

Reweaving Family Bonds: A Study on Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*

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Abstract

*Family Dysfunction is a social construct characterised by mental illness, unhealthy relationships, leading to emotional longings and the absence of transactional patterns in a family. While dysfunctions are pernicious to family functioning, family resilience enables family members to recover from persistent life challenges, fostering positive family functioning despite dysfunctions or myriad adversities. It is a nascent concept across all the disciplines of the study; nevertheless, the literary panorama of the research is diminutive. The present study negotiates a holistic appraisal of family dysfunctions and family resilience in Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*, highlighting familial conflicts between three Devereux family women, Lily, Dora, and Helen, who forget all their differences and join with Declan's friends to succour, Declan in his last stages of life. By adopting family resilience processes proposed by Dr. Walsh, it uncovers the strength-oriented approaches of the family in the novel to argue and revitalise transactional patterns in surmounting dysfunctions. The findings unfold a synergistic examination of dysfunctional systems, highlighting the absence of transactional patterns, emotional dysphoria, and the quest for resilience among the distressed family members involves rejuvenating reparative potential and equanimity through the systemic study of family resilience. The study asserts that flummoxed family relationships within the human community must forge resilience despite dysfunctions to achieve positive outcomes for effective family functioning.*

Keywords: Family Dysfunctions, Emotional Dysphoria, Family Resilience, Transactional Patterns, Reparative Potential.

Introduction

The family system in society consists of two or more individuals related by blood or kinship, defined by the patterns of relationship and moral values between them. As the pattern of relationships exists in family dynamics, it is the web of complex human relationships and emotional struggles that compete within the family functions; and emphasised as "...families

are shattered by crisis events or multi-stress conditions, what is remarkable is that others emerge strengthened and more resourceful” (Walsh 3). This analysis is called resilience within the individual or systemic processes within family members. More importantly, resilience is a prerequisite for a family to understand inherent strengths and be resourceful in dysfunctional situations. “Resilience research is also quintessentially developmental in nature” (Masten 8). The more dysfunction occurs, the more family members should strive to adopt resilience despite differences in conflicts. The resilience perspective often demonstrates the psychological aspects of healing, recovery, reconciliation, and reparations for familial relationships for effective functioning. This study reveals an understanding of positive psychological development in the face of prolonged adversity within families, shedding light on how resilience can foster growth amidst challenges. Generally, resilience involves “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al. 543). This theory emerged aftermath of World War II and the Great depression. Firstly, it is considered a trait and disposition of an individual, leading to ongoing debate till now; later, it has evolved into a dynamic process of human functioning. Moreover, approaches to resilience, focusing on the strengths of adaptive changes, are imperative for resilience studies. Since the studies representing resilience in literary texts have been scarce, Mahdiani questions, “Why then, does the number of studies on the proximity of fictional narratives to themes of resilience remain so small?” (Mahdiani 53). Undoubtedly, “The concept of family resilience refers to the capacity of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity” (Walsh 14). Family Resilience functions as “the unit of analysis and intervention for understanding resilience” (Patterson 233). It is a decade-old concept known for its novel approach to studying family resilience in fiction. Since multifarious definitions, meanings, and ambiguities of family resilience appear in developmental psychology and mental health studies, there is a lack of clarity regarding the concept of family resilience. In addition, there is a lack of consensus among scholars in various fields in defining the concept of resilience. Family resilience theory offers a paradigm shift from deficit-focused of the pathological aspect to examine strength-based approaches to explore human complexities in social institutions. Families require resilience in the context of adverse situations. “A shift to a more systemic focus on studies of positive functioning and resilience began in earnest the 1980s with the important work of Dr. Froma Walsh and her focus on patterns of adaptation in families” (Hadfield and Ungar 81). The study applies Dr. Froma Walsh’s family resilience framework, developed as key processes of belief system, organisational pattern, communication and problem-solving function as the theoretical guide to substantiate and develop the overall concepts related to family resilience for positive growth in a dysfunctional family.

