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Rewriting Masculinity through Fathers in Ian McEwan's The Child in Time and Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner

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Abstract

Fatherhood fiction provides the prism through which the malleability and moral aspects of masculinity can be questioned. Stephen Lewis of The Child in Time by Ian McEwan represents a grieved masculinity: "he could not talk, could not even breathe correctly; his sorrow had made a wall around him" (McEwan 87). His emotional detachment and ritualistic habits - like his obsessive organization of the toys of his dead daughter - show that "trauma exaggerates the socialization of stoic manhood, turning care into silent incarceration" (McEwan 112). The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini offers the concept of fatherhood as a place of moral and emotional bargaining. The authoritative figure of Baba is mixed with caring behaviors, Rahim Khan is a great example of a mentor, As Amir grows up to be a caring father to Sohrab, he says, "To you, a thousand times over", (Hosseini 152). These representations broaden masculinity to include vulnerability, moral bravery and amenable love. In comparison of these two texts, we get the idea of masculinity as a continuum: the stoicism of Stephen, who is devastated by the loss of loved ones, and the proactive approach to care, responsibility, and ethical behavior of Baba and Amir. Fatherhood in these novels is not just a social role, but a transformational power, which is modulate in terms of moral, emotional, and relationship aspects of the male identity. The paper sheds light on the way literature subverts conventional gender conventions and that grief, kindness and moral accountability are constituent parts of true manhood..

Keywords

Masculinity, Fatherhood, Emotional Vulnerability, Ethical Responsibility, The Child in Time, The Kite Runner

1. Introduction

Masculinity as a construct in literature is seen to be dynamic and molded by sorrow, conscience and social pressure. Fatherhood is an avenue of tracking these dynamics through which men bargain power, nurturance, and emotion. The Child in Time by Ian McEwan was written about the loss of his daughter, Kate by Stephen Lewis. He thinks, "the world is getting smaller, the light itself has forsaken him" (McEwan 92). McEwan describes grief as a condition of loss and grief as well as something that changes the masculine identity, limiting the expression and alienating the father in the concept of stoicism in society. This barrier filters the attempts of Stephen to approach the world, including "watching children playing: when he does it, he has a weird feeling of distance, as though he was an outsider in their play" (McEwan 119). The novel is therefore an example of how fatherhood under duress can be a place of tension between duty, emotion and social expectation.

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini offers a different paradigm of fatherhood in the form of a

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continuum of relationship and moral activity. Baba lives with a balance between authority and moral conscience, Rahim Khan supports and mentors him, and Amir transforms himself as a self-interested person into a responsible one. At the beginning of the novel, Amir comments, "I was jealous of his self-confidence, the manner in which he appeared to have authority without yelling at anyone" (Hosseini 23). But the weaknesses of Baba are also in full sight: "he was able to stand on his feet when faced with injustice, but the reader could see the shaking in his hands, the burden of fear under his bravery" (Hosseini 62). These situations show masculinity negotiated both in terms of strength and vulnerability. Subsequently, "Amir is so devoted to Sohrab - I held his hand as we walked... I did not want him to think I would abandon him" (Hosseini 236) - shows that fatherhood is one of the ways that personal guilt is turned into ethical and emotional accountability.

Comparing these novels brings out the opposite reaction towards sorrow, responsibility, and moral obligation. The withdrawal of Stephen is a stoic lament of grief, as the culture of which the manifestation of the masculinity of the emotional constitutes a vital part. It is also evident that "fatherhood can be viewed as the arena of the moral and emotional bargain as Hosseini's fathers have to cope with social and historical forces that require authority and empathy" (Sharabi and Tong 312). Fatherhood then emerges as a place of change where masculinity is made, tried, and relocated and vulnerability, care, ethical action are seen as part and parcel of real male identity.

