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Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*

Xueni Li, Mohammad Ewan Awang* and Florence Toh Haw Ching

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The late 20th century saw societal shifts and a reevaluation of gender identities, particularly in Western societies, which informed how writers rethought traditional notions of masculinity, heteronormative ideals, and family structure in their works. British writer Ian McEwan explores these issues through his novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978). While the novel's portrayal of masculinity has received scholarly attention, this study posits that the reading of this theme could be further facilitated through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. Set against the socio-cultural and gender landscapes of 1970s Britain, the novel centers on Jack, a young male protagonist whose identity is shaped by the idealized yet troubled forms of masculinity. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of gender practices, this study investigates the ways the novel depicts Jack's relational struggle to achieve legitimacy and recognition within a fractured family environment. The analysis shows this process includes ambivalence towards and resistance to hegemonic masculinity, and exploration of alternative gender practices. Despite *The Cement Garden*'s provocative stance, this article argues that the novel is aware of both the potential and limitations of challenging hegemonic masculinity. Thus, it reflects on how, despite efforts, the specters of long held and entrenched Western ideals of masculinity remain ever-present and inevitable. This article contributes to the discussion on the representations of masculinity in fiction and how authors such as Ian McEwan engage with the contours of hegemonic masculinity and its repercussions on the construction of identity for young men.

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E-mail addresses:
catherineli1368@gmail.com (Xueni Li)
ewan@upm.edu.my (Mohammad Ewan Awang)
florence@upm.edu.my (Florence Toh Haw Ching)
*Corresponding author

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th century, the rise of mass media and the information age reshaped public perceptions of strength and power,

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prompting shifts in gender norms and sparking the emergence of masculinity studies. As (Western) societies began to prioritize intellectual and emotional skills over physical strength, traditional metrics of masculinity came under scrutiny. According to Martha McCaughey, the economic and political shifts of late modernity have undermined traditional masculine ideals. She argues that "men today have been offered a way to think of their masculinity as powerful, productive, even aggressive—in a new economic and political climate where real opportunities to be rewarded for such traits have slipped away" (2010, p. 4). This disconnection demonstrates the fragility of ideal hegemonic masculinity, and the high demands placed on men by prevailing social conventions and views of masculinity, as further suggested by Goffman's (1963, as cited in Kimmel & Messner, 2010) argument that middle-class, white, heterosexual masculinity serves as a standard against which other masculinities are measured and subordinated. Goffman's observation reiterates how ideal hegemonic masculinity marginalizes other masculinities to maintain its legitimacy. Societal shifts in male identity and masculinity during the late 20th century are reflected in the works of British authors of the period. Davies (2003) notes that writers such as John Fowles, Julian Barnes, Irvine Welsh, Iain Banks, Michael Ondaatje, and Ian McEwan explore symptoms of the "British male literary psyche at the turn of the millennium" (p. 118). Their male protagonists are often portrayed as passive, retreating into imagination to preserve a semblance of traditional masculinity. Among them, McEwan stands out for his engagement with the grotesque and macabre, with his early works categorized as "shock lit" (Gieni, 2018, p. 47). Ryan (1994) characterizes the "willful obscenity and eccentric violence" of McEwan's early works as a critique of hegemonic masculinity (p. 5). The male characters in his early works are depicted as grappling with imposed roles of dominance and control, illustrating the burdens of patriarchal expectations (Davies, 2003).

Published during a period of significant shifts in gender roles, *The Cement Garden* (1978), Ian McEwan's debut novel, explores the complexities of male identity, familial dynamics, adolescence, and masculinity. Critics note that McEwan's early works display "an obsession with sketching and re-sketching of gender identities, especially masculinities" (Hosseini, 2015, p. 192). According to Head (2007), the shifting family dynamics and the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s likely informed McEwan's perspectives on gender and domestic life. Set in the late 20th century, *The Cement Garden* follows 15-year-old Jack, the second oldest of four siblings aged six to seventeen, as they struggle to survive alone after the deaths of their parents. The loss creates a vacuum that compels them to reenact a semblance of traditional family structure, propelling Jack into a process of self-discovery and the exploration of his masculinity.

