

## Configuring the Mother-Son Dyad in Colm Toibin's Short Story "The Name of the Game"

**Hashima Kenneth**

Research Scholar, PSMO College, Tirurangadi  
Dr. Noufal PT, Assistant Professor, PSMO College, Tirurangadi

### Abstract

*The relationship between mothers and sons was always been a contentious subject among feminists; owing to that, studies on it were scarce until recently. Earlier this relationship was mainly seen through oedipal fears of the Freudian lens. But now that case has changed and this relationship is getting recognized as a potential relationship that can bring positive changes in society. So, it is necessary to study this particular human relationship so as to understand the dynamics of power and to dismantle traditional gender stereotypes in order to empower both parties involved and thus for the betterment of the society at large. Therefore, this paper tries to focus on the mother-son relationship in Colm Toibin's short story "The Name of the Game" from his short story collection Mothers and Sons. The story is centered on the life of Nancy, a widow, and mother of three children. Nancy runs a supermarket and pays off the huge debt, both left by her husband who died in a car accident. Her dream is to sell everything and move into Dublin where she and her children would start their life afresh. Then, Nancy becomes a successful business woman after opening a chip shop and off-licence in the supermarket. When the time comes, she decides to sell everything which initiate conflict in the relationship with her adolescent son who had dreamt of inheriting the business. The paper mainly probes into how the sexist assumptions are internalized and reinforced by the sons, how the cultural glorification of masculinity leaves them injured and alienated, how mothers resist all these things and also the subjugation and self-sacrifice expected of them and how they try to bring about changes in themselves and their sons. It also analyses what dilemmas these mothers have to encounter in the process as well as how these attempts on the part of the mother give her agency, authority, autonomy, and authenticity which is denied to her in patriarchal motherhood.*

**Keywords:** Mothers and sons, institutionalised motherhood, maternal ambivalence, empowered mothering, patriarchal masculinity, maternal agency, motherhood studies

Mothers and sons have been considered as an unnatural dyad compared to fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. Therefore, only the latter has been the focus of academic and personal inquiry. This relationship remained a sensitive and under-researched area for a long

time owing to the feminist ambiguity regarding how to deal with this particular relationship. Because, a discussion on it eventually leads to a discussion over power and patriarchy on the one hand, and on love, on the other (O'Reilly 1144). But this relationship cannot evade investigations for long as it is important to understand the institution of motherhood, the oppressive traits inherent in it, the hidden motive behind discouraging mother-son attachment, as well as what contributes to making the boys be raised as sexist and how they internalise and adopt the traits of patriarchal masculinity (1144). In the end, to divulge the potentiality of the relationship in bringing about positive changes in society by empowering mothers who in turn can raise sons accordingly thereby creating a desired gender transformation in their sons and the society. As a first step towards it, it is necessary to understand how this relationship is portrayed in various field of narratives.

Hence, this paper tries to look into a mother-son relationship in Irish writer Colm Toibin's short story "The Name of the Game" from his short story collection *Mothers and Sons*. It is the story of Nancy who lost her husband in a car accident and left with 3 kids and huge debt. Nancy converts the failing supermarket business left by her husband to a successful one after adding a chip shop and off-licence to it. Gerard, Nancy's only son become an adept in managing the business at the cost of his social life and education. The story takes the readers through Nancy's role as a mother and as a business woman and her struggle to keep her identity as both. The paper tries to focus on the ebb and flow of the relationship between Nancy and her son, while focusing mainly on maternal ambivalence especially when mothering sons and also on patriarchal values internalized by children.

