

# **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***

*Ali Gunes*

*This paper explores shifted views about traditional family values, its make-up, gender relations, roles and identities, together with the disintegration of the patriarchal man's image and identity in Nick Hornby's About A Boy. In doing so, it first looks at the contemporary family structure as well as the roles of both husband and wife in comparison with the traditional view of family. The paper also examines the ways in which Hornby represents in the novel far-reaching shifts in the position, roles, and perception of patriarchal man's image, identity and roles in the contemporary period.*

*Key Words: Family, single parents, gender identity and new man*

## **1. Introduction**

The family, its role and function in society as well as gender relation and identity have drawn a great deal of attention from a variety of disciplines such as politic, history, sociology, religion, and arts. The people from these areas have approached the issue from various points of view as for their interest and expectations (Elliot 1986; Blake 1989; Giles 1993; Waite 1995; Collier 1995; Patterson 2002; Chambers 2006 and Collier and Sheldon 2008). For example, Norman W. Bell and Ezra F. Vogel "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" (1960:1). Moreover, Noval D. Glenn makes a similar comment and sees it as the centre of reproduction, whose function has been of vital importance for traditional societies throughout history:

The most important functions of the family in any society pertain largely to children, to the biological reproduction of the population and the cultural reproduction of the society. Families bear children, take care of their physical needs during the early helpless years, nurture them, and impart to them the most basic of the values, norms, understandings, and skills that enable them to become functioning members of society. Families also perform crucial functions for adults [...] but what they do for children is more important, if only because today's children are tomorrow's adults. (1997: 200)

As pointed out in the quotations above, the family, with its well-constructed structure, functions and roles, has a vital importance in a traditional society as being a corner stone and basis for its continuity, since it is not only a place where children are produced and brought up in a stable and secure environment, but it is also a place where moral codes, values and culture are vigilantly, carefully developed and are continually passed on from one generation to another without cessation. Hence a proper heterosexual marriage, in which husband, wife and children perform socially and culturally assigned relationships and roles, was of crucial significance for the link of stability and order from the past to the future in a traditional society.

As to relations and roles, the traditional family has been based upon strict gender differences and segregations in life. These differences and segregations, as often discussed and criticized by feminist critics, are not biological but are social, cultural and ideological perceptions constructed by patriarchy to construct a particular pattern of relations by suppressing and controlling women's lives in society (Millett 1971; Risman 2004). Within this division, the lives, identities and roles of both a man and a woman were obviously stereotyped, sharply polarized and determined to a greater extent that they were unable to shake off what had been decided for them by society and culture as in Lacan's symbolic order (Marini 1990). The debates on this polarization have been not only well searched for and then documented but also represented artistically in many novels written by female writers such as George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* (1919), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In these predetermined and stereotyped perceptions, identities, relationships, and roles, woman was assigned the roles and characteristics of nurturing, rearing children, cooking, washing up dishes, together with emotional sensitivity, domesticity, passivity and dependence, whereas man was considered rational, active, strong, independent, educated, dominant, and economically productive in the public space (Fernando 1977; Woolf 1992; Stone 1996 and Gunes 2007).

Since World War II, however, the Western world in general and Britain in particular have undergone a lot of sweeping radical developments and changes in social, cultural, political and economical realms of life—mainly, the Labour Party's coming to power, the attempt to build up a Welfare State, the move towards a classless society, Margaret Thatcher's privatization policy of economy, shifts in the perception of gender and sexuality, changes in the attitudes towards homosexuality, lesbianism and bisexuality, the dismantling of the Empires, the rise of postcolonial sentiment, multiculturalism and ethnic identity, and the development of youth and subcultures (Morrison 2003; Acheson and Ross 2005; Rennison 2005; English 2006 and Bently 2008). All 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 “the growth of domestic partnerships and decline in the popularity of marriage, as well as growth in the number of divorces, remarriage (serial monogamy), re-formed or step-families, single parenthood, joint custody, abortions, and two-career households” (1999: 1). Simply, the new trend has aimed at creating alternative space and relationships for both man and woman by obviously distorting the hegemony of the heterosexual relations glorified in the traditional patriarchal societies and thus undermining the basis of traditional family values, together with gender relations, roles and identity particularly in the contemporary British society.

