

**FAMILY DYNAMICS AND DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN LAURA  
DAVE'S *THE LAST THING HE TOLD ME* AND JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE  
THE BONES***

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
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**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this essay titled: Family Dynamics and Dysfunctional Relationships in Laura Dave's *the Last Thing He Told Me* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage The Bones* was carried out by Elizabeth Omocuwa ODILE of the department of English and literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, under supervision.

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**Dr. Lilian C. Onyeiwu**  
**Project Supervisor**

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to God Almighty for his grace and help to finish this project. Also I dedicate this work to my family especially my Sponsors Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Edonojie for their manifold financial assistance. Lastly, I dedicate this to my mom Mrs. Patience Odile and to my amiable friends who have always supported me throughout my year of Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

This research work is to explore the theme of family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships, its roles, relations in family relationships using Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage The Bones* as case study. The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth study of the themes by analyzing the formation of family dynamics and to portray the dysfunctional relationships in these two contemporary novels. It sheds light on how individual struggles with their sense of self amidst amidst challenging interpersonal dynamics and how how family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships intersect, influence one another and shape characters journeys in the context of the texts. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of Id, ego and superego to examine the topic and the impact this theory has on the characters in the texts of study. It also explores factors such as poverty, neglect, separation as causes of dysfunction in the family

This study considers the societal and cultural context in which the novel are set by looking into the unique perspective and techniques used by each author to address family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships. This research employs the qualitative method of research with the aim of exploring how the characters sense of self identity is influenced by the complex familial contexts they find themselves and how they respond to navigate through these challenges.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.0 Introduction

In the realm of literature, authors often dig into the intricacies of human existence, exploring the dynamism of the family and the complexities of relationships that define us as individuals. The exploration of these themes becomes a captivating lens through which we navigate different dimensions of the human condition. Two remarkable novels that offer insights into such themes are Laura Dave's *The last Thing He Told* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. Both of these works skillfully probe the depths of family dynamics and portray the dynamics of dysfunctional relationships, resonating with the emotional and intellectual level of every reader.

Family Dynamics according to Jabbari Bahareh and Audra S. Rouster defines dynamics as the patterns of interactions among relatives, their roles and relationships and the various factors that shape their interactions. This interaction affects the way they see themselves and see the world. This has a great significance in the mental health and well being of everyone in the home. Examples of family dynamics are the competitive family dynamics. In this kind of family members are in competition with each other to see who is better or best. It could be between parents, other children or children to parents. They value the best and will do whatever it will take to get it. The uninvolved family dynamic

is when a member neglects the rest either by being absent physically, emotionally, financially, socially or otherwise present but not involved in the lives of others in the family. An example of an uninvolved could be a mother who chooses to pursue money or her business and by so doing neglects to give proper care to her children, thereby her children looks very unkempt, disorganized, dirty and irresponsible. Communal family dynamics is the family where everyone feels valued and loved. An example is a family that listens to each other without haughtiness and judgement. Other examples of dynamics are alliance based on authoritarian family dynamics. Family dynamics also plays a significant roles. These roles could either lead to a healthy family dynamic or dysfunctional. Every member of the family is expected to play these roles and could operate as the hero of the family, the rescuer, the scapegoat, the switchboard etc.

Dysfunctional relationships on the other hand, refers to a relationship where chaos, neglect, misunderstandings and communication breakdown becomes the other of the day. Collins dictionary also defines dysfunctional relationships as relationships or behavior which are different from what is considered normal. Therefore, a Relationship is considered dysfunctional when the peace and stability of such a relationship is threatened. When a family's relationship becomes dysfunctional, conflict begins to emerge. Members of such a family find it hard to become vulnerable to one another, hence, the strength and support needed for the growth and life of the family is drained. Each family member begins to seek refuge outside the home. In little or no time, nothing is left in the family

anymore. Family dysfunction would begin to take its roots in a home where one or both parents have addictions, an example is found in Esch's father whom they lovingly call Daddy. His addiction to alcohol greatly affects the children negatively. The reality and consciousness of a family becoming dysfunctional can and will be marked by conflict and tension. *The Last Thing He Told Me*, written by Laura Dave, weaves a captivating tale of a woman's journey to discover the truth behind her husband's sudden disappearance. Hannah Hall, a resilient protagonist, struggles with her identity not only as a devoted wife but also as an individual seeking her own sense of purpose. On the other hand, Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* presents an intimate exploration of a poverty-stricken family who struggles to survive in an environment that is not safe from the almighty hurricane named Katrina. As they are thrown into the midst of a society that still breathes in the air of racism and neglect. These protagonists are left to pursue and carve out a proper self-identity and acceptance for themselves and their families. Here in both novels Jesmyn Ward and Laura Dave take us on a ride navigating the living conditions that go on in a dynamic family and the interruptions that occur in a dysfunctional family setting. Identity formation in a dynamic family is a multifaceted construct that extends far beyond mere self-awareness. It encompasses a sense of belonging, self-definition, and the interplay between individuality and the roles we play within our social contexts. Literature has long served as a mirror that reflects the concept of identity and explores the commonalities and disparities between individuals and the

characters they encounter. Through Hannah Hall and Esch Batiste, the protagonists of *The Last Thing He Told Me* and *Salvage the Bones*, introduces the family dynamics in the Batistes family leading up to Hurricane Katrina's catastrophic arrival. Esch Batiste, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, strives to shape her identity amidst the complexities of her impoverished upbringing, while her family struggles with fractured relationships amidst their shared struggles. At the heart of both narratives lies a profound exploration of identity, how it is shaped by personal experiences, family ties, and societal expectations. As we look into these novels, we are confronted with characters who, in their pursuit of self-discovery, expose vulnerabilities, strengths, and an enduring human desire for belonging and acceptance. Thus, we are given the opportunity to witness the profound impact of identity formation amidst life's trials and tribulations in their respective family situations.

