

*Chapter - II*

**IMAGE OF THE FAMILY**

## IMAGE OF THE FAMILY

In examining the literature of the family we are immediately overwhelmed with contradictory claims and interpretations. We find support for sharply different definitions of the family. Some authors stress its territorial dimension, focussing on the household, that physical unit made of kin and others living together, sharing daily life on a primary, face-to-face basis. Legal experts stress biological relationships. Other scholars look at kinship and family as an attitude, a self-defined identification with or among a group of individuals who exist for each other psychologically and socially, however geographically remote they may be. Mass communication and transportation make a new kind of unit feasible, one composed of dispersed membership based on perceived emotional proximity and interaction rather than face-to-face contact. All of these definitions are entirely sensible.

Neither is there agreement on the family's current state of health. There are scholars who claim that the family is imperilled, shrinking, on the verge of collapse or disappearance. Others, with as much authority, assert that the family is merely in flux, responsive to altered external conditions, its changes reflect its viability. It is, they say, notoriously flexible and indeed there is even reason to think that the family is more important than it ever was.

Nor do we find consensus on how the family has changed. One set of studies claims that the family is growing steadily smaller, less important, and less satisfying; that before widespread urbanisation and modernization, the family was extended, larger, more important and happier than at present. Another set of studies claims that such a view is an idealization, that in the past the family was never so large, nor emotionally satisfying; indeed premodern families were characterized by emotional indifference, violence, and corruption. Another group of investigators suggests that nuclear family forms are not nearly so common in our time as once was supposed, that the current view is idealized and sentimental. In this thicket of interpretations, reliable, extensive data are found for every view and claim.

Moreover, there are other contradictions. The modern family has been called a sanctuary that succors its beset members from competitiveness and impersonality of the outside world. And indeed it is a refuge for many. But this kind of family and home has at times been the man's castle, maintained for him by his wife and children. Often, for all, the family has become less refuge than prison, and the growing members of refugees from the family — runaway children, permanently defecting adolescents, wives, and husbands — disturb those who prefer to concentrate on its protectiveness of members from the public domain. The family's very closeness, privacy, and the protracted intimacy

among members have been viewed by some as generating violence, mental disorders, and human incapacitation. When a historian calls the family "a haven", a feminist calls it "oppressive" and a child psychologist labels it "schizophrenogenic".

The family has its own special peculiarities and special hazards as an object of study. And these hazards contribute to the great diversity of viewpoints. We must be aware that objectivity in family-study is less possible than in most social subjects, for everyone has experiences in a family, and there are no control groups. No one is impartial without powerful positive and negative emotions in the subject. It is so since by definition the experiences in the family, the first and deepest that a human being knows, shape the individual more profoundly than any other set of social-cultural forces. In a sense, everyone is an expert on the family and has an opinion, deriving ultimately from unarguable premises of first-hand knowledge. The family is what the Freudians might call a highly cathected notion, gathering to itself powerful opinions, laden with emotions. In one sense, the family is only an idea, itself a construct, nothing more than an image; for we cannot know it impartially, and it is never completely separated from our fantasies, projections, and unconscious responses. No discipline, no methods assure safety from the unconscious. In reading, talking and writing about the family, we are writing and thinking about ourselves. So family studies necessitate the most conscious self-examination we can manage. Claude

Levi-Strauss brought out this point in his analysis of how totem functions in simple societies.<sup>1</sup> A tribe uses a totem animal with which it identifies to state its relationship to other tribes, to nature, to tribal members. Thus the family, like a totem is a way of thinking indirectly but practically about metaphysical questions, human interdependence, solidarity and separateness, collectivities and individuals, connections and differences, and the like. Through the family, we are showing ourselves to ourselves; family like self, cannot be recognised except through symbols and metaphors.

The family has customarily attended to in all cultures its "realities". It is seen as the collection of people carrying out the irreducible social tasks of creating new members who are then protected and trained to become recognizable "people" as that it understood in a particular socio-cultural setting. Any assemblage for any period of time of two or more individuals carrying out these minimum tasks may qualify for the label "family". This allows for enormous variation, since all that is minimally necessary is a cohabiting couple, and soon after, a protective adult. Social geneticists promise us that the former requirement may also change, and even new artificial insemination is not uncommon. So still farther shrinkage of the definition is imaginable. This minimal definition coexists along with other definitions, emphasizing different features taken up by "family" at various times in history and social circumstances. We can then never know what the family "really is" and "really not". Speaking of it

even in the most simplicistic behaviourist terms, as a hypothetical external reality, we do not gain clarity. It is as construct that "family" interests us.

As a construct the family is often used as a particular species of idea, what Max Weber labelled as an "ideal type"<sup>2</sup>, a form or model that "ideally" has certain features, seldom reproduced precisely in nature. The use of an ideal type is to identify certain features as "definitive" in order to sharpen our observations. But the problem is that we soon tend to forget the heuristic purpose of ideal types and confuse them with some reality that inevitably falls short of the model. Disappointed expectations take on the power to poison that which we have, and which may be serviceable even if imperfect.

As an ideal type the family is conceived of as the necessary opposite of "public life". It is quintessentially the private (Some feel that the family is the only contemporary private) opportunity for vulnerability, trust, intimacy, and commitment, for lasting pleasant and peaceful relations, for fullness of being in the human realm. The family thus is located as the physical site for a vast (and repressed) range of human expression, the valid arena where quality of life is a concern. It is in the family that we find the opportunity for psychologically bearable, non-exploitive, personal life.