This paper explores these shifted views about family values, its make-up, gender relations, roles and identities in Nick Hornby's *About A Boy* (1998). As Hornby illustrates in the novel through his representation of male and female characters as well as through their relations, roles and identities in British society, traditional family values and structure are split up in many ways: gender relations become loose, light, and less serious. At the same time the view of traditional gender roles and professions change as opposed to traditional views, positions, experience and culture, and particularly the image of the patriarchal man is profoundly ruined. The paper will debate two interacting views or aspects linked to the family, culture and gender identity in British society during the 1990s with reference to Hornby's *About A Boy*. First, it will look at the contemporary family and structure as well as the roles of both husband and wife in comparison with traditional views through Hornby's representation of his fictional characters: Will Freeman and Fiona. Will Freeman and Fiona are not husband and wife in the novel but

single parents in their own way. As a 36-year-old man, Will is still single, whereas Fiona has been divorced from her husband and lives together with her son Marcus in her “split-up” family (2000: 1; see also 31-7, 276). Hornby represents them as single parents in different ways, yet their lives and views are closely interwoven and become central points of discussion in this paper. As Hornby illuminates throughout the novel, traditional heterosexual family relations are no longer possible, and even young children are psychologically convinced that the stable togetherness of father and mother will not be achieved as Alli, the child of a single mother in the novel, says towards the end of the novel, “I just don't think couples are the future” (276). Secondly, the paper also focuses upon another hot contemporary issue about male gender identity, in which contemporary men do not want to carry out the roles and professions of traditional men, and Hornby demonstrates the shift in the image, identity, and role of the traditional man through the life and views of Will Freeman. Will Freeman is not much concerned about what was given importance in the past: a proper job, suitable family life with heterogeneous relationship, and so on.

## **2. The “Split-Up” Family**

The family is simply defined as a group of people who are related by blood or two or more persons who are connected by birth, marriage, or adoption and who live together as one household. Traditionally, the family was considered the fundamental basis or corner stone of a society, warranting its stable continuity in a linear and uninterrupted way from one generation to another. It was a place where moral and cultural values and norms, which were indispensable for a traditional society, were generated, and children learned them from the very beginning of their lives. Simply, the family was an essential means for children to begin their first education prior to their formal education in latter stages, so that the unity of the family, its structure and collective values are of vital significance not only for bringing up decent individuals but also for the ideas of social stability and cohesion (Eekelaar 1984). In this respect, the family is viewed as a centre of education, morality and culture by developing and promoting certain values accepted by society, and it was believed that these values could only be gained through a stable heterosexual marriage and child rearing, along with strong relations within the family with parents, children, and relatives. This kind of family, as Althusser argues, is one of ideological state apparatuses necessary not only for securing social stability but also for the reproduction and continuation of its capitalist values in a society (Althusser 1971: 157).

Moreover, the traditional family in particular and society in general encouraged the segregation of space for man and woman—the domestic space which is allocated for women and the public space for men. The identities of man and woman, their professions and roles, were constructed and categorized in line with this separation of space, since each space necessitated particular professions and roles to satisfy the requirements of social norms and standards of a patriarchal society. Within this polarized space and perception, man was viewed as educated, independent, active, dominant, strong, rational, and provider, whereas woman was regarded as being domestic, less educated, passive, weak, emotional, and economically dependent on man. As Diana Gittins and Richard Collier succinctly summarize, 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 them with appropriate moral values and prepared them for adulthood, all in gender specific ways. Men’s role was as economic providers, as representatives of the family in the public sphere and as a source of moral authority. 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 taking financial and moral responsibility for wives who were busy creating a regulated domestic sphere, as against the profligacy and excesses of the aristocracy and the dangers of the undomesticated working classes (1993:157; 1995:219–20).

However, the changes and developments mentioned above 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 since the eighteenth century. On the one hand, marriage has become less and less important in the views of young men and women; and, on the other hand, the proportion of divorce has increased dramatically, causing the emergence of single parenthood, which has been a blow to heterosexual relations and traditional marriage, and which eventually has also altered the roles and identities of man and woman in the contemporary period accordingly.

In *About A Boy*, Hornby represents these shifts in the perception of the contemporary family and demonstrates how its structure and gender roles change in the British society. However, up until now the novel has not received critical attention concerning the family, its formation, gender relations, roles and identities, even though Hornby, unlike his contemporary male writers, is much interested in "domestic" fiction as well as the relationships between man and woman as he himself explains:

I read a lot of books by women and identified with them much more because I lived a domestic life—and most of us do—and that really wasn't reflected in any of the books written by men. It seemed odd to me that most of us bring up families and go to work and yet the books our male representatives are writing are about huge things in history and people on the edge. Of course we have a need of those books but there did seem to be a bit of a hole where no one was writing about what actually happened (qtd in Rennison 2005: 71).