The Cement Garden's interrogation of traditional gender norms can also be contextualized within the rise of punk culture in 1970s Britain. Emerging in response to economic depression and post-war political disillusionment, the punk movement challenged authority and conventional norms (Popović, 2013). Jack's rebellion and masculinity development in the novel align with the era's marginalized figures who resisted societal expectations. The parents' death metaphorically suspends social order, mirrored by the siblings' self-imposed isolation from the outside world and from normative structures (Popović, 2013). This setting serves as a microcosm for exploring how, even in isolated settings, traditional societal structures persist and permeate the renegotiation of gender roles.

The presence or absence of a positive male role significantly shapes perceptions and performances of gender. In the novel, this is exemplified by Jack's father, who represents a traditional, though flawed, model of hegemonic masculinity. Hosseini (2015) describes the father as a staunch believer in his superiority, embodying a culturally idealized masculinity that asserts dominance over women and other men. The central tension, Hosseini argues, lies in Jack's negotiation of masculinity, caught between his father's oppressive model and Jack's own shifting experiences and perceptions.

This study argues that *The Cement Garden* not only portrays the oppressive effects of hegemonic masculinity encountered by late 20th-century men but also examines the transformation of gender roles as adolescent males negotiate masculinity within their domestic environment. Nünning (2002, as cited in Horlacher, 2015) rightfully argues that literature serves as a crucial space to examine the waning legitimacy of patriarchy and how different groups of men negotiate these changes. Horlacher (2015) further elaborates that literature not only provides insights into the distinct configurations, functions, and shortcomings of masculinity but also empowers readers to critically reconsider their own understanding of masculinity.

In reading *The Cement Garden*, this study employs Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, a culturally idealized configuration of gender practices that legitimizes men's dominance in society and justifies the subordination of women and other marginalized masculinities. It explores how this hegemonic masculinity impacts the construction of masculinity for Jack, the young male narrator and protagonist of the novel. Jack's struggle to achieve hegemonic masculinity in the novel exemplifies Connell's argument that masculinity is relational, formed through interactions with others and continually negotiated within specific social contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). By examining Jack's attempts to achieve hegemonic masculinity within a fragmented family unit, this study argues that *The Cement Garden* not only portrays the oppressive effects of hegemonic masculinity but also reveals its unattainability and fluidity, particularly

in contexts where traditional structures of authority are absent or disrupted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ian McEwan's debut novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978), explores the journey of four siblings as they search for their own identities after the death of their parents. This novel, along with his early short stories collection, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978), has been characterized by critics as "shock lit", which delve into "lurid subject matter, including stories of rape, incest, molestation, sadomasochism, and murder" (Gieni, 2018, p. 47). Wells (2010) suggests that McEwan's exploration of the "violent, twisted and psychopathic characters" reflects a modern, urbanized culture characterized by "alienation, isolation, selfishness, and exploitation of others" (p. 34). In *The Cement Garden*, the child characters respond to the loss of their parents and the collapse of their family structure with unsettling and extreme actions, including encasing their mother's body in cement in the cellar—an act that lends the novel its title. These responses also reflect an ongoing negotiation of identity and masculinity. Jack, the eldest male sibling, must navigate inherited patriarchal expectations and his emerging identity, shaped by both the absence of adult guidance and the persistent influence of societal norms within their isolated world.

Head (2007) argues that the siblings' attempts to replicate adult societal norms in the absence of their parents lead to distorted behaviors such as incest, which indicates the disjunction between societal ideals and personal identity formation. Slay (1996, as cited in Wells, 2010) notes that the family's replication of conventional gender roles mirrors the patriarchal structures in the late twentieth-century British lower-middle class. Gieni (2018) also elaborates on this theme by suggesting the cultural imperative of patriarchal control reflected in Jack's vulnerability and assertion of dominance. These analyses show how the siblings' isolation intensifies their struggle with inherited gender expectations. The novel's portrayal of masculine crisis, family dynamics, and social pressures offers insight into how gender identities are potentially reconfigured within disrupted familial and cultural structures.

Scholars have highlighted the theme of masculinity in crisis in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*. Childs (2006), for example, examines the impact of absent adult male figures on children's development by focusing on how the siblings in *The Cement Garden* adapt to and negotiate roles left vacant by their parents. Childs (2006) notes that the children in the novel internalize socially accepted gender roles as they take on the parental roles of father and mother. Jack's masculine identity, shaped by his parents, continues to be primarily influenced by his father even after his death. This influence reflects the societal power structures within the insular family setting (Wells, 2010). Our study contends that the father represents a dynamic form of hegemonic masculinity, which Jack emulates and negotiates through ongoing gendered practices.