Literature Review

Literature reviews on Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* mostly examine a study of familial conflicts. Mayron Estefan Cantillo Lucuara (2015), in her article, “On Death, Loss, Mystery, And Other Existential Concerns in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*,” argues the familial conflicts through the lens of existentialism in studying the hidden traces of

traumatic experiences of death, silences and neglect. She discusses the novel under philosophical complexities identified under the theory of existentialism (Cantillo Lucara 377). Jose Carregal Romero (2016), in his article, “The Cultural Narratives of AIDS, Gay Sexuality, and Family in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*,” advocates for a more tolerant society, recognizing family dynamics, homosexuality and AIDS stigma (Carregal-Romero 350). He further examines the inherent voices of troubled gay narratives and AIDS stigma associated with them under societal repressions. He explores themes of AIDS, homosexuality, and homophobic prejudices towards gay lives in Ireland. He attacks “disunity and failure of communication with biological families” (Carregal-Romero 352-360). Graham John Matthews (2019) in his article, “Family Caregivers, AIDS Narratives, and the Semiotics of the Bedside in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*,” argues on pernicious negotiations of media on AIDS/HIV narratives of homosexuals, and analyses caregiving experiences of family by highlighting bed, bed-sides are places of intimacy, connections. (Matthews 292-296) Finally, he discusses biomedical aspects of the “patient’s subjective experiences in hospital” (Matthews 296). He rejects the idea that medical care brings isolation and psychological tensions, emphasizes emotional costs and absence of interpersonal connections (Matthews 296). Lorenzo Rinaldi, in her dissertation (2019), “(Re)possessing the Narrative: Silence, Repression and the Need to Tell One’s Story in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*,” discusses repressed Devereux family and gay identities through Cathy Caruth’s theory of trauma (Rinaldi 6). It also highlights the role of oral memories in reshaping value of family dynamics (Rinaldi 9-12). Robinson Murphy (2021), in his research article, “Pain Comes in Waves”: Eroding Bodies in Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship*, Murphy “... juxtaposes the AIDS crisis with our currently-unfolding and similarly life-destroying environmental crisis” (Murphy 552). He conducts textually a comparative analysis of AIDS related conditions of Declan’s with the eroding coastline of Ireland and the climate change, as it represents themes of neglect and loss. (Murphy 552) Though the literature review explores the study of familial issues in Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* from various angles and disciplines of study, the idea of family resilience has not yet been negotiated or examined by literary scholars. Therefore, the idea of family resilience and its related concepts explored by the researcher is novel in examining the strength-oriented approaches for the study of family functioning. As Colm Tóibín’s works rely on conflicts within the family systems, the resilient values in families are evident through his narration. Colm Tóibín is an Irish author whose oeuvres mostly encompass the familial issues of modern family dynamics in his novels. His famous novels are *The Story of the Night* (1996), *The Master* (2004), *Brooklyn* (2009), *The Testament of Mary* (2012), *Nora Webster* (2014), *The Magician* (2021) and his recently published novel *Long Island* (2024), a sequel to *Brooklyn*. Tóibín’s oeuvres iterate “the tension between revelation and concealment, emotional release and reticence, as well as the ambiguities between knowing and unknowing, which underlie most of his character’s dilemmas” (Carregal-Romero 66). His sombre and elegiac novel, *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), focuses on a dysfunctional family that needs relational repairs to forge a strength-based life process. The novel reverberates the familial issues of three generations of the Devereux family, Lily, Dora, and Helen, who adapt

to forget their conflict and come to aid Declan to comfort him and satisfy his necessities. The article presents the idea of understanding the conflict in the family as a unit of analysis rather than individual explorations. It deeply identifies changes in family dynamics, adaptations, and complex relationships that exist within the family and interactions.

The present study resonates with getting glimpses of various resilient concepts to connect with the systemic analysis of families. The resilience strives forward to comprehend the problems, focusing especially on the family as a unit of analysis in the study. The research objectives determine a keen focus on a complex transactional pattern of dysfunctional family within the Devereux family. In addition to the above, the study explores the reparative qualities represented in the fiction to analyse family resilience and synergic study of family dysfunctions and family resilience operations to forge strengthening the family dynamics. Therefore, the research article aims to demonstrate that the complexities of modern family dysfunctions and transitions in relationships are represented in literary text, and it identifies resilient qualities of reparation, healing, and emotional proximity that are needed for the contemporary family challenges, and positive lifestyles are a quintessential part of the study.

