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Psychological Effects of Complex Father and Son Relationships

The relationship between a father and son is a unique bond that can have enduring effects for both the father and the son. Chris Abani’s, *The Face: Cartography of the Void,* dives deep into his complicated relationship with his father that left psychological wounds as he grew up and resentment after the death of his father. The complex relationship between Chris Abani and his father produced chapters in his life where he experienced resentment, forgiveness, and redemption which led to struggles of acceptance later in his life. Even though men are often depicted as strong and unfazed in their emotional state, the complex nature of father and son relationships can have psychological effects on the son’s life leaving men vulnerable and insecure as seen in Chris Abani’s *Face: Cartography of the Void.*

Abani, through his face, sees his own father’s reflection looking back at him. Through analyzing his own father, he is able to analyze himself as his father’s son. When looking at old photographs, Abani realized that “it is possible we would look nothing alike. It is possible we would look exactly alike” (13). This contradicting issue reflects the relationship that Abani shared with his father. In reflection of his own relationship with his father, he describes father-son relationships as complex and unclear as he stated, “I have also come to learn that the other side of truth is that your father can hate you for the ways in which he cannot help loving you. We are complex equations: fathers and sons” (69). The burden of lacking the ability to please his father remained with Abani. He is reminded by this as he sees his father’s face in his. His father used to state, after Abani’s rebellions, “You are just a disappointment” (21). This affected the relationship between the two. He stated, “This was the relationship I believed I had with my father-- the son whose every choice would disappoint (40). Even after the death of his father, this guilt remained in him. He desired something more from this father. He claimed, “I didn’t know this, but for years this was the shape of my yearning for a different father” (50). Abani did believe that his father loved him but because there was a lack of paternal affection, he was vulnerable and insecure about his role as a son. Understanding the relationship between his father and him left Albani carrying the burden that his father inflicted. He stated, “My father beat my mother. Often. I still carry my guilt of my helplessness” (33). As Abani grew up, he has had to carry the burden of the complex relationship between his father and him and it remains with him even after his father’s death.

By remembering his father as a spirit, Abani was able to forgive his father, stating that “My father loved me even though violence was his preferred mode of affection… My father has been forgiven” (34-35). This forgiveness allowed him to see his father’s face as his own. Redemption is the last stage that Abani’s sees in his face where he has a realization that, “I am just like my father, and twelve years after his death I can say it with pride, with an ease. I resemble my father” (70). Abani accepts that his father has shaped him into who is today by his struggle to find his own identity, apart from his father’s.

Abani was able to accept that he shared the same face as his father, however others may argue that through his acceptance, his insecurity and vulnerability were dismissed and he was able to find himself as his own man and not his fathers. However, even though Abani did accept his father’s face, he stated, “I am my father’s son—and yet still there is a seed of doubt, and the texture of that doubt is the texture of my face, smooth but for the resistance of stubbed cheeks. But when I shave there is not the sound of a blade carving ancestral wood masks” (70). Although he has accepted that that he is his father’s son, the wounds left by his relationship with his father will remain on his face. Nevertheless, Abani chose to make them a part of his face when he described his face has “a face worn in by living, worn in by suffering, by pain, by loss, but also by laughter and joy and the gifts of love and friendship” (84). He chose to embrace relationship with his father, however, the effects still remain with him.

This mental effect happens to sons when their complicated relationships with their fathers endure in households and become part of the son’s identity. When examining how father-son relationships affect sons psychologically in an ex-steel community, it was found that broken relationships infused by masculine standards led to sons wanting to live up to their fathers, causing internal conflicts such as insecurities as they grew up. In the article, “Shameful Work: A Psychosocial Approach to Father-Son Relations, Young Male Unemployment and Femininity in an Ex-Steel Community*,*”by Luis Jimenez and Valier Walkerdine, the complex relationships between fathers and sons in an ex-steel community is investigated where they find a direct correlation between insecurity and paternal expectations. In the South Wales Valleys in Wales, a rise in youth unemployment occurred where young men look for other jobs to sustain themselves such as bagging at supermarkets or working at retail stores. However, in their culture, these jobs are seen as feminine and they do not correlate with what the male elders expect from their sons. Because of this, the relationships between fathers and son became distant, where the son was left with guilt that he could not please his father. Jimenez stated, “Not only did fathers appear to feel terrible shame and distress in relation to their sons, but they were unwilling or unable to talk about it” (281). This clash between fathers and sons is similar to Abani’s where he could not please his father and lived with that regret until his adulthood.

Another example of complex father-son relationships is examined in the article in which a young man, Tony, was interviewed. When his stepfather neglected him for taking a cleaning job, Tony “distanced himself from his stepfather by depicting him as a bully surrounded by like-minded mates who perceive as a threat any male who fails to perform appropriate masculinities” (283). In order to correct his wrongs with his father, he would quit the jobs his father deemed feminine. This need to always please his father from a young age followed Tony to his adulthood where he has two children and a wife to support but struggles to find the right job that would define himself as a man. Jimenez observed that “Tony understands his stepfather's embarrassment and rejections as having to do with their special closeness and his stepfather’s wish that he, in particular, would follow in his father's footsteps. Yet, at the same time, he does not seem to be fully aware of the emotional costs of conforming to the role of his father’s closest and preferred son” (287). By submitting to the expectations put forth by his father, Tony takes up jobs that leads him to unhappiness and furthermore, insecurity of his ability to take care of his family. Abani also tried to conform to what his father expected of him. Abani stated, “I continued to disappoint because I always choose my own path” (40). This inability to choose one’s path due to a father’s disapproval created doubt and guilt in men where “their [fathers] contempt and bullying leave the sons isolated and humiliated; they are left with few options other than conforming to their fathers’ views of what is best for their sons” (292). The desire to conform leads to psychological effects that are not always apparent at first sight.

The societal standards for men often limit relationships between fathers and sons. As Jimenez stated in his article, “Both fathers and sons continue to enact a type of male persona who is aware of the difficult times… and yet, at the same time, needs to protect or perform an image of being able somehow to cope in a manly way with such difficulties” (281). It is true that limited and complex relationships between fathers and sons can lead to difficulties with coping of unspoken emotions in the son’s present and future life. A father serves as an example for many sons as the person they strive to become. Jimenez stated, “The way in which sons assimilate and think about their own fathers’ projected feelings of despair become enmeshed in complex ways with the sons’ own needs to see in their fathers some kind of idealized strong supportive image that would also serve to consolidate their own sense of masculinity” (291). This constant reminder of what it means to be a man that is enforced by a father can lead a son to question if he is living up to that standard. Sons are most affected by these types of relationships because fathers’ “contempt and bullying leave the sons isolated and humiliated; they are left with few options other than conforming to their father’s views of what is best for their sons” (292). Abani experienced this struggle to balance his father’s expectations and his own path that he was creating in his own generation. He stated, “My generation struggled to reconcile the often conflicting, schizophrenic expectations of our parents’ old-world ideals and punishments with the equally schizophrenic Western ideals.” Due to this fight for acceptance, sons are then likely to follow the standards placed by their fathers because they have been taught that they are unable to make that decision for themselves.

In both Abani’s life and in the life of the men highlighted in the article, complex relationships between father and sons can cause psychological effects that last beyond years. This need to conform remains as Abani sees himself in the mirror and sees his father instead of himself. The journey to find your face takes acceptance and in Abani’s case, it took resentment, forgiveness, and redemption for the burdens of his father. Abani has learned to accept it and transform it into his own face, a comfortable face, a face that he is proud to wear.

Works Cited

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