



# Deconstructing the Traditional Family Representation in Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* and Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy*

Ndode Divine Halle(MA), Adamu Pangmeshi(Ph.D), David Toh Kusi(Ph.D)

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Faculty of Arts, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Correspondence email: [ndodehalle@gmail.com](mailto:ndodehalle@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**— This paper sets out to examine the traditional family in contemporary British fiction with focus on Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* and Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy*. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed many changes in the structure of family formation and family behaviour that resulted in a diversification of family forms. Consequently, it has become more and more difficult to use a general or universally acceptable definition to define the term 'family.' Using Jean-Francois Lyotard's decentring, or better still, lack of fixity as well as Louis Montrose's inextricable link between literature and history and Jacques Derrida's a 'decentered universe', the paper interrogates and deconstructs typologies of family set-ups emanating from the traditional family as depicted in Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* and Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy*. The paper therefore intimates that there is no 'death of the family' as heralded by some critics like Judith Stacey in her discourse geared towards 'rethinking family values in the postmodern age,' but rather a dramatic, and profound transformation. It further reveals that the literary representations of the family now include other types of families that have thus expanded the paradigm of the family to what is perceived in this study as triad, which, even though challenged, does not substitute the traditional family.

**Keywords**— family, representation, deconstruction, transformation, substitute.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The role and function of the family has drawn a great deal of attention from a variety of disciplines such as politics, history, religion and literary studies. Investigations about the family in the different disciplines have approached the concept from various points of view. For example, Norman Bell, and Vogel Edward in *A Modern Introduction to the Family* regard the family as "a structural unit composed, as an ideal type, of a man and woman joined in a socially recognized union and their children. Normally, the children are the biological offspring of the spouses" (1). On his part, Nicolas Glenn in *A Critique of Twenty Families and Marriage in Family Relations* sees the family as the center of reproduction, whose function has been of vital importance for traditional societies throughout history (21).

Since World War II, the western world in general

and Britain in particular have experienced radical developments and changes in the social, cultural, political and economic domains of life. These changes included shifts in the perception of gender and sexuality, changes in the attitudes towards homosexuality, lesbianism, among others. These developments and changes have profoundly challenged and crumbled not only the traditional family values, but they have also altered gender-based relations and roles in both public and private spaces, resulting in what Gill Jagger and Caroline Wright summarize in *Changing Family Values* as "the growth of domestic partnerships and decline in the popularity of marriage, as well as growth in the number of divorces, remarriage, single parenthood, abortions" (16). Simply put, the new trend of family interaction seems to be evolving towards creating alternative spaces and relationships for both man and

woman by distorting the hegemony of the heterosexual relations that were hitherto upheld in the traditional patriarchal societies. The consequence of this shift of focus in the contemporary British society is the undermining of the basis of traditional family values, gender relations, identity, and roles.

There have been several reasons behind the increase in single parenthood, since the 1940s. One of the reasons is the development of the feminist movement, which has continued to challenge patriarchal family values, male authority and perceptions, gender relations and roles particularly since the 1960s, together with all the practices that had limited before women's movements and rights, curbed their freedom and inculcated into their mind that they were inferior to men. Eventually, the women's suffrage activities have enabled them to gain some rights in that they have managed to shake off the chain which had locked them for ages. Hence, many women have preferred to live on their own without marrying or they have chosen to live alone after breaking up with their husbands. The second reason, and closely related to the first is that more women have received formal education, which has availed them of the opportunity to gain freedom and privilege in the public space. As a result, many women have started working, which has caused them to achieve their economic independence from their husbands, who had used their economic support as a master status to control women for ages. This corroborates with Stacey's claim in *In the Name of the Family* when she argues that women have more freedom than ever before to shape their family arrangements to meet their needs and free themselves from patriarchal oppression.

However, the development of single parenthood has also been viewed as a strong blow not only to the traditional family structure, but also to the stability and security of society in several ways: the continuity of a society in the past, which was based upon the well-formed family is disrupted. The family of the past was seen as the place to generate and promote culture and morality and then pass them on to the following generations.

The second half of the twentieth century has ushered in a paradigm shift in the patriarchal family system fostered by women's emancipation, education, a rise in divorce rate, the emergence of modern technology, among others. The emancipation of women and the subsequent changes in their role and status in the English society have undoubtedly led to a reconsideration of the relationships between men and women both within and outside the family. Besides, the rise of the educational level of women and their increasing participation in economic, professional, and other social activities outside the home have resulted in a dwindling of the traditional importance of the status of