Moreover, there are also a few brief comments made by other critics about Hornby's *About A Boy* and his view of "domestic life". Nick Rennison spares only three pages for Hornby in *Contemporary British Novelists* (2005) and gives very brief information about the novel. For Rennison, "fatherhood is at the heart of Hornby's second novel *About A Boy*", but she talks a little bit about his writing of "domestic fiction" and why "fatherhood is at the heart" of his novel (2005: 70-2). Besides, Derick Sweet reviews *About A Boy* and touches briefly on Hornby's characterization in the novel. Furthermore, Jago Morrison in *Contemporary Fiction* (2003) and Nick Bently in *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008) have entirely overlooked Hornby and his novel *About A Boy*. Bently gives some space only to Hornby's first novel *Fever Pitch* (1992). The reason behind why *About A Boy* has received little attention from Hornby's critics may be the view that he demonstrates the radical shifts in the contemporary period as to the family, relationships between parents and children, divorced single couples and other issues in social life, yet his position is vague; he often vacillates between the traditional view of life and contemporary one. In my view, however, Hornby strives to represent all the changes in contemporary period, including the family life, heterogeneous relations, relationship between parents and children, and construction of male and female gender identities, yet in his struggles, what I have observed in *About A Boy* is that he appears a bit traditional and domestic in his approach to the family life, relationship between parents and children together with husband and wife, so that he is not thoroughly happy all together with these shifts, which, as seen throughout the novel, spoils harmony, peace and stability of traditional life of the past in various ways. In order to justify the reasons behind his discontent, Hornby artistically creates certain situations

and relationships and thus attempts to find an acceptable ground for his own displeasure. In a sense, Hornby, as a man, seems interested in “domestic life” and thus seeks to restore traditional family life as he artistically stresses the view that there is a need for togetherness of father and mother in a family, for the stable upbringing of children as well as for their well-constructed psychological development. Another reason behind his tendency for domesticity may be Hornby’s inability to cope with the realities of contemporary life, the realities linked to constant shifts in life throughout the 1990s.

As soon as *About A Boy* begins, the reader notices at once the “split-up” of relations as well as fragmented identities in the contemporary family. Even the first sentence of the novel starts with “Have you split up now?” (Hornby 2000: 1). Marcus, a twelve-year old boy, whose mother Fiona and father Clive have divorced and now live separately, speaks to his mother and constantly reiterates the question and phrase, “have you split up now?”, “you’ve split up”, and “we’ve split-up”, investing the reader with a sense that there is a kind of problem in their lives (1). In the first place, the word “split-up” refers to the broken relationship in marriages; this word is persistently reiterated throughout the novel by giving the reader not only a sense of both 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 smashed and will not easily be restored. Moreover, the word “split-up” may also refer to the fragmented identities of children, following the separation of the married couples, since it visibly disturbs the psyche of children divorced couples. Due to the psychological impact of this battered relationship between father and mother, children are obviously affected as to psychological and social aspects of their lives; they are unable most of the time to establish a proper relationship in their lives; they are either introverted and antisocial or very disruptive, having different untraditional tendencies in life as opposed to normal common attitudes. For example, Marcus, as a child of the ‘split-up’ parents, is having a hard time at school where he is bullied because of his “hippy” life style, which is, in fact, seen in the lives of children of many single-parents today. Through his style, he may want to draw attention to fill in the vacuum created by the separation of his parents.

Marcus lives with his depressive, suicidal, psychologically uncomfortable mother. Her problem seems to derive not only from her “split-up” with her husband but also from her work and responsibilities towards her son, towards his education and well-being, since she, unlike a traditional mother, has to shoulder all the responsibilities inside and outside home. In a sense, Fiona, like Hornby himself, is unable to get over the realities of the life which she has to lead. Marcus thus strives to help his unhappy mother at home. When *About A Boy* opens, for example, Marcus and his mother are talking about the relationship between Fiona and her former boyfriend Roger. As a suicidal and sorrowful mother, she, like many other separated couples, is fragmented in her view and identity, and thus she seems unable to start a new proper relationship in her life, which may return her back to normal life. In fact, this kind of strain, which Fiona undergoes, has been a widespread attitude among single parents from the 1970s onward, even though the reasons for this attitude change from one case to another. Kathleen O’Connell Corcoran argues that “divorce is associated with an increase in depression—people experience loss of partner, hopes and dreams, and lifestyle” (Corcoran 1997). When the sense of confidence is destroyed, divorced couples become more careful and psychologically reluctant to jump into a new emotional relationship. Moreover, they may be disappointed and angry with their ex-relationships and may thus consider the other unreliable and opportunist. At the very beginning of the novel, Fiona appears to the reader in a way that she is unable to kick off a new relationship, and this inability is observed by the reader throughout *About A Boy*. What is bizarre and interesting but normal at the turn of the century is that Fiona and Marcus as mother and son can talk openly about Fiona’s

emotional relationship and boyfriends, and that Marcus does not mind his mother having boyfriends. As the narrator informs us, Marcus and his mother led a “normal” happy family life until his mother and father split up four years ago. He was then “eight years old,” and he attended school, went on holidays with his parents and paid “visits to grandparents.” Since then he has had a messy and painful life. But now things are different for him, since he does not enjoy the same pleasure as before in his life. Besides, the circle around him becomes narrow every day, which obviously bars him from socialisation. For example, he can see only “his mother’s boyfriends and his dad’s girlfriends”, and in his life, there are simply “flats and houses; Cambridge and London” (3). In the end, Marcus gradually gets used to this form of life, yet at the same time this kind of life has its consequences for him. It apparently leads him to be “shy” and inward-looking in his attitudes, and he begins to feel isolated in his life and thus does not want to go to school (11-2). In the overall implication of *About A Boy* as it will be debated below, the reader observes that the way Marcus acts is caused by the condition that he does not have a proper role model, a good family relationship, warmth, and nurturance, because it seems clearly that his lonely, depressive single mother cannot provide what he needs in his life.

