

## Dysfunctional Family in Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*

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### Abstract

Family is the basic social unit of a society which frames the social skills of an individual. Dysfunctional family is an abnormal family where conflicts among the members occur and as a result physical and verbal abuse of family members may take place. Through the novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, Christina Stead explores the dysfunctionality which prevails in the Pollit family. This paper attempts to explore the psychological and emotional consequences of family dysfunction. The novel portrays the sufferings of women in the patriarchal society. Henny dislikes her step daughter Louisa and abuses her verbally and physically. Despite of Henny's treatment towards Louisa, she is able to sympathise with Henny because she knows how her husband and a male dominated society have grounded her. Henny and Sam remain unchangeable throughout the novel. When the tensions of the family reach its maximum, Louisa decides to kill her father and mother by poisoning the tea. Henny dies by drinking the poisoned tea and everyone thinks it as a suicide. Without taking the responsibility of the house, Louisa runs away from the home attaining her freedom. By portraying the Pollit family, Stead depicts the true emotions of a dysfunctional family and also its negative impact on the family members. This project attempts to bring out the importance of a healthy family for the moulding of a healthy individual.

### Key Words

*Dysfunctional family, patriarchy, mental and physical abuse, strained relationships, denial of freedom, economic pressure, lack of acceptance and love*

Literature is an art which represents life. It portrays the reality in life. Literature showcases the relationship between man and society. Society plays a major role in moulding an individual's character. The socio-political background of each age characterizes the works of that age. C. S. Lewis states: "Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it, it enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become".

Fiction emerges as a powerful medium to portray the life in its reality. Gao Xingjian observes: "It's in literature that true life can be found. It's under the mask of fiction that you can tell the truth". Family becomes a major theme in the modern fiction which showcases the fears, tensions,

aspirations and conventions of man in its most truthful way. Family is the basic social unit of a society which frames the social skills of an individual.

Family has a great impact on the characterization of a child. Family is a group of people who are connected by blood, marriage or adoption. The members of a family are depended on each other. Its main function is the reproduction of individuals biologically and socially. Family can be considered as the basic institution for children where they mould their basic character. Dysfunctional family is an abnormal family where occurs conflicts among the members and as a result physical and verbal abuse of children and women may occurs. Sometimes children growing in such an environment think it as normal functioning of the family and can imitate this in future creating another dysfunctional family. Dysfunctional families create stress and strain in the relationship between parents and children. A dysfunctional family sometimes fails to supplement the members with psychological and physical needs. These types of families hinder the emotional and social development of a child. The elder family members, especially parents, influence the child's life and to an extent it determines what a child would become in future. Susan Vreeland observes: "Where there is no human connection, there is no compassion. Without compassion, then community, commitment, loving-kindness, human understanding, and peace all shrivel. Individuals become isolated, the isolated turn cruel, and the tragic hovers in the forms of domestic and civil violence. Art and literature are antidotes to that".

The rivalry between couples has become a dilemma all over the world. Couples who fight at each other before their children cause behavioural and emotional damage to their children. Marital conflicts sometimes cause the alienation of the child. Such conflicts develop depression, terror and behavioural disorders in children. They feel insecure in their own home and sometimes develop a similar kind of approach towards their marital lives. The root cause of marital conflicts is the self-centred nature of couples; each one is unaware of their partner's psychological and physical needs. The emotional stress may lead a wife to become a child abusive mother. Financial strain is another root cause of conflicts in families. Insufficient financial resources create stress and strain in the relationship between husband and wife and this economic pressure heightens marital conflict.

Some of the major works of fiction that deals with dysfunctional family are *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* by Anne Tyler, *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie, etc. The theme of dysfunctional family is most memorable and can be related to the current scenario. The numbers of dysfunctional families are more in the contemporary age and fictions with such themes are relatable to many of the readers. The readers can clearly understand the emotional and psychological strains faced by each member of the family.

Christina Stead, the Australian writer deals with the themes of love, dysfunctional family and focuses on the intricacies of daily life. Her subjects include the desire for freedom, marital conflicts, child abuse, etc. Stead's most celebrated and popular work *The Man Who Loved Children* clearly depicts these subjects and portrays minute elements of family life. It showcases how a dysfunctional family works in its true sense.