Discussion

Family dysfunctions require reorganising the relational roles of family members to address neglect, interpersonal conflicts and emotional deprivations. Froma Walsh's family process of belief system and organisational roles evaluates the dysfunctional system to reassess the relational roles by making meaning of adversity, connectedness, and flexibility essential for positive family functioning. Walsh defines "Family belief systems provide coherence and organise experience, enabling to make sense of crisis situation" (Walsh 40). The Deveraux family women, Helen, Lily and Dora, are disengaged from each other, reinforcing the old conflicts of the past childhood neglect, lack of love and emotional deprivation. All the characters in the novel exhibit precariousness in their roles, reflecting a lack of belief in each other's relationship. As Helen interacts with Paul about Declan's condition in the hospital, she hesitates to inform her mother about Declan's AIDS, "The main thing tomorrow is my mother, Helen said" (39). Tóibín's narrator initiates a tension within Helen as she prepares to inform Declan's condition to her mother, upon his request, "Declan, the hospital, her mother" (40). When Paul informs Helen about Declan's condition, first, she prepares to avoid her mother. This reflects past bitter memories of her childhood experiences, early dysfunctions occurred in her family due to her mother's uncaring attitudes and lack of love. When her father was hospitalised for cancer treatment, leaving Helen and Declan in their grandmother's house, they faced nightmares and yearned for parental presence, hindering their growth. In the words of Ann S. Masten, He explains, "Some of the threats to child development arise within the family itself, in the form of abuse, neglect and interpersonal conflict" (Masten 197).

Helen's belief in her mother, Lily, is built on a fear of a lack of presence and isolation in Dora's house, which tormented most of Declan and Helen's childhood. "And Helen knew that there was another fear, which was never mentioned in all that time: the fear that their parents would

never come back, that they would both be left here, and that these days and nights” (56). The Devereux family is mostly dysfunctional because of reticence and emotional silences. Jose Carregal-Romero, Tóibín’s scholar, quotes this as “Silence-the space where energy and emotion are ‘insistently generated’ in Tóibín’s Fiction” (Qtd. in Delaney 66). This study reveals that the characters in the novel are ignorant of their conflicts, and that they allow for a longer gap to recover. Thus, it remains a dysfunctional system as nursing their old wounds, which mostly resulted in enmeshment.

This notion of silence between Helen and Lily remains opaque to their repressed animosities on neglect and unspoken feelings towards each other. That’s why both remained aloof, embittered by past animosities and stirring up dysfunctions in their relationship. Declan’s friend Paul, who breaks the occlusions between them, creates an interaction with Helen to share her painful experiences with him. When Helen opens up about her pain, all her burdens are relieved through emotional therapy to reduce her burden. Helen’s bitterness towards Lily indicates psychological tensions; this shadows as Helen interacts with Paul about her mother’s past wrongdoings, “I learned nothing here except this awful bitterness against the two of them, my granny and my mother” (180). The narrative style permeates that Helen’s belief dwells only on the concealment, trauma, reticence and animosities. Walsh reiterates in her theory, “A well-functioning family draws on a wide variety of inspirations to solve its problems, including past experiences, family stories, creative fantasy, and new and untried solutions” (Walsh 61). However, Helen’s recriminations and animosities in the novel against her mother, Lily, revolve around a broken bond as mother and daughter.

When Helen meets Declan in the hospital, “Hellie, Declan said. Will you deal with the old lady?” (37). Helen suddenly senses that the distance between them is gloomy. Helen tries to reimagine how her family was dysfunctional due to her mother’s neglect. Even her brother’s lack of presence, the death of her father triggered anger and recrimination against her mother. “She realised that the bitter resentment between her mother which had clouded her life had not faded; for a long time, she had hoped that she would never have to think about it again” (45). These are what further tormented her anger and catalysed stronger hatred against her mother. It is examined that Helen and Declan’s psyches are affected by the absence of parents in their growth, which marks the psychological tension and lack of attachment in their growth, leading them to develop their lack of attachment with Lily. Because of her mother’s neglect, Helen and Declan needed to neglect their mother and make their way to care for their life. Walsh justifies that, “Children are more likely to feel abandoned or unsolved when a parent drops in and out of their lives without clear expectations about contact and support, or when promises are vague and plans repeatedly fall through” (Walsh 68).