The issue of single motherhood or single parenthood has drawn much attention so far. As Gill Jagger and Caroline Wright define, “lone motherhood” means “mothers parenting without the father of their child(ren) following marital breakdown”, and “single motherhood” means “parenting by never married mothers” (1999: 30). Since the 1940s, there has been observed a continuous increase in the number of women having children outside marriage and bringing them up alone without father, together with the number of women having children through marriage and bringing them up after the breakdown of marriage. For example, Bradley A. Coates, Esq. compares the rate of divorce in America with those in the rest of the world:

How do marriage and divorce rates in the United States compare with those in the rest of the world? It is interesting to note that *Americans marry and divorce more often than almost anyone else in the world*. Other nations—notably Russia and Sweden with their inordinately high overall divorce rates of about 65 percent—have even higher divorce statistics than America does. But, we are just about tops when it comes to the serial cycle of multiple re-marriages and re-divorces. Americans marry literally twice as often as the French, 40 percent more than Germans, 30 percent more than Japanese, 25 percent more than Canadians, and 20 percent more than Mexicans. Ninety percent of Americans will say “I do” at some point in their lives.

Not surprisingly, Americans then turn around and divorce more frequently than almost anybody else. In the United States, the divorce rate per thousand residents runs at about 4.8. In Canada, it is 2.9, in France it is 1.9, in Germany it is 1.7, in Japan it is 1.4, while in Mexico it is 0.6 (2008: 8. See also 12-17).

As in the quotation above, there is an obvious decline in respecting and preserving traditional family values and heterosexual marriages in the contemporary period, even though no reason is given behind. One of the reasons may be shift in the way that family life and heterosexual marriages has 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, rules and coded relationships not only as burden but also as limiting their freedom; they have been less enthusiastic to take responsibility and face difficulties of life. This kind of tendency, as seen in the quotation above, has undermined the basis of the traditional stable society and its continuity in the future, since traditional society had considered the family

as the cornerstone of its continuity. Hence many countries have been alarmed and then inclined to take radical measures to minimize the impact of anti-family attitudes and views in life (Collier 1995; Coates 2008; and Collier and Sheldon 2008). For example, I do remember that when I was in England during my graduate study from 1993 to 1999, the British government was trying to encourage and enforce church marriage not only to reduce the proportion of lone or single parents and bar them from getting state benefits but also to protect the traditionally stable British society against the decline of traditionalist behaviours and views, because the rate of teenage pregnancy, partnership and cohabitation was so high that it threatened the future of British society. As seen in the study conducted by John Ermisch and David J. Pevalin, for example, “among the British women, who were born in 1970, 82 % of teenage-births were outside marriage”, and this “discourages marriage and increases the chances that subsequent marriages and cohabiting unions dissolve” (2005: 470). For traditional family and society, this high rate of the teenage-births outside marriage is visibly dangerous and alarming as it destabilises the basis of heterogeneous marriages, which eventually results in the fragmentation of families. Hence this situation strongly urges societies to fight against the inclination among young people and then to take necessary measures to minimize the child-birth outside marriage for the sake of family and society.

There have been several reasons behind the increase in the number of teenage-births and single parenthood since the 1940s. The first one 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. Secondly and closely related to the first reason, 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 to work, 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. Thirdly, the post-war period has also witnessed the development of liberal views, which has visibly affected gender relations and the perception of single parenthood as well (Chambers 2006). Finally, as to the welfare state, particularly during the 1940s, the Beveridge report in England proposed the following categories of benefits:

First, social services like health care, unemployment insurance, pensions, and the like were to be paid for through a combination of contributions from employers, employees, and the state. Second, these contributions and the benefits they would pay out would be set at a standard rate across classes, and not be limited to the poor. Third, all citizens could expect a minimal level of subsistence from the state, derived from a combination of full employment, social-security payments, family allowances, and the provision of free or inexpensive health care through a national health service. This all added up to a view of the welfare state as the guarantor of support in the event of lost wages (Kent 1999: 311-334).