All the discussion about mother-son relationship will touch upon Adrienne Rich's opinion about it in her monumental work *Of Woman Born*. In that book Adrienne rich theorizes patriarchy; in her words: "Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Willey 310). The story is about the protagonist Nancy's struggle to overcome her father's rule and establish her identity as a woman of willpower and courage. Talking about motherhood as an institution, Judith Arcana in one of her works talks about how in traditional motherhood mothers are positioned as secondary to men and how they are expected to serve men and children (O'Reilly 1144). Thus, it is evident that mothers need to redefine the ways they experience and practice motherhood. So that they can change their sons' way of experiencing

and defining masculinity. This practice of mothers to challenge patriarchal form of motherhood which is oppressive to women is termed as empowered mothering (O'Reilly 1144). Empowered mothering disrupts, rewrites and undermines patriarchal scripts of motherhood. This in turn provides these mothers with autonomy, agency, authority and authenticity. Empowered mothering rejects hegemonic narrative of mother-son attachment propagated by psychoanalytical theory and the like. In the story, Nancy challenges the oppressive traits of patriarchal motherhood as she rejects the attempts of her son to control her and proclaim her identity as a self-assured woman. What she enacts in other words is called maternal agency. The maternal agency is a mother's ability to take control of her own life and influence her children and the larger culture through mothering (Hallstein 697). It is a way of challenging institutionalized motherhood which curtail women's power as mothers.

Nancy's son Gerard though in his teens, seems to have internalised several patriarchal traits. He wanted to know every detail of the business his mother is doing. Several time in the story, Gerard's questions reminds Nancy of how much Gerard is sounding like his father. Gerard is keen about the details of business his mother is running, he wants to supervise every work, he is very meticulous in calculating the cost and expense and he even develops a complex system to avoid taxes. But at the same time Gerard often forgets his mother's struggle to fight off the poverty their family faced and also to pay off the huge debt left by his father. When, his father George died, the supermarket and the living quarters above it already had been mortgaged by him so there was no chance of getting a loan from the bank, and the earning from the supermarket was not enough to do the payment. Nancy's attempt to get some loan went futile when the bank manager Mr. Roderick Wallace refused to give any money to her saying that what he wants is repayment not written cheques. But Nancy being a woman of determination, instead breaking down before him to earn his sympathy determined to find another way. Nancy seems to resist any attempt of others to cow her down, instead of begging for help, she searches for alternative solutions for her problems. Nancy though a self-respecting woman was a very considerate mother too. She was more of a sister to her children than a mother and she was very cautious not to give them too much advice or to be too critical of their actions and behaviour. Yet, she wanted to keep her plans and actions secrets. Not because she doesn't want to share it with anyone but because she believed that she would lose the courage to implement it once divulged. In fact she had the habit of spending time with her children, sharing the events of the day among each other, but she kept some details to herself for the above reason.

Many times, in her life, Nancy had to go through a condescending attitude from people because of her gender and family lineage which is presumably no match to Sheridan's, her husband's family. The shoplifter who came to the supermarket insults her and calls her a huckster, saying that she is not a good match for Sheridan because she came from Hills. Then, Matt Nolan, one of the members of the credit union committee expressed his hatred towards her for being married to a privileged family than hers and now borrowing money in their name and he also scorns her implicating her supposed lack of expertise in business because of her sex. Moreover, Nancy had to overcome the enmity of her competitors to establish her business. Nancy's competitors worked every possible way to prevent her from succeeding with the business for example by complaining about the litter and noise her business made and instigating the health and planning officer against her. But then Nancy had no option but to show them the letter from the bank about the huge amount of debt which is beyond her capacity to repay as it exceeds the amount she can get even if she sells the whole property and how her family is on the verge of destitution. She found solutions to every complaint raised against her business with immense patience. She fought against the authority that favoured the well-to-do merchants in the town while ignoring people like her. Yet, Nancy's attitude towards her work was always ambivalent. On the one hand, she hated her work in the supermarket because she thought that it robbed her of privacy and left her at the mercy of other people who come and command her attention with their money.

