



Mother fixation in *Sons and Lovers*: An Educational Implication

Vol. IV, No. I (Winter 2019) | Page: 303 – 311 | DOI: 10.31703/grr.2019(IV-I).32

p- ISSN: 2616-955X | e-ISSN: 2663-7030 | ISSN-L: 2616-955X

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Abstract

The present study aims at exploring the effective teaching approach of the theme of Mother Fixation in Sons and Lovers to Pakistani students. It has adopted phenomenology as a research paradigm. The study examined some of the impediments that teachers face in literature class, while dealing with this theme as well as how they tend to overcome these hurdles. There is some evidence from the data that majority of the respondents expressed feelings of embarrassment and hesitation while discussing the theme of the phenomenon of Mother Fixation. The result has shown that the theme of Mother Fixation, if handled properly while observing the ethical limitations of Pakistani society, would not harm the perception of the students about their family values. In addition to this, teachers cited valid concerns about giving a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the psychological aspect of the theme, taking into consideration the cultural restraints of Pakistani society.

Key Words: Mother Fixation, Phenomenology, Psychology

Introduction

Sons and Lovers by D.H. Lawrence has been universally venerated as the first psychoanalytical novel in the history of English Literature. The central focus of the plot is the phenomenon of Mother Fixation, dealing with an inexplicable relationship between son and mother. As Freudian perceptions about mind exercised a remarkable influence on Western thought so the last decade of 19th century witnessed the weakening of religious convictions, causing a sensation in society.

Since this novel has been the part of curriculum in many schools, colleges and universities in Pakistan so the current study aims at finding out the impact of the phenomenon of mother fixation on students' perception, exploring the effective teaching approach of the novel in Pakistani scenario.

Theoretical Background

Freudian psychology has a deep influence on English novel than drama or poetry, because novel offers larger scope for depiction of various human relationships. The selected novel of the study is the first Freudian novel in English literature, dealing with two major relationships between mother, sons and their beloveds and the relationship between sons, mother and father. Salami (1999) mentioned that some readers have found fervent connection between Gertrude Morel and her sons. Lawrence's greater knowledge of Freudian theories exercised profound impact on *Sons and Lovers*. Since the publication of the novel in 1913, critics and psychologists held it to be an all-pervading study of the sexual implications of mother-son love and how it might destroy the man who could not transfer such feelings to her beloved. Often, Paul's relationship with Mrs. Morel was extremely obsessive, who despised his father and desired to live with his mother. Consequently, he faced great problems in finding a satisfying relationship with any other woman, except his mother.

The constant inclusion of *Sons and Lovers* in the syllabus of so many schools, colleges and universities is due to Kuttner's observation in 1916, where he first drew the parallel between this novel and the contemporary

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Oedipal Theory of Sigmund Freud. Kuttner argues that complete perception of the novel needs Freudian Theory, "For without the Freudian psycho-sexual theories, *Sons and Lovers* remains an enigma; with it we see that artist and scientist supplement each other, that each in his own way attests to the same truth". He further remarks, "Where Mr. Lawrence particularizes so passionately, Freud generalizes" (p. 90). There are critics like Aldington (1968) who opine that *Sons and Lovers* is the first illustration of Freud's Theories of Psychoanalysis.

Since his early childhood, Paul, the hero of the novel, has been suffering from mother fixation and it puts forth a profound effect on his adult life. His unsolved oedipal complex makes him experience an odd attraction towards his mother. D. H. Lawrence uses this Freudian Theory as its base for the exploration of Paul's relationship with his mother. According to Freud (1900), we all are quite ignorant of certain buried desires which are repulsed by moral values but have been imposed by "Nature" and as soon as they are exposed, we try to close our eyes from the memories of childhood (p. 365).

On 14th November, 1912 Lawrence expounded the dominant idea of this novel in a letter to his friend by saying, "As her sons grow up she selects them as lovers-first the eldest, then the second. These sons are urged into life by their reciprocal love of their mother-urged on and on. But when they come to manhood, they cannot love, because their mother is the strongest power in their lives" (Coombes, 1973). Ruderman (1984), examines the fiction "unresolved pre-oedipal conflicts beneath the oedipal overlay", such as the conflict between Paul Morel's "wish to merge with the caretaker mother and a fear that...dependency on her will destroy him"... The devouring mother is one "who engulfs her children to assuage her own narcissistic needs" rather than allowing children to develop their own egos (p. 155).