For Hannah Hall, a central aspect of her identity is intricately tied to her relationship with her husband, Owen Michaels. The abrupt disappearance of Owen forces Hannah to confront her sense of self, unearthing questions about the authenticity of their relationship and the devotion of the life they built together. As she navigates the unfamiliar territory of single motherhood, her own aspirations and desires become more pronounced, leading her on a path of self-discovery beyond the confines of her role as a wife.

In contrast, Esch Batiste's identity is deeply rooted in the harsh reality of her impoverished Mississippi community. Her existence is shaped by the hardships endured by her family, the unrelenting impact of poverty, and her longing for affection and validation in a world that often overlooks her. As the only girl in a family of boys, Esch struggles with her femininity, yearning to be recognized and valued for more than just her nurturing nature. Alongside the profound exploration of identity in family dynamics, both novels offer a unique portrayal of dysfunctional relationships, laying bare the fragility and complexity of human connections. Dysfunctional relationships can manifest in various forms, encompassing emotional, familial, and societal bonds that fail to provide the support and love one seeks.

### **1.1 Purpose of Study**

This study aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of the themes of family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships in Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. By analyzing the formation of family dynamics and the portrayal of dysfunctional relationships in these two contemporary novels, this research seeks to shed light on how individuals struggle with their sense of self amidst challenging interpersonal dynamics. The study intends to offer a comprehensive understanding of how family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships intersect, influence one another, and shape characters' journeys in the context of the texts.

## 1.2 Scope of Study

This study will consider the societal and cultural context in which the novels are set and how these factors may impart the characters identity and relationships. Also it will look into the themes of family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships as depicted in these novels to explore the unique perspective and techniques used by each author to address family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships.

## 1.3 Methodology

This research employs the qualitative method of research. It shows how the main female protagonists in *The Last Thing He Told Me* and *Salvage The Bones* navigates their way through dysfunctional family dynamics and how they were able to discover their identities in the midst of the challenges passed down to them either from their family or the society they find themselves. The main aim is to explore how the characters sense of self identity is influenced by the complex familial contexts they find themselves in and how they respond to navigate through these challenges. Using this method of research, we can dig into the characters emotions, thoughts and perceptions providing a refined understanding of how family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships intersect and shape their journeys within the narratives. Other secondary sources include the internet and articles in journals and due references are made for them.

## 1.4 Theoretical Background

Among the various lenses through which literature can be analyzed, psychoanalysis stands out as a compelling approach, developed by Sigmund Freud. It digs into the subconscious mind, unearthing hidden desires, fears, and motivations that shape human behavior, which attributes to a person's personality, thoughts, actions to unconscious conflicts and motives, generating its bearing from psychology, which is a study of the mind and behavior (Zhang, 229). Psychoanalysis is said to be one the

modern day theory used in interpretation of modern day text and characters. This became evident in the early 20th century which marks the beginning of modern day psychology. With the series of post-war Theoretical waves, psychoanalytic criticism is considered the most influential interpretive theory in having its premises on the workings of the mind, instincts and sexuality.(Roper and Rajasekaran, 930).

The theory arose from the 19th century with much focus on the subconscious and dream analysis. Freud the propounded of the theory was born in 1856 in Monrovia. His childhood was characterized by a strict and depotic father (Zhang, 229). However, his mother cared about him. This made him to love his mother in a special way, which influenced his theory of Oedipus complex. Sigmund Freud right from his days of writing between the 1880s and 1930s developed a collection of theories which formed the basis of the psychodynamic approach to

psychology. There are aspects to psychoanalysis such as projection, psychology, Id ego superego, repression, psychodynamics etcetera, but the aspect this research will focus on is the id ego and superego aspect of Freud's psychoanalysis. These three elements according to Freud interact dynamically to shape an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions.

The id, which is known as the pleasure principle is the most archaic and instinctual part of the human psyche. This part seeks gratification for basic needs and desires such as thirst, hunger, comfort and sexual urges. Freud compared the id to a child who desires to have everything he wants, without considering the consequences. It often operates as a subconscious level and is responsible for impulsive irrational and sometimes socially unacceptable behavior. Freud argued that this is the only part of the personality that is present at birth, suggesting that this primitive component of personality that Id, exists wholly within the unconscious. It acts as the driving force of one's personality (Cherry, 2023). It does not only strive to fulfill the most basic urges or needs that people have but also provides all the energy necessary to drive a person's personality (Cherry, 2023). It begins to rule a child's personality right from infancy that becomes the reason why infants mostly crave satisfying basic needs as in food, drink and comfort as the utmost importance.

Moreover, as people grow older, it would be seen as problematic if they continue to act on the needs of the Id wherever they felt an urge, need or desire, and Freud believes that all of the compelling force of behaviour is the Id. The Id needs not change but it continues to be infertile, instinctive and primal. (Cherry, 2023). Having nothing in touch with reality or logic or social norms. Freud in his book *New Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*, describes the Id as the dark, inaccessible part of our personality. (Freud, 1931). He also compared it to a cauldron of seething excitation and described the Id as having no real organization (Cherry, 2023).

The ego, in contrast to the Id, is known to be the reality principle. The ego develops after the Id to mediate between the demands of the Id in a person's life. That is, it seeks to find realistic and socially accepted ways to satisfy the Id's wants and at the same time considers the consequences and limitations imposed by society. It acts as the checkmate to the personality, making decisions that balance the conflicting demands of the Id and superego. It is more organized and it is compared by Freud to a man on horseback : the rider must harness and direct the superior every of his mount, and at times allow for a practicable satisfaction of it's urges(Freud, 1933). The superego is the component of personality made up of the internalized ideas that we have aquired from our parents and society and it's function is to suppress the desires of the Id and tries to make the ego

behave morally, rather than realistically (Cherry, 2020). The superego is the last personality component to develop. The Id which is the basic followed by the ego which begins to develop in a child between the first three years of life. Then the supergo emerges as at age five.