This sharp contrast between public and private intensified family relation inordinately. It might be referred to as a cauldron, overheated by its seclusiveness, specialization and uniqueness. These factors — cauldronlike intensification, separation from and contrast with other social arrangements and roles, the confusion of ideal type with actuality, and the refixation of a construct — have something in common. All of them load down the family impossibly; heaping upon it duties, conscious expectations, and the inevitable disappointments and resentments that accrue them, along with unconscious projection.

The family is microcommunity, to be sure, and from it we draw our first and usually deepest idea about social arrangement, authority, hierarchy, equality, and justice. But so extreme is the distance between family and the rest of society that these ideas are at best irrelevant, at worst disruptive. Emile Durkheim's classical analysis holds up in accounting for the discrepancy<sup>3</sup>. As a society's division of labour grows more complex, and as sufficient number of people living together have different ways of life, solidarity is based not on fundamental commonality, sameness and homogeneity but must arise out of numerous differentiated parts whose specialization make them independent. Durkheim thus distinguishes "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity. As social differentiation continues and diversity expands, the overlap of family and polity shrinks, and an intervening arrangement, community, comes into being.

In the simplest conditions, the husband father is the headman or chief, adult brothers and lineage heads etc. are kinship relation. Kinship is the idiom in terms of which all activities are played out. Kinship is the formulation for all relationships. No such thing as unrelated person exists. Visitors or strangers must be incorporated into the kinship system by adoption or renaming.

But today the family is a less permeable unit. Paradoxically, some argue that in our time and culture, the more impermeable the boundaries around the family, setting it against from the public domain, the more satisfying and successful it is in protecting its members. The other side of protection, its shadow side, is severe isolation, certainly as dangerous as too much permeation.

We may mention some additional stresses on the family in our time. A number of scholars have noted the connection between the family in its protective sanctuary manifestation and the rise of the individual. The "individual" as distinct from the human being, is a relatively recent occurrence. Colin Morris suggests that the concept of "individual be regarded as an eccentricity among cultures"<sup>4</sup>. We may accept Morris's concept of the individual, marked by concern with "self", self-discovery, and expression, the belief in the uniqueness and value of each human being,

the positive valuing of the relation between people; the assessment of people in terms of their inner intentions as well as their external acts. Morris traces the origins of the notion, citing numerous ideological and existential factors, the impact of classical Western philosophy and learning, the corollary concepts of romantic love and friendship and social institutional differentiation. Whatever origins of the concept of the individual one wishes to emphasize, there is agreement that the family must preserve and succor this entity. Lawrence Stone has recently made this point most carefully in his discussion of "affective individualism"<sup>5</sup>. In groups where several private selves are strongly developed and regarded as of equal value, and at the same time where collective concerns are placed below individual concerns, conflict is inevitable. And when other, usually highly sentimental notions about family harmony are superimposed on its emphasis on individual expression, the very failure to achieve harmony itself creates strain.

A second feature of the contemporary family also has a jenus-like appearance. The protective, permissive family allows individuals to flourish, and then must abide by the centripetal pulls that flow from such freedom. The family, kept aloft and subsidized by external aid, and services, finances and support, has also the greater potentiality for freedom because of this aid, yet must cope with another built-in-strain — the withdrawal of the absolute necessity of interdependence for survival, a condition that can buttress

as well as tax any organisation. Emotional need is stronger than ever between family members. Yet instrumental, practical necessities have not deepened or intensified proportionately. We witness many other institutions carrying functions formerly belonging to the family. Outside agencies are contributing a great range of support — medical care, financial aid, education of children, and the like. This means that a family must choose to remain intact, because its members can survive without each other. And remaining intact is an extremely difficult choice. Lasch points out in *Heaven in a Heartless world* "As the world grows more menacing and insecure and the family fails to offer protection from external dangers, all forms of loyalty becomes increasingly attenuated"<sup>6</sup>. This option is transformed into necessity and brings both advantages and afflictions. Knowledge that choice exists, that one may cancel the marriage contract, makes it more difficult to put up with the dissatisfying, unfulfilling features of the relationship. If ambivalence is a natural part of every intimate relationship, freedom to leave it often means that ambivalence, instead of being regarded as an inevitable fact of human affairs, is viewed as unnecessary and disagreeable.

Our images of the family have changed over time, and our modes of producing and receiving images have also changed in significant ways that bear heavily on the functioning and form of the family and possibly constitute an added strain on it. Today, more than ever before in history,

we are at the mercy of images. We consume images because we are a thoroughly commercial society. A commercial society requires a culture based on images. Images soothe our worries, lest there be no comprehensible "reality" endowing such "reality" with an inevitability and authority that inhere only in that which can be stopped, named in words, or framed in our vision. How commercial formulations fill the hunger for some order and certainty we know too well. The pluralism and diversity of family forms are surely a condition that most thoughtful people would support. The monolithic, pejorative views of variation have at least lost some of their grip on our ideology. But unless the images that surround us reflect that diversity honestly and fully, in effect the diversity is reduced to aberration and insignificance. We must be as diligent and thoughtful about images and our access to them as we are about the family itself. Our image-world is a "real" world - the well-being of our imagination deserves no less care than the "fact" of the family.

## Note and references :

1. Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago, 1966). PP 109 - 33.
2. Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Science, trans. and ed. E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch (Glencoe, Ill. Free Press, 1947). Thomas Burger, Max Weber's Theory of concept Formation 1978. P 80.
3. Emil Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society, trans. George Simpson, Glencoe, Ill. Free Press. 1933. Reprinted 1960.
4. Colin Morris, The Discovery of the Individual, New York, Harper & Row, 1922, p. 2.
5. Lawrence Stone, Family, Sex and Marriage in England, pp. 221 - 269.
6. