family falls victim to it. The husband-wife relationship is on the verge of collapse. The deterioration in the husband-wife relationship is caused by self-interest, ambition, lack of mutual understanding, neglect, and dissatisfaction. The parent-children relationship is marked by parental domination, generation gap, and ideological differences. The disagreements and betrayal between them make relationships full of conflict, dissatisfaction, and hatred. Sibling relationships are determined by various factors such as parental treatment, elderly attitude, and the emotional atmosphere of the family.

References:

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