women as wives. A major outcome of the education of women is an increase in divorce cases, which has been one of the most visible features of family alteration in most societies since the 1980s. In addition, the patriarchal concept of masculinity predicated around a male's breadwinning role and that had become a central tenet of post-war masculinity has been rendered untenable in the new post-industrial economy following the preference for technological skills. All of these developments and changes have endangered the traditional family.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine how families are depicted in contemporary British fiction, and how the alteration of family norms contributes to a redefinition of the concept of family. For centuries, the traditional nuclear family was perceived as the only possible form of family, while any other construct was out of place for such consideration. However, with the advent of globalization and ideological plurality, adjustments have become necessary. Concepts that stood unchallenged for centuries, such as race, nation, gender, and the family are being re-examined and re-defined to suit contemporary socio-cultural interactions. One of the problems plaguing the traditional family is the rampant cases of divorce observed in the selected novels, especially when investigated from the postmodernist's perspective of choice and lack of fixity or the absence of a centre, from the New Historicist's inextricable link between history and literary work, as well as from deconstructionist views of Jacques Derrida's a 'decentered universe.' The complexity of twenty-first century English society that has led to an adjustment in family life, universally speaking, is an important motivation to investigate the presentation of the family in contemporary fiction for, unlike in past centuries when family was one of the most standardized and uncontroversial institutions depicted in literature, contemporary societies have rendered the institution of the family dynamic and re-definable. This can clearly be seen in the fictional families presented in the novels of Nick Hornby and Hanif Kureishi. In the selected novels, the presentation of the family suggests a dislocation of the traditional norm thereby necessitating the need to attempt a re-examination and possibly a redefinition of the term 'family' in accordance with contemporary literary discourse and society.

## II. 'SPLIT-UP' MARRIAGES AS A REFLECTION OF FAMILY DISINTEGRATION

Traditional family, especially with regard to societal norms before the modernist and postmodernist eras, favoured a clear definition of spaces for both the man (husband) and the woman (wife) in the domestic spheres. Socially, the man

occupied the public space and had the responsibility of fending for the family while the woman stayed at home to carry out domestic chores and catered for the children. The identities of men and women as well as their professions and roles were constructed and categorized in line with this separation of space, since each space was associated with particular professions and roles to satisfy the social norms and standards of the society. Such traditional societies considered the man to be largely educated, independent, active, dominant, strong, and rational while the woman was regarded as being less educated, passive, weak, emotional, and economically dependent on man. Summarising the different roles of the sexes in *The Family in question: Changing Households and Families Ideologies*, Diana Gittins points out that the 'proper' role of the woman was deemed to be the full-time care of her children and husband, and children were deemed to require a childhood that inculcated in them the appropriate moral values and prepared them for adulthood, all in gender specific ways. Men played the role as economic providers, as representatives of the family in public sphere and as a source of moral authority (41). The men of the new middle classes used this gender division of labour within the family as the basis for their claim to moral superiority. They asserted the virtues of husbands assuming financial and moral responsibility over wives who on their part managed the domestic sphere.

Contemporary socio-cultural, economic and technological advancements have not only severely shaken the foregoing order but have equally re-positioned the social spaces with regard to gender roles. The question is no longer a sex-defined space but one of capability and gender role. In other words, the acquisition of education and skills as well as growing emancipatory voices in favour of women have destabilized and disintegrated not only the stable heterosexual marriage and relationships but also the very structure of the nuclear family, which used to be a model family before the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. According to Ali Gunes in "From Mother-Care to Father-Care: The Split-Up of the Traditional Heterosexual Family Relationship and Destruction of Patriarchal Man's Image and Identity in Nick Hornby's *About a Boy*," such contemporary revision of societal roles has affected marriage and the family as social institutions. Gunes notes that young men and women no longer see the importance of marriage as divorce rate has increased dramatically, causing the emergence of single parenthood (12). This tendency has negatively affected heterosexual relationships and hitherto accepted marriage norms and established roles and identities of man and woman. *About a Boy* depicts Hornby's vision of these shifts in the perception from the earlier family norms to the contemporary family dynamism. The

author demonstrates how the family structure and gender roles have changed in contemporary English society in which the novel is set.

From the outset, *About a Boy* announces 'split-up' of marriage relations and fragmented identities as a major concern of the novel. The opening statement of the novel, "Have you split-up now?" (1), suggests that marriage and family disintegration are recurrent themes in the novel. This is reflected in the utterances of characters such as Marcus, a twelve-year-old boy, whose mother (Fiona) and father (Clive) have divorced and now live separately. Marcus' ceaseless interrogation of his mother when he reiterates the question and phrase, "have you split-up now?", "you've split-up", and "we've split-up", emphasises that unstable marriage and family relationships are problems plaguing marriage and family life in his society. The recurrence of the phrase 'split-up' echoes this tendency of broken relationship in marriage evince not only the physical and psychological breakdown in the marital and familial relationships, but also a view that the old unity, harmony and togetherness of heterosexual relationships have been irreversibly distorted.

Moreover, the phrasal verb 'split-up,' from the semiotic perspective of Jacques Derrida, may also refer to the fragmented identities of children, following the separation of the married couples, since it visibly disturbs the psyche of children from broken-up homes. Due to the psychological impact of these battered relationships between father and mother, children are affected socially and psychologically. They are largely unable to establish a proper relationship in their lives. They are either introverted and anti-social or troublesome and exhibit abnormal social behaviours. Marcus' case is a typical example. As a child of the 'split -up' parents, Marcus experiences difficulty at school. He is bullied because of his 'hippy' lifestyle (10), owing to lack of adequate parenting. Marcus' behaviour, Kathryn Harrison holds, is seen in the lives of children of many single parents today (16). Through his lifestyle, Marcus could be seen as wanting to draw attention to make up the vacuum created by the separation of his parents. The narrator insinuates that Marcus and her mother are victims of divorce:

...Whenever he had been upset about anything before, there have usually turned out to be some kind of answer. ...one that mostly involves telling his mum what was bothering him. But there wasn't anything she could do this time. She wasn't going to move him to another school, and even if she did, it wouldn't make a whole lot of difference. He'd still be who he was, and that, it seemed to him, was the basic problem. (6)

The issue of single motherhood or single parenthood has drawn much attention as it has become a common issue in the postmodern society, which is characterised by choice. Discussing the problem of single parenthood, Gill Jagger and Caroline Wright in *Changing Family Values* explain, "lone motherhood means mothers parenting without the father of their child or children following marital breakdown, and, single motherhood means parenting by never married mothers" (30). This explanation fits squarely with Fiona's situation in the novel.