The absence of nurturing parental figures compels a renegotiation of gender roles in *The Cement Garden*. Sistani et al. (2014) discuss the impact of "emotional assurance" (p. 452) on Jack's development, noting how the lack of nurturing relationships compels him to create "internal objects inside himself" as psychological substitutes for unsatisfactory real-world interactions (Mitchell, 1981, as cited in Sistani et al., 2014, p. 455). This dynamic is evident in Jack's relationship with his father, an "internalized object" that informs his approach to masculinity. The maternal relationship, emotionally significant to Jack, exacerbates his trauma after his mother's death, pushing him and his sister Julie to adopt parental roles. Their transition into these roles, culminating in an incestuous relationship, represents their quest for lost parental affection and a renegotiation of gender roles. The study contends these internalized figures continue to influence Jack's masculine identity and that his masculinity is an amalgam of personal desires and external social norms. Our study aligns with this perspective but prioritizes how hegemonic masculinity as an ideal influences Jack's construction of masculinity, rather than focusing primarily on trauma.

Meng (2023) explores the fluidity of gender roles in *The Cement Garden*, applying Virginia Woolf's concept of androgyny to show that masculinity and femininity are complementary, not oppositional. Meng (2023) notes that Jack's expression of femininity—characterized by tenderness and sensitivity—originates from his longing for maternal affection and resistance to his father's harsh masculinity. Conversely, rather than asserting dominance, Julie's adoption of masculine traits in the novel suggests an attempt to interrogate and reject the typical passive female role entrenched in their society. This study corroborates the hypothesis that *The Cement Garden* illustrates the dissolution of conventional gender order and the emergence of alternative masculinities. By depicting masculinity and femininity as complementary rather than oppositional, the novel accentuates how alternative masculinities are constructed and negotiated in localized contexts—specifically, the socially confined setting of the family.

The collapse of traditional gender binaries could also imply the emergence of new forms of masculinity. In so arguing, Hosseini (2015) employs Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to examine the portrayal of patriarchal influence in the novel. Coining the term "filiarchy"—"the reign of sons", Hosseini (2015) argues that the novel portrays a shift from traditional hegemonic masculinity, typically represented by the father, to a scenario where sons coexist interdependently with women rather than dominating them (pp. 192–193). This transition not only upends conventional male-female power dynamics but also signals the unsustainability of traditional male dominance within the novel's setting, consistent with the broader societal impact of rising feminism on traditional gender identities during the

time. While we acknowledge Hosseini's interpretation of the negative impact of hegemonic masculinity, our study focuses instead on the mechanisms through which it is established and its interaction with the dynamic configuration of personal practices. As Messerschmidt (2018) clarifies, hegemony involves submissiveness on the part of the dominated—a distinction particularly relevant to Jack's inability to establish a stable masculine identity.

Previous studies by Gieni (2018), and Mitra and Srivastava (2014) highlight the psychological motivations for Jack's behaviours and McEwan's critique of patriarchal authority through shock and transgression. Their studies confirm the link between the father's hegemonic masculinity and authority, but do not further discuss its impact on Jack's behaviour. Our study applies Connell's reformulated theory of hegemonic masculinity. The emphasis on contextuality, relationality, and fluidity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) allows for analysing Jack's masculinity as constructed through interactions with his father, mother, Julie, and Derek. Rather than a fixed ideal, Jack's pursuit of hegemonic masculinity emerges as an aspirational, relational project characterised by tension, conflict, and social isolation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Raewyn Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity

Historically, men have been regarded as "the normative gender" (Kimmel, 1986, p. 519). It was not until the 20th century that psychoanalysis and gender studies revealed the ambivalence and oppression inherent in traditional male identity. Following these developments, men's studies saw significant growth after the 1970s. Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, first introduced in the 1980s, defines the normative ideals of a "real man" and addresses how ideal masculinity is both oppressive and desirable. In her seminal work, Connell (1996) characterizes masculinity as a "configuration of practice" (p. 56) which focuses on actual behaviors rather than expectations. She explains masculinity as involving one's position in gender relations, the practices influencing this position, and their impact on personal and cultural aspects (Connell, 2005). Connell (2005) identifies hegemonic masculinity as the prevailing configuration of gender practices of the West in the 1970s that legitimizes patriarchy.

