



ISSN: 1994-4217 (Print) 2518-5586(online)

Journal of College of Education

Available online at: <https://eduj.uowasit.edu.iq>

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Keywords :

*Morality; childhood,
disappointment , loss of
freedom*

Article info

Article history:

Received 27 Apr 2022

Accepted 23. June.2022

Published 1. Augus 2022



The Difficulty of Coping in Jonathan Franzen's Freedom

A B S T R A C T

The paper examines Jonathan Franzen's Freedom (2010) from a moral perspective. It studies how people live, make choices and take decisions, whom to marry, how to raise children. I attempt to discuss Franzen's view that the crucial part of becoming a mature is that grown-ups abandon a definite kind of freedom. In adulthood one is not able to do the things one used to do when one was a child. What gives this novel its richness and critical recognition is the difficult journeys of the characters towards moral recognition. Therefore, this novel is regarded as one of the most prominent novels in the twenty- first century. It has been called a "masterpiece of American fiction" by Time Magazine and "an indelible portrait of our times" by Michiko Kakutani in The New York Times. The pains, departures, disappointments and even tragic deaths, act as a crucible that allows the awakening of the moral sense of the characters to ultimately achieve their longed-for happy endings.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol48.Iss1.2962>

صعوبة التأقلم في رواية الحرية لجوناثان فرانزين

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الملخص:

يناقش البحث المنظور الأخلاقي لرواية الحرية لجوناثان فرانزين (2010). حيث يشرح كيف يعيش الناس ، ويصنع الخيارات واتخاذ القرارات ، ومن يتزوج ، وكيفية تربية الأطفال. يحاول الباحثين مناقشة وجهة نظر فرانزن القائلة بأن الجزء الأساسي من أن تصبح ناضجاً هو أن الكبار يتخلون عن نوع محدد من الحرية. في مرحلة البلوغ ، لا يستطيع المرء أن يفعل الأشياء التي كان يفعلها عندما كان طفلاً. ما يضيف على هذه الرواية ثراءً واعتراقاً نقدياً هو الرحلات الصعبة للشخصيات نحو الاعتراف الأخلاقي. لذلك تعتبر هذه الرواية من أبرز روايات القرن الحادي والعشرين. وقد وصفته مجلة تايم بـ "تحفة من الروايات الأمريكية" و "صورة لا تمحى لعصرنا" لميشيكو كاكوتاني في صحيفة نيويورك تايمز. تعمل الآلام والمغادرة وخيبات الأمل وحتى الموت المأساوي بمثابة بوتقة تسمح بإيقاظ الحس الأخلاقي للشخصيات لتحقيق نهاياتهم السعيدة التي يتوقون إليها في نهاية المطاف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخلاق، مرحلة الطفولة ، خيبة الأمل ، فقدان الحرية

Introduction:

Jonathan Franzen stands firmly as one of the greatest American novelists of the 21st century. He is best known for his novel entitled *The Corrections* (2001) which gathered extensive critical acclaim earning him the National Book Award in 2001. His second masterpiece is *Freedom* (2010) which achieved extensive success and reputation. The New York Times selected *Freedom* as number one in its "*The 10 Best Books of 2010*." The Guardian (2010) also ranked this novel number one for its "Best Books of the Year": stating that the novel was head and shoulders above any other book this year.

Jonathan Franzen's "*Freedom*" discusses the life of two characters, Patty and Walter with their two children, Joey and Jessica. It is centered on a mid-western American couple who, together with their son Joey, are ethically tested throughout the novel with varying degrees of successes and failures. Patty faced difficult and tough situations when she was a child, which helped her to mature. When she was a teenager, she was raped by a powerful son of one of her parents' friends. Her mother's immediate response was: "Oh, I wish it had been almost anybody else. Dr. and Mrs. Post are such good friends of—good friends of so many good things." (Franzen, 2010, p. 40) While one would expect compassion and condolences from a mother, Patty receives neither. All her mother's concerns are about losing close ties with a politically powerful family like the Posts. She is not so much concerned with the tragic and life destroying event her daughter went through as much as her regret that the perpetrator wasn't "anybody else." Consequently, Patty's family makes no charges against the Posts and Ethan escapes justice without punishment. Patty's disturbed upbringing and traumatic events severely damaged her later life. She finds no satisfaction with Walter and lives an unfulfilling life: "In her chuckling, confiding, self-deprecating way, she spilled out barrel after barrel of unfiltered

detail about her and Walter's difficulties with him. Most of her stories took the form of complaints" (p. 8) Therefore, she decided to move as far away from them as possible. When she met Walter and she married to him she regretted her decision of marriage because she never expected herself to become but a housewife.

The difficult Journeys to childhood to adulthood to all the characters are unbelievable. It is impossible to believe that Joey is able to marry at the age of twenty to an older woman Connie as it is unbelievable that he does so without his parent's consent. The parents think that he moves to live with Connie in her house for the sake of her daughter but they are unaware that he is having sexual relationships with Connie herself. It is unbelievable that he succeeds in making his marriage work better than his parent's marriage. Joey is no longer the child who needs his parents to take care of him. He wants to be independent, with no more restrictions by his parents. Patty wants a different kind of freedom. She wants the freedom of the sexual thrill, knowing she can't have it.

