



## CHILD ABUSE IN JUDITH GUEST'S *SECOND HEAVEN*

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### ABSTRACT

Judith Guest's *Second Heaven* (1982) deals with the major conflicts between the son and father relationship. The author introduces her protagonist who is always against his father's wishes and stubbornly refuses to bend to him. The fact is that he has a close relationship with an unknown Lady and her lawyer friend. They willingly offered to help the boy who is in trouble with being severely punished by his father. The protagonist, Gale Murray is a school going young boy who was forced to come out of the home without informing anyone in the family due to his father's harsh treatment. The boy seeks help from Catherine, who voluntarily offers him without asking any questions. She acts as the protector of the boy and makes necessary arrangements to get himself relieved from the inner struggle. On the other hand, she understands the spiritual and emotional oneness with Gale's unendurable problems with his father. She brought this case into the court with the help of lawyer Michael Atwood. This paper focuses on the child abuse and the inner struggle underwent by Gale Murray.

**Key words:** Inner struggle, trouble, frustration, isolation, child abuse

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### INTRODUCTION

Judith Guest is known by her first successful work *Ordinary People* (1976), which brings her name among the American novelists. Her first published work produced a dramatic change in the American family system: two-parent families with one working parent. The author's second work, *Second Heaven* (1982) was written during this same twenty-five-year period of family upheavals. The novel addresses the main issues of divorce and an adolescent struggle. The protagonist introduces a different social and psychological issue especially child abuse. The author has focused on major social and psychological problems of the period. The novel's primary concern is an extraordinary adolescent boy who needs a second chance at life and love with another woman.

### Child Abuse

There are four different types of child abuses: Physical abuse, Sexual abuse, Psychological abuse, and Neglect. Child abuse is when a parent or caregiver and his or her action or failing to act, causes injury, death, and emotional harm or risk of serious harm to a child. Leeb et al. (2008) says that "the terms abuse and maltreatment are often used interchangeably in the literature." McCoy and Keen (2013) described about child abuse "in general, abuse refers to acts of commission while neglect refers to acts of omission," and "Child maltreatment includes both acts of commission and acts of omission on the part of parents or caregivers that cause actual or threatened harm to a child." According to The World Health Organization (WHO) child abuse is defined as "all forms of physical

and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power" (2016).

In 1960s, the young adult fiction is considered a new genre in literature; its stories are about orphans and lost boys of. The protagonist's triumphant rise often looked like a struggle for survival. Fagan (1997) viewed "child abuse as one of the most abhorrent of behaviors. Unfortunately, however, it often remains hidden until it is too late for society to save the child's life or repair the damage. Child abuse also is difficult to define." Many a novelist dealt with the same protagonist problems. Likewise Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), deals with two weeks in the life of a fourteen year old boy. The story of the novel is about the protagonist Pony boy Curtis and his struggles with right and wrong in a society in which he believes that he is an outsider. *Ramble Fish* (1975) is another novel in which the protagonists are orphans. That novels give a strong impression about the problems that are faced by the teenagers; "Many contemporary young adult novels seem to reflect genuine confusion over what the job of parents. Consist of, beyond keeping kids fed and safe" (2010).

The recent example of a novel where the protagonist gallantly sets out for adventures towards fulfilling his wishes is Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1985). Similarly, in Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943), there is no good father figure. Judith Guest has also discussed the protagonist's problem in her novel *Second Heaven*. As the novel progresses, it brings out the characters' emotions automatically especially the protagonist and other two adults. Catherine happened to sympathize with the protagonist and tries her best to take care of him. The first instance of their meeting, Gale stands in silence and realizes that there is a strong sense of connection with Catherine. He feels that it is his mistake to have associated with an unknown woman, though, he strongly believes that no good would have happened to him if he had not met Catherine: "that she made no

attempt to either contact the parents as to the whereabouts of said child, or to aid them in securing his turn" (Guest 22). Even though the outsiders discourage her to attend the boy and take care of him without the permission of the parents, she does not change her opinion; she continues helping him until the boy's father finds that he stays with Catherine.

Haupt Lehman (1982) says that "the way the newly divorced people dovetail, conveniently providing a surrogate mother and a fatherly Counselor for battered Gale." The way offers various broken families one another; everything is compared with these three characters who get into a close relationship after they meet together. They wanted to move freely without anyone's restriction on their ways. Irrespective of their age and gender, their problems seem to be the same. The author points out at the 'heaven': "perhaps all I'm saying is that I wish *Second Heaven* had some sort of mark of imitable individuality to distinguish it - some crazy, inexplicable development some peculiar flight of prose - an ugly mark" (Lehman 1982). Every critic and novelist had dealt with different perspectives with regard to their protagonist's problems as followed by Guest.