The superego has two dimensions which are; the ego ideal and the conscience (Cherry, 2020). The ego ideal is the part that understands the rules and standards for good behaviours. Such behaviour are mostly approved by parents and other authority figures. Following these rules gives one feelings of pride, wake and accomplishment. Breaking this rules can result in feelings of gult. The ideal image we have of ourselves according to Freud is the ego ideal. That is, the exact picture we have of what we desire to become and known for and this ideal image is often modeled after the people we have known so, with the knowledge we have gathered from others our own standards are now formed (Cherry, 2020). The conscience dimension of the superego comprise of the rules for which behaviours are considered bad, we experience feelings of guilt (Cherry, 2020). When the superego acts in the conscious mind, we are aware of our resulting feelings, and the superego act unconsciously to suppress the Id, we might end up with the feelings of gult and no real understanding of why we feel that way.

Finally, the superego's ultimate goal is to strike balance for moral perfections without taking reality into account. The Id which is the desire for immediate gratification is helped by the ego to ensure that the impulses of the Id are expressed in a manner acceptable in the real world. Now in applying by Using the psychoanalytic theory of id ego and superego to analyze a text means digging deep into the character's past experiences beginning from the first formative years to maturity.

### **1.5 Review of Related Literature and Justification of Study**

Literature explores the concept of identity, it identifies how individuals define their cultural and social backgrounds, and how external factors influence their perception of self. *The Last Thing He Told Me* and *Salvage the Bones* are both novels that treat the theme of identity in family dynamics with dysfunctional relationships. Books Amaya in it's review of *The Last Thing He Told Me*, gave a short review on the text, first he gave a little insight into the author's background. Laura Dave was born in New York city, studied at the University of Pennsylvania where she received her B.A in English in 1999( Amaya, 30). Her novel *the last thing he told me* written in the year 2021, was labelled a New York times best seller and a Reese Witherspoon book club selection. He noted that Dave found inspiration for the text in the Enron scandal, specifically Enron CEO Kenneth Lay and his devoted wife Linda Lay. Dave saw an interview with Linda Lay where in she insisted that her husband was innocent of any wrong. This caught her

attention and so led to the question that planted the seed for her novel: what if you trust someone in spite of all evidence proving the contrary. Finally, Ameya highlighted some other things that if they were added to the text could make it better. One of them was adding more depths to the relationship between Hannah and Bailey, the media coverage of the raid at Owen's office that should have been a highlight was not added and that Dave also downplayed the main conflict to highlight Hannah and Bailey's growth individually as a family (Ameya, 30)

Research has been made on the last thing he told me and it's been observed that probably because it's a new book published, scholarly works have not been done on it. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* has more published scholarly reviews. Some of which we would consider in relation to the study.

Ramon Vincent Cucarella in his essay titled 'Biblical echoes and communal home in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* explores the living conditions of an African American family in dire poverty struggling to weather the horrors of Hurricane Katrina on the outskirts of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi (Ramon, 1). The article had its focus on the novel's ideology of form, which is premised on biblical models of narration, grounded on a literary transposition of the book of Deuteronomy, as it serves to portray the victimization of African Americans. He compared their living conditions with that of mythical tones to evoke the country's failed covenant between God and his chosen people (Ramon, 1). And he argued that, the novel contends that the revamped concept of

communal home and family bonds echoing Winthrop's emblem of natural belonging (Ramon,1). And he finally recasts the trope of biblical refuge as a potential tenet to foster self assertion and to rethink the limits of belonging and acceptance (Ramon,1).

Christopher W. Chark in his article carried out a study on : what comes to the surface . Storms, Bodies, and Community in *Jesmyn Ward's salvage the Bones*. The study examined how human and non-human bodies manifest regional stories, playing an inportent role alongside particular racialized histories of the South (Clark, 343). He examined how Ward's novel highlights the tensions and contradictions that surround Hurricane Katrina. This he is able to accomplish by investigating the landscape, femininity, as well as natural and man made environments . Show casing the way Ward represents the south through a typically regional mode of address, while challenging pre-conceived motions of who is affected by the storm ( Clark, 343). And how in examining the social and cultural effects of Katrina alongside Esch's narrative which uncover's the way familial and community relationships function. By so doing revealing the southern myths alongside Katrina to erase individuals identities and histories.

family dynamics refers to To the patterns of interactions among relatives, their roles, relationships, and the various factors that shape their interactions (Bahare, 2014). She further explained that because family members rely on each other for emotional, physical and economic support, it becomes easy for anyone of them to get intimidated, feel unaccepted and stressed when a member of the family goes astray. Thereby causing a

dysfunction in the relationship. Interpersonal relations among family members has influence in the development and psychological well-being of the people in the family setting. Thus, family dynamics and the quality of family Relationships can have either positive or negative impact on their health and stability. Some factors have been seen to influence family dynamics. Some of these factors are mutuality, individuality, flexibility, stability, clear communication and role reciprocity as the primary factors contributing to healthy family dynamics. Mutuality in particular means a shared feeling of agreement and warmth, which has been identified as an important factor in building functional Relationships in contrast isolation, rigidity, disorganization, unclear communication would do nothing but bring about dissimulation in the relationship. As we clearly see in the relationship between Hannah and Bailey. An understanding of the impact of family dynamics on a person affects his or her self perception and attitude towards others.

Alejandro in family and social dynamics observed that Despite the criticisms of the flaws in frued's theories as they pertain to the psychological development of the individual, his theory of psychoanalysis as an interpretive device aimed at explaining, understanding and predicting human behavior is, if nothing else, of great philosophical importance (Alejandro, 2014). Inorder to get a proper understanding of fruedian view on the origins of family and society, an explanation has to be given in reference to the development of the individual's psych. This psychological factor as regards his theory are

the id, the ego and the superego. Each of them are instrumental in playing the role in derivation of an individual's psychology and the relations to both family and society. The id acts as the part of the individual psych that provides the enegetic drives with instinct desires. Thus, the id allows for the explanation of the psychial energies that pertain to the primary drives of human survival such as the need for shelter, satisfaction of hunger and the desire for warmth and love. He also noted that, The ego refers to the psychic force by which an individual may come into contact with an understanding of the other two more influential psychial forces. That is, the ego adopts the role of negotiator within the individual inorder to produce a balance between the thoughts, feelings and emotions that may arise as a result of an interaction with the external world (Alejandro, 3).The super ego according to him originates from an individual's with their socio cultural environment.