Patty painfully narrates her tragic backstory in a chapter entitled "Mistakes Were Made." We discover that the root of her depression and alcoholism goes deeper than merely her crumbling relationship with Joey and Walter. Through Patty, Franzen invites his reader to consider whether freedom itself might be a source of American misery: "She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her freedom was more miserable. The autobiographer is almost forced to the conclusion that she pitied herself for being so free." (p. 181)

Thus, a culture that values freedom this much doesn't necessarily equate to a culture where people are able to succeed, where they feel proud of themselves and are able to find happiness. The worst harm to the country was not being done by the infection but by the immune system's overwhelming overreaction to it.

As Nicoline Timmer (2008) eloquently and succinctly puts it: "being free does not necessarily make people feel free" (p. 325). John Shotter (1996), concludes that one of the main characteristics of the self is not only its being autonomous and free, but also in its being affected by the social context in which it finds itself. Consequently, what any human being does, the way in which he or she behaves, responds and feels within themselves is affected by the surrounding environment and other people's actions. Here is an indication that Franzen believes in the generations, rather than degenerating. He believes that one will achieve success if one keeps trying. Hard work, efficiency, and certainly coolness are the key elements of thriving. After being so depressed and frustrated for her marriage with Walter, Patty pulls herself together to become almost a model Mom to Joey and Jessica, finds gratification in work

Patty finds herself returning to the man she always wanted before being married to Walter, namely, Richard Katz. Richard was a music band member from high school and a mutual friend of both Patty and Walter. Her marriage to Walter was more or less a compromise for her inability to gain Richard who refused her advances and seductions out of respect for his close friend Walter. Now that he has returned, it is Richard who seduces Patty into entering an extramarital affair with him; though this time there is little to no resistance to the advances. Nevertheless, Patty is aware that a man of low moral character like Richard does not, and will most likely not, love her. All he wants from this affair is just the pleasure of it: "Richard Katz

talking about love. This must be my signal that it's time to go to bed" (p. 193). When Walter finds Patty's autobiography which not only revealed her extramarital affair but also Patty's doubts on whether she actually loved him to begin with, Walter was devastated. He throws Patty outside and continues to live alone. Despite all that, deep inside himself, Walter was able to read beyond his wife's hard-hitting words to consider something far more profound: "However unworkable his life with Patty had become, he loved Patty in some wholly other way, some larger and more abstract but nevertheless essential way that was about a lifetime of responsibility; about being a good person," moreover, "Patty still needed him to think the world of her. He knew this, because why else hadn't she left him? He knew it very, very well ". (p. 304)

Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, in *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* argue that instead of using her autobiography as a way to safely "migrate[e]" through her social life, and also to realize a number of possible identities, Patty is trapped by the way others define her". (1973, p. 73) She cries for help and attention but no one is aware of her cry. She desperately needs others to give her little attention. Although she goes back to live with Richard but she still feels lonely because for Richard she is not at all different from the women he encountered before. As she states, she is a "nobody, the furthest possibility away from a special you" (p. 34).

Walter begins to a revenge by having a sexual relation with affair with Lalitha, a co-worker who had shown interests in Walter for a long time. Walter started "enjoying, every minute of every day, the love of a woman who wanted all of him" (p. 252) Though this affair is consensual, it invites us to consider its moral implications.

Female objectification occurs when women bodies are viewed as objects of male desires while not considering their personalities (Bartky, 1990). Walter clearly sees Lalitha as a way of furthering his own personal revenge with little consideration to her as a person. Hearing that [Patty] returned to Richard must be seen as a kind of liberation and must be considered as a cleaning of consciences. However, it was not like that. It didn't feel like a liberation, it felt like a death. He could see now that the last three weeks had merely been a kind of payback, a treat he was due in recompense for Patty's betrayal. Despite his avowals that the marriage was over, he hadn't believed it one tiny bit" (p. 480) The above excerpt also reveals that Lalitha was fully aware of being used as a mere object to further Walter's revenge. Her consent in this relationship doesn't negate the fact that it was explicit female objectification.

Walter , on the other hand, offers a more serious explanation: "the American experiment of self-government [was] statistically skewed from the outset, because it wasn't the people with sociable genes who fled the crowded Old World for the new continent; it was the people who didn't get along with the others" (p. 444), and later, "the personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom is a personality also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage" (p.445). He believes that when the dream 'sours,' it becomes a real nightmare: "You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to" (p.361)

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) confirm that women may become complicit in this female objectification by participating in what they called self-objectification. The same male objectification of women is found in Joey's relationship with Connie. Joey imposes a period of separation between him and Connie: "The idea was to develop independent selves and see if these independent selves were still a good match, but to Joey this was no more a "test" than a high-school chemistry "experiment" was research. Connie would end up staying in Minnesota while he pursued a business career and met girls who were more exotic and advanced and connected" (p. 234). Walter is hurt when his wife left him for Richard. He tells his daughter Jessica, "I know you want a happy ending" (Franzen 2010: p.508) Walter cries for this happy ending more than his daughter does. His solitude is unbearable without Patty. But his isolation halts with the arrival of his brother, Mitch, who does not know how to be alone.

