

The Changing Representation of Family and Social Relationships in Contemporary English Literature

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Abstract: This paper examines how contemporary English literature has reimagined the family and the wider network of social relationships that surround it. Where the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English novel typically organised itself around a coherent, patriarchally structured domestic unit, contemporary fiction increasingly represents families as fragmented, multicultural, reconstituted, and non-linear in form. Drawing on sociological theories of intimacy and individualisation alongside literary criticism of the contemporary British novel, this study undertakes a close comparative reading of works by Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Andrea Levy, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Sarah Moss, Jonathan Coe, and Philip Hensher. The analysis identifies four recurring patterns: the erosion of the idealised nuclear family; the emergence of multicultural and diasporic kinship structures; generational conflict as a vehicle for social critique; and the expansion of ‘family’ to include chosen, communal, and non-biological relationships. The paper argues that these formal and thematic shifts register broader sociological transformations in British social life migration, individualisation, and the erosion of traditional authority while also demonstrating that the novel remains one of the most sensitive instruments available for tracing the reconfiguration of intimacy and belonging in a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: family; social relationships; contemporary English literature; British fiction; domesticity; kinship; individualisation; multiculturalism

1. INTRODUCTION

The family has long functioned as one of the central organising structures of the English novel, providing both a narrative frame marriage plots, inheritance plots, generational sagas and a symbolic microcosm through which broader questions of morality, class, and social order could be explored [1]. From the domestic realism of the nineteenth century through to the modernist scrutiny of the bourgeois household, English fiction has repeatedly used the family as a lens onto the health, or sickness, of the wider social body. Contemporary English literature, however, inherits this tradition at a moment of significant sociological transformation. Migration, secularisation, the loosening of marriage as a lifelong institution, and what sociologists have termed the individualisation of intimate life have together reshaped the lived experience of family and community in Britain [3][5]. This paper asks how contemporary English fiction has registered these transformations, and what new narrative and formal strategies it has developed to represent family and social relationships that no longer conform to earlier, more stable models.

Two overlapping questions guide the analysis. First, how do contemporary novels represent the structural changes affecting the family divorce, blended households, single parenthood, multicultural and diasporic kinship, chosen or communal forms of relationship? Second, how do these novels use family and social relationships as a means of dramatizing wider questions of class, race, generational change, and national identity in contemporary Britain? The paper argues that contemporary English literature departs from earlier domestic fiction not only thematically, through its attention to non-traditional family forms, but also formally,

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through fragmented, multi-perspectival, and temporally disordered narrative structures that mirror the instability of the relationships they depict.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section two develops a theoretical framework combining literary-historical accounts of the family novel with sociological theories of intimacy and individualisation. Section three reviews existing scholarship on family and social relationships in the contemporary British novel. Section four outlines the comparative textual methodology. Section five presents the analysis across four thematic dimensions. Section six discusses the broader implications of these findings, and section seven concludes.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework draws on two complementary bodies of thought. The first is the literary-historical tradition of criticism concerned with the family novel and domestic fiction as a genre. This tradition, extending from studies of the nineteenth-century industrial and domestic novel through to accounts of its apparent ‘disappearance’ as a named category in English scholarship, demonstrates that the family has always been a vehicle through which the novel negotiates broader social and economic anxieties, even as the terminology used to describe this function has shifted over time [1][4]. Raymond Williams’s account of the relationship between culture, community, and economic change provides a useful complementary lens, showing how English fiction has historically used depictions of family and locality to register the pressures of industrialisation, urbanisation, and social mobility pressures that this paper argues find a contemporary analogue in migration and globalisation [2].