Christina Stead was an Australian novelist, short story writer and a Hollywood screenwriter who has published fifteen novels and several short stories. The best known of her works are *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and *Letty Fox: Her Luck* (1946). She is known for her satirical wit and penetrating psychological characterisations. Her most celebrated work *The Man Who Loved*

*Children* was included in the “100 Best Novels from 1923-2005” by TIME Magazine. She won the Patrick White Award in 1974.

*The Man Who Loved Children* tells the story of a highly dysfunctional family, the Pollits and contains autobiographical elements. The head of the Pollit family is Sam Pollit, a character based on Stead's own father and this novel portrays the strained relationship between Stead and her father. Stead uses a third person narrative in this novel which helps to view the text from multiple perspectives and understand the psychological and emotional consequences of family dysfunction.

The setting of *The Man Who Loved Children* is the Baltimore-Washington area in the late 1930s. The novel explores the marital conflict between Sam Pollit and his wife Henrietta (Henny) Pollit. Sam is cheerful but self-centred whereas Henny is angry and eccentric. Sam and Henny live in their home, Tohoga House, along with their six children. Henny and Sam have difference in their manners and in the way of parenting and both are in rivalry with each other for years. Henny hails from a rich family in Baltimore and the financial stability of her family helps the Pollits to sustain. But the deep financial strife of Henny's family creates economic pressure and conflicts between Henny and Sam.

Henny feels herself as a suffering wife and feels downtrodden and trapped by the marriage. The fights between Henny and Sam go on throughout the novel. Sam considers himself as honest, loyal and suffering husband. He is egotistical and cannot understand the sufferings of others. Louisa (Louie) is the eldest of six children and she is from Sam's first marriage. Henny dislikes Louisa and abuses her verbally and physically, but instead of hating Henny, Louisa empathises with Henny and understands why her stepmother behaves as she does and starts to dislike her father because of his dominating nature and ignorance.

Henny has a secret affair with Bert Anderson. While she was in the town to visit Bert, Sam's elder sister, Josephine (Jo) visits the Pollits to question Bonnie (younger sister of Sam and Jo) who is the housemaid of the Pollits, over a relation she has with a married man. While these events take place in the family, the pressure between Louisa and Sam increases. Sam considers Louisa as his favourite child but he mocks at her because of her obesity. She contradicts her father a lot.

During the first days of her holidays, she stays with the Bakens, the family of her late mother and this is the only place Louisa feels a sense of companionship. Louisa and Henny visit Henny's family, which financially is in strain and pressure. The conversations between Henny, her mother and her sisters suggest that the conflicts Henny has with Sam are equally shared by many women in the patriarchal society.

Sam goes to Malaya and some problem with his colleague adversely affects his career. When he returns to Tohoga House, his power over the family appears to have weakened. Henny becomes pregnant and also her father's death further increases the economic pressure. Sam does nothing to regain their financial stability due to his pride and finally the family sells the Tohoga House to cope up with their finances. They move to a new house near a river and call it as 'Spa House'.

Louisa finds her role model in her school teacher, Miss Aiden, who has an optimistic attitude towards the world. The conflicts between Sam and Louisa repeatedly occur and Sam emotionally abuses her. Sam claims that he wants Louisa to be independent and think of herself while

denying her freedom. Another problem arises when Sam receives an anonymous letter stating that the new born, Charles Franklin is not his son, but it is the result of Henny's secret affair. Henny decides to leave Sam for Bert but he abandons her. Louisa thinks that the family is a great trap and in order to escape; she should kill her father and stepmother. She decides to poison their tea and out of tension she only poisons one cup of tea. Henny drinks the poisoned tea and dies quickly and everyone thinks that she committed suicide. Even after the death of Henny, Sam remains unchangeable and considers himself as the poor suffering man. Louisa runs away from the home seeking her freedom instead of taking the responsibility of the family.

This project attempts to analyse how a dysfunctional family works and how the family life influences each member of the family. The family dysfunction begins at the earlier stages of the marriage in this novel. It also portrays the emotional conflicts of all the characters. This novel showcases how the dysfunctional family affects the mental and physical health of human being.

*The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead explores the internal conflicts and emotions of individuals. This novel portrays darker topics such as marital conflicts and domestic violence which are basically due to financial strain and denial of individual freedom. *The Man Who Loved Children* is set in a patriarchal society where the female freedom is restrained by male power. The character development of an individual is mostly based on the family environment. The internal and external conflicts of the members of a dysfunctional family can be clearly understood by analysing Pollit family in *The Man Who Loved Children*.