Since the 1940s, there has been a continuous increase in the number of women having children outside marriage and bringing them up as single parents, together with the number of women who single-handedly bring up their children after divorce. In *About a Boy*, Jessica, a member of the SPAT group (Single Parents Alone Together), represents a single mother who singlehandedly brings up her children. The number of divorce cases identifiable in the novel shows that there is a decline in the moral obligation of preserving traditional family values and heterosexual marriages in the contemporary English society. One of the factors responsible for this is the shift in the way family life and heterosexual marriages have been perceived since the 1960s. After this period, there have been increasing anti-family attitudes, approaches and views particularly among the young people in that they have seen the family, its values, roles and coded relationships not only as a burden but also as limiting their freedom; they have been less enthusiastic to take responsibilities and face family challenges.

The idea of family breakup is equally recurrent in Kureishi's *Intimacy*. The opening sentences of *Intimacy* announce a split up between the protagonist, Jay, and his wife, Susan:

It is the saddest night, for I am leaving and not coming back. Tomorrow morning, when the woman I have lived with for six years has gone to work on her bicycle, and our children have been taken to the park with their ball, I will pack some things into a suitcase, slip out of my house hoping that no one will see me, and take the tube to Victor's place. There, for an unspecified period, I will sleep on the floor in the tiny room he has kindly offered me, next to the kitchen. (8)

In the novel Kureishi presents a family relation void of genuine love. Besides, the postmodernist's notion of choice shapes the lives of Kureishi's characters like Jay which is reflected in his family life and even the family life of his friend, Victor, just before he is about to abandon his family/wife and two sons. Jay's reflections about his past

life, his fears, desires, and expectations reveal that he has no emotions for Susan, his wife. This lack of feelings provokes the desire to find his true love elsewhere. Kathryn Harrison in "Connubial Abyss: The Mysterious Narrative of Marriage" corroborates this view when she states, "Jay reveals himself to be a self-obsessed miserable man whose life is polluted by notions of romance" (86). Although he tries to find faults in Susan and thus gets an excuse to leave, it is revealed that he has been having various love affairs for years. Harrison qualifies him as one who suffers from "chronic unfaithfulness" (86), possibly owing to his desire to find true love. Jay is not committed to any of his sexual partners, and he does not want to accept marriage responsibilities; little wonder that he declares, "there is little pleasure in marriage; it involves considerable endurance, like doing a job one hates. You can't leave and you can't enjoy it" (50).

Jay's obsessive search for true love through a series of meaningless sexual encounters may also be a consequence of his feelings of entrapment in the family relationship with Susan and their children. The act of forming a traditional family by means of a contract, legal or religious does have a limiting effect on certain liberties of the partner. In a traditional family, there is a strong demand for sexual exclusiveness, not as a choice, but as an obligation. Our "genital love" according to Sigmund Freud is supposed to be of monogamous, natural and altruistic; that is, reproductive and heterosexual (25). Taking all these into account, it seems logical that to a character like Jay, marriage and family no longer represent a "safe harbour" (32), the end of search for one's soul mate and the ultimate goal in one's private life through which all social, cultural and biological expectations become realized. Instead, marriage is perceived as a restructure union, not just in the sexual sense, which pressures the spouses into behaving in a certain way.

Kureishi's *Intimacy* is marked by the continuous ambivalence between the protagonists' desire for romance, which involves a lifetime love with a soul mate, and the need to expose marriage as a "job one hates" as Jane Dizard and Howard Gadlin in *The Minimal Family* recognize the ambivalence in their sociological research explaining that "We may still wish for 'happily ever after', but it is no longer believable" (97). To show his contempt for the institution of marriage which cannot guarantee eternal love, but also to retain the appearance of "freedom," Jay, like Will and Duncan in Hornby's *About a Boy*, has never agreed to marry Susan, although they live together and have two sons. Despite the fact that "cohabitation does not resolve the dilemma inherent in any attempt to combine long-term commitment with recognition of each partner's need for autonomy" (142), and that (technically and in most Western

countries even legally), cohabitation with children counts (and functions) as a traditional nuclear family, Jay feels that he is making a statement by renouncing the traditional way: "I still took it for granted that not marrying was a necessary rebellion - The family seemed no more than a machine for the suppression and distortion of free individuals. We could make our own original and flexible arrangements" (*Intimacy* 60).