The second body of theory is sociological. Anthony Giddens’s account of the transformation of intimacy proposes that late-modern relationships have increasingly come to resemble the ‘pure relationship’: a bond sustained not by external structures such as economic necessity, religious obligation, or extended kinship, but by the ongoing, reflexive satisfaction of both partners [3]. This shift, Giddens argues, extends a form of democratisation into the personal sphere, but it also renders relationships more contingent and less stable than earlier institutional forms of marriage and family. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim extend this argument through the concept of individualisation, describing how individuals in late-modern societies are increasingly required to construct their own biographies including their family lives outside of inherited scripts, often improvising new forms of kinship and obligation in the process [5]. Judith Stacey’s ethnographic account of ‘brave new families’ further demonstrates that the decline of the standardised nuclear family has not resulted in the disappearance of family as such, but in a proliferation of diverse, often improvised domestic arrangements [6]. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that the representation of family in contemporary fiction should be read not simply as a decline from an earlier ideal, but as a literary registration of a genuinely new social landscape of intimacy, obligation, and belonging.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism of the contemporary British novel has increasingly identified family and domestic life as a central preoccupation of post-1970s English fiction, even as critics disagree about how to characterise the nature of this preoccupation. Surveys of the contemporary British novel note that the genre has been marked by a sustained interrogation of national identity, class, and multiculturalism, with the family frequently serving as the site at which these larger social questions become personal and embodied [7]. Broader introductions to post-war British fiction similarly trace a shift from the socially cohesive, if often critical, family narratives of mid-century realism toward more fragmented, ironic, and formally experimental treatments of domestic life in the work of later writers [8].

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A significant strand of this scholarship focuses on the representation of multicultural and diasporic family structures. Critics have observed that novels dealing with migration to Britain frequently stage tension between inherited familial and cultural expectations and the more individualised, negotiated relationships available to second-generation characters, a tension explored with particular acuity in fiction concerned with South Asian and Caribbean diasporic communities in Britain [9]. Related scholarship on the depiction of family in contemporary Anglophone fiction more broadly notes that family constellations are increasingly used to address wider social, economic, and even ecological anxieties, with the traditional nuclear family giving way in many texts to ‘post-nuclear’ or ‘patchwork’ formations that better reflect the diversity of lived domestic arrangements [10].

Other scholarship emphasises generational conflict as a recurring structural device through which contemporary novels represent social change, with parent–child relationships frequently functioning as a microcosm of larger struggles over class, race, and gender norms [11]. Meanwhile, research specifically addressing the British context has traced how contemporary authors depict the diversification of family forms blended families, single-parent households, and multicultural kinship networks as reflective of genuine demographic and cultural shifts within the United Kingdom over recent decades [12]. This paper builds on and extends this scholarship by combining thematic analysis with sustained attention to the formal strategies fragmentation, multiple focalisations, non-linear temporality through which contemporary novelists represent these transformations.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative method of close textual analysis, consistent with established practice in literary-sociological criticism. Nine contemporary English novels were selected for their sustained engagement with family and social relationships and their prominence within scholarly and critical discussion of the contemporary British novel: Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* [13], Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* [14], Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* [15], Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* [16], Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* [17], Zadie Smith’s *NW* [18], Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* [19], Philip Hensher’s *The Northern Clemency* [20], and Sarah Moss’s *Ghost Wall* [21]. These texts span roughly four decades of publication and represent a range of class positions, regional settings, and cultural backgrounds, allowing the analysis to test whether identified patterns of representation hold across otherwise divergent contexts.

Each novel was read closely with attention to three analytic categories derived from the theoretical framework outlined above: (a) the structure and composition of the central family or household depicted, including its departures from the idealised nuclear model; (b) the narrative strategies multiple narrators, non-linear temporality, retrospection used to represent relationships within and around that structure; and (c) the relationship between familial and social representation and wider thematic concerns such as class, race, generational change, and national identity. As with comparable studies in this tradition, the method is interpretive rather than quantitative, and the findings should be understood as an account of recurring patterns rather than an exhaustive survey of contemporary English fiction.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Erosion of the Nuclear Family Ideal

Several of the novels examined here explicitly stage the breakdown or inadequacy of the idealised nuclear family as an organising social unit. McEwan’s *Atonement* is structured around a single catastrophic misjudgement within an outwardly respectable upper-middle-class family, the consequences of which fracture sibling and romantic relationships across an entire lifetime, while the novel’s late revelation that its narrative has been shaped and revised by an unreliable narrator draws explicit attention to the constructed, retrospective

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nature of family memory itself [14]. Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* similarly traces a family across several decades of social and economic change in Sheffield, using the household's slow drift and eventual dispersal to register the wider decline of the stable, geographically rooted communities that characterised earlier English domestic fiction [20]. In both cases, the family is represented not as a timeless, natural unit but as a historically specific and fragile arrangement, vulnerable to the same pressures economic change, shifting gender roles, individual desire that sociologists have identified as reshaping late-modern intimate life [3][5].