The Pollit family is a heterogeneous combination of eccentric family members. It focuses on the strained relationships among Sam Pollit, Henny Pollit and Louisa. In Pollit family, father Sam is self-centred and is too confident in his own thoughts and judgements while mother Henny is angry and eccentric in nature. The elder daughter, Louisa is abused by her step mother Henny, restricted by her father and is continuously teased for her appearance. She has artistic quality within her but is very much reserved. Henny and Sam are very much disappointed in their marital life and there exists a rivalry between each other. Despite of Henny's treatment towards Louisa, she is able to sympathise with Henny because she know how her husband and a male dominated society have grounded her down.

In the beginning of the novel itself, Henny's changeable mood is showcased: she snaps at her children but 'then she would be cheerful' (5). This shows the fluctuation in her maternal role: her love for the children and anger for confinement. Sam considers himself as a great man; he says he is 'going to glory' and that he has 'come a long way' (17). His over pride and self-focus indicate his ignorance to the feelings of others around him. Sam's moralism is hypocritical: he feels love towards his secretary and another woman. Henny is a misanthropist. In contrast to Henny's views, Sam's world view is more optimistic. "Mother Earth", Sam says, "I love you, I love men and women, I love little children and all innocent things, I love, I feel I am love itself-how could I pick out a woman who would hate me so much!" (21). This shows how much he is disappointed in his married life.

Louisa is very much dissatisfied with Sam's control over her while she looks sympathetically on Henny even though she is abused by her. Louisa identifies the problems of Henny as the problems of women in general: "For it was not Henny alone who went through this inferno, but every woman" (10). This suggests the problems faced by women in a patriarchal society. When Henny attacks Louisa, the girl "looked up into her stepmother's face, squirming, but not trying to get away, questioning her silently, needing to understand, in an affinity of misfortune." (21).

This shows that Louisa identifies herself with Henny because of the same oppression they shared. Louisa has admiration for Henny because of her powerful and strong mind and for her guts to criticise Sam's control and power. Louisa understands that Henny's hatred towards Sam is the hatred of an individual who is house-jailed and that her unhappiness has valid reasons.

Henny sings a song to her children about a parrot named Polly who speaks out words it has taught. It can be seen as a symbolism to the children; Sam wants his children to learn whatever he taught them and reproduces his own ideas. Moreover the caged parrot is a metaphor for both Louisa and Henny as both are caged by Sam. Sam denies the life of Louisa away from his direct influence. Sam claims that he is tired of family's disunity and instructs Louisa to ask Henny to join them for breakfast. But Henny rejects this proposal as she hates to have food with her husband. Sam uses the name 'Pet' to address Henny and it brings the imagery of imprisoned pet animals showing how Sam sees Henny.

Sam points out his views of 'brotherhood' of man to the children. His language is of a sexist. He also expresses his views on women: "that is the curse of the bringing up of women to useless arts. They used to be brought up to catch men... women have been brought up much like slaves, that is, to lie" (63). He puts all the blame on his wife and always criticises his wife for her deceitfulness.

Henny shouts at Bonnie for ruining her blouse and this incident showcases the financial strain of the family. Henny borrows money from Ernie and his character contrasts with Sam in money matters. Sam has unreal views on money and likes to lead a simple life without dealing with the family's financial matters. This shows Sam's irresponsibility as a guardian. Ernie has more focused approach towards financial matters. Ernie understands Henny's need for money. Henny thinks her son would rescue her from the financial difficulties in future; "That boy will get me out of a mess later on" (65).

The section heading 'Beautiful and childlike was he' refers to Sam and it can suggest the cheerful nature of Sam. Ironically, he generates frustration in those around him. Sam considers himself as innocent and harmony lover but really he is ignorant to others. Sam criticises his family for limiting his achievements. "It is a pity I had handicaps ... or I should have been able to accomplish all the wonderful things in my heart" (75). While he complains about his own restrictions, he restricts others and denies their freedom. Especially Henny was restricted; her life has been hindered by struggling to cope up with the financial crisis using her family's money. Sam boasts about his achievements and talks about the sacrifices he has made for the family while remaining unaware of the sacrifices others have made for him. Sam gives certain instructions to his sons for taking care of the women and animals in the house. His language again proves his sexist nature. "I want all of you to stand together and look after the house for me, not only the female hanni-miles mentioned and aforesaid, but also the real honest-to-goodness hanni-miles" (75). His words make the readers understand that both women and animals are to be taken care of by men. The grouping of women and animals together implies female subordination.