In a letter of December 3, 1910 he wrote to the poet Rachel Taylor: "I was born hating my father: as early as ever I can remember, I shivered with horror when he touched me. He was very bad before I was born. This has been a kind of bond between me and my mother. We have loved each other, almost with a husband and wife love, as well as filial and maternal" (Aldington 1968, p. 190).

Though we observe that when we speak of mother-son love or mother as love object, we find little boys' behavior to be quite natural and do not justify the concept of an erotic complex. This bond is the keystone, on one hand for the personality development of a son, and on the other hand, for all the future relationships with other women. In *Sons and Lovers*, we find Paul to be the center of mother's emotional life. This over-attachment frustrates Lawrence and results in writing out a really great novel. Freud's Theory of Mother Fixation is a vital issue of the novel. The novelist depicts a very strange sort of mother-son or male-female relationship which is quite unusual, even sometimes very odd to readers. These imperfect relationships of the novel are among hotly debated and most analyzed issues in the history of English Literature. In the present study, the researcher has selected this important novel to study the impact of this unique work on students' perception. So far no research has been reported on this topic in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

The study adopts qualitative research paradigm. The researcher has endeavored to measure the perceptions of students and teachers about the impact of the phenomenon of Mother Fixation in the novel *Sons and Lovers*. The whole study focused on the lived experiences. The main aim of this phenomenological study was to enhance our understanding and realization of the existence of the Mother Fixation in Pakistani society. This mode of research basically deals with what people experience and how they share it. As Patton (1990) observed;

"...a phenomenological study...is one that focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience. One can employ a general phenomenological perspective to elucidate the importance of using methods that capture people's experience of the world without conducting a phenomenological study that focuses on the essence of shared experience"(p.71). Since the phenomenological research requires an in depth investigation to provide rigour and merit for a reliable analysis, so all the respondents of the study were requested to give a detailed description of what they think and feel about the phenomena of Mother Fixation. In the present study, the researchers have attempted to find out how the theme of Mother Fixation in the novel *Sons and Lovers* affects its readers. Furthermore, it has aimed at devising a better teaching approach of such themes in Pakistani scenario.

Population

The researchers made an in-depth analysis of the three universities of Quetta city – Sardar Bahadur Khan Women’s University, University of Balochistan and Balochistan University of Information Technology and Management Sciences with reference to the selected topic. However, it has been observed that the novel *Sons and Lovers* is not being taught in Balochistan University of Information Technology and Management Sciences because of the non-availability of English Department, so other two of the universities were chosen as sample. Since these universities, where the study was carried out, is a typical specimen of the universities in Quetta, hence all the Pakistani universities teaching the novel *Sons and Lovers* to Bachelors and Masters students shall be considered as the population to which the study conclusions may be applied. All the students and teachers of English Department in these universities comprise the population of the study.

Interviews with Teachers

Item No.1

As per your opinion what steps are to be taken by the teachers to provide their students a healthy personality utterly lacking this psychological disorder?

□ By more in-depth understanding □ By identifying similarities and dissimilarities between eastern and western cultures □ By empowering independent judgment

Literature is largely considered to be one of the most problematic subjects to teach. Its adaptability lies in the fact that its core idea is not just to get an answer but to get an in-depth, inciting reply. Here the task of a teacher is to instill desirable principles in students’ character that society considers worthwhile. When asked about some steps that teachers might take to prevent their students from any psychological problem, some of the respondents were of the opinion that matters pertaining to psychoanalysis i.e. psycho-sexuality, mother fixation etc. must be dealt with utmost care in the classroom. Keeping into consideration the intricacies and complications of this theme, one of the respondents shared his opinion as; “Every time before starting the novel *Sons and Lovers*, I try to take all the students into confidence while ascertaining their moral fiber. Because I think that once the understanding is developed, the teacher-student relationship will be strengthened and will be mutually beneficial for the future interaction on the theme of Mother Fixation.”