As the quotation illuminates, the welfare state provides almost all the benefits for those individuals who are single or unemployed, so that particularly females, who have been suppressed by or exposed to violence by their husbands, have prepared to live on their and be free

as long as the state covers main necessities of life such as “health care, unemployment insurance, pensions” without making any discrimination between the poor and rich. These benefits might have encouraged the increase in the number of single parenthood. However, the development of singly 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. First, the continuity of a society in the past, which was based upon the well-formed family, may be disrupted. Secondly, the family of the past, as explained above, was seen as the place to generate and promote culture and morality and then pass them on to the following generations. With this anti-family attitude and indifference, this process may be interrupted. Thirdly, single parent families may face a higher risk of poverty and vulnerability if the welfare state cuts off the benefits, giving rise to social confusion and complexity. In addition, it may result in behavioural and emotional disorders of single parents as seen in the novel under discussion. Rickard has this to say: “These negative outcomes are the result of the age, educational, economic and social isolation disadvantages that often accompany single motherhood” as well as of lack of the family support network of friends and extended family members (Rickard 2002: Research Note no. 41 2001-02).

In *About A Boy*, Hornby deals with these 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:

‘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 clichés. You know, all men are bastards, a woman without a man is like a...a...something without a something that does not have any relation to the first something; all that stuff’ (Hornby 2000: 20).

As seen in the quotation, Angie as a single mother is disturbed and angry with men and their view about single mother 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 woman had not been considered well in a traditional society. However, Angie refuses the connection between the first “something” and next one, which obvious demands a woman to attach herself to a man. For her, it is a rubbish 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 enable her to gain her identity as free. 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 of these views and roles. 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 behaviours with the other 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 Freeman, in which he will satisfy his need of fatherhood in an unconditional way that he will be together with single mothers and children for a while and then will depart 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 3-year old son Joe meet regularly; they go to McDonald’s



and visit the Science Museum and the Natural 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 gambolling happily in front of him, and everyone could see him doing it, and when he had done it for an afternoon he could go home again if he wanted to” (21-4). 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. As Hornby writes in *About A Boy*, contemporary fathers and mothers are not strong enough to take responsibility and face difficulties as in the past: “the kids stopped you going out and anyway a lot of men didn’t like kids that didn’t belong to them, and they didn’t like the kind of mess that frequently coiled around these kids like a whirlwind” (21). Yet, Hornby creates a sentimental, warm and peaceful environment for single men and women without messing their lives or “competition” (21). In an odd way, for example, Will wants to be “a serial nice guy” for single mothers without a serious commitment, and thinks of what he could offer to them: “Great sex, a lot of ego massage, temporary parenthood without tears and a guilt-free parting—what more could a man want? Single mothers—bright, attractive, available women, thousands of them, all over London—were the best invention Will had ever heard of. His career as a serial nice guy had begun” (24). The way Hornby represents Will suggests a flirtatious way of life, although he does not approve of the absence of stable and cohesive relationships.

Lack of stability obviously affects parents and children alike. They become alienated, anti-social and rebellious. As Hornby writes in the novel, children of single parents are “stuck between the equally wretched states of childhood and adolescence in early 1194” (195). They cannot develop an appropriate and consistent personal progress in their life because of two views. The first one is that children are deprived of the love, sympathy and warmth of a proper family, and thus they feel lonely and empty in their life. Secondly, since there is no right guidance and support for children, they are left alone in life to find their own way, and this struggle often ends up in unfavoured ways. Unfortunately, children often tend to imitate or make friends with wrong people to fill in the vacuum created by lack of normal family relationships, and they may become indifferent, do things against what is appropriate in private and public life and sometimes may get involved in drug addiction, crime, vandalism and theft, even though there may be exceptions.

Hornby himself has also suffered from the disadvantage of being a single parent when his wife abandoned him and his 2-year old son. In the novel, he represents Will, Fiona and Marcus in a way that they all miss something very important in their lives. For example, Fiona has separated from her husband, who leaves her alone with his girlfriend in Cambridge. Now she is a working single mother with her 12 year-old son 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, as already noted, “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. Lady Saltoun commented in House of Commons in February 1990 and empathised the importance of the role models which children need in their lives, particularly in early years of their lives. Saltoun’s comments and arguments suggest a traditional perception of the family and gives importance to father, who has authority, takes decisions and organizes activities of children’s live on his own way, which is “a distinctly male model of parenting”, in which “fathers are important for the healthy psychological development of children into the well-adjusted spouses and parents of tomorrow”:

Children learn primarily from example, by copying what they see. It is by example that a boy learns how to be a responsible husband and father and how to treat his own children in turn. It is by example that a girl learns how to be a wife, from seeing how her mother cares for her father. The father is enormously important, if only as a role model (qtd in Collier and Sheldon 2008: 73).

In the quotation, Saltoun visibly advocates traditional role models in a family and tries to remind us of the roles of a father and a mother in a family and of how children can take advantage of them. This view of family and role models is obviously traditional and patriarchal view. She makes this statement at a time when the family values decline and when role models shift. As seen also in the novel, the “split-up” of the family not only destroys the basis for these role models but also affects children emotionally, psychologically and socially, since children lack the role model and support for a better and stable growth in their lives.