5.2 Multicultural and Diasporic Kinship

A second, closely related pattern concerns the representation of multicultural and diasporic family structures. Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* follows a mixed-race protagonist navigating the competing expectations of an English mother and a Pakistani father whose own relationship to tradition is itself unstable and performative, dramatizing the way inherited cultural and familial scripts become objects of negotiation rather than unquestioned inheritance for second-generation characters [13]. Levy's *Small Island* interweaves the perspectives of Jamaican and English characters whose households are reconfigured by the experience of post-war migration, representing family and marriage as sites where racial prejudice, economic precarity, and personal loyalty are worked out in intimate, everyday detail [16]. Ali's *Brick Lane* extends this pattern into the experience of a Bangladeshi immigrant wife in London, whose arranged marriage and subsequent extramarital relationship stage a tension between inherited familial obligation and an increasingly individualised model of personal fulfilment consistent with sociological accounts of the changing nature of intimacy [17][3]. Smith's *NW* pushes this multicultural reconfiguration further still, following several interconnected characters across a single, ethnically and economically diverse north London neighbourhood in which family is repeatedly shown to be inseparable from questions of class mobility, race, and urban space [18]. Across these texts, family is represented less as a fixed inheritance than as an ongoing site of negotiation between competing cultural, generational, and economic demands.

5.3 Generational Conflict as Social Critique

A third pattern concerns the use of generational conflict as a device for broader social critique. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the protagonist's rejection of his father's spiritual performance and his mother's domestic resignation functions as a critique of both the constraints of English suburban class conformity and the commodification of ethnic identity within it [13]. Coe's *What a Carve Up!* uses the dysfunctional, grotesquely wealthy Winshaw family as an explicit satirical allegory for the social and economic policies of 1980s Britain, with each family member's individual moral corruption mapped onto a specific sector finance, media, agribusiness, arms manufacturing of national life [19]. Here, generational and familial dysfunction becomes an overt vehicle for political critique, extending the long-standing tradition, identified in earlier scholarship on the English family novel, of using domestic narrative to comment on the health of the wider social and economic order [1][4]. Moss's *Ghost Wall* similarly stages conflict between a controlling father, obsessed with an invented vision of ancient British masculinity, and his teenage daughter and wife, using this generational and gendered tension to interrogate contemporary anxieties about nationalism, tradition, and patriarchal authority [21].

5.4 Beyond Biology: Chosen and Communal Relationships

A fourth and more formally radical pattern involves the extension of 'family' beyond biological or legally sanctioned kinship altogether. Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* depicts a group of cloned children raised together in an institutional setting, whose intense friendships and quasi-familial loyalties substitute entirely for conventional parentage, using this speculative premise to interrogate what, if anything, remains essential to family once biological and legal ties are removed [15]. The muted, restrained narration through which the

novel's narrator recounts her closest relationships further suggests that even non-biological attachments can carry the same emotional weight, and the same capacity for loss, historically reserved in English fiction for the family proper. Smith's NW similarly represents chosen, non-familial bonds particularly a lifelong female friendship strained by diverging class trajectories as carrying a comparable emotional and structural significance to biological kinship, suggesting that contemporary fiction increasingly locates 'family' wherever sustained intimacy and obligation are found, rather than only within legally or biologically defined households [18]. This expansion of the category of family is consistent with sociological accounts describing the proliferation of diverse, improvised domestic and relational arrangements in late-modern societies [6].

5.5 Home, Place, and Belonging

A related concern across several of these novels is the relationship between family and physical place. Smith's NW ties its characters' shifting family and friendship structures closely to the geography of a single London estate and its surrounding streets, suggesting that changing patterns of intimacy in contemporary Britain cannot be separated from changing patterns of housing, gentrification, and urban mobility [18]. Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* similarly roots its account of familial drift in the specific economic geography of Sheffield during a period of deindustrialisation, so that the slow dispersal of the household mirrors the wider hollowing-out of the industrial communities Raymond Williams had earlier identified as central to English social and literary life [20][2]. Moss's *Ghost Wall*, by contrast, uses a remote, ostensibly timeless rural landscape to expose the fragility of the father's fantasy of an unbroken, ancestral English family line, suggesting that appeals to rootedness and tradition can themselves become instruments of domestic control [21]. Across these differing geographies metropolitan, post-industrial, rural place functions less as a stable backdrop to family life than as an active participant in its transformation, reinforcing the paper's broader claim that contemporary English fiction represents family as embedded within, rather than insulated from, wider social and economic change.