2. The Emotional Castle: Fatherhood in The Child in Time

In The Child in Time, grief and social norms define fatherhood, and the identity of Stephen Lewis becomes a location of tension in terms of emotions. After the loss of his daughter, Kate, "Stephen feels heavily isolated: It was as though the air around him had become thick, every breath seemed to be an indication of space lacking something to fill it" (McEwan 95). The grief is both physical and psychological, it creates an invisible wall between him and the world and turns the traditional masculine stoic attitude into an airtight emotional safe haven.

The trauma is the prism through which Stephen tries to relate to his life. He notes as "he visits a children play ground, that they ran, shouted, laughed... and he stood outside it all looking through a glass that was not there" (McEwan 121). This imagery is employed by McEwan in order to externalize the emotional dullness that Stephen is in as a father can turn into paradoxical place: he is a protector in name only but is crippled by sorrow he has inwardly. This dissonance is even emphasized by professional obligations. Stephen looks back at a child welfare committee, saying, "I speak but my words sound like borrowed, hollow; I was a man to play a life that was no more mine" (McEwan 144). The novel depicts masculinity as staged under the pressure of trauma in which capacity of caring is dwarfed by loss.

The innerness of fatherhood of Stephen is also seen in dreamlike sequences. In one of the visions "he is in a pub where he is a boy and he sees his own parents: I was both parent and child, observer and observed, caught in a time which would not rest, not the past but a cross between the past and the present" (McEwan 138). These scenes depict the intersection between the past and the present and reveal that masculine identity cannot be distinguished without memory, loss, and a sense of unspoken duties of fatherhood. Slowly, Stephen is faced by his emotional loneliness. To his wife, "he admits that he can no longer live behind this wall; he has to attempt to experience life again in its fragmented nature" (McEwan 357). In this case, vulnerability is the initial move to reinstating relational and paternal agency. McEwan illustrates that true masculinity does not mean not feeling but being able to process grief and continuing to care, which means that fatherhood requires both stamina and moral attentiveness. The fatherhood journey depicted by Stephen Lewis paints the masculinity as an ordeal that is challenged by trauma, social

pressure, and relationship pressures. Isolation, ritual, and subsequent reconnection help McEwan to show how grief-related stoicism is just one pole, whereas emotional involvement, as challenging as it may be, is the core of paternal identity redefinitions.

3. Fatherhood in The Kite Runner: The Heart of the Father

The fatherhood in The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini is a complicated provision of power and responsibility and emotional connection, unlike the remote stoicism of Stephen Lewis in the novel by McEwan. Baba is a person who is both powerful and morally brave. At the beginning of Amir, Baba displays "manly courage by facing a man who is trying to rob a beggar: Baba stepped forward and his voice was calm but strong, and the man stepped back" (Hosseini 41). This intervention is a masculinity of justice and protective responsibility and not dominance. However, Amir sees his father as an "indication of the detachment of emotions of conventional masculine values: I could not look at his face, I was afraid that they would tell me questions that I was afraid to ask" (Hosseini 28).

Hosseini points out that fatherhood is not just about action but it concerns the prices of relations; that only authority cannot support paternal relationship. This gap is bridged by "Rahim Khan as a surrogate father who gives guidance but never imposes it: You have in you to be what he never thought of you being" (Hosseini 119). In this case, fatherhood is turned into an ethical mentoring which informs Amir of the new concept of manhood and responsibility.

The novel follows the progress of Amir through guilt and egocentrism to active responsibility and consideration. Raising Sohrab, an orphan son of Hassan, Amir thinks: "I am not going to lose him this time, again" (Hosseini 236). The fatherhood depicted by Amir in contrast to Baba focuses on purposeful presence, emotional work, and retaliatory action. Baba has the power to impose and restrain his emotions, something that Amir does not show in his fatherhood. Hosseini therefore introduces masculinity as a negotiated and performative realization that is achieved in decisions that embrace courage, empathy, and a long-term care.