Wajid Luqman Abdulla in his book titled Connection Between a Dysfunctional Society and the False self asserted indefining that an trait of dysfunctional family is one in which a conflict and instability are common (Wajid, 6). Parents might abuse or neglect their children, and other family members are often forced to accommodate and enable negative behaviour in some cases, dysfunctional families can be the result of addition codependency, or untreated mental illness (6) and that while the term 'dysfunctional family' might be used flippantly in popular culture, growing up in a toxic environment can have a lasting impact as children transition into adulthood (6). He went ahead to give

common characteristics of a dysfunctional family dynamics such as poor communication. Drug abuse or alcohol use, perfectionism, lack of empathy external (7). These feature he claims are very evident and seen in a dysfunctional and in speaking of the effects to a growing individual in a dysfunctional family, he asserts that the individuals the Family end up struggling in life, disorder and negative behaviour and they could have study problems in school and later drift into drug abuse. They could also be withdrawn and socially isolated having difficulty expressing their feelings, and are at risk of developing depression, low esteem anxiety and more (7). Finally his conclusion was that adults from dysfunctional families suffer internally from self rejection and self criticism.

Kostandy w. Kostandy carried out a study on the effects of alcohol abuse in family relationships and family dynamics in this research the question of if there is a reciprocal effect between alcohol abuse and Family dynamics is being discussed; using various perceptions to guide empirical students in the area of Family dynamics to relate to alcohol abuse including genetic biological efforts Studies of the personality and psychosocial characteristics of the alcoholic as well as of their spouse and children are analysed (Kostandy, 1) as well as other variables. The variables are Family Structures, social class, and ethnicity.

According to him, in administering therapy, the therapists needs to ask the client, 'who is important to you? And who you consider as Family to you? (Kostandy, 2) it's critical to identify people who are important in the person's life (2) and a list of

operational concepts such as love, affirmation, avoidance and fear were offered to better classify the dynamics among the family using both verbal and non verbal accounts. The results from this research indicated that alcohol abuse plays a role in couple's relationship formation and dissolution (Laslett, A.m. et al., 2015) and that adolescents who abused alcohol were likely to many younger than those who did not also alcohol abuse is further responsible for cognitive deficits and impaired judgement (2). They after participate in risky sexual behaviour get pregnant and then marry early. Kostandy also asserted that 11% of diversified men and women claim that alcohol abuse played a role in their divorce and that alcohol abuse rates are higher among divorced individuals compared to married individuals (Laslett, A.m. *et al.*, 2015), (2). The children folks are not left out of this study as he noted that children living in such a dysfunctional family are often verbally abused, left unsupervised, physically hurt or exposed to domestic violence (Kostandy, 2). He concluded with his facts that the family has a role in the offset of alcohol abuse, and that it may start when families unsuspecting have a dysfunctional system (Kostandy, 5) and that family therapy can help families better communicate on important issues and reconcile from past issues (5).

## **1.6 Thesis Statement**

Applying Freud's psychoanalytic theory of id ego and superego to the texts , this study employs the interplay of self consciousness, acceptance, questions of colour and race and external factors such as poverty, neglect and separation to illuminate the

profound effects of these psychological constructs of family dynamics and emergence of dysfunctional relationships.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE IMPACT OF COLOUR AND RACE ON SELF PERCEPTION, ACCEPTANCE AND CONSEQUENCES.

#### 2.0 Introduction

The human mind has a great role to play in the psychological wellbeing of an individual as regards their desires, reason and morality. The psychological formation of an individual largely depends on both internal and external forces. In this chapter, we will discuss external forces such as race, colour, self perception and acceptance in relation to family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships, and also explore how the subconscious and conscious mind to shape the characters sense of self perception, acceptance and behaviour in relation to Freud's psychoanalytic theory.

#### 2.1 Self Consciousness and Acceptance

Self consciousness refers to the awareness and concerns one feels about himself and how they are perceived by others. It also refers to self awareness, that is awareness of one's thoughts, activities and the awareness of one's present situation and how one manages the issues at hand, including how one perceive the activities around one's self and the responses that comes from these experiences. Self consciousness develops in an individual when they begin to understand rules, standards, happenings and experience that surfaces around them. According to health line, self consciousness in young children begins to surface around eighteen months old. This is when emotions begins to develop. The visible factors that affect the consciousness of this child would arise from

pain, loss, rejection etc. Although self consciousness could either be positive or negative depending on the cultural and societal background one is raised. such a child would either go into maturity with positive emotions or grow into an individual who would begin to struggle with identifying with the people around them, in order to gain acceptance in his society. Thus, the identity of such a one is being formed. Hannah in *the last thing he told me* we see her struggles with self consciousness in her navigating her role in her new family. She feels the weight of her stepdaughter's pressure to fit into the established family dynamic. Bailey her step daughter is finding it hard to accept her as her as part of her family that's made up of her and her father Owen. she would rather prefer to live with her father alone than allowing an intruder in the family. The intruder here, happens to be Hannah. She is making every effort to find acceptance from Bailey. this we can deduce from her words, I do want her to move toward me. I want us to have a relationship, and not just because of Owen. It's more than that—what draws me toward Bailey even as she pushes me away. Part of it is that I recognize in her that thing that happens when you lose your mother...(pp 19).

This mirrors the broader reason of individuals in families often feeling self-conscious about their place and acceptance within the family unit. Just as in *salvage the bones*, the protagonist Each has her insecurities in terms of her changing body and her Identity within her impoverished family. The struggles with self acceptance are connected with the complexities of their relationships revealing how ones self

consciousness can lead to dysfunctional interactions within the family. In both novels, characters inability to fully accept themselves impacts their interactions with their families. This often lead to misunderstandings, miscommunications and strained relationships.