6. DISCUSSION

Read together, these four patterns suggest that contemporary English literature has moved decisively away from the family novel's earlier reliance on a single, normative household structure. Where nineteenth-century domestic fiction typically resolved its plots through marriage or the restoration of a stable family unit, the novels examined here more often end in fragmentation, ambiguity, or the quiet substitution of one form of relationship for another. This shift corresponds closely to the sociological accounts of individualisation and the transformation of intimacy discussed above, which describe a broader late-modern move away from inherited, institutionally sanctioned relationships toward more reflexive, negotiated, and contingent forms of bonding [3][5].

At the same time, the analysis suggests an important qualification to any narrative of straightforward decline. Rather than depicting the disappearance of family as a meaningful category, each of the novels examined here relocates and redistributes familial meaning into diasporic and multicultural kinship networks, into chosen friendships, into institutional substitutes for parentage, or into satirical allegories of the nation as an extended, dysfunctional household. This finding is consistent with sociological research emphasising the proliferation, rather than the disappearance, of family forms under conditions of social change [6], and it suggests that contemporary English fiction functions less as an elegy for a lost domestic ideal than as an active site for imagining what family and social relationship might mean under changed historical conditions.

A further significant finding concerns narrative form. Several of the texts examined *Atonement's* late narratorial revelation, NW's fragmented, multi-perspectival structure, *Never Let Me Go's* restrained first-person retrospection use formal disruption to mirror the instability of the relationships they depict. This supports the broader critical claim that in the contemporary novel, form is not a neutral vessel for social content

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but is itself part of how changing patterns of intimacy and obligation are rendered legible to readers [7][8]. The consistent appearance of non-linear temporality and multiple focalisations across texts as different as a wartime country-house novel and a north London urban narrative suggests that these formal strategies have become something close to a shared toolkit through which contemporary English fiction represents relationships that no longer conform to a single, linear, generationally transmitted script.

The recurring attention to place and geography across these texts also suggests a further refinement of the theoretical framework outlined earlier. While Giddens's account of the pure relationship and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualisation both emphasise the reflexive, biographical construction of intimate life, the novels examined here consistently insist that this reflexive construction is never placeless [3][5]. Family and social relationships are shown to be shaped as much by housing markets, regional economic decline, and urban redevelopment as by the personal, negotiated choices these sociological frameworks foreground. Contemporary English fiction, in this respect, offers a materially grounded supplement to sociological theories of individualisation, insisting that the freedom to reinvent family and relationship is unevenly distributed according to class position and access to place.

These findings should be read with appropriate caution. The nine texts examined, while spanning a useful range of class, regional, and cultural contexts, remain a purposively selected sample rather than an exhaustive survey of contemporary English fiction, and the interpretive method employed does not permit statistical generalisation. Future research might usefully extend this analysis to poetry and drama, to fiction from other national traditions within the wider Anglophone novel, or to reception studies examining how readers themselves interpret changing representations of family across generational and cultural lines.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that contemporary English literature registers, and actively participates in imagining, a profound transformation in the structure and meaning of family and social relationships in Britain. Across the range of texts examined spanning multicultural suburban comedy, wartime tragedy, speculative fiction, urban ensemble narrative, political satire, and rural gothic the family emerges not as a stable, naturalised unit but as a historically contingent and continually reconfigured arrangement, shaped by migration, individualisation, class mobility, and shifting gender norms. Rather than simply lamenting the decline of an earlier domestic ideal, contemporary novelists have developed a rich repertoire of formal strategies fragmentation, multiple focalisations, non-linear temporality through which to represent the proliferation of new, often improvised, forms of kinship and belonging. As Britain's social and demographic landscape continues to change, the English novel is likely to remain one of the most sensitive available instruments for tracing how family, friendship, and community are lived, imagined, and reinvented.

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