Moreover, the news that her daughters are being called chips in their school because of the smell of chip-frying oil in their cloth made her hate the chip shop too. That is why she wanted to sell the property and go to Dublin to begin a calm and quiet life there and settle there with a job like secretary to a businessman. She loved the time she slept in the afternoon. Yet she was at a loss to handle free time if there is too much of it and one of her worst nightmares was becoming an unwanted old woman in the shop of her married son who being egged by his wife to demand her to hand over the right of business to him. Another problem Nancy faces in her life is keeping balance between work and life. Finding balance between work and motherhood is not an easy task and slight changes in itself can put intense mental pressure on mothers. The struggle becomes worse in the case of lone mothers. Because their rate of poverty is high, and access to affordable quality child care, education etcetera is less. Earlier, women were socialized to remain at home and be dependent on fathers, husbands and later sons. But now women are encouraged to work outside home yet they are not relieved of the task of household chores and care work. Superwomen or women who can do it all, that is by excelling both in

private and public sphere are celebrated now. While it has its own advantages it is also a kind of exploitation of mothers because while people who do paid jobs get ample rest after outside work, mothers are expected to do 'second shift and third shift' which denies them time for recreation and rest. Due to a lack of structural, mental and physical support, these mothers often end up carrying the double burden of familial and professional responsibilities. Though Nancy is very calculative about her business, she sometimes craves rest, sometimes she hates her status as a businesswoman and a mother and yearns for afternoons in her bed away from her professional and familial obligations.

Another thing is, Nancy challenges the good mother behaviour expected of her. A good mother is supposed to be selfless, doting doing all domestic chores successfully raising her children and being content in all these things. Unlike the loving self-sacrificing domestic mothers who are romanticised for the same, Nancy wants things for not only for her children's sake but also for herself even though she faces problems when navigating between her roles as a mother and a businesswoman she still had a definite plan for her future life. Nancy had a lot of doubts in her mind about the feasibility of her plans and the future of her family but at the same time she was meticulous, calculative, well planned in her business dealings. All these latter traits are usually attributed to men and traditionally a mother is not expected to use her brain in things other than care work and household chores. Because it is believed that "women are primarily driven by emotion not rationality" (Takseva 188). In that sense, Nancy is an anomaly to the so called "good mothers". Nancy could have handed over the business to Gerard as soon as he gained expertise in it, this is what traditionally an aging mother or father is expected to do. But Nancy was determined act against the stereotype. She wanted to be valued, recognised for the hard work she invested in that business and financially independent until her death. This is important because to be subdued as a mere home maker is a devaluing prospect in the society. Not because mothering and related works are easy jobs but because it is unpaid hence people take it for granted. And once a mother's ability to procreate and do the chores subsides, she becomes a redundant object in the lives of her children. This is what exactly Nancy tried to resist. Her biggest nightmare was to become a useless hag in the house of Gerard's family.

Nancy's story of resistance does not end there. Because a good mother is supposed to be an excellent homemaker and one of the important aspects of it is cooking and doing the chores. But in the story, Nancy does not consider herself an exceptional cook because according to her, even her kids have said that she can hardly fry potatoes well and neither is she is particularly concerned about tidiness at home. Tidiness is considered a yardstick to measure the



homemaking skills of a woman but Nancy did not show special interest in it and that is why her children became surprised at the tidiness Nancy insisted just before implementing her plans to expand the business. Nancy's relationship with Gerard was smooth sailing until he began to assert power over her. Unlike her daughters, Gerard was curious about his mother's all movements and plans. In the beginning, Nancy tried to quench his curiosity by answering his questions to an extent and letting him help her in the shop. But later she had to ban him from working in the shop when she realised the detrimental effect, it has on his education and social life. Besides, Gerard's behaviour at times confused Nancy and she was at a loss to how to respond to him.