Connell characterizes hegemonic masculinity as a dominant configuration that informs men's gender identities through ongoing practices. She notes that "gender is organized in symbolic practices" (Connell, 2005, p. 72). This concept evolves, guiding contemporary men's behaviors, shaping their personalities, and influencing gender relations. In the 1970s, hegemonic masculinity was characterized by men's dominance over women in power, economic, and sexual spheres. Demetriou (2001) refers to this as "external and internal hegemony" (p. 341), where external hegemony denotes the institutionalization of men's dominance over women.

Connell (2005) also discusses how the current Western gender order revolves

around the dominance of men over women. Hegemonic masculinity, she argues, is a strategy that "guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Internal hegemony within hegemonic masculinity signifies dominance over other men and creates a hierarchy among them (Demetriou, 2001). Connell (2005) identifies the relational nature and dynamics of masculinity, namely "hegemony, subordination, complicity, marginalization" (p. 76). These terms detail the oppressive dynamics towards men who do not conform to hegemonic traits, and how masculinity intersects with other social structures like class and race.

Connell (1987) identifies three configurations within male hierarchies: hegemonic masculinity, the dominant but largely unattainable ideal; conservative masculinities (complicit masculinities), which do not fully embody hegemonic norms but benefit from them; and subordinated masculinities, which are culturally devalued, including but not limited to gay masculinities (p. 110). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reconceptualize hegemonic masculinity as a fluid, relational construct that adapts to shifting social contexts. Unlike dominant masculinity, which is most common within specific settings, hegemonic masculinity achieves cultural legitimacy by establishing itself as normative and socially validated. Crucially, not all dominant masculinities are hegemonic. As a dynamic configuration of practices, hegemonic masculinity gains legitimacy by materially embodying and/or symbolizing culturally supported gender superiority and gender inferiority (Messerschmidt, 2018). In constructing hegemonic masculinity, individuals simultaneously establish unequal gender relations with others at the cultural level. Hegemonic masculinity also evolves through continual negotiation, absorbing and neutralizing alternative masculinities to maintain its cultural dominance.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity functions as a culturally legitimized and aspirational ideal. However, its exclusivity and unattainability generate instability, contradiction, and the potential for transformation (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While alternative masculinities are often marginalized and "culturally discredited or despised" (Connell, 2000, p. 217), their divergence from hegemonic norms can provoke resistance and renegotiation. This dynamic interplay reveals masculinity as a continually evolving construct, particularly in periods of social transition, familial rupture, or adolescent development.

In *Gender and Power* (1987), Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is not maintained solely through dominance but through ongoing negotiations with subordinate genders. Connell illustrates how women challenge or adapt to hegemonic masculinity, such as by negotiating authority within the domestic sphere or adopting aggressive, nonconformist styles, like punk fashion. These negotiations reveal that hegemonic masculinity is relational and context-dependent, sustained by

its capacity to contain and incorporate alternative practices rather than overpower the prevailing structure. However, such interactions often result in superficial adjustments rather than genuine shifts in gender power dynamics, which further affirms hegemonic masculinity's resilience and adaptability.

Connell's work in *The Men and the Boys* (2000) is particularly relevant to the analysis of *The Cement Garden*. Connell (2000) argues that developing masculinity involves "active negotiation in multiple social relationships", shaped by resistance and conformity to institutional pressures (p. 31). Importantly, Connell emphasizes that the process of forming masculinity is neither linear nor passive; instead, it is a complex, dialectical process involving moments of confrontation, denial, and adaptation. The emotional dynamics within families make negotiations central to family life, sometimes challenging the gender order. Connell (1987) observes that localized deviations, where women assume dominant roles, can influence the larger gender order.