The secret affair of Henny with Bert Anderson shows that she is dissatisfied with her husband. She tells about her sorrows and family's financial strain to him which makes readers understand about the hatred she has for her husband. Henny is aware of her vices and at the same time Sam tries to hide his vices. Henny criticises her husband for his hypocrisy.

Sam states that there is no need to send his children to school. "It's not even right they should be forced to go to school when they have a father like me: I can teach my children. I don't need schoolma'ams!" (114). This shows the narcissist nature of Sam. He also condemns the idea of women being political representatives because he states that women are 'crazy'. Sam feels sympathy for himself only. "Sam, like all men who have the traits of a man, had not failed to do, in the second year of marriage and ever since, what all real men do: he had confided his secret sorrow to a great many of his bosom friends" (122). This shows his nature of gossiping and also he has a tendency towards martyrdom. He reveals all his sorrows in an exaggerated manner in order to get the admiration from others for his sacrifice and patience.

Louisa is always ridiculed for her physical appearance by both Sam and Henny. Sam scolds Louisa when she dances: "Stop it, you fathead, you silly fathead...do you want to make an idiot of yourself? You don't know what you look like, you great fat lump" (118). Henny says, "I couldn't drag her into all the muck of existence myself" (127). Her conversation with Sam reveals that she doesn't want to talk to Louisa about menstruation and sex as she feels she will guide her into the miseries of womanhood. When Henny points out that Sam had an affair, the readers came to know the real nature of Sam behind his virtuous mask. After hearing this, Louisa is drawn towards Henny and her condemnation for Sam increases: "The look of concern she turned on her mother changed to rebuke when she looked at him" (130).

At Monocacy (Henny's family), Henny explains her views about marriage: "You fall madly in love with one man and nearly break your heart because he throws you over and years later you find out you would have been miserable with him; and you go with a man you don't care for and it's just the same with him too" (182). This shows Henny's disbelief in marriage. And also it shows why Henny had not divorced Sam and looked for another marriage as she thinks it is the same case with every marriage. Marriage is thus portrayed as a contract to reinforce male power over women in this novel.

While on his tour, Sam receives a letter from Gillian Roebuck, daughter of his colleague. The letter suggests an inappropriate relationship between Sam and Gillian. Sam replies Gillian through a letter and it states that Sam regards her as differently in public and private. The reply letter adds to the suspicion of their relationship. It also convinces the readers about the fake moralist attitude of Sam.

Sam returns from Malaya and Henny becomes pregnant with yet another child. Sam and his father, Old Charles decides to name the child after Charles. It shows the patriarchal power as the child bearing woman has given no right for deciding the name of her child. Henny dislikes the idea of naming the child by Sam and his father. She thinks it as an unfair thing as she bears the pain of labour and Sam names the child as he pleases.

Louisa gets fascinated by her new teacher, Miss Aiden. Miss Aiden is intelligent and an independent woman. As Louisa lacks a positive woman model in her life, she easily gets influenced by her teacher. It also shows her desire for relationships outside the Pollit family. Miss Aiden visits Louisa's family for a dinner as Louisa invites her. The conversation taking place in Pollit family at the presence of Miss Aiden is dominated by Sam himself. This shows his desire to become the center of attraction everywhere.

Because of Sam's control and restrictions over her, Louisa asks her father whether she can live with Bakens where she feels a sense of inclusion. He himself considers him as a free thinker but

ironically he restricts Louisa's freedom and forcefully makes his children follow the patriarchal tradition: "a woman must not leave her father's home till she goes to her husband: that is what I am here for, to look after you" (367). He also threatens Louisa by saying that if she leaves the house, the conflict between him and Henny becomes out of control. He makes use of Louisa's concern for her stepmother: "Do you want me to blame her?" (367). This shows that Sam doesn't want her daughter to go out of his control and influence.

Sam receives an anonymous letter stating that the youngest son, Charles Franklin is not his son but a result of her secret affair. This increases the tension between Sam and Henny and it leads to severe argument. Henny decides to leave Sam for Bert but he ends the relationship with her. This makes Henny helpless and there is no way to escape from Sam. This incident adds fuel to her exploitation. Henny feels hopeless: "game she had played her whole life was finished" (474). Henny is trapped for the rest of her life. Meanwhile Bonny becomes pregnant by a married man with whom she is having an affair and gives birth to the child making Aunt Jo and Sam angry. All these incidents increase the tension in the family and reaches to its extreme end.