The Devereux family progresses towards long-term adaptations to the situations of adversity. Helen is the only character who initiates the resilient qualities of connectedness and flexibility of her family. When Helen meets Declan in the hospital, he tells “Hellie, I’m sorry about everything, Declan said, his eyes still closed” (38). On seeing Declan’s condition, his desire to stay with his mother and sister, the remarks connectedness. Helen stabilises her roles by understanding

Declan's previous gay life, and her mother's pain in facing the death of her father situates flexibility and connectedness. Walsh defines these as restoring roles as "sense of connection" (Walsh 67). Since these roles play an important for strengthening resilience, the transactional pattern for families envisages positive outcomes of the family functioning.

The second part of the analysis of the dysfunctional system reflects a lack of transactional patterns between Helen and Lily as they interact to express their unspoken pain after a long gap in Dora's beach house. The transactional pattern in the novel is mutually interactive, which adheres to present recriminations against her mother, childhood stress, and trauma on the death of her father. They keep vigilance in interacting with them when taking a topic to discuss. When they take Declan from hospital to Dora's house upon his request to spend last days, Helen's instinct on her mother's presence in the car as "She realised, too, that the unspoken emotions between them in the car, and the sense that they were once more a unit, seemed utterly natural now that there was a crisis, a catalyst" (106). Helen's emotional sharing of her unspoken pains to Declan's friend Paul revokes emotional dysphoria as she tells him, "You asked me about my mother and my grandmother and I told you things, but there are other things I left out that are harder to understand, and maybe I should try" (186). This interaction with Paul expresses her emotional dysphoria, reaching a peak of her inner pain.

Helen reinvokes her communication with Paul as a therapy to reconcile with her mother. Walsh mentions that "Good communication facilitates all aspects of family functioning and Resilience" (Walsh 82). Helen and Lily's interaction revolves around uncertainty, breeds anxiety and a lack of empathetic feelings in the beginning until they accept each other's emotional pain by sharing their pain. Though Bowen talks about 'emotional oneness' in a family, the transactional trajectory aptly contradicts in the novel embodied as emotional dysphoria as a major reason in the mother-daughter relationship. "Somewhere in the part of her where fears lay unexplored and conflicts unresolved" (120).

Helen and Lily's interactions in Dora's house when succour Declan's illness reflect on silence, reticence and emotional dysphoria between mother and daughter, "There was an uneasy peace between them; they chose topics with care and then moved cautiously, alert to the friction which even a stray word could cause" (115). Helen's emotional dysphoria with her mother strongly ameliorates her forgetfulness, distance, and withdrawal from her family ties because of her neglect in childhood. The lack of transactional pattern unfolds emotional dysphoria as a reactive position between mother and daughter, as one of the reasons for familial dysfunctions. Since familial discord, constraints of emotional despair ferment dysfunctions, Helen's trajectory to reunite the family after a long gap reappraises her emotional proximity to her mother and Declan. According to Matthews, oral communication does not merely constitute the functional family but also "presence, tactility, and empathy in caregiving" (Matthews 291) promote healthy relationships, trigger emotional proximity.

The resilient qualities of family functioning in dysfunctional families are called equanimity and collaboration, which play pervasive role in the challenging situations of adversity and dysfunctions. "The news of Declan's terminal illness forces the family to set aside their differences

and come together to care for him” (Matthew 290). It manifests resilient qualities of collaborative skill and equanimity in adverse situations, as family members intervene to handle Declan’s AIDS condition and Helen’s reconciliation with Lily after long, open emotional sharing of her conflicts. The collaborative task to handle everyone’s inner wounds is highlighted to mark their situational resilience in context. Even though they all endured their conflict reflected upon each other, they all forgot their differences and came to take care of Declan in his death. “I hope we were some comforts to Declan, Helen’ her mother said” (271). At the end of the novel, it is examined that collaborative healing has taken its highest place in the novel because Lily finally comes to understand Helen’s problem of neglect and exchanges their resilient qualities for effective relationships.