Once, Gerard enquires about her plan to get married because he heard from people that his mother is hanging out with a man called Birdseye, a well-known commercial traveller in the town, but even after Nancy's denial of any relationship with Birdseye except that of business, Gerard was not ready to buy into it and he kept on teasing her. She was surprised at his confidence and cheek. This can be interpreted as Gerard's attempt to act as the man of the house by controlling the lives of its female members. Because, when sons grow up they absorb certain values from the society that posits men as the legatees of authority and prerogative. Moreover, ever since the beginning of the chip shop and off-license, Gerard considered himself the sole heir of it. He forgot about the presence of his mother and became more and more reserved as he withdrew from conversation with his mother and sisters. Gerard became adept in handling the business. He worked out the ways to handle taxes with the help of an accountant. He was on his journey to become a patriarch. After assuming the air of an adult he began to advise his mother on business matters. In the beginning, Nancy took it positively and even admired her son's skill in handling business. But later Nancy began to see some alarms in his behaviour when she understood that the business has become an obsession for her son, he is no longer interested in his studies, and he cut his ties with his friends, he is assured of his future as a successful businessman and he has assumed the role of the head of the family where he thought he can use any coarse language he liked and his mother and sisters are under his command. This power of patriarchy starts when sons realize that they can manipulate their mothers according to their wish (Willey 310). Nancy could find that he is absorbing several masculine traits from his environment and tries to assert control over her. It hurts Nancy that Gerard considers the business as his own forgetting the struggles she had to go through to develop it and the fact that people appreciate her for keeping the business for her son's sake enrages her. This is Nancy's attempt to resist the societal attempt to deny a mother or a woman her

personality, dignity, and independent existence. Society takes it for granted that a mother exists only for the sake of her children and it tends to believe that a mother has no personal interest other than the betterment of her children. At that point on Nancy decided to take firm control of the business and of her life, as it dawned on her that she needed to lead her son not only for his sake but also for herself, her daughters, and all the women who will come to cross their path with him in the future. Nancy's announcement to sell the business and move into Dublin initiates a major faceoff between her and Gerard. Nancy informs her children about her plan to find a house in Dublin, and send all of them to schools while she finds a job. Gerard confronts his mother and announces that neither does he want to go to any school nor does he want her to sell the business and move into Dublin where he has nothing to consider as his own. And as if he is seizing the control, he tells his mother that she wouldn't be able to run the business without him and it is not up to her to decide whether to sell the business or not because it is owned by Sheridans, his father's family. Finally, he tries to emotionally manipulate his mother by telling her that George will feel bad if he sees all these things. Nancy didn't yield, though she was hurt and alienated but stood firm on her decision to proceed with her plans. She understood that what lies ahead with regard to her relationship with her son is no way an easy task but a big responsibility that may last a lifetime. What motivated her to take responsibility is her love for her son, her compassion, and also resilience. Her goal is to inculcate compassion, empathy, tolerance, respect, care, inclusiveness, cooperation, negotiation, and humanity in her son. As it is evident from the behaviour of Gerard, Patriarchal masculinity encourages men to suppress the so-called feminine emotions like gentleness, empathy, and weakness, compassion, while asking them to put on a mask of strong, emotionally cold, independent, and individuated masculinity (O'Reilly 1145). Thus, they end up hiding their emotions as they think it is shameful to express them and thus forced to keep important parts of themselves hidden from others. This comes at a price; because it forces men to grow up emotionally damaged and secluded. Gerard goes through all of these phases, at first he absorbs several masculine traits from his environment and tries to be independent, calculative, and emotionally cold person but in the end only to break down in front of his mother. Writers like Adam Jukes and Michael J. Diamond talk about how shame is used as a tool to discipline boys into the prescribed disposition of masculinity. Thus boys are pressured by parents and peers alike to give up gender-inconsistent traits than girls (Willey 313). Likewise, violent or aggressive behaviour in boys is often excused mainly because of the belief that boys are supposed to be violent or aggressive. Hence, giving birth to a son often is the beginning of several anxieties in his mother.

The otherness, the uncontrolled nature, and violence in boys trigger fear and worry in mothers (313). Therefore, if mothers are not willing to challenge this ‘boys will be boys’ dictum, they will remain conducive and as well as prey to patriarchy. Nancy’s attempt to discipline Gerard starts from advising him to put his school bag in the room rather than leaving it in the supermarket (it may be because he assumes that his sisters or mothers will do things for him), to her attempt to suppress his violent behaviour by advising him against using coarse language and also advising him against his wish to beat his Latin teacher whom he hates. In short, Nancy does not promote aggression in Gerard, just because he is a boy.