Similarly, some other respondents opined that there is a world of difference between eastern and western cultures. Tutors while discussing controversial issues in the class should deal such issues prudently because the customs which prevail in the western culture are not applicable in the eastern culture. Though there may be some resemblances but they are different in the broader spectrum. For instance, homosexuality, prior marriage sex, mother fixation and so on may not be as intense in the western culture as compared to the eastern culture. Thus by identifying this difference, tutors should apprise their students to distinguish between right and wrong and also to evade the psychological disorders on the students’ perception. But as described earlier, such themes should be discussed in the classroom with ultimate care, keeping in view the mental capabilities of the students.

Another fact, which is also to be considered, is the empowerment of independent judgment of the student. While discussing this in detail, a respondent shared her viewpoints in the following words:

“Teachers are the molders of students’ personalities. They inculcate the same moral values in their students, which they themselves possess. Since they have profound knowledge of their subject, they should instill the sensitive issues i.e. mother fixation and the like by adopting a unique methodology, through which a student is empowered to form an independent judgment.”

Somewhat similar viewpoints were also given by another respondent, who commented;

“Irrespective of other truths which one keeps into consideration during the teaching of *Sons and Lovers*, it should also be borne in mind that Lawrence was severely censured by a number of critics for promoting indecent exposure in his numerous novels, including the *Sons and Lovers*. I, therefore, personally feel that prior to teaching this controversial novel to students, teachers, in an introductory class, should apprise students regarding Freud’s Theory of Mother Fixation so as to enable them to desist from its sexual implications.”

Nevertheless, the instructor should ensure that whatever the student imbibes through his or her studies is achieved by adopting a prudent approach towards the core issue. Likewise, the teacher should adopt all possible measures to preclude any probability by the student to form a negative judgment of the psychological disorder.

Item No.2

In case a controversy arises in class, how do you handle students?

Dealing with grave issues in the class room such as Mother Fixation is a sensitive task especially in eastern culture. In order to cope with it efficiently teachers were asked that how do they handle their pupils if any controversy arises in the class? Some respondents remarked that in an era where classrooms have become not only a key instrument of education but also the basic factor of personality development of students, teacher's role is quite sensitive. Today society expects from teachers not only to instill social and moral values to young citizens but also to determine the boundaries of what permitted and what is prohibited not only in action but in thought. The Theme of Mother Fixation in the novel *Sons and Lovers* occasionally invites a controversy during classroom discussion. For this, the researcher has tried to find out that what should be teacher's role while dealing with controversial issues in class.

One of the teachers expressed his views in the following words: "Oh! Yes, this theme motivates few students to express their views without restrictions (I used the word few" because the majority of the students are unwilling to utter something because of being shy, especially, female ones). During this free discussion of ideas, my responsibility is to simply give a right direction to their thought and make them tolerant to others' viewpoints."

One of the teachers, on asking the same question, shared the following views:

"It was a nightmare when I first taught the novel *Sons and Lovers* to my mixed students i.e. (male and female) in my literature class. Whenever I recall that day I get embarrassed when one of my female students stormed out of the class, inciting other students also to follow suit. Nonetheless, I tried to control them by adopting a "Not Retaliating" methodology and to pacify their anger. This weird behavior of my students later forced me to reassess my teaching skills. I am thus of the view that in order to convert your classroom to more learner-centered environment; conduct pre-class discussion with your students, never discuss dissenting issues provoking anger openly in your class, if a heated discussion arises, adopt "Not Retaliating" approach. Invariably, mishandling such complex discussion may even lead to disputes and serious repercussions."

A similar viewpoint was given by one of the female teachers in the following words:

"We should never forget that we are living in a traditional Pakistani Society. Before discussing this question we have to understand that discussing controversial issues in the class can be extremely threatening, especially for female teachers. As far as the question of discussing and handling sensitive issues in the class is concerned, I would state that dealing with such situations a teacher must be unbiased, balanced (making sure not to favour one perspective) and candid (not taking sides and speaking the truth)."

Item No.3

What are students' approaches and feelings during the classroom discussion of Mother Fixation?

In a student-centered class environment, teaching and discussing issues concerning values generate diverse feeling in students. The theme of Mother Fixation deals with ethical principles of our familial setup, so it is generally observed that either the students become highly emotional or get reticent. As one of the respondents shared her views in the following words:

"While teaching *Sons and Lovers*, I always take care of students' sensitive beliefs and life experiences. Especially, male students quite often indulge in hot debate about this theme. So I found it very disturbing for students to learn such an idea which is in complete disharmony with our values. I emphasize that the real reason for reading this novel is to enhance students' judgment about what ails the society. Moreover, they have ample opportunity to appreciate a classical work of art that has attracted the attention of many since the time of its publication."