Gamophobia or the fear of marriage is on the rise in the twenty-first century. The novels under discussion suggest that marriage has unsatisfactory, burdensome and source of strife. In fact, Asif, one of Kureishi's protagonists, says "marriage is a battle, a terrible journey, a season in hell and a reason for living. You need to be equipped in all areas, not just the sexual" (39). It follows that in order to attain a successful marriage, one must almost be at par with medieval knights who were bestowed with all kinds of virtues needed to complete dangerous quests. The marital "battle" requires maturity, honesty, selflessness, persistence, strength, and many other qualities from the spouses battling to make it work. However, as Nick Hornby points out, young peoples' priorities have changed, and not everyone perceives marriage as worthy of all kinds of sacrifice: "monogamy is against the law because we're all cynics and romantics, sometimes simultaneously, and marriage, with its clichés and its steady low-watt glow, is as unwelcome to us as garlic is to vampire" (179). It may even be argued that the demythologization of marriage, that is, the loss of faith in the romantic version of it or the fear that one may not attain it despite the desire to do so, have fostered a cynical attitude towards marriage and family as a means of self-preservation, which is demonstrated by characters such as Kureishi's Jay who simultaneously searches for intimacy with a soul mate and looks down upon the marital happiness of others.

Consequently, instead of trying to start a family as soon as possible, young people today attempt to avoid sacrifice, especially for the benefit of others, and prefer to spend their time indulging in life's pleasures or working on their self-improvement. Nevertheless, centuries of human history has proven that it is not quite plausible to believe in the idea that being single is what people truly desire. Rather, it may well be claimed that the new media trend of promoting the happy, wealthy single person into an ideal we should strive for is a direct result of the economic circumstances. In the consumerist society, single people represent a very important market segment because in their lack of commitments that come with family life, they become dependent on the market place. Consumerism is important for sustaining the autonomy of the single person and the market place is a settling for social encounters, which is why the individual is very important for the current

economy. According to Dizard and Gadlin, research has however shown that the constant focus on the 'self' always creates satisfaction of limited duration and even those who are professionally successful, financially well-off and have an active social and sexual life, still report that something is missing.

As we consume goods, suggests Kureishi, so we also consume people, that is, relationships, blaming the effect of the capitalists' production for the failure of the traditional family. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels proposed the following:

By transforming all things into commodities, if (the capitalist production) dissolves all ancient traditional relations, and for inherited customs and historical rights it substituted purchase and sale, 'free' contract...the closing of contracts presupposes people who can freely dispose of their persons, actions and possessions, and who meet each other on equal terms. To create such 'free' and 'equal' people was precisely one of the chief tasks of capitalist production. (748)

This presupposes that the capitalists placed more importance on possessions at the expense of human beings. Such circumstances influenced a whole generation of people whom Kureishi refers to as the:

Privileged and spoiled generation. The children of innocent consumerism and inheritors of the freedom won by our seditious elders in the late sixties. We weren't much restrained by morality or religion. Music, dancing and conscienceless fucking were our totems. We boasted that we were the freest there'd ever been. (58-59)

Going by the quotation, importance is given to freedom in the postmodern society at the expense of moral values and religion. The protagonist of Hornby's *About a Boy*, Will Freeman, is a case in point. Will's freedom, or rather unattachment, that is, not being responsible for anybody, is not only symbolized by his last name, but is also realized through his lifestyle. He refuses to have intimate friendships; his romantic relationships are acceptable only as occasional sexual encounters and he even refuses to commit to a job because he lives quite comfortably off the royalties for a Christmas song his father wrote. Mesmerized by the ideology of simulation and consumption, he represents the contemporary individual who wishes to indulge in all sorts of pleasures, to be free and not responsible to anyone as seen below:

Will wondered sometimes how people like

him would have survived sixty years ago. People who didn't really do anything all day, and didn't want to do anything much, either...there were no daytime TV, there were no videos, there were no glossy magazines which would have left books. Books! He would have had to get a job. Now, though, it was easy. There was almost too much to do. You didn't have to have a life of your own anymore; you could just peek over the fence at other people's lives, as lived in newspapers and East Enders and films. (7-8)

This contrasts sharply with the postmodern society where the notion of choice and the absence of a centre has rendered the traditional family irrelevant. Postmodernists such as Judith Stacey argue that recent social changes such as increasing social fragmentation and diversity have made the traditional family more of a personal choice and as a result, it has become more unstable and more diverse. She intimates further that we no longer live in the modern world with predictable orderly structures, such as the nuclear family. Instead, society has entered a new chaotic postmodern age. Will Freeman is an example of postmodern humanity. This can be portrayed in the carefree life he lives. He wants to live as an island. He says:

In my opinion, all men are islands. And what's more, now's the time to be one. This is an island age. A hundred years ago, for instance, you had to depend on other people. Whereas now, you can make yourself a little island paradise...and I like to think that, perhaps, I'm that kind of island. (46)

Will Freeman is a perfect model for the possessive individual, Stuart Hall's designation for the self-reliant person whose primary goal is to acquire wealth and property. As an independently wealthy man, he needs no assistance from anyone, and this independence allows him to disengage from the world around him. In fact, his consumerism is ultimately his only purpose in life. He does not only base his importance on what he has acquired, but he focuses on the price of his purchase as well. When a woman asks him why he doesn't put his head in the oven, his answer is that "there's always a new Nirvana album to look forward to" (250). His desire for the next rock album may suggest that he is interested in art, but his life is driven by the need and ability to acquire the next new thing. He mentions throughout the novel that possessions will cure any negative condition. He believes very strongly that purchasing power is the cure for every problem and a measure of a person's value. If he feels insignificant, the carefully chosen purchase will restore his self-worth. If his world begins to look a little bleak, he can always buy

something to make his problems disappear. The trials of life are reduced to matters of exchange. Will's reliance on wealth and what it buys him fosters an aggressive selfishness, a result desired by Thatcher's administration which Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques call "the ideology of selfishness, one of the main underpinnings of Thatcherism" (251).