From the very beginning of the novel, Marcus is represented as missing something central in his life: a normal family, in which mother and father live together, love and support each other and provide their children with love and security in their lives. Unfortunately, contemporary society has torn down all these values, giving rise to problems in family and social life. When he gets exposed to social life and its wider perspectives further, Marcus gradually begins to realize all the negative aspects of a “split-up” family and broken relationships not only in his own family but also in his contact and relations with the other people around him. His father has abandoned him and his mother at a time when they “needed him most” (254), and his mother cannot even help herself. Marcus is left to fend for himself:

He was having a shit time at school and a shit time at home, and as home and school was all there was to it, just about, that meant he was having a shit time all the time, apart from when he was asleep. Someone was going to have to do something about it, because he couldn't do anything about it himself, and he couldn't see who else there was, apart from the woman under the coat. (40)

Marcus's father is absent, and mother is “funny,” “depressed” and gives him neither guidance nor security. Ironically he has to remind his mother of her duty: “he was only a kid, and she was his mum, and if he felt bad it was her job to stop him feeling bad, simple as that. Even if she didn't want to, even if it meant that she'd end up feeling worse. Tough. Too bad. He was angry enough to talk to her now” (40-1). Once his mother starts to cry again, Marcus asks her to stop it, since the way his mother acts also makes him unhappy and depressive: “You've got to stop this... You've got to. If you can't look after me properly then you'll have to find someone who can” (41). Marcus appears very angry with his mother and gradually comes to notice Fiona's inability to “look after” and guide him properly in life. Both Fiona and Marcus are aware of what is missing in their lives, yet they seem at the same time doomed not to find a solution. Marcus seeks a substitute to replace Fiona and the absence of his father: Will.

As seen above, it is not only Marcus but also his single mother who is emotionally disturbed in her life. As a working single mother, Fiona is represented in a way that she suffers psychologically from the “split-up” with her husband. She got divorced from her husband four years ago and now lives with her son Marcus. From the first sentence of the novel to the last one, Fiona always appears unhappy, uncomfortable, “depressed” and “suicidal” (Hornby 2000: 25-27, see also 64-5, 71, 74). Although she is a working mother, rich enough to support her family and

her son, she seems to be missing something important in her life, which obviously perturbs her psyche and her relationships with her son, together with the people around her. Her unhappiness may derive from two sources: she cannot cope with the loss of her husband and she is unable to take care of Marcus. Fiona's helplessness and lack of control over her son, along with Marcus's emotional need for a father or a fatherly figure, continue to occupy the attention of the reader through every single stage of the novel. As a 12-year old boy, Marcus wants to help his mother and does his best to find out the reasons behind her depressive and suicidal feelings: "What else made you cry, apart from money? Death?" (26).

For Hornby, the solution is "an enormous, happy, extended family," and it is "true" that "this happy family included an invisible two-year-old, a barmy twelve-year-old and his suicidal mother; but sod's law dictated that this was just the sort of family you were bound to end up with when you didn't like families in the first place" (74). Will tries to achieve Hornby's purpose by acting a fatherly-role and establishing a kind of relationship with Marcus and Fiona in a way that he shows how a child and mother need father and husband for a proper family as well as for the stable emotional growth of children. The idea that three of them together with Will's son Ned (Marcus thinks that Ned is real) live in the same house apparently captivates Marcus:

He wanted his mum to come with them was a way of getting her and Will together, and after that, he reckoned, it should be easy. His mum was pretty, and Will seemed quite well off, they could go and live with Will and his kid, and then there'd be four of them, and four was twice as good as two. And maybe, if they wanted to, they could have a baby. His mum wasn't too old. She was thirty-eight. You could have a baby when you were thirty-eight. So then there would be five of them, and it wouldn't matter quite so much if one of them died (78).

Will seems the right person to help Marcus. He starts to act like a father for Marcus; he purchases him "the adidas basketball boots" (112), supports him emotionally and gives him advice. When his mother learns the purchase of the boots and the fact that Will does not have a child, she gets angry and bans Marcus from visiting Will. In order to shut her mouth, Marcus tells her, "I need a father" (122). Eventually Fiona realizes that: "Marcus seems to think he needs adult male company. A father figure. And somehow [Will's] name came up" (126). Once Fiona and Will meet to talk of Marcus's need, she confesses: "you know, it's the first thing you think of when you split up with the father of your son, that he's going to need a man around and so on" (130). Marcus obviously undergoes the experience of a contemporary child in the sense that he definitely needs an environment where there is enough emotional support, where he may get proper guidance and true information, and unfortunately, it is not Fiona but Will who notices what Marcus actually needs in his life:

Will saw the kind of help Marcus needed. Fiona had given him the idea that Marcus was after a father figure, someone to guide him gently towards male adulthood, but that wasn't it at all: Marcus needed help to be a kid, not an adult. And, unhappily for Will, that was exactly the kind of assistance he was qualified to provide. He wasn't able to tell Marcus how to grow up, or how to cope with a suicidal mother, or anything like that, but he could certainly tell him that Kurt Cobain didn't play for Manchester United, and for a twelve-year-old boy attending a comprehensive school at the end of 1993, that was maybe the most important information of all (147).