Esch, a young, pregnant, black teenager living in poverty and without her mother, a status upon which anti blackness has placed her, she is in a psychological crises, facing the challenge of never achieving the joy of her complete self. Each member of the family is left to pick up the remaining pieces of their mother Rose Batiste. To Esch, this means swallowing the pain of losing her mother and turning to sex as a means of accepting her loss. The absence of her mother in the family made Esch to believe that sex and romantic love are ways through which she might gain a sense of self, wholeness as a young, black teenager who is about to face motherhood. The early loss of her mother is what brings to what Marie calls Psychological loophole..... which she calls the realm of maternal memory (Yvette, 3).

She is thrown into the psychological loop hole of maternal memory, in which she recalls vivid memories of her mother, of her grandmother connecting them to the history of black motherhood. for instance she will do everything to stay alive so that she can become a mother herself. As the narrative progresses Esch began to realise that her so called coping mechanism which is sex is a dangerous route to gaining acceptance from the boys especially Manny whom she finds herself deeply in love with. Manny on his part

isn't much interested in her, as the only thing that seems to bind them is the sex. Although Esch is very aware of her past, retreating to it, though the realm of maternal memory as much as she can. She does not understand that this past is able to affect her present. This past is needed for her survival for her to attain self consciousness, she must recognize her worth in the present irrespective of her inner desires and struggles to fit into her world. Esch's identity is largely formed from an economically disadvantaged family living in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage Mississippi, where the family without cars and options are forced to prepare for the storm (Katrina) as best as they can, gathering what food they can, with very little money, and using old scraps of wood to cover their windows.

Ward uses this medium to attest to the reality of the kind of life that is peculiar to her community where the blacks in the community struggles to gain acceptance in the eyes of the white folks in their society. Therefore, their identity is punctured. *Salvage the Bones* ruptures this narrative, showing the intensity of south 's legacy of racism contributing to the poverty that left Esch, her family and those who actually lived through Katrina stranded, left to weather the storm with their own will to survive.

Marie noted that, when Katrina Hurricane hit the gulf shores, many lives were lost and others displaced and during a television show for Katrina victims, days after the disaster occurred, famous hip hop artist Kanye west declared George Bush doesn't care about black people (Yvette, 2). This statement is an open declaration that Hurricane Katrina is beyond a national disaster. It attests to the fact that racism was alive and well

in America. Hence, the struggle for acceptance by the black continues, and their self consciousness and acceptance will continue to have a question mark attached to it.

## 2. 2 Questions of Color/Race

According to merriem Webster dictionary race is defined as class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits or unchangeable characteristics, ie skin color, hair texture or certain facial features. It defines color as skin pigmentation, complexion, shade or tone. Color discrimination happens as a result of difference in races. Black Americans are not the only people obsessed with how light or dark a person's skin color is. colorism is a societal ill felt in many places all around the world including latin America, East and Southwest Asia, The Caribbean and Africa. Nevertheless, Lori states that White Americans are just as "colourist" as their brown brothers and sisters. All forms of discrimination on skin color is a form of prejudice in which people of certain ethnic people are seen to different and given different treatment.

Colourism has it's focus on people whose racism manifest itself in the psychology of a people. Colourism is set to affect how one sees beauty, wealth and privilege. Skin colour and race is seen by many as a yardstick for getting opportunities and connections. Africans for instance has had their fair share of colourism and racial problems drawing an instance from Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. Ward's has this to say about racism against the African Americans living in the south. The outbreak of Hurricane Katrina

would go on to be one of the deadliest storms to even hit the United States, and the aftermath would go down in history as one of the most disastrous experiences in American history. This disaster which affected mostly the blacks living in the south, especially the black communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. This largely brought racism of colour to the lime light. Just as the American hip hop artist and producer Kanye West publicly declared in a television show that the president does not really care about black people, this affirms the fact that racism against colour black especially in a society that sees and assumes white to be superior is still very much alive. The aftermath effects of Hurricane Katrina is a major challenge that Esch and her black family would have to struggle with even as they prepare to welcome the next coming Hurricane.

Yhatte, noted in her essay that irrespective of the gruesome effect of Hurricane Katrina to black communities, the American government has subtly shown its racist attitude by delaying in rendering help to the blacks that have been displaced from their homes. The high rate of segregation and racial discrimination has led to many blacks to become economically disadvantaged as we see in the Baptiste Family. This has led many to living in low income housing, no cars, less properties and their kids found it hard to access schools. Esch and her brothers, Pardall, Skeetah and Junior are never given the opportunity to access school. Mississippi as at 2004, held the highest poverty rate at 21.6%, which was well above the national average of 13% when this fact came to blend with the black bodies hovering in the news, it becomes obvious that colour

discrimination is not only alive and well in America but also deeply rooted in a legacy that could be traced back to slavery. And till date, hidden in plain sight, loopholes of retreat in post Katrina literature performance looks for spaces of temporary relief from anti black racism in post Katrina America (Yvette, 2).

And in all this we can see that, the state of one's environments and cultural background has a lot to define about self identity and Laura Dave in *the last thing he told me*, discover that Hannah or her way to searching for the reasons for her husband's disappearance, discovers that his racial background plays a significant role in the events around his disappearance. This revelation prompts her into confronting her own perceived notions about race and color. While Laura Dave explores racism as a pervasive force in the lives of marginalised individuals, Ward in *other hard* highlights the complications of racial identity and how it can shape one's understanding of the world. In America of today, the question of racial discrimination is still on a high scale as pew research center has on records that more than 50 years after the 13th amendment abolished slavery in the United States, most u.s adults say the legacy of slavery continues to have an impact on the position of black people in America society today (Juliana menasce *et al.*, 2019)

Many are of the opinion that the country has not made enough progress towards the improvement of racial equality, and there is skepticism particular the blacks that black people will even have equal rights with whites according to a new pew research center

survey. The fear about the current state of race relations and how president Donald Trump as at 2019 handles the issue are also negative, thus, six-intern Americans say racial issues in America are on a low scale as only few see the issues improving. The blacks are particular about the country's racial progress because it speaks volumes of their identity as citizens, the rights given or allocated to the black people are far more than equal with their white counterparts.