Besides, Will embodies the "meanness of spirit" which Salman Rushdie attributes to Thatcherite Britain. His selfish individualism translates into a cruel indifference for others. He often reveals the Thatcherite stance that every person must fend for himself. If other people do not have what he has, then they have gone wrong somewhere in their lives, and he should not be expected to supplement their finances. Will's ideology is clear; he does not want people to insinuate themselves into his posh, uncomplicated life. In fact, his sentiments amount to little more than an echo of the conservative manifesto. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques explain that in Thatcher's Britain "the road to salvation lay through people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. The only acceptable motive for action was self-interest" (251). Will ensures his own self-being, and he wants Fiona and others to do the same:

You had to live in your own bubble. You couldn't force your way into someone else's because then it wouldn't be a bubble any more. Will bought his clothes and his CDs and his cars and his Heal's furniture and his drugs for himself, and himself alone; if Fiona couldn't afford these things, and didn't have an equivalent bubble of her own, then that was her lookout. (67-70)

Will is a little more than a social Darwinist. Fiona's bubble is not the government's concern, and it certainly is not Will's either. Margaret Thatcher once told a group of entrepreneurs: "The only thing I'm going to do for you is to make you freer to do things for yourself. If you can't do it, I'm sorry. I'll have nothing to offer you" (236). Will is a product of this ideology. He believes that his indifference towards others is both natural and healthy.

Moreover, the fact that a single person commits to a relationship in ways that the consumer commits to commodities keeps one continually dissatisfied because it leaves hardly any possibility for achieving true intimacy: "Jessica and Will split up when Jessica wanted to exchange the froth and frivolity for something more solid: Will had missed her, temporarily, but he would have missed the clubbing more" (10). This shows that Will values commodities (things) more than human beings. The "clutter" of family life seems like "disgrace" (8) to Will and he doesn't even want to spend time with friends who have a

family: "he had no use for them whatsoever. He didn't want to meet Imogen, or know how Barney was, and he didn't want to hear about Christine's tiredness, and there wasn't anything else to them anymore. He wouldn't be bothering with them again" (10). One could claim that, paradoxically, under the auspices of the humanistic psychology that fosters self-realization, the prevailing human attitudes, values and beliefs have become distinctly hedonistic, if not selfish and thus less humane in nature.

The reluctance to take up family life often does not simply result from the desire for personal freedom and independence, but also from fear of failure: "What if I am not good enough to be a husband or wife, a mother or father"?(24). Yet, because they need to present themselves in such a way as to be 'marketable', single people cannot afford to show their vulnerability. Instead, searching for some of external reassurance that they are not cowards or failures because they are single, they like Will Freeman read magazines and books that tell them that being single is "cool"(24) as evident in Hornby's *About a Boy*.

From the forgoing analysis, it is established that divorce and the lack of interest in marriage are recurrent as far the traditional family is concerned. The reasons for this include individualistic ethos, postmodern view of life, among others. This therefore gives room for other family forms to come to the fore in addition to the traditional family.

### III. THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FORMS OF FAMILY

The traditional family does no longer occupy the centre stage in the postmodern world. This therefore means that there is lack of fixity, what Jacques Derrida refers to as a 'decentered universe' (10). According to him in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", the word has lost its value, as language does not reflect the world we live in, but shapes it so that we end up seeing things not as they really are, but as we think they are, or, in other words, as we interpret them. A 'decentered universe' is a world which has lost its points of reference; it is a universe in which nothing is certain anymore, since the concepts which previously defined its center have lost their value and thus do not represent reliable points of reference anymore as Peter Barry opines (64). This can be applied to the traditional family which has lost its values as a result of the advent of other family forms such as the single-parent family.

Concerning single-parent family, which is one of the representations of family, Jay's mother in Kureishi's *Intimacy* is a case in point. After having two boys, she got depressed because she had no life of her own as she says:

"Mother was only partially there, most of the day she sat, inert and obese, in her chair. She hardly spoke except to dispute; she never touched anyone, and often wept, hating herself and all of us... she was aware of it, in some way. 'Selfish', she called herself" (51). She was both unhappy for having children because "children stop you living" (61), and at the same time for being so selfish for not being a proper mother, just like other women are. With time, as she found a job, and even more so after her two sons left to live their own lives, she resumed the kind of life she once led with her husband: "when my brother and I left, our parents started going to art galleries, to the cinema, for walks, and on long holidays. They took a new interest in one another, and couldn't get enough of life... my parents went through the darkness and discovered a new intimacy" (52).

According to Jay's mother, the experience of having children, of being responsible for them is not an easy task. She proves that parenting can be very frustrating because it requires constant and utter selflessness. The only thing a parent may expect and hope for is the emotional satisfaction of having an offspring, but the risks and frustration seem to be much higher. Jay's mother struggles through the feeling that she has given up on her life and ambitions for the sake of her children and manages to find happiness again once her sons have grown up and become independent.