METHODOLOGY

This study explores masculinity in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* through Raewyn Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity. Using textual analysis, it examines how the novel's father figure embodies hegemonic masculinity and shapes the protagonist, Jack's perception of male identity within a patriarchal family setting. The analysis then traces Jack's evolving masculinity through his initial emulation of his father, his struggles to assert dominance, and his interactions with siblings as he negotiates his gender identity. These dynamics are further complicated by the socially confined environment of the family, which limits Jack's ability to achieve hegemonic masculinity and forces him to adapt his gender practices. The study demonstrates that Connell's concepts of hegemonic masculinity, relational masculinity, and masculinity hierarchies are essential for understanding Jack's psychological development and gender practices within this isolated setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hegemonic Masculinity in the Family

The Cement Garden unfolds within an isolated household devoid of adult supervision, serving as a microcosm to examine hegemonic masculinity in confinement. McEwan (1979, as cited in Ricks, 2010) notes that his novel explores a setting stripped of social control, where children navigate identity formation without traditional authority. While Jack's models of masculinity are confined to familial figures, the novel reflects broader socio-cultural tensions of 1970s Britain, including second-wave feminism, punk subculture, and the weakening of patriarchal structures. Although Jack's development is rooted in familial dynamics, his negotiation of masculinity is also informed by these cultural anxieties. The novel's domestic setting complicates Jack's masculinity by denying him external validation and cultural legitimacy—factors Connell and

Messerschmidt (2005) argue are essential for hegemonic masculinity. This insularity highlights how hegemonic masculinity is relational and contingent upon social recognition rather than isolated dominance.

Connell's (2005) assertion that families are "fields of relationship within which gender is negotiated" (p. 146) is reflected in *The Cement Garden*. In the novel, the protagonist Jack's initial conceptions of masculinity, shaped by his parents, mirror traditional gender norms. Narrated from Jack's first-person perspective, *The Cement Garden* opens with his reflections on how his father's dominant role and his mother's submissive demeanor shaped the family dynamics. This scenario epitomizes Connell's (2000) definition of hegemonic masculinity as a culturally exalted form that stabilizes the gender order. In the late 20th century, the prevailing patriarchal system in the Western world required wives and children to comply with the father's demands. Connell (2005) notes that patriarchy guarantees the dominant position of hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, the mother, embodying "emphasized femininity", represents compliance with male interests and desires (Connell, 1987, p. 183).

In *The Cement Garden*, Jack's conception of masculinity is structured around his father's authoritarian presence, symbolized by the smoking pipe, which Jack describes as "a missing section of his [father] own anatomy" (McEwan, 2003, p. 15). This emblem of authority reflects how hegemonic masculinity is enacted through symbols of power and control rather than direct violence. McEwan's sparse, measured prose conveys how authority is asserted through suggestion and manipulation. For instance, when Jack's father ends a financial disagreement with his wife by tapping his pipe and quietly stating, "out of the question" (McEwan, 2003, p. 15), the dismissal functions as both rhetorical dominance and exclusion, banishing the wife from economic power and reinforcing the hierarchy within the family. Jack mimics this gesture through an "imaginary pipe" (McEwan, 2003, p. 16) in interactions with Julie, to emulate his father's tactics and symbols of control despite lacking their social legitimacy. Jack's emulation of his father's symbolic gestures illustrates Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity as aspirational and performative. His reliance on such props signals his incomplete internalisation of masculinity and reveals how hegemonic norms are learned through everyday practices, interactions, and discourses. The mother's compliance with the father, contrasted with Julie's resistance to Jack, illustrates how attaining hegemonic masculinity depends on securing consent and reinforcing unequal gender relations, often intersecting with other forms of social inequality, such as age.

In the novel, Jack's retired soldier father exemplifies hegemonic masculinity through his strict, militaristic order within the family. He uses severe measures to uphold his masculine standards, using Mother against Tom, Jack's younger brother, "much as he used his pipe against her" (McEwan, 2003,

pp. 17–18). He mocks Jack for his pimples, Sue for her faint eyebrows and lashes, Julie for her athletic pursuits, and their mother for her arithmetic, with each critique "stage-managed" to maintain control (McEwan, 2003, pp. 19–20), ensuring "none of them ever worked against him" (McEwan, 2003, p. 20). The children privately "set to work filling pages with crude overworked jokes" (McEwan, 2003, p. 20) against their father to resist his demeaning humor. The father is considered the sole exemplar of masculinity in the closed environment. Jack aspires to emulate this masculinity, seeking to attain the same autonomy and authority. This phenomenon can be likened to Connell's (2005) model of hegemonic masculinity in society, which functions through a few male role models. Additionally, this exemplifies Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) emphasis on how gender intersects with other social hierarchies. In this case, age and gender inequalities are legitimized through the father's verbal devaluation, militarized control, and the family's willing compliance. As such, the father exemplifies the workings of hegemonic masculinity outlined by Connell (2005). This dynamic illustrates the psychological costs of conforming to hegemonic ideals and hints at the possibility of reconfiguring gender practices through subtle acts of defiance.