Occasionally, students show extreme sensitivity about their moral values during classroom discussion. After encountering such situations, their students get offended, Instructors need to know how to tackle with emotional responses from students. As another respondent shared his experience as saying;

“Literature presents a platform for ethical education of students. The novel *Sons and Lovers* definitely fulfills this need of students, but its major theme of Mother Fixation, most of the time, makes students uneasy. I always remember the comment of one of my female students when she said, “Sir, I wish I could not have gone through this novel.” I got shocked. On being asked what did she feel? She answered, “I am emotionally much disturbed after reading *Sons and Lovers*. I thought she was courageous enough to express her views but there are other students especially female students who do not utter a single word during class discussion. In my opinion teachers should always stand at a sensible level while dealing with Mother Fixation, otherwise their students might have the same shocking experience.”

Most of the respondents were of the view that being educators we make a tremendous impact on the lives of the students. Our role is primarily that of a facilitator. The acceptability of the phenomenon of mother fixation as universal in-application is sometimes difficult for students. Thus teacher’s job is important in providing their students’ feelings a right direction. As one of the students puts;

“My observation about students’ feeling regarding Mother Fixation is that sometimes they feel themselves in quite a difficult situation because of Freud’s claim that this is intrinsic and universal theme. So I always try to make clear that this is just a theory not a conclusion. Instead of having any emotional attachment to this idea, I ask them to enjoy the classic study of Lawrence.”

Meanwhile, another respondent felt that students are much conscious about how their class fellows judge them, if they share their views about the existence of this phenomenon in the society, especially about mother’s role. As he observed;

“As far as my experiences about students feelings are concerned, I mostly found that they are not much expressive during discussion – the reason I diagnosed is that students are concerned with how their classmates think about them if they say anything against family values.”

Somewhat similar ideas were given by another respondent who encountered student’s avoidance on discussing this theme frankly, as he said:

“Since I impart education to both males and females, I have observed that sometimes students are quite reluctant to discuss this novel openly. Though all of them are not reticent, but my efforts to initiate healthy discussion often invite uncomfortable silence on the part of students.”

Item No.4

What values you try to inculcate in your students while teaching ‘Sons and Lovers’?

Being a teacher is so difficult a job as he or she is often required to deal on one hand with the universal truths, on the other with a huge range of students’ values, opinions, beliefs etc. When enquired about how teachers of the novel *Sons and Lovers* try to cope with these two aspects successfully and what values they try to inculcate in their students, one of the respondents replied; “While teaching *Sons and Lovers* I always make up my mind that what students should learn and must acquire from the text in Pakistani scenario. The first concept that I make clear to students is that Freud’s Theory of Mother Fixation has been criticized even by his own followers like Adler and Jung. Freud was believed to be pre-occupied by his harsh childhood memories and so his self-experience universalized this phenomenon.”

According to another respondent;

“Since the issue of Mother Fixation is a sensitive one, a teacher should be very cautious about class discussion. Teacher plays a critical role in enhancing judgment of proper versus improper. During my teaching of this novel, I emphasize on the weak filial relationships in family rather than putting stress on explicit sexual incest. Most of the time I have at least few students in class who know such cases in society where mother plays quite destructive role for son’s personality development as has been the situation in the novel. This makes the theme more approachable, so students are motivated to think rather than dismissing it altogether. In this way they enhance their understanding and broaden their vision.”

The moral decay of western society ensued in complete disintegration of ethical values. Some respondents opined that if religious orientation is given to students, it can prevent them from any mental disturbance. As one of the respondents commented;

“Since I always try to focus on religion, my discussion of Mother Fixation is based on what our religion says about such mental disorders and how we can prevent the purity of our cherished norms by implementing our religious teachings.”

A few respondents were of the opinion that it is important to highlight the difference between eastern and western culture while dealing with the theme of Mother Fixation. As one of them observed:

“I am careful in giving students the understanding of the theme of Mother Fixation by raising a wall between eastern and western culture. However, students need to be fully equipped with knowledge of real life events, so that if they encounter such phenomenon, they might not be shattered and shocked.”