Americans see disadvantages for blacks and Hispanics in the US tub and the consequences of this is that as long as there fail to be an equality in race and colour, the identity and self consciousness of the common man especially the blacks as we see in the character of Esch, will remain threatened and survival will continue to be a thing of constant struggle and fight.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ROLES, RELATIONS, AND FACTORS OF FAMILY DYNAMICS AND DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

#### 3.0 Introduction

In bringing to limelight the efficacy of human psyche, this chapter unveils a compelling narrative that surpasses individual desires and moral judgements. Just like the Id, ego and superego dynamically shape an individual's internal world, we are made to see the reasons for the characters inner struggles within their familial relationships. We will unveils how the Id's primal instincts, the ego's mediate balance and the superego's moral balance help to shape the actions experiences of the protagonists in family life. Here we explore how these inner forces impact not only individual choices find actions but also the stability and bonds within the families. As we journey into their experiences we will explore the roles played by members of the family, their patterns of relations and the factors that impact their relationships.

#### 3.1 Roles and Patterns of Family Relationships

Jabbari Bahareh, Audra S. Rouster defines Family dynamics as the patterns of interactions among relatives, their roles and relationships and the various factors that shape their interactions. Dynamics are forces that can change or shape a system. Family Dynamics are important in the growth and development of each family member. This interaction affects the way they see themselves and see the world. This has a great

significance in the mental health and well being of everyone in the home. Examples of family dynamics are the competitive family dynamics. In this kind of family, members are in competition with each other to see who is better or best. It could be between parents, other children or children to parents. They value the best and will do whatever it will take to get it. Every member of the family is expected to play these roles and could operate as the hero of the family, the rescuer, the scapegoat, the switchboard etc.

Family patterns are ways in which members of a family interact, That is, the way they communicate with each other in the family. These patterns according to the Family communicative Patterns Theory (FCRT) can be pluralistic, consensual, protective or laissez-faire (Das,2022). A consensual family pattern aims to achieve a balanced level of both conformity and communication. Conformity here, mean to align to the principles, beliefs and practices shared by individuals in the family, while in conversation with one another. Consensual family pattern according to Thomas kilman conflict mode Instrument (TKI) works within five levels which includes collaborating, accommodating, avoiding, compromising and competing. A pluralistic type of family communication has a high level of conversation and there is a high level of openness in dialogue and in this type of pattern every member of the family is valued equally and there is no single authority who gets the final say. The protective pattern has the belief system of lifting the authority figure above everyone else in the family. In this type of pattern the beliefs and contribution of one or two authority is highly respected and accepted by other members

of the family . The laissez-faire communication pattern in the family allows everyone to communicate accordingly and conflict level is low in this type of communication and the kind of conflict resolution is avoidance.

There are roles that each member of the family is expected to perform if a family must be considered dynamic. For the parents, they are responsible for providing for their children with both physical and emotional care and support. They are to ensure that their children have that is needed for their growth and development to becoming ideal adults. The children as members of the family are to depend on their parents for guidance, support and love. The siblings which consists of brothers and sisters are expected to share a unique bond and acceptance that revolves within the family. As they share their bonds they could become each other's best friends or worst enemies depending on the dynamic within their family system. Other members of the family such as aunt's, uncle's, in-laws, friends and grandparents fills special roles in the lives of the children in giving support and love and they could intervene during family crises.

The definition of family itself has evolved over the years in previous generations families stayed close to one another, and multiple generations helped raise the children but now it is common for families to spread abroad across the country and grand parents do have less involvement in their grand children's lives with this new development in the family setting where family are scattered abroad, some develop a core group of local families which they consider their family. This family structure can change with moves so a

person's family grows beyond one's immediate family. Another aspect of family that has changed over the years is the acknowledgement and acceptance of non traditional families and the increase of blended families.

This bond in the family reflects the joys and challenges that come with blood relation. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me* both explores family dynamics although in different settings and circumstances. *Salvage the bones* portray an African American family struggling to face and curb with the challenges of impending Hurricane Katrina while *The Last Thing He Told Me* focuses on unravelling the mystery surrounding a white woman's husband. These experiences will come to shape the families identity, choices and likes as a whole. A significant dynamic role in Esch family is the act of responsibility and sacrifice. Esch being the only female in the family takes on the maternal role, caring for her brothers and helping with her father's needs, she cleans, prepares food as well as go to get stuffs for her family in the local store. The family's survival largely depends on their collective efforts to create a positive family dynamic environment. Her brother Skeetah, the eldest brother, is portrayed by Dave to be so much protective of his pet dog china, who is pregnant with puppies. China is considered an extension in the family and he is willing to go to great length to protect it from danger even if it means risking his life for it. This is a reflection of familial bonds and the length to which family members will go to protect and provide for each other to get comfort irrespective of the external challenges. Family dynamic

encompasses vulnerabilities. Vulnerability here is where everyone is free to reveal secrets, true self within the confines of their home. It is through their unwavering support that she is able to carry her pregnancy without feeling too embarrassed.