These fatherly dynamics are emphasized by cultural and historical pressures. Honor and power are championed by the Afghan society, but war, displacement, and diaspora disrupt the hierarchies of the past and put fathers and sons into conflict, as the former have to adhere to moral and ethical principles and the latter to the laws of survival. According to Hosseini, "it was either the right or the safe thing, duty or conscience" (Hosseini 147). Fatherhood is a place of trial, when masculine principles are tried not in the abstract but in the concrete, in the real moral and emotional hardships.

Finally, Hosseini builds a continuum of fatherhood, with Baba and his authoritative bravery at one end, Rahim Khan and his mentorship and Amir and his transforming nurturing at the other. Masculinity is revealed as multidimensional and relational, being implemented in the context of protection and ethical decision-making as well as willingness to work with vulnerability. Fatherhood in this story is neither a social role nor mere practice but an experience that determines identity, both in terms of ethical performance and emotional attachment.

4. Comparing Polarities: charting the Masculinity Spectrum

The father characters in The Child in Time and The Kite Runner are on the extreme sides of masculinity, but collectively they help to comprehend that fatherhood bargains with the loss, moral duty, and emotional involvement. The stoicism that Stephen Lewis in the novel of McEwan is of the trauma bound type. He thinks after losing Kate: "He no longer felt part of the world, an outsider to life which had been his own" (McEwan 97). His sorrow creates an emotional wall that seals him off to relationship obligations including oneself as a father. The concept of masculinity here is based on perseverance and oppression wherein love is present,

but not allowed to be manifested without vulnerability.

Masculinity in Hosseini narrative is negotiated and performative, it is expressed through caring acts, ethical bravery, and engaging relationships. The way Baba demonstrates moral strength in society - standing up against injustice - is the opposite of his emotional detachment in the family since Amir remarks: "he was able to boss a room, but I never felt I really understood him" (Hosseini 33). Rahim Khan and Amir give fatherhood an extra meaning of mentorship and taking care of. Masculinity is attained through responsibility, empathy and reparation as Amir vows to Sohrab, "I will not lose him, never again" (Hosseini 236).

The juxtaposition brings out the differences with cultural, psychological, and narrative differences. Placing Stephen in the 1980s Britain, McEwan puts him in an environment of trauma and privatized grief enhancing the stoic ideals, and taking his fathers into war-torn society and diaspora of Afghanistan, Hosseini puts him in the area of honor, survival, and making moral decisions. Although the fathers are portrayed differently, in the same direction, both novels in their own way portray fathers as transformative, although in different ways: Stephen develops his soul inward, trying to reclaim the lost emotional capacity, and Amir is trying to develop his outwardly, converting the guilt into active care towards the next generation.

These contrasts are supported by stylistic decisions. McEwan has divided the narrative with the stream of consciousness, which reflects the loss of location by Stephen, insisting on interiority and the powerlessness of grief. The first-person retrospective narration by Hosseini gives the readers the firsthand experience of the ethical and emotional development of Amir and captures flashbacks vividly to predict the relationship responsibility in the future.

Another way in which the two texts are dissimilar is through symbolism (the empty toy shops in Stephen bring in a sense of frozen hope, whereas the kite in the novel by Hosseini is associated with the aspiration, ethical endeavor, and conflict between personal desire and a moral obligation) (Hosseini 150). Relating to each other, these figures of fatherhood trace out a continuum of masculinity: the withdrawal of grieving Stephen and the engagement in the relations of relative Amir as a morally responsible model. The novels imply that the true fatherhood is not about authority only but also about emotional presence, ethical choice, and vulnerability, proving that masculinity is not a monolithic and unchanging concept and is constructed through action, care and thought.

5. Beyond the Fathers: Implications to Literary Masculinity

Fatherhood as depicted in The Child in Time and The Kite Runner goes beyond personal stories to transform literary ideas about masculinity. The results of stoicism with a trauma burden are depicted by Stephen Lewis, "who tries to clarify to the society that it is not possible to express anything, as his comment, I cannot even reach her; my hands will not move" (McEwan 118) demonstrates the conflict between the social construct of the masculine and the father emotional weakness. This representation weakens the idea that manhood is characterized by authority and emotional repression, and that masculinity cannot be complete without the bravery to face grief and resume the life of relationship.