Myriam Miedzian wrote that women are reluctant to question the long established and taken for granted beliefs and norms due to the fact that it will disrupt their sense of identity and self-worth thus creating a guilty feeling. Consequently, they are inadvertently facilitating patriarchy by assisting to normalize the violent and domineering behaviour which has a potential to become pervasive social problem of violence in the long run (Willey 313). As a result these boys grow up and at a loss when it comes to feeling and intimacy. Yet raising an anti-sexist son is fraught with difficulty, because fathers and the world itself is against it. One of the important anxieties that haunt mothers who attempt empowered mothering is the fear of effeminizing their sons (that means her mothering will make him “soft, weak, dependent and homebound” mama’s boy (O’Reilly 1145) and that the sons will be unfit to live in the patriarchal world outside. They are afraid of the ostracism, alienation and loneliness their sons will have to face in the society (Willey 315). The term Mama’s boy has its own derogatory connotations thus seen as an insult to both the mother who is castrating presence in her son’s life and for the son who is deemed to be lacking self-sufficiency and dependent on his mother for everything (Willey 312). In the beginning of the story, Nancy removes an old photograph of her husband in his teens standing behind his mother. It can be interpreted as her own ambivalence about influencing her son. In other words, mothers desperately want to influence their sons yet they are afraid of the making visible changes in the lives of them sons due to the fear of mother blame. In Alison Thomas’ opinion it is the separation of mothering activities into private sphere and father’s activities into public sphere resulted in the fear of mothers about effeminizing their sons (Willey 311). In fact, mothers fear two type of relationship with their sons; in one, they fear becoming a “too loving, over-protective, seductive and smothering mothers for their sons” and on the other they fear becoming a “Cold, unresponsive, castrating, hostile mothers for their sons” (311). As an attempt to do away with patriarchal conventions in mothering sons, their first step should be communication with their sons and the attempt to listen to their sons and as



well as to explain what is happening in their lives (Willey 314). The presence and support of fathers are of high importance for mothers when they attempt at empowered mothering. Feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich proposes that by foregrounding one's presence in a son's life, a mother is establishing a close and caring connection in her son's life which will be beneficial for both and it will save her son from becoming a detached and wounded man. In fact, theorists like Pollack suggested that attachment with the mother is far from debilitating for sons; on the contrary it will strengthen them emotionally and psychologically (Willey 312). In the story

Nancy's attempt is to resist patriarchal motherhood by resisting it and carving her own identity while becoming a beacon of light in the life of Gerard. Moreover, Linda Forcey, Sara Ruddick and Jacqueline Haessley discuss the concept of "peacekeeping", "peacemaking" and "peacebuilding" for mothers. They differentiate between these terms and according to Forcey peace keeping at home means how a mother works as a mediator in order to avert an atmosphere of conflict between family members especially between fathers and sons (Willey 316). In Jacqueline Haessley's opinion peace building is more positive because it means "creating an environment where everybody can feel safe" but not at the expense of expressing one's opinion or by deliberately avoiding conversation and action which make one's difference with others explicit. And it happens not only at home, but also outside of it (316). Peacemaking becomes meaningful when mothers are successful in imparting and implementing the concept of non-violence, justice, inclusiveness to their children in order to apply it to every arena of life especially in the context of every social institution. It also means that teaching the importance of communication and cooperation, values of love, freedom, compassion, tolerance and sensitivity to the issues of race, class, and gender oppression (Willey 317). In a sense, Nancy's role is that of a peace builder as she tries to teach her children especially her son the importance of non-violence and tolerance instead of promoting authoritarian behaviour in them. When mothers think and act this way together with their sons they are partaking in empowered mothering and acting towards social change. Furthermore, their action become an organised and systemic resistance against out dated and oppressive norms and thus they are helping to generate a grass root change and a safer world for all. So, if mothers want to influence their sons for a better world, they must overcome they're the fear of emasculating their sons with their influence and the fear of being seductive and acting into oedipal fears, or the tendency to leave them to their fathers thinking that fathers might be the proper role model for sons while negating her influence as a negative one. This is a call for change or to move away from



patriarchal dictates which discriminate the world on the basis of various privileges like class, race and gender.

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