Marcus's "need of a father" is also noticed by his own father towards the end of *About A Boy*. His father, Clive, falls off the window-ledge and breaks his collar bone, and he sends for Marcus to see him in Cambridge. Marcus leaves for Cambridge with Ellie, a friend of his. Ellie breaks the window of a music shop on their way to Cambridge and both end up in the police station. Eventually they are released and Marcus goes to Cambridge with his father and his girlfriend. On their way to Cambridge, Clive goes over the life of his son, the way he acts towards his son; he thinks of his own life as well as of his son's life, and then eventually comes to the conclusion that he has made mistakes and been "a useless father" for years and that he could have helped his son better in life; Clive then tells Marcus, "you know you need a father" (270-1).

It is not Clive as biological father but Will who helps and educates Marcus through his fatherly manners and attitudes, and in the end Marcus becomes not only a normal child, but he is also able to cope with life, find his way and establish proper and stable relationships with other people: "He dressed better—he had won the argument with his mother over whether he should be allowed to go shopping with Will—and he had his hair cut regularly, and he tried very hard not to sing out loud" (274). For Will, Marcus becomes a normal (read: traditional) child:

Will thought he knew one of the reasons why, but he also knew that it would be neither wise nor kind to elaborate. The truth was that this version of Marcus really wasn't so hard to cope with. He had friends, he could look after himself, he had developed a skin — the kind of skin Will had just shed. He had flattened out, and become as robust and as unremarkable as every other twelve-year-old kid. But all three of them had had to lose things in order to gain other things. Will had lost his shell and his cool and his distance, and he felt scared and vulnerable, but he got to be with Rachel; and Fiona had lost a big chunk of Marcus, and she got to stay away from the casualty ward; and Marcus had lost himself, and got to walk home from school with his shoes on (277-8).

Marcus has been socialized to the extent that he is not introverted and "shy" anymore; he is able to take care of himself without losing himself, without being depressive, without feeling lonely in life, and "Will knew then, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Marcus would be OK" (278). Through his representation of Will and Marcus as well as the father-son relationship between them, Hornby illuminates the need for a proper family and for a proper relationship and harmony between parents and children in a family to provide a better "outcome for men, for women, for children and for society more generally" (Collier and Sheldon 2008: 179).

### **3. The House-Husband**

The second part of the paper examines the ways in which Nick Hornby demonstrates in *About A Boy* that the traditional image, identity and roles of the traditional man has been devastated by the drastic changes of contemporary society. Contemporary men are less interested in marriage; they are not active or dominant any more but idle, indifferent, unemployed, and thus economically dependent either on their parents or on their wives. Will Freeman clearly fits these definitions. When Will first appears in the novel, the narrator tells us that he has unconventional aimless life, sleeping with women, spending extravagantly and listening to Nirvana and Snoop Doggy Dogg. Unlike a traditional man, who was active and productive in life and strove to earn money and support his family, Will does not have a "proper family, which he thinks will cause him "an awful lot of trouble" (Hornby 200: 10). In fact, he hates both "monogamy" and children, since family, wife and children mean responsibilities and difficulties. However, he is inconsistent

and ambivalent in his views. On the one hand, he does not want to have his own children, and on the other hand, he strives to take care of Marcus in a fatherly way. When he learns that Angie has children, he muses ambivalently and seems confused:

I've never been out with someone who was a mum before, and I've always wanted to do. I think I'd be good at it.

"Good at what?"

Right. Good at what? What was he good at?...Maybe he would be good at children, even though he hated them and everyone responsible for bringing them into the world..."

I don't know. Good at kids' things. Messing about things..."...Maybe he should have been working with kids all this time. Maybe this was a turning point in his wife! (19)

Will feels that he does not fit in the role of traditional parent or father:

*I'm a single father. I have a two-year-old boy. I'm a single father. I have a two-year-old boy. I'm a single father. I have a two-year-old boy.* However many times Will told himself this, he could always find some reason that prevented him from believing it; in his own head — not the place that counted the most, but important nevertheless — he didn't feel like a parent. He was too young, too old, too stupid, too smart, too groovy, too impatient, too selfish, too careless, too careful...he didn't know enough about kids, he went out too often, he drank too much, he took too many drugs. When he looked in the mirror, he didn't, couldn't, see a dad, especially a single dad.