Outwardly, while the father's hegemony stabilizes the family's adherence to traditional gender order, it exposes at the same time the inherent vulnerabilities of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (2005) notes that "gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained" (p. 54), a point exemplified by the father's debilitating heart condition. His inability to meet the demands of his patriarchal role causes his authority to falter, especially as the children notice his physical and authoritative weaknesses. This growing awareness within the family reveals the fragility of hegemonic masculinity and prompts Jack to explore alternative gender practices.

Pursuing Hegemonic Masculinity: The Influences of the Parents

As an adolescent, Jack identifies with his father's masculinity. With no other model, Jack's emulation of his father's masculinity becomes a form of social practice: embodied, experimental, and shaped by isolation, rather than a socially ratified expression of masculinity. Connell's (2005) notion of complicit masculinity suggests that men benefit from systems of patriarchal dominance even without overt exertion of power. However, in Jack's case, this benefit is ambiguous: he imitates hegemonic masculinity without necessarily gaining its rewards, as Julie and others often undermine his authority.

His attempts to emulate his father's masculinity are particularly evident when he tries to assert himself in front of the cement workers. Mimicking his father's posture, Jack hopes that enacting this role will initiate his transition into manhood:

> I wanted to say something terse and appropriate, but I was not sure I had heard them right. … my father stepped out, biting on his pipe and holding a

> clipboard against his hip … I folded the comic into my back pocket and followed the three men up the path to the lorry. (McEwan, 2003, p. 14)

This incident highlights Jack's fragile approximation of authority, which lacks the external validation and social power normally associated with hegemonic masculinity. His internal conflict is further underlined during a domestic argument, when he observes his father's behaviour with both admiration and critical distance: "I sensed he was right. But how self-important and foolish he looked as he took the thing [the pipe] out of his mouth, held it by its bowl and pointed the black stem at my mother" (McEwan, 2003, p. 15). This scene illustrates Jack's complex relationship with the hegemonic masculinity he seeks to embody. Jack's ambivalence towards his father, through his emotional resistance and simultaneous tacit approval, elucidates the dynamics of power, recognition, and identity within the patriarchal structure.

However, Julie, Jack's older sister, perceives their father's strictness as compensating for his declining physical capabilities, saying, "now Father was a semi-invalid he would have to compete with Tom for Mother's attention" (McEwan, 2003, p. 17). This comment suggests that the father's authority is influenced not just by his will but also by his physical condition. As his illness reduces his ability to maintain power, it catalyzes a shift in family dynamics, prompting the children, especially Julie, to reinterpret their roles and power distribution within the family. This realignment reflects Connell's notion that a shift in hegemony can provoke changes within the dominated group (2000).

The death of Jack's father and his mother's illness leave him unsupervised, causing him to adopt traditional hegemonic patterns as he tries to assert power and resist maternal influence. Connell (2005) describes this as a response to childhood powerlessness, manifesting "an exaggerated claim to the potency that European culture attaches to masculinity" (p. 111). After the death of his father, Jack oscillates between seeking autonomy and responding to his mother's discipline, driven by her love. His mother criticizes his neglect of personal hygiene, but he feels proudly "beyond her control" (McEwan, 2003, p. 26). As her health declines, guilt compels Jack to clean up on his 15th birthday, following Julie's advice: "I filled the washbasin with hot water. … It was the closest I came to washing. … I cut my fingernails and combed my lank brown hair … deciding at last to celebrate my birthday with a center parting" (McEwan, 2003, pp. 43–44). This act of grooming symbolizes his conflicted feelings and his quest for his mother's approval.

Jack's behavior is informed by his father's example of hegemonic masculinity, which he emulates through displays of physical acts and emotional detachment from his family. However, he simultaneously harbors resentment towards his father and emotional attachment to his mother, who serves as both a caretaker and emotional anchor. Despite resisting his mother's

guidance, Jack is willing to change for her. His awe for his father's authority and his bond with his mother influence his actions. However, any change in his gender practices is temporary and does not alter his underlying adherence to male hegemony.