#### **The Protagonist left Home**

The Protagonist, Gale Murray is out of home and stays with Catherine, which brings the conflicts with his father who does not like his stay with an unknown woman. This is really a strange attempt of the boy, and protest against his father's wishes. It shows the daring action of the boy who is questioning regarding his freedom. Catherine and the Lawyer are eagerly trying to solve his problems to seek magistrate's legal approval in the court. The protagonist's father is being an old fashioned strict religious fanatic and his severe punishment causes the boy's run away from home. He filed a case and charged it as: "that there has been chronic truancy...that there has been chronic absence from home...that there has been lying, stealing, and general disobedience...that there has been a general lack of respect in the home" (Guest 1982:22). The Lawyer Michael Atwood approaches this case in various perspectives because the boy should be relieved from his father's torture. Morally, it is an

accepted principle that parents have all the rights to rectify their children's mistake and it is the prime duty to correct them early, especially when the kids take the wrong path. Giving punishment and other correctional approaches on the children are for the sake of their future betterment.

The close observation from Catherine and the Lawyer of the boy seems to have developed a close connection with them, the boy realizes that in his pathetic condition there was an unknown person feeling pity on him and this made him move out of the house. Guest brings fictitious characters like Catherine and Michael Atwood who are there for needy. The father's concern about that was, "there was no supervision there. And no discipline, as far as I could make out" (Guest 24). Gale wants to come out this and he knows that there is no choice in it. The later development of the boy's relation with an unknown lady becomes very stronger. Catherine who is also recently divorced and feeling alone searches a new companion. She thinks that God shows mercy on her when she was alone when he approached her. In connection with them, the author shows that her characters are an emotional vehicle for their feelings. They must have to carry good strong feelings that can be elaborated on that by the author. The boy is abandoned ultimately to being so depressed personally. His statement about his father has intolerant, abusive, and cruel to him in the name of birthright. However, it becomes real that the boy escaped from the house, running out of his father's control and trying to control his father through a legal way.

#### **The Protagonist's Father**

The protagonist's father is strict towards his son, and this forced him to run away from home. Therefore, the author is particularly talented to articulate the concerns and interest of high middle ground ordinary surroundings like the novel's protagonist. In which the boy's happiness is not expected to come easily, she describes with sympathy those who are struggling. Chettle (1982) portrayed "Gale Murray, a teen-age boy almost irreparable harmed by the savagery of his fanatically religious father." The protagonist is arrested by his vengeful father's complaint from school and taken into a juvenile detention centre. He wanted his son

to be sent to prison as a punishment for his run away from home without informing. The same incident had happened to the boy's elder brother, "he left home when Gale was eleven. For a while nobody knew where he was, but it turned out he joined the Navy. If they could find him, maybe they would let him live there" (Guest 1982:46). Now, his father faces second problem with legal approach. The Lawyer visits Juvenile home and verifies Gale's school attendance and finds his grades with fine records. He regrets the boy's present condition that, "I feel awful about this. Still can't believe it's happening" (Guest 15). "A difficult kid, he thought. Secretive and Suspicious" (Guest 15). In the beginning, the Lawyer too has faced the same problem with the boy's attitude, and finds it difficult to understand him. Later, he turned to look at him saying that "nobody much wants somebody else's sixteen-year-old problem. It is too risky" (Guest 47). Because, the boy seems to be really tough, the lawyer thinks that it is very difficult to handle this case.

The boy ran away from home, and after four months only, his father came to know about his whereabouts that he is living with an unknown lady. When the boy entered Catherine's house, she understands that the boy is in trouble: "that father's efforts to remove him from the premises resulted in threats, abusive languages, and violence on the part of said child" (Guest 22). During night hours Gale closes his eyes and deeply thinks about his father: bad times for him. He is helpless as hell during those hours remembering about his father's attitude and this causes the breakup of his relation with son and father.

#### **Approaches of Catherine and Michael Atwood**

In the view of Catherine, she feels that she had been wrong in her approach towards the boy without giving any information to the parents. Catherine, "tried to think what she knew about burns; that there were degrees of seriousness. She had no way of knowing how bad this one was, or how to treat it was worse even than she thought? The Pain, the cold treatment- all that could send him into shock and here she would be with him, standing by, doing nothing about it" (Guest 104). She should begin some task that would carry throughout the

end. Normally, children did go mad, and kill themselves sometimes, but Gale is different from them. He deals with a much larger social issue: child abuse. She slowly tries to read nearly all his life she just had read for escape from real life worries.

Next, Michael Atwood, a Lawyer; he is also recently divorced, grieving over the loss of his own children to their step father. His recent case is Gale Murray, a sixteen year old boy who runs away from his home and is in the custody of Catherine. The Lawyer is concerned about the boy, mainly his future, not for his living with anyone as his wish. He is telling his opinion of the children, "they see parents trying to teach right and wrong and not having any luck, so they do the only thing they know, which is punish. When it doesn't work, they punish harder. They don't know what the hell else to do" (Guest 1982:76). When there is a heated argument between Gale and his father, Michael intervenes and tries to make peace between them; but, the boy narrates whatever he had experienced with his religious father's strict rules, and the way he is finding to come out from that sever painful atmosphere and settling with Catherine. Everywhere he looked it was hatred and he himself is afraid of violence and evil spirits like his father.

### Conclusion

To sum up this paper, the protagonist escapes from strict and demanding father successfully at the end of the novel. The boy becomes safe and searches his ways through which he needs to protect himself. His stay with an unknown woman gives him a better understanding, because of the growing phenomenon of his father's abuse of him. He daringly refuses to bend under the harsh treatment of his parents. Consequently, he really trusts other helping hands to be relieved permanently from torture and punishment.

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