In addition, in *About a Boy*, Hornby deals with the negative outcomes of single parenthood in the 1990s of British society. For example, Will Freeman's new flirt, Angie, is a single mother who views single motherhood as a reaction against man's organization of woman's life in a way that fits his view of the world as well as his way of life as he says:

I'll tell you {Will} although he had missed much of the cogitation that had brought her to this point, when you're single mother, you're far more likely to end up thinking in feminist cliches, You know, all men are bastards, a woman without a man is like a. a. something that does not have any relation to the first something, all that stuff. (10)

As seen in the quotation, Angie as a single mother is disturbed, and angry with men and their view about single mothers due to their lack of understanding and concern, since she says that men think that women are nothing without men; their identity is not complete without men, so that women have to depend on men. Traditionally, a single woman was half alive without a complete identity; marriage was considered a school, where women would get their identity fully completed, so that single women had not been considered well in a traditional society. However, Angie

refuses the connection between the first 'something' and the next one, which obviously demands a woman to attach herself to a man. For her, it is a foolish idea; it is 'all that stuff' in the sense that being a single mother may have a meaning for her as an alternative way of family life as opposed to the traditional one. That is, being a single mother enables her to gain her identity and freedom. This equally illustrates the concept of choice in postmodernism. Individuals in the postmodern society have the right to go in for what pleases them not minding the interests of others. Social bonds like marriage are therefore irrelevant. What is important is individualistic ethos.

On the other hand, what is also equally important is that both men and women are victims of the traditional views which assign certain roles and professions for them as husband and wife, and they are unable to strip themselves off these views and roles, intimates Deborah Chambers in *New Social Ties: Contemporary Connections in a Fragmented Society*. Thus, Will Freeman is very much under the impact of the view of fatherhood culturally allocated to him, and this view obviously influences his interactions, decisions, thoughts, and behaviour with the opposite sex. He is bold and free in his attitudes in that he always thinks of how society and culture will view him. Eventually, Angie proposes a different view of fatherhood for Will, in which he will satisfy his need of fatherhood in an unconditional way that he will be with single mothers and children for a while and then will depart from them without any commitment to each other. During the talk with Angie about mothers and children, for example, Will begins to get excited at the idea of a family suggested by Angie. He, Angie and her three-year-old son, Joe, meet regularly; they go to Mc Donald's and visit the Science Museum and the National History Museum; they cruise in the river as friends without any obligation, and this 'new relationship' and the idea of 'fatherhood' fascinates Will:

He had convinced himself that fatherhood would be a sort of sentimental photo - opportunity, and fatherhood Angie -style was exactly like that: he could walk hand-in-hand with a beautiful woman, children gamboling happily in front of them, and everyone could see him doing it, and when he had done it for an afternoon he could go home if he wanted to. (11)

This implies that Will prefers a type of family lifestyle that will guarantee his freedom, and this cannot come from the traditional heterosexual family relationship, but from single parent family. In this case, the traditional family is not only relegated to the background, but does no longer occupy a centre stage. It therefore competes with other forms of family. This is a new kind of family relationship as well as

the new form of fatherhood and motherhood Will and Angie imagine; single fathers and mothers could meet and have sex and then live in their separate houses without commitment, yet it is quite different from the relationship of a father and mother in a traditional family. For example, Fiona has separated from her husband who abandons her and goes and stays with his girlfriend in Cambridge. Now she is a working single mother with her twelve-year-old son, Marcus, and has to face the difficulties of life alone at home as well as at work. But Marcus is not the only child whose parents live separately. There are, "a million kids whose parents have split. And none of them are living with their dads" (182). This is a contemporary family phenomenon and reality, taking place around the world: children without fathers.

Besides, contemporary fiction represents two kinds of families based on emotional rather than biological or legal ties: the metaphorical and the homosexual family. Metaphorical families are those in which (some) family members are neither kin nor bound by religious or legal contracts. Rather, they are a group of people who are committed to each other and who prove their commitments by permanent help, understanding and sharing of experiences. In contemporary fiction, the acknowledgment of these families does not aim to in the words of Kath Weston "oppose genealogical modes of reckoning kinship. Instead, they undercut procreation's status as a master term imagined to provide the template for all possible kinship relations" (213), the template being, of course, the tradition nuclear family. Nevertheless, starting families that are anything other than a traditional nuclear family is perceived as beginning of "destruction of family values" (314), Jodi Picoult intimates, which makes one wonder what "family values" are. To illustrate a dysfunctional nuclear family to which parents are unfaithful to each other, or a family with abusive members cannot be said to promote family values simply because it consists of two heterosexual parents and their biological child(ren). If, however, family values include love, commitment, safety, security, and integrity, then these values do not depend on the form of the familial unit.