Hosseini on the other hand introduces fatherhood as moral and relationship work. The process in which Amir comes to terms with his past and his loyalty to Sohrab – "I held his hand tightly; once, I wanted to be the man who never left" (Hosseini 237) - shows that masculinity is practiced in terms of care, responsibility, and making moral decisions. The mentoring of Rahim Khan, the courage of Baba with the conciliatory quality thereof, and the reparative activity of Amir all positively indicate that "literary masculinity is not an idol; it is built and developed in the relations, historical experience, and the morally correct decisions" (Sharabi and

Tong 315).

Another theme that is brought out by these novels is the role of fatherhood as a teaching mechanism to the readers. The isolation of Stephen and the transformation of Amir make one think of the gender expectations of being a man. They unveil that paternal identity is inclusive of emotional work, moral accountability and adaptive endurance, that rejuvenate the definition of courage to incorporate weakness in addition to strength. According to one critic, "both McEwan and Hosseini break down the gender roles of masculinity, demonstrating that men are capable of being grieving, taking moral chances, and developing a compassion without losing power" (Seidler 120).

In addition, this comparative prism also creates new paths of literary investigation. What do postcolonial, diasporic or cross-cultural narratives show about fatherhood as a place of negotiation of masculine identity? Are queer, single or absent fathers able to challenge or push such constructs further? These novels provide an indication that masculinity is not absolute, situational and morally based thus inviting the readers to rethink what it means to be a man in various social, historical and emotional situations. Finally, according to the novels, fatherhood is not merely a social position, it is a living structure, within which masculinity is performed, experimented with, and reinvented, combining grief and moral duty and emotionality in a multidimensional ideal.

6. Conclusion

Both The Child in Time and The Kite Runner demonstrate that fatherhood is the test of renegotiating masculinity, where power, nurturing, sadness, and ethical duty cross over. Stephen Lewis is "a masculinity that is limited by traumas: his reflection, I cannot even put my hand on her; my hands do not want to move" (McEwan 118) describes the paralysis that the loss of a loved one puts on the fatherhood. McEwan shows that emotional suppressions, which are usually perceived as strength, can alienate men not only to their children but also to themselves, through Stephen. But recovery is also indicated in the novel; the slow opening of the emotional barriers of Stephen has shown that being vulnerable is not being weak but rather a component of ethical and relational fatherhood.

Hosseini, on the contrary, portrays fatherhood as a sequence of moral activity and social interaction. Baba is brave, yet his moral and emotional consciousness - "Even when he fell, he was the kind of man who never left him alone; he required responsibility and care, and I provided it to him" (Hosseini 63) - and Amir is reparative with the son, Sohrab, - "I held his hand tightly; for once, I wanted to be the man who never left him alone; he needed responsibility and care, and I gave it to him" (Hosseini 237) - portray masculinity as exercised through empathy, accountability, and Hosseini extends the literary portrayal of fatherhood to mention mentorship, moral courage and emotional investment to reveal that manhood cannot be dissociated with relational and ethical work.

A comparison between these two novels helps provide a range of masculine identity: the withdrawn and grief-filled Stephen to the active, ethically conscious father Amir. Both stories indicate that fatherhood is something that pushes men to balance the social norms with the emotional reality, which proves that masculinity is not an absolute notion that is constantly negotiated in terms of experienced and lived as well as ethical and relational roles. In conclusion, the texts are challenging the literary masculinity. McEwan and Hosseini subvert the monolithic stereotypes of stoic and unemotional men through the grieving, faltering, mentoring and repairing fathers. The role of fatherhood is turned into a place of ethical and emotional change, as true masculinity is also vulnerable, caring and morally present, in addition to being strong. As Amir in Hosseini remarks, "there is a way to be good once more" (Hosseini 152) - a line which echoes not only through the two novels, but which also implies that being a man means being as much about his ability to feel, act and take care as it does about his external powers.

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