Louisa feels the house as an endless trap and decides to kill her father and stepmother. "She was on the other side of a fence; there was a garden through the chinks that she had once been in, but could never be in again" (519). This showcases the loss of innocence. Louisa feels she had stepped out of her childhood forever. Henny drinks the poisoned tea and dies quickly. After this incident Louisa runs away from her house gaining freedom. She thinks of her siblings: "She pictured Ernie, Evie, the twins, darling Tommy" (529). The thought of her father doesn't come to her mind and this indicates that she finally attained complete freedom from her father's influence.

Family is the most important institution for an individual as it means a group of blood related individuals who can count on each other. Family is where there is no hatred and judgements and it provides an individual with emotional and financial needs. Family plays the most important and crucial role in the life of an individual as it is the first place of education. The dysfunctionality of family is one of the major issues in the contemporary scenario. Many writers worked on this issue and portrayed the dysfunctionality within family in its real form. Christina Stead, the Australian writer also brought this theme in her novel *The Man Who Loved Children*.

The traditional family system underwent several changes due to the modernisation. The concept of individualism brought changes in the attitude of individuals. Thus traditional families are breaking up into nuclear families which constitute two married individuals and their children. Marriage can be considered as the beginning of the family and it is a life-long commitment. It is important for the husband and wife to love, care, respect, understand and accept each other. If the accepting mentality lacks in couples, there begins the dysfunctionality of family. Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* showcases the lack of acceptance and love between the husband and wife and from their marriage, the dysfunctionality of Pollit family begins.

Children raised in dysfunctional families are more likely to exhibit behavioural and psychological problems when compared to children who are raised in healthy families. When children are raised in a healthy family they experience and understand the long lasting benefits of family. In the novel *The Man Who Loved Children*, the eldest daughter, Louisa suffers physical and mental tortures by her parents. Louisa, in order to set her free from the self-centered parents, decides to kill them. The dysfunctionality prevailed in Louisa's family made her to poison the tea

of her father and stepmother. Children from dysfunctional families get less emotional support from their parents.

Family should solve their problems standing together. Reasonable advices and guidances should be given to each and every individuals of the family. It is necessary for the parents to understand the emotional trauma within a child. Parents should understand that children need love, care and support in order to remove the negative effects of fights between the parents. Social connections within society also help to remove emotional strain of individual. In this novel, father Sam doesn't allow his children to be social and restricts them from making connections outside the house.

Effective communication is important among the members for the smooth running of family. Communication helps to make other members of the family to understand the emotional conflicts of an individual. Communication with society can make others understand about the problems prevailing in a family and can get help from them. Children need love, care, support and above all security. Children should not be restricted from their area of interest. Louisa is an artistic child and loves to read literature whereas Sam contemns her love for literature and asks her to read science related books about animals and birds.

Child and woman abuse within family shows the intensity of imbalance in family relations. Abuse within dysfunctional family can be verbal and physical. Physical abuse affects physically whereas verbal abuse affects psychologically. Both types damage the growth of the individual. Abused individuals feel hatred and anger towards others. In the novel, stepmother Henny abuses Louisa verbally and sometimes physically. This act of Henny is because of her husband's way of treating her. Out of the hatred and anger towards her husband, she acts violently and this frustration results in the abuse of Louisa.

Over controlling parents also hinders the development of a child. These types of parents dominate their children and don't allow them to step out of their sphere of control and influence. The over controlled children feel insult and become cynical of their own ability. In this novel, father Sam over controls his children. He is over confident in his own abilities and he expresses his dislike of sending the children to school. He has the view that he can teach his own children. Sam wants his children to intake his ideas and echoes it. Sam showcases himself as a free thinker but in reality he restricts Louisa from moving in with the Bakens.

Through the Pollit family in the *The Man Who Loved Children*, Stead portrays the true emotions of a dysfunctional American family. The conflict between the husband and wife, lack of respect, dislike and hatred for each other and domestic violence are expressed through the novel in its true emotions.

In the Western culture, the intensity of love between family members is decreasing. Many parents are working long hours away from their home and it results in less affection between the parents and children. The lack of love between husband and wife also affects children. In order to avoid such issues, pre-marital counsellings and parental guidance should be given. At school level itself, children should be taught moral values and it should be included as a subject for study at school. The study is an attempt to stress the importance of warm and loving family for the benefit of a healthy society.

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