Subordinated Masculinity: Jack's Ineligibility of Hegemony

Following the death of their mother, the siblings decide to place her remains in concrete within the basement to "keep their sense of family together" (Head, 2007, p. 47) and prevent separation by social services. The siblings fear that disclosing her death, especially after their father's earlier passing, would lead to foster care placement. Yet, Jack confesses experiencing "a sense of adventure and freedom" at his mother's death (McEwan, 2003, p. 79). This concealment signifies a rejection of external authority and an attempt to establish a self-governing familial order, albeit shaky and illegitimate. The death of their parents heightens the siblings' moral and societal defiance. Slay (1996, as cited in Head, 2007) states that McEwan's unsettling plot forces readers to confront societal brutality and that recognizing such realities is essential for transformative change. This behavior, indicative of the alienation wrought by toxic masculinity and rigid patriarchal norms, is a critique of the family's and society's underlying dysfunctions.

The death of Jack's mother signifies the end of the contradictory influences of his parents, leaving him and Julie to take charge as their mother intended (McEwan, 2003). This marks the beginning of a gendered power struggle between the siblings in a household devoid of traditional authority. Julie's dominance over Jack highlights his distance from the hegemonic masculinity he seeks and recalls his father's failures in asserting control. Connell (2005) describes such dynamics as gender relations of dominance (hegemonic masculinity) and subordination (subordinated masculinity). Jack's inability to fulfil his father's hegemonic role relegates him to a subordinated masculinity, considered "expelled from the circle of legitimacy" (Connell, 2005, p. 79).

Unlike Jack, who struggles with identity and patriarchal expectations, Julie, on the other hand, exhibits feminist traits and effortlessly assumes familial and parental responsibilities. Despite their mother's directive for shared leadership, Jack finds himself overshadowed by Julie's "quiet strength and detachment", as well as her beauty (McEwan, 2003, p. 29). Julie's practical proficiency is evident when she manages the finances of the siblings and prepares the cement to bury their mother, overpowering Jack, who feels sidelined and accuses her of "exploiting the position" (McEwan, 2003, p. 50). Julie's authority over Jack can be read as disrupting traditional forms of emphasized femininity. Instead of merely accommodating Jack's attempts at masculinity, she asserts control. This reversal also disrupts Jack's attempt to access cultural legitimacy because Julie's power operates in defiance of the very hierarchy Jack tries to emulate.

Feeling disillusioned about his place within the family, this dynamic upends Jack's understanding of male-female relationships and amplifies his sense of inadequacy and quest for recognition. Connell (2000) notes that such alternative masculinities to the hegemonic model are often "culturally discredited or despised" (p. 217).

Jack's attempts to assert authority within the family, such as by questioning Julie's financial decisions and inquiring about her and Sue's activities, consistently meet resistance. His efforts to demonstrate capability by cleaning the kitchen are met with derision, as the sisters remark that "[h]e's done his bit for a few weeks" (McEwan, 2003, p. 82). This treatment by the sisters, suggesting his exclusion from the legitimate circle of hegemonic masculinity, combined with Julie's authoritative demeanor, challenges traditional masculine tactics. Jack perceives Julie's responses as patronizing, feeling she speaks to him "as if to a child about to burst into tears" (McEwan, 2003, p. 92). This dynamic captures how the establishment of hegemonic masculinity is contingent upon the recognition and affirmation of others, which Jack cannot obtain. As Jack's interactions with Julie and Sue reveal, hegemonic masculinity is not simply a trait he can embody but a configuration of practices that depends on relational validation and mutual recognition. This dynamic illustrates the limitations of traditional masculinity in a family context where feminine authority is not only present but effective. The shift of authority towards Julie illuminates that hegemonic masculinity is not an isolated possession but rather an ongoing negotiation that can be contested or reconfigured within specific social contexts.

Jack's attempts to exert his authority are further challenged by the arrival of Julie's boyfriend, Derek, who the siblings immediately more favorably receive. Derek, described as "very tall and looked as if he were dressed for a wedding—pale grey suit, cream-colored shirt and tie, cuff links and a waistcoat with a small silver chain" (McEwan, 2003, p. 101), clearly impresses the siblings. Derek's accepted masculinity contrasts with Jack's shaky authority, illustrated particularly during a snooker game were Derek's confidence eclipses Jack's insecurity. Observing the match, Jack quietly wishes that Derek's opponent, Greg, would win (McEwan, 2003, p. 115). This reveals his ambivalence and the subconscious acceptance that Derek represents a more successful, socially accepted version of masculinity—qualities Jack finds elusive.