Despite the fact that metaphorical families which is one of the focus of this paper, have not yet been legalized, contemporary fiction writers like Hornby and Kureishi recognize the fact that people connect with one another in various ways. Hornby's *About a Boy* describes the constitution of enlarge metaphorical family consisting of people who feel the need to connect and be close to people that they are not related to by blood or law. Will Freeman, the main protagonist is an immature thirty-six years old man who lives off the royalties for one of his father's Christmas songs. Being able to live comfortably without having to



work, he indulges in shopping, listening to music, watching TV and having a series of meaningless (sexual) relationships, rejecting any kind of commitment. After rejecting the fact that women who are single-parents also have trouble committing, he comes up with the idea of attending a single parents' group as a new way of picking up women suitable for short-term relationships. At one of the single-parents' meetings, he meets the twelve-year-old, Marcus whose mother suffers from depression, is suicidal and overprotective because of the fact that he mostly interacts with his mother, and has no idea what teenagers do and like. Marcus becomes the target of bullies and has a hard time at school. Their meeting is crucial for both Marcus and Will since they begin to help each other in their mutual struggle to achieve maturity. Will is able to show Marcus how to be 'cool' and less afraid of life, and at the same time, begins to appreciate the value of a familial relationship, and thus, deals with his fear of commitment. As the story progresses, both of them meet different people who all become a part of their metaphorical family. It includes: Ellie, a rough, fifteen-year-old girl who is constantly in trouble at school and who 'adopts' Marcus as her protégé and friend, Marcus' mother, his father, his father's new girlfriend, his father's mother, and finally Rachel, a single mother who has a son named Ali about the same age as Marcus, and with whom Will falls in love. By the end of the novel, they all function as a large family; they meet for holiday and important events, and provide support and love to one another. The novel is a "coming of age" (41) story on several levels. Not only do both Will and Marcus mature thanks to the help of their family members, but the institution of family seems to mature as well, through the ability to overcome and function without the unreliable formal demands of blood and law.

In addition, thinking about his life, Marcus realizes that his "first sort of life" (21), which implies the time before his parents got divorced has ended, forever indicating symbolically, also the end of the traditional family in general: "The first sort of life had ended four years ago, when he was eight and his mum and dad had split up, that was the normal, boring kind, with school and holidays and homework and weekend visits to grandparents" (3). The second sort of life includes more people, more places, nothing is steady; there is no security of a home or a steady relationship with adults who take care of him: "the second sort was messier and there were more people and places in it: his mother's boyfriends and his dad's girlfriends; flats and houses; Cambridge and London. You wouldn't believe that so much could change just because a relationship ended" (3). The breakdown of his nuclear family has left a hole in his life because his suicidal mother was incapable of creating a feeling of safety and belonging that a family

typically provides. Her suicide attempts to make Marcus painfully aware of the fact that at any time he could be left alone in the world. This prompts him to the conclusion (or, rather, realization), that the most important function of the family is taking care of each other and making sure one is not alone in the world. He also realizes that this function needs to be of a permanent nature, and that it is not important who your family is, but simply that there actually is someone you can count on: "Two wasn't enough, that was the trouble. He'd always thought that two was a good number, and that he'd hate to live in a family of three or four or five. But he could see the point of it now: if someone dropped off the edge, you weren't left on your own." (75).

For Marcus, it makes no difference whether he is actually related to the people who will take care of him or not. They do not have to be kin or bound by some kind of contract. What connects people into his/any metaphorical family is the emotional component of a relationship. Because the circumstances of his life have taught him very early on that a legal contract does not prevent the family from falling apart, Marcus very maturely realizes that people need to want to be together. From that moment, he works hard at creating relationships that would alleviate his loneliness and fear, until, by the end of the novel, he becomes a part of a large family. Will, who is neither romantically nor legally connected to Marcus, and his mother, Fiona, comes to realize that he is becoming a part of a new kind of family consisting of kin, ex-spouses and friends as he arrives for Christmas lunch at Marcus' house:

There was Marcus' dad, Clive, and his girlfriend, Lindsey and his girlfriend's mum, six of them altogether...Will didn't know that the world was like this. As the product of a 1960's second marriage, he was labouring under the misapprehension that when families broke up some of the constituent parts stopped speaking to each other, but the setup here was different. (177)

Although Marcus' parents are divorced, they still care for Marcus and each other's benefit, which allows them to be a part of a metaphorical family even though their original traditional family has collapsed. Family, whatsoever its constituent parts may be, gives Marcus a sense of security, a sense of belonging and an inner strength one needs to cope with everyday's events:

I can't explain it, but I feel safer than before, because I know more people. I was really scared because I didn't think two was enough, and now there aren't two anymore. There are loads. And you're better off that way. But, see, I didn't know before that

anyone else could do that job, and they can. You can find people. It doesn't really matter who they are, does it, as long as they're there...because you can't stand on top of your mum and dad if they're going to mess around and wonder off and get depressed. (298-299)

The lack of support from family is one of the problems that necessitates the formation of communities in *About a Boy*, such as SPAT (Single Parents Alone Together). The name of the group underscores the fact that people cannot function well without understanding and support. The community (family type) functions as a place where people who need support can come when they need that assistance. Perhaps, the only requirements for inclusion are being a single parent and being frustrated. Suzie explains what she finds so refreshing about the group: "One of the reasons I like coming here is that you can be angry and no one thinks any the less of you. Just about everyone's got something they're angry about" (40). Although they are alone, without family to help them, SPAT becomes a replacement for family, uniting people who can offer one another emotional support. Knowing that they are not alone seems to help many of them carry on with their lives. The group is comprised almost entirely of women, and they meet to discuss their frustrations and vent their anger. The reasons for these women being on their own are a laundry list of men walking away from their families: "There were endless ingenious variations on the same theme. Men who took one look at their new child and went, men who took one look at their new colleague and went, men who went for the hell of it" (40). Nearly every member of the group has a similar story to tell of family members walking out on them.