For Joey, Connie becomes a throwaway object that can be substituted at any moment with a more talented and gifted partner. In fact, he wants to be with Jenna the sister of his roommate Jonathan. In order to pursue his cause, he even joins Jenna and Jonathan father's right-wing thinking that campaigns to encourage president George W. Bush to invade Iraq with the intentions of protecting Israel. Connie, on the other hand, is seriously in love with Joey, and she is willing to do anything to please him: "I only want to be with you. That's all I want in my life. You're the best person in the world. You can do anything you want, and I can be there for you. You'll own lots of companies, and I can work for you. Or you can run for president, and I'll work for your campaign. I'll do the things that nobody else will do. If you need somebody to break the law, I'll do that for you. If you want children, I'll raise them for you" (p. 235).

Joey, luckily, comes to appreciate this devotion. Joey began appreciating Connie only after realizing that she was sleeping with her manager. For the first time, he faced competition with Connie. Connie was also facing a mental breakdown from this separation. It seems that this role of preserver and savior Joey had to play is what ultimately convinced him to return to Connie. Nevertheless, Joey ends up marrying Connie and in the process finds the identity construction he so longs for: "It was a strange thing to feel, but he definitely felt it: when he emerged from the bathroom with the ring on his ring finger... he was a different person. He could see this person so clearly; it was like standing outside himself... there was something comforting and liberating about being an actual definite someone, rather than a collection of contradictory potential someone's" (p. 432-3).

As opposed to any of the other characters, Joey receives the most attention in *Freedom* as a result of the events of September 11.

However, his connection with national defense contractors while still a college student, selling the military clearly insufficient replacement vehicle components, has been criticized as stretching credibility and threatening to destroy the reality of the work.

Mahon argues: "the unlikeliness of a university student being trusted with a military commission amounting to tens of thousands of dollars" – an opinion shared by Walter – and finds this representative 'of the occasional strain on Franzen's socially realist ambitions' (Mahon 2014: 99)

In the narrative, Joey is not the only character who feels morally compromised or complicit. The politics of popular music and the aestheticization of ordinary life are of great importance to Freedom.

The morally questionable acts of Joey, nonetheless, are important to understate the difficulties that Joey's journey to moral recognition entails is not only to underestimate the struggles of a single character but also to a failure to comprehend the richness of Franzen's characterization. Joey had to break the chains of a psychologically traumatized and possessive mother. Patty stood firmly against her son's attempts to be romantically involved with other women; Connie or otherwise: She was like a woman bemoaning her gorgeous boyfriend. As if she were proud of having her heart trampled by him: "As if her openness to this trampling were the main thing, maybe the only thing, she cared to have the world know about" (p. 8). Patty, with her victimhood mentality, views Joey's affairs and attempts to connect to other women as a threat to her "because it's all about Patty, see, she's always got to be the victim" (p. 24).

Joey, as a consequence, developed what Erikson (1950) called a negative identity. An identity defined in opposition to someone else, in Joey's case, his parents. He breaks away from his mother's chains to achieve fulfilling relationships with other women and even adopts far leaning right-wing ideologies in opposition to his family's left-wing political tendencies. All in an attempt to construct his own identity far from his family. On a similar tone, Patty and Walter have to go on similar painful journeys of moral recognition in order to gain the fulfilling life they hope for.

For Patty, it was the painful absence of her family from her life that allowed her to recognize the amount of love she carried for them. For Walter, it was the tragic death of Lalitha in a car accident that allowed him to reaccept Patty in his life. In addition, the reciprocal feeling of the possibility of losing one another (something they previously might have taken for granted) allowed the awakening of their moral senses and gaining their happy ending at the end of the novel: "And so he stopped looking at her eyes and started looking into them, returning their look before it was too late, before this connection between life and what came after was lost, and let her see all the vileness inside him, all the hatreds of two thousand solitary nights" The reunion happens when ", the two of them were still in touch with the void in which the sum of everything they'd ever said or done, every pain they'd inflicted, every joy they'd shared, would weigh less than the smallest feather on the wind. "It's me," she said, "Just me." "I know," he said, and kissed her "(p. 559)

Conclusion

Jonathan Franzen examines the freedom the Americans have while most people in the world do not have. It better describes the life of the Americans after the choices they make in their lives. We follow what happens to every single character in the novel. Despite the mistakes they commit but they are still desirable characters. They, at the end, do not only acknowledge their

mistakes, but they also bear the consequences of their mistakes. They have difficulties coping when they grow old but they succeed to defeat these difficulties and reach the happy ending at last.

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