In contrast, the kind of dynamic family presented in Laura Dave's *The last thing he told me* is a stepfamily type that features a white woman Hannah Hall who marries Owen and Bailey his daughter as her stepdaughter. The disappearance of Owen forces both of them to begin to bond as they need this bond if they must be able to unravel the mystery behind his disappearance. Initially distant, challenges brings them together. This reveals the fact that challenges has the ability to bond a family together. The contrast between these two families is in the fact that family dynamics can evolve and adapt, showing that family is not solely defined by blood but also by shared experiences and the choice to support and care for one another. Trust is in family also and bring bonding among members of the family. In the face of challenges and uncertainty. Family members must decide to trust and support each other to confront any harsh truth that threatens to tear them apart. Threats such as that of Hurricane Katrina needs a collective strength and resourcefulness to survive the Baptiste resilience in the face of the overwhelming storm exemplifies the enduring power of family bonds. Similarly Hannah and Bailey must join strength and mind together to be able to ascertain the uncertainty surrounding Owen's disappearance. Their determination to uncover the truth at the end of the novel gives a

credit to the power of a dynamic family's ability to endure even the most challenging circumstances.

In *Salvage the Bones*, the family's dysfunctional relationship is deeply rooted. First, the absence of a nurturing mother figure contributes to the disorderliness in the home. From the narrative individual members of the family are left to take their decisions independently leading to isolation and low emotional support. Esch the fourteen years old narator reflects on the loss of her mother, leaving them to fend for themselves ....Mama, the only baby still living out of the eight that mother Lisbeth had borne, died when having Junior. Since its just us and Daddy here now with China, the chickens and a pie whwn Daddy can afford one, 1....(pp 16). This absence of maternal guidance and care creates emotional distance and a lack of stability within the family.

Furthermore, the poverty and lack struggles is a factor that increases the dysfunction in the home, making the Batiste unable to meet their basic needs, leading to constant tension in the home. The alcoholism of their father hinders his ability to provide or maintain a healthy household. His addiction fuels conflicts, emotional distance and affects the overall dysfunction within the family. And their inability to openly communicate to address their individual struggles increases a culture of silence, perpetuating the gruesome dysfunction within their household.

Laura Dave in *The Last Thing He Told Me* also reveals the dysfunction that affects a family by introducing us to a family where one of the key sources of dysfunction in the family is the lack of transparency and honesty. Owen's hidden past and the secret he carries become a central cause of conflict in the family. This lack of transparency and the unravelling of secrets drive a wedge between family members, causing tension. Another notable aspect of dysfunction in this family relationship is the strained relationship between Bailey and Hannah. Meeting each other initially as step mother and step daughter, they struggle to connect and understand each other. The disappearance of Owen forces them to lay aside their differences and work together to uncover the truth about Owen.

However, the communication is often interrupted by misunderstandings and miscommunication, showing the dysfunction that arises when members of the family struggle to bridge the gap between their individual experiences and opinions. Another notable dysfunctional we could deduce from this family is the estranged relationship of Bailey with her biological mother Lisa. This estrangement makes Bailey to develop resentment and bitterness towards her mother for abandonment and a history of neglect. This dysfunctional parent to child relationship acts as doors which foster traumas in the family. This acts as a pointer that dysfunctional relationships have far reaching consequences on the characters' lives. Pointing this generally to the society, seeds or children from dysfunctional homes often grow to become miscreants and nuisances to the

society. In our society today families still struggle to navigate through dysfunctional families. Here, we see broken homes everywhere, children mature into adulthood with little or no parental love or support. Many people hope that once they leave home, they will leave their childhood experiences behind. Ironically, they begin to experience same problems, the reality of their past begins to dawn on them.

### **3.2: Poverty, Neglect and Separation as Causes of Dysfunction**

Parent child relationship has a great role to play in the well being of a child; poverty, neglect and separation are major causes of family dysfunction. When a family is faced with these elements dysfunction becomes the order of the day in such family. Poverty refers to a condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials to create or live comfortable life or living (investopedia). At this stage the basic needs are not met due to little or no resources. People or families that could be seen to be poor may go without proper housing, healthy food, lack of water, electricity, medical attention to name but a few. This happens to be a societal problem that is not limited to any race, colour or tribe. Poverty on an individual or family level can lead to a large number of physical, mental and emotional issues. At the societal level, high poverty rates can crumble a country's economic growth. Crimes would begin to surface because when the poverty rate is high in a nation, tension begins to rise and the desire for survival will force many into doing everything possible to stay alive. The situation becomes a matter of survival of the fittest. Other problems like unemployment,

urban decay, corrupt educational systems and poor health including health facilities increases and the nation begins to struggle to cope. Nevertheless, governments often times considers putting social welfare programs in place to lift the people, family and individuals from poverty.

For instance, the US tends to be much more individualistic and shuns welfare programs as can be clearly seen in the treatment meted out to the survivors of the blacks during the Hurricane Katrina that swept many lives among the black communities living in the south Mississippi and its environs. European countries in comparison have a much broader range of welfare programs and support for those affected by poverty. When poverty is narrowed down to the family setting, it becomes an avenue where members of the family find it hard to Carter for the basic needs. Ward's reflects on the harsh reality of poverty in the lives of the Baptistes. The family's economic struggles are largely as a result of their rural location Mississippi; a region characterized by limited opportunities and resources. The house barely provides by their shelter. The family's poverty is further increased by daddy's alcoholism which drains what ever little money he has to spend for his family. They often go without food and they are left to go about scavenging for food to eat. This becomes evident in the scenes where Esch and her siblings hunt and prepare animals for food; struggling to secure enough food to survive. Ward's portrayal of hunger and scarcity emphasizes the daily challenges faced by those living in poverty. Evident in the text is that poverty also is the reason Esch and her brothers had limited opportunities

for education and advancement. Obviously speaking, when one cannot feed well, catering for educational needs would be far fetched. Dreams and aspirations in life becomes null and void. Thus, the immediate concern of a man lacking food will not be to pursue living term goals of education or dreams but survival. Additionally, poverty highlights the Baptiste family inability to adequately prepare for the storm, leaving them exposed to it's devastating effects. The novel exposes the disadvantages poverty could impact, natural disasters living the vulnerable poor to marginalised risk. In the last thing he told me poverty is seen in Hannah and Bailey following the disappearance of Owen, they needed to maintain their quality of living. The primary aspects of poverty in *The last thing he told me* is the sudden and unexpected nature of their financial crises. This is a show of how many families are thrown unexpectedly into lack and poverty irrespective of how financially stable they had been. Hannah, despite the initial shock of the way things turns and, takes on the role of a breadwinner to begin to fend for herself and Bailey. She searches for ways to maintain stability in their home. As Hannah navigates her role as a provider and single mother, she becomes aware of the judgements and stereotypes that society places on individuals in poverty. This ultimately attests to the stigmatization of poverty going on in the society. As no one would want to be publicly connected to the poor.