The traditional nuclear family, which is highly stratified and has a definitive, strict form, follows binary logic as its root principle, much like the classical books or ways of thinking; the metaphorical family, however, represents an indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots that graft out the basic root, that is structure, whereby the family undergoes a flourishing development. While the basic family form is changed by 'natural reality', still the roots, that is the family's unity subsists (5). Like Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, the form of the metaphorical family seems a radical innovation; it in fact simply signifies an adaptation to the contemporary reality which favours multiplicity and equality over binary dichotomy and hierarchy.

Consequently, thanks to its focus on the feeling and meaning, rather than form, the metaphorical family gave Will "a glimpse of what it was to be human. He wasn't too bad, really; he wouldn't even mind being human on a full-time basis" (292). Isolated, cynical life is unfulfilling and people have both the desire and the need to make

intimate relationships with other people. What Hornby proposes in *About a Boy* is that this intimate relationship, typically considered to be epitomized in the form of a traditional nuclear family, need not be realized within this traditional framework. All one needs are people who are willing to commit and participate in each other's life, regardless of their blood or legal ties. Marcus' relationship to Will echoes Judith Stacey's proposal in *In The Name of the Family* that in a postmodern society, people should foster a collective, rhizomatic responsibility for children by drawing on our communitarian sentiments. She asserts that many childless adults are assuming pseudo parenting roles, or, para-parenting, to use her term, by forming, nurturing long-term relationships with children of overburdened parents (80), which in fact signifies and speaks for a more frequent forming of metaphorical families.

The new circumstances in Marcus' life caused not only by the fact that his parents got divorced but also by his realization that you get love from people other than your biological family made him aware of the fact that there are no guarantees in traditional relationships and that a traditional family is not a place of safety or security at all. Getting married is not "the right way" (46), says Marcus, and proposes a new way of organizing human life:

You know when they do those human pyramids? That's the sort of model for living I am looking at now...you're safer as kid if everyone's friends...if your mum and Will get together, you think you're safe, but you're not, because they'll split up or Will will go mad or something. I just don't think couples are the future. (304)

Marcus' idea of a human pyramid as an ideal model for living does not rely on the symbolic interpretation of this geometric form which implies a hierarchy with the person on top given the most power or importance. On the contrary, Marcus refers to the fact that in a human pyramid, everyone depends on one another, as everyone is equal and equally important. Everyone's limbs are mutually connected or touching in order to hold on to each other, and sustain each other's weight, and in effect, they strongly resemble the multiple roots of a rhizome. One has to be able to rely on others in order not to fall to the ground, but the people who form the pyramid and whom you trust your life with are not necessarily your kin. The pyramid works as long as everyone has the same goal, and has the well-being of all at heart. Unlike the traditional family, which can formally through a legal or religious contract still exist even after the emotional components of loyalty and love have long gone, the pyramid will collapse the minute anyone of its members decides not to hold the other(s) any longer. What is crucial here is the feeling of commitment which, as it seems, does

not have to arise in the form of a written (marital) contract that says one is bound to his partner for life because both the contract and the wedding band are just symbols of a person's dedication to someone. If the feelings disappear, the contract and the ring have no value at all.

This points to the conclusion that a metaphorical family, even if it lacks blood ties, genealogical hierarchy and marital paraphernalia, can be equally strong and valid as the traditional one. Although Gilbert Daniel's claim in *Stumbling on Happiness* that "we are more likely to look for and find a positive view of the things we're stuck with than of the things we're not" (201), seems quite logical, and suggests that we tolerate people we are related to more than we do those who are not our kin, it does not always hold true. Being 'stuck' often provokes the desire to 'break free', which is why a lack of a formal contract or a blood relationship may prove to be beneficial for the feeling of mutual intimacy because of the freedom of choice it implies. The idea of marriage as 'possessing' someone, or claiming the right on someone frightens certain people, and the sense of obligation deters them from relationship. Furthermore, it can cause people to take their family members for granted and become less attentive to their needs. The niche that exists between the human desire for intimacy and respect, and the refusal to either feel possessed or taken for granted are the points of origin of the metaphorical family.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how families are depicted in British fiction with focus on Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* and Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy*, and how that has contributed to a redefinition of the concept of the family. What this research has found as new is that literary representations now include other types of families next to the traditional nuclear one, expanding thus the paradigm of the family in such a way as to include several family forms, instead of transforming it from one model to another. The development of new family forms was enabled and fostered by the postmodern life which negates hierarchies, distrust grand stories and supports the emergence of individual voices with different tastes and preferences. Consequently, the analyzed texts show that the triad of the traditional nuclear family coexists with families that, although they challenge its forms, do not attempt to stand as a substitute for it. On the contrary, even though multiple new family forms have emerged, their members seem to construct their family identity in comparison with or in contrast to the framework of the traditional nuclear family as the 'ideal' model, if such exists.

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