The reparative potential is one of the resilient landscapes to view positive growth of the family relational system despite prolonged dysfunctions. A final topic of the discussion aims to rely on family reparative qualities of healing, growth and positive life styles prerequisites for family dynamics. Helen’s recuperative skills embody positivity, growth and hope as the most important part of the resilient landscape in examining the literary text. Her adaptation to reweave the broken boundaries with her mother’s illustrates her reparative quality. When Helen accused her of her father’s death, which extends in most of the novel’s narration, “You took him away and you never brought him back” (245). Lily, too, exclaims her pain of isolation after Helen and Declan’s lack of presence, “I locked no one away, I am afraid, Helen, she said wearily. He died in my arms” (245). Helen comes to revision her reparative quality in understanding her mother’s isolation in Wexford, even though she is judgemental and reticence, Helen understands that her mother’s emotional pain for long time to be reunited for her, “I know, Mammy, I know, Helen said, and linked arms with her mother and they continued walking” (245). She recognises two versions of her mother’s agony in death of Helen’s father and her isolated life previously from Helen and Declan. “Helen saw in both versions of her mother’s face a desolation and a hopelessness, and, more than anything, a fear that would never leave her now” (218). The analysis is firmly grounded in Helen’s conviction of a reparative landscape of inclusivity, empathy, forgiveness and hope for reunification with her mother and family.

Though Helen’s recriminations of her mother are justified, Helen anticipates her healing and growth in the relationship with her mother. Walsh explains this context as “Every member can have a part to play in easing the family burdens or offering support and each feels valued by being included in some way” (Walsh 73). Helen and Lily’s lives are valued in restoring their embittered life towards the land of reparation. It is Helen who sees from Declan’s side, as she doesn’t want to lose another member of her family. Perhaps, the author gives a situational chance to comprehend the internal catastrophes of her mother and Declan, reflecting on systemic analysis of the family to reunite for effective family functioning.

Considering the next process of family dynamics, the healing and growth in family relationships are pivotal role of reparative potential in families. It is a cure for deficits in human relationships. Helen and her mother Lily recuperate and strengthen their family dynamics as Helen senses that “She realised that at some point in the afternoon the opportunity had come and passed for

her to put her arms around her mother, cry alongside her, forgive her everything, and promise to start a new relationship” (214). Helen and Lily’s troubled relationship strengthened at the end of the novel as they understood each other’s unspoken pain. The process of healing and growth attempts to incorporate disparate aspects of experience into a larger whole, giving each its place. Except Helen, most of Tóibín’s characters in the novel are flummoxed about their reconnection and their lack of resilience in dealing with adverse situations. The concept of growth in the novel has amplified the exploration of resilience between Helen and Lily while they adapt to changing their bitter past identity for growth in their relationships. At the end of the novel, leaving Declan in the hospital after severe pain, Helen conveys her anger toward her mother. Helen’s request for Lily to stay in her house reflects a new healing and understanding of the possibility of forgetting their pains: “We should go back to my house and have a rest” (268). Helen’s perspective of their rest is not merely a sleep, “And we’ll go and see Declan later, but we’ll sleep for a while first, we’ll sleep for a while” (273). The sleep indicates that her mind is free from all adversities and recriminations happened between them, and there is renewed hope, growth and forgiveness in their relationship that they might meet often and reconnect with their family members in every situation of adversity and dysfunction.

Conclusion

The study concludes by asserting the role of reorganisation processes in dysfunctional families, emphasising the resilient qualities necessary for family building, reparative behaviour, and emotional connectedness. In addition, the transactional patterns determine the highest value of family resilience for dysfunctional families. This pattern effectively unfolds as Helen and Dora engage in their emotional sharing of past resentments in the novel. Tóibín’s characters, who evolve from dysfunctional to resilient, synergise the strength-oriented aspects and an effective functioning with the current ruptures in families. Helen’s unspoken pains, emotional dysphoria, and precarious communication with her mother succumb to the fertile grounds of negative orientation, harnessing a dynamic assessment of family resilience for strength-oriented approaches. By understanding family resilience through Helen’s perspective, it becomes evident that she is the only character who has reconstituted the resilient qualities of reunification in Declan, her mother Lily, and Dora as they collaborate to heal wounds of the family members. From Helen’s viewpoint, the potential growth in a relationship mitigates the hidden pains of the past. This is to be achieved through communication, problem-solving techniques and reverberating developmental processes of family functioning.

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