Neglect is a state where little or no attention is given to someone or something. A person receiving neglect might experience lack of food, clothing, or health care, the result have long effects on the victims wellbeing. Neglect could either be physical, educational, emotional or medical. Nevertheless, whichever was the effects it has on its victims knows no bounds. Neglect has gruesome effect if found in a family dynamic, as it could lead to dysfunction among family members and alter their whole wellbeing. In *Salvage the bones* for instance, neglect is evident in the absence of a mother figure within the Baptiste family. The loss of a mother in a family leaves them emotionally and physically abandoned just as the demise of Lissa leaves a children. If the exact state where they are left to care for themselves independently with no one else to provide the maternal or motherly love they all deserve as members of the family. This void in their lives brings them to witness the reality of what emotional neglect could offer. Feelings of abandonment, isolation, insecurity resides vulnerability among the siblings.

Furthermore, Daddy, as he is lovely called by his children, shows his neglect when he began to drown himself in alcoholism. This takes a toll on the children who yearns for their father's attention and affection, but are met with his indifference and inability to provide for their emotional needs. His sense of neglect is seen as abandonment and it is felt by the children as him being unemotionally unavailable. The psychological effects of neglect are innumerable as it ranges from feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, abandonment, sense of isolation etcetera. Esch in particular, seek love and

validation in the arms of a local boy, Manny, as a route to filling the emotional void left by her absent mother figure and emotional distant father. Moreover, the negligence in the Baptiste family fosters a culture of self reliance and self preservation. Each member of the family had to learn to survive independently and cater for themselves since there is absence of parental support this puts each of them on the pedestal where it becomes difficult for them to express their inner desires and longings. Thus, greatly affecting their external relationships.

Dave, in *The last thing he told me* expressed and highlights neglect in the character of Hannah and Bailey. Their neglect surfaces as a result of Owen's sudden disappearance. This disappearance leaves an emotional gap in their lives as he was not only a husband but also a father figure to this women. His actions brings to an abrupt end the peaceful lives they have been made to live before his mysterious disappearance. This narrative highlights the depth of emotional emptiness suffered by many dynamic families today in our society. This is as a result of loss of a parent, divorce, separation and loss of family resources. The psychological effect neglect has on Hannah in *The last thing he told me* results to grief and confusion. Separation as a cause of family dynamics acts like a lion that is readily available to tear down it's prey. The prey here happens to be individuals and families in a world where family dynamics is being altered everyday. It manifest from a loss or demise of a member of the family to sudden disappearance of a partner or child from the home. It could also manifest in form of an emotional and psychological

departure from the home. Here members might still be living under same roof but emotionally far apart, disconnected and unavailable. In the psychological aspect of separation mindset, thoughts desires and cravings will be far from each other. This becomes an issue when each member is more interested in satisfying themselves rather than putting others into consideration, so as to foster a positive family dynamics. The unavailability of a mother or father figure in any family probes a sense and feeling of separation and abandonment in the lives of other members of the family.

Conclusively, the theme of neglect, poverty and separation are themes that are evident in Dave and Ward's narrative as they use this medium to highlight the dangers and length to which these issues could cause dysfunction in family dynamics.

## **Conclusion**

This study has been able to explore the theme of family dynamics and dysfunctional relationships. With all the research methods used above, it has been discovered that family dynamics is the relationship between family members in all levels of their interactions and that themes such as self-consciousness and acceptance have a relationship with a dynamic family. This study identifies the means of self-consciousness and acceptance and how it affects the characters' view and perception of themselves. Showing that a character's psychological and mental well-being in conjunction with outward experiences such as poverty, neglect, separation as core causes of how one sees themselves. The study also

explores the dynamic relationships within a typical African American family. The chaos and limitations that affect members within a dysfunctional family. Dysfunctional family is defined to be a family where members deviate from the normal accepted characteristics and begin to live independently of other members of the family race and colour. Questions of color and race have also been considered as external forces that could affect and contribute to the instability and self perception in familial relationships. The presence of racism and color discrimination in a given society gives room to negative self perception. Here the occupants of such society begin to mirror their minds and identity in response to the happenings around. Here, we also draw reference from Freud's psychoanalytic theory of id ego and superego. These personality elements act as the building point of an individual's personality, and as such the total perception of an adult is formed. As discussed, the id acts as the personality element in children below 3 years of age seeking for instant gratification for basic needs. The first stage to building an adult personality according to Freud is the Id element that is responsible for a child's immediate desires and need for hunger, thirst, comfort, sexual urges etcetera. The ego is called the reality principle. It develops in the child to mediate between the needs and demands of the Id. Summarily, the ego's main aim is to strike balance between the craving needs of the Id and limit to the level where such needs are accepted in the society. The superego manifests in two dimensions. First, the ego ideal which understands the rules and standards for good behaviours such behaviours are the ones approved by

parents and other authority figures. Freud presupposes that the ideal superego is the ideal image one have about oneself. The second is the conscious superego, the conscious ego gives awareness to the happenings around us. And as such the id, ego and superego becomes the background on which a person's psychological, behavioral, social and general wellbeing is formed.

Finally, this research has been able to reveal the background cause of dysfunction in a dynamic relationships using Freud's psychoanalytic theory and create an in-depth highlights into Laura Dave's *The Last Thing He Told Me* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage The Bones*, exploring the psychological trauma the characters had to go through as they are a reflection to what goes on in the society.

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