Another respondent shared his views in the following words:

“I believe that as a developmental educator, teacher’s task is quite risky, especially in matters which are generally considered Taboos of Society. *Sons and Lovers* basically deals with the theme of Mother Fixation which involves a direct contradiction with morality and ethics. So I always attempt to emphasize only on those aspects of the novel which are not shocking for students like moral, psychological, social etc. but avoid its sexual implication, with the fear that too much of its discussions will make students annoyed. So I stay at sensible level by emphasizing that Mother Fixation occurs only in those cases where distorted parent-child relationship exists in family environment.”

In a continuously changing teaching profession, the role of a teacher has become multifarious and multidimensional, consisting not only to teach but to lead his/her students in the right direction. So as to avoid any disturbing feeling in students, a respondent shared his experience as follows:

“I always find it very hard to make students clear about Freud’s Theory of Mother Fixation which is rather considered a taboo in our society. The important thing, in my opinion, to be told to students is that Freud was not the inventor of the idea of Mother Fixation; the Greeks had already its realization. Secondly, in order to avoid extreme emotional responses, I discuss only those aspects of the theme which are morally appropriate like Mrs. Morel’s role in personality development of her children, factors that lead Paul to become over-dependent on his mother, socioeconomic causes of his failure in love etc.”

Item No.5

According to your opinion, what should be the appropriate teaching strategy adopted by teachers for the novel *Sons and Lovers*?

There is an increasing belief that education should be future oriented. It should focus on increasing students’ connection with the demand of practical life. Each piece of literature affects and influences its readers’ perception about life, inculcating numerous values and norms. The teaching of “*Sons and Lovers*” is a trying and demanding task in this regard. Instructors need to be extremely careful about how they are imparting morality in students. As a respondent remarked;

“This is an interesting question. I believe that literature can never be taught effectively without connecting the ideas in the text to the lives of people but sometimes it creates a disturbance in class when students argue about the non-existence of Mother Fixation in our society. I always permit my students to express their views freely and determine their own judgments. In order to encourage productive discussions in the class my responsibility is to maintain the environment where exchange of ideas is quite respectful.”

Sons and Lovers is the initiatory novel in which Lawrence overtly dealt with the theme of sexuality. In a well-defined pattern, he developed the language for the body and sexual urge. This aspect of the novel is largely skipped by teachers, especially in co-educational institutions. The researcher had an informative conversation with a respondent who referred to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs during the discussion on Paul’s personality development in the class, and observed;

“The first time when I taught this novel to my class having male and female students, I asked myself, “Should I have to limit my students to certain aspects of the novel?” Frankly speaking, I was scared that my students will find the theme of Mother Fixation to be quite repulsive and shocking because of our cultural boundaries. I thought

this theme to be quite immoral, anti-family type of thing which has the power to corrupt the minds of our students. So I just give a brief introduction of Freud, and the theory of personality development, while superficially touching the theme of Mother Fixation with the emphasis on 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs'. My students, in this manner, have the knowledge of Freud and Maslow both."

But then, some respondents fully disagreed with the notion of avoiding the discussion on mother fixation in the class. They were of the opinion that our students need to learn tolerance on diverse views. It is the vital aim of education to teach students how to differentiate between opinion and fact. This can only be achieved by assisting them find reliable information from various sources. As a respondent observed; "I have been teaching this novel for many years to my Master's students. To be very frank, I personally believe in an open discussion of the theme of Mother Fixation in class. Dealing with this issue has many advantages like when students are engaged in lively discussion, they develop their critical thinking, debating skills and explaining opinions and justifying ideas. But still I think that it should be the responsibility of the teacher to give right direction to their students' perception. Since this theme of the novel is not simply and easily 'digestible', the teacher needs to define the moral and cultural boundaries of our society. Our classrooms are the places from where students absorb moral values. In today's world the teachers' task has become much difficult because of diverse sources which influence our mind and heart. Here we, being instructors, are responsible for promoting and inculcating what is healthy and constructive in students' personality."