He was trying to see a single dad in the mirror because he had run out of single mums to sleep with; in fact, Angie had so far proved to be both the beginning and the end of his supply. It was all very well deciding that single mums were the future, that there were millions of sad, Julie Christie-like waifs just dying for his call, but the frustrating truth was that he didn't have any of their phone numbers. Where did they hang out?

It took him longer than it should have done to realize that, by definition, single mothers had children, and children, famously, prevented one from hanging out anywhere. He had made a few gentle, half-hearted enquiries of friends and acquaintances, but had so far failed to make any real headway; the people he knew either didn't know any single mothers, or were unwilling to effect the necessary introductions due to Will's legendarily poor romantic track record. But now he had found the ideal solution to this unexpected dearth of prey. He had invented a two-year-old son called Ned and had joined a single parents' group (31-2).

As suggested in the quotation, Will Freeman as a man is not ready to face the responsibilities and difficulties which a family may impose upon him. The reasons for inventing a son and joining a single parents' group are his desire to meet and go out with single mums, his need to do something in his spare time to forget his troubles, and most importantly, the urge to satisfy what he misses in his life: a normal and proper family life. Yet, Will does not have the courage to take up the responsibilities of a family and children. From the traditional point of view, Will is a "failure"; he is "hopeless" and useless (123-6).

In addition, Will is not as strong as a traditional man and thus chooses a "life without work and care and difficulty and detail, a life without context and texture" (171). Besides, he does not have a proper job but depends upon the others for his living: he lives off the income

which he receives from the song “Santa’s Super Sleigh” that his father wrote in 1938 (47). Suzie, another single mother in the novel, is surprised when she learns that Will does not have a job and asks him if he has ever tried to find one. His answer is yes, but he is lazy and unwilling to get a job: “he never seemed to get round to it [job]. Every day for the last eighteen years he had got up in the morning with the intention of sorting out his career problem once and for all; as the day wore on, however, his burning desire to seek a place for himself in the outside world somehow got extinguished” (48-9). He is good at passing his time: “Filling days had never really been a problem for Will. He might not have been proud of his lifelong lack of achievement, but he was proud of his ability to stay afloat in the enormous ocean of time he had at his disposal; a less resourceful man, he felt, might have gone under and drowned” (71). He is also good at inventing fictions:

It was all a dreamy alternative reality that didn’t touch his real life, whatever that was, at all. He didn’t need a job. He was OK as he was. He read quite a lot; he saw films in the afternoon; he went jogging; he cooked nice meals for himself and his friends; he went to Rome and New York and Barcelona every now and again, when boredom became particularly acute . . . He couldn’t say that the need for change burned within him terribly fiercely (72-3).

#### **4. From “mothercare” to “fathercare”**

As the quotation above suggests, Hornby summarizes and indicates radical shifts in the perception of a traditional man’s image and identity. Unlike a traditional man, a contemporary man is distanced from the reality of life; he does not have a job to support his family, wandering about without a real purpose in life and having no will to change his life. As Hornby represents throughout *About A Boy*, the way Will acts and defines himself actually seems a common practice among contemporary men. They are irresponsible and often try to avoid the burden caused by the family, wife and children; they prefer to lead a causal life. Nowadays, a lot of women and mothers, single or married, fill in the work places and make their living, while many fathers sit at home, take care of domestic duties, look after babies and wash up dishes. Through Will’s life, Hornby illustrates the shift from “mothercare” to “fathercare”, indicating the radical change in the gender roles and professions (77). In the past, kitchen was the place of women where husbands were never seen; cooking, washing up dishes, and caring for children were solely among responsibilities of wife, and if a man had been involved in those activities in the past, he would have been called henpecked husband in some societies and cultures, and it was not only a joke among men but also a kind of humiliation for him in his status and respect.

In sum, Hornby represents in *About A Boy* drastic shifts in the perception of family values, child-rearing, gender relationships, identities, and role models in the contemporary period. Within these shifts, heterosexual relationships are crushed into pieces, giving rise to “split-up” families, fragmented relationships and identities and single parenthoods, in which not only single mothers and fathers but also children undergo a deep psychological and emotional trauma as in the case of Marcus and Fiona. Hornby also illuminates the shift in the perception of gender identities: men go away from their traditionally and culturally assigned characteristics and roles; they become more passive, sluggish, inoperative, uninterested, immoral, jobless and domestic, whereas women, like Fiona, are more active and outward with job. They are free and independent in their movements without being controlled by their husbands as well as by the rules and norms of the family as in the past.

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**Ali Gunes**

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
International University of Sarajevo  
Paromlinska 66, 71000 Sarajevo  
Bosnia and Herzegovina*

[aligunes@ius.edu.ba](mailto:aligunes@ius.edu.ba)

[gunesali\\_1@hotmail.com](mailto:gunesali_1@hotmail.com)

[gunesali1@gmail.com](mailto:gunesali1@gmail.com)

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