Jack's regression towards the end of *The Cement Garden*, where he exhibits infantile behaviour, yearning to be carried and weeping uncontrollably, can be read as a final withdrawal from his failed gender project. This tension surfaces in a dream where Jack yearns for childhood comfort, crying out, "I was crying because I was tired, and I wanted to be carried. … I shook my head and wailed louder" (McEwan, 2003, p. 142). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, hegemonic masculinity is sustained through the maintenance of unequal gender relations. Jack's masculinity is deemed to

fail because it lacks both institutional and interpersonal recognition. Messerschmidt's (2018) distinction between hegemonic and dominant masculinity further clarifies this breakdown. Jack aspires to embody hegemonic masculinity but cannot achieve even dominance within his household, as Julie and Derek consistently undermine his authority. The return to childlike behaviour reflects Jack's acknowledgment that the masculine ideal he strives for remains inaccessible. Moreover, his adolescence renders his gender project inherently experimental and incomplete as he lacks the social legitimacy necessary to perform hegemonic masculinity effectively. His retreat into infancy thus symbolises his failure to negotiate a coherent masculine identity within the fractured domestic sphere McEwan constructs.

Head (2007) interprets the siblings' effort to recreate a traditional family structure as "driven to construct a parody of the family structure they needed to react against in order to achieve maturity" (p. 48). While Jack briefly escapes societal norms in the absence of other adult males, allowing him some freedom to reconstruct his masculinity, this freedom is fleeting. Derek, likely the one who alerted the police after discovering the siblings' actions, cementing their mother's body and engaging in unconventional relationships—embodies the societal forces ready to reassert control. The arrival of the police towards the end of *The Cement Garden* symbolizes the inescapable authority of social structures and scrutiny that enforce hegemonic masculinity and standards of male behavior. McEwan's narrative closure, while seemingly open-ended, subtly critiques the cyclical and rigid nature of gender roles, suggesting that any deviation from societal norms is ultimately short-lived and subject to correction by overarching power structures.

CONCLUSION

Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* explores the pervasiveness and instability of hegemonic masculinity, even as the narrative momentarily allows for alternative expressions of gender. Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as a crucial framework for understanding the novel's delineation of masculinities and how they are organized around social recognition, cultural legitimacy and social validation. In the novel, the father embodies this hegemonic ideal and represents traditional norms of manhood in late twentieth-century Britain, where physical strength and dominance are key indicators of masculinity. However, as the novel progresses, Jack's construction and negotiation of masculinity portray ambivalence and even resistance to this ideal. While moments in the novel, such as the death of the father, suggest a shift towards alternative gender practices—where the maternal influence offers Jack a different model of masculinity—these shifts are, however, tentative and temporary at best.

Jack's negotiation with hegemonic masculinity might temporarily disrupt the hegemonic order, and in doing so, offer the readers a glimpse of alternative masculinities and gender practices. However, the novel

ultimately reflects the inevitability of these entrenched societal norms. The hint at a return to hegemonic masculinity at the end of the novel somehow subdues its narrative critique of traditional gender structures. *The Cement Garden* shows how deviations from societal norms are closely monitored and swiftly corrected. The novel thus serves as an experiment with provocative ideas about familial institutions and the potential for and limitations of challenging hegemonic masculinity.

Implications of the Study

This study demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity influences Jack's construction of masculinity within the isolated setting of *The Cement Garden*. Applying Connell's framework reveals Jack's negotiation of masculinity as a relational process which involves fluctuating between hegemonic ideals and alternative practices. Jack's adolescence complicates this negotiation; his attempts to assert authority remain fragmented and undermined by his dependency and vulnerability. Connell's theory proves to be feasible in reading the novel, particularly in showing the construction of masculinity as a protracted and fraught process, which necessitates ongoing negotiation with hegemonic masculinity.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

This study focuses primarily on Jack, the novel's main protagonist. While our analysis considers how familial relationships inform his construction of masculinity, further research on other male and female characters in the novel and McEwan's oeuvre in general, would enrich our understanding of how hegemonic masculinity operates. Connell's theory encompasses masculinity and femininity as they relate to patriarchal structures. Further research in this area would expand the discussions of gender, identity, and power.

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