Quite similar views were expressed by another respondent whose observation was: "Not discussing the theme of Mother Fixation in the class is a remiss and quite inappropriate. As far as the complexities of the controversial themes are concerned, researches have shown that in-class conversations on controversial issues assist in the personality development of the students. Teachers should make them analyze this theme dispassionately. I am, therefore, of the opinion that by avoiding the theme of Mother Fixation in the classroom we do injustice with the classical work of art. Whereas discussing it openly in class is a contributing factor in enhancing students' moral fiber whilst broadening their vision."

A few respondents were of the view that so as to make the theme of Mother Fixation explicit to students, instructors should make them read the novel not only for personal enjoyment but also for the enhancement of critical enquiry. Besides, students should be given opportunity to shape up their own viewpoints after a thoughtful discussion. They added that they always try to be mindful towards that reading material, which is suitable for students' age, gender and religion. As a respondent remarked;

"It is very important to devise a teaching strategy of the novels like *Sons and Lovers* because they are generally thought as taboos. Sometimes students avoid participation in class for the fear of being embarrassed. I always encourage my students to visit me after class if they have anything to discuss which they cannot before their class fellows. I remember the coming of a group of female students who stated that they consider their honour and politeness to be more important than getting good marks in presentational skills of *Sons and Lovers* so they asked me to assign them quiz, instead of presentation on the theme of Mother Fixation. I am of the opinion that certain parts of the novel which are likely to cause strong emotions in students should be skipped, specially description of Paul's erotic feelings towards his mother, certain scenes pertaining to Paul's sexual relations with Miriam and Clara. I usually avoid dealing with them due to my co-educational class."

Findings of the Study

In *Sons and Lovers*, D. H. Lawrence dealt with his erogenous attachment to his mother, emphasizing on his confused sexuality, so majority of the students felt reluctant to discuss its theme of Mother Fixation frankly. The findings of the study disclosed that certain tinges of the phenomenon of Mother Fixation are existent in Pakistani society, though mostly people avoid discussing them.

Analyzing the real picture of our society regarding the phenomenon of Mother Fixation and considering the results of present study, a rational conclusion can be deduced that the existent Mother Fixation in our society cannot be denied but instead of dealing with its Freudian sexual interpretation, we must pinpoint the social factors contributing to its growth in our family culture.

The present study tried to expound various aspects and ideas regarding teaching approach of the novel *Sons and Lovers*. It has been observed that in Pakistani colleges and universities, a traditional method is adopted by

instructors which leave them with no option but to impart a huge amount of information to their pupils, compelling the students to gather the imparted information and reproduce the same in their exams. Some of the educationists like Miller (2002) viewed this kind of teaching-learning method in literature class as a decline of literary studies.

There is some evidence from the data that most of the respondents expressed feelings of embarrassment and hesitancy on the discussion of the theme of Mother Fixation, especially in the presence of the opposite sex and preferred to evade the sensitive aspect of sex and sexuality in the novel. Interestingly, in the open discussion of the theme of Mother Fixation in literature class, mostly female respondents exhibited their concern for the feminine sanctity and honour to be at risk.

Also, teachers cited valid concerns about giving a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the psychological aspect of the theme, taking into consideration the cultural boundaries of Pakistani society. Every one of them expressed more favourable attitude towards their moral responsibility of enriching his/her students' views about the world and its ailments to make healthy decisions about their behavior.

Conclusion

The present study is an attempt to explore the discernment of students about the phenomenon of Mother Fixation in the novel *Sons and Lovers*. The research study proved to be an honour to involve with. It discovered the signification of students' critical responses during the teaching of the novel *Sons and Lovers*, both in formal and informal environment. The phenomenological interviews provided an in-depth insight into students' understanding of the phenomenon of Mother Fixation which was rather helpful and enlightening. The entire focus of the study was to inspire students to give voice to their own interpretations of the text of the novel daringly and independently. The novel *Sons and Lovers* is among D. H. Lawrence's masterpieces. The main objective of the study is to figure out the psychological approach of the main character Paul Morel and his mother Gertrude Morel, particularly focusing on the impact of their relationships on students' perception. Moreover, it also analyzed the moral values that can be taken out from the novel. In today's world, the economy and structure of society is changing enormously, which some people find difficult to pace with. The shocking reality is that many families suffer this phenomenon of son-mother knot. Psychologists pinpoint that if such events continue to increase at such a quick rate, the evolution of human society will be seriously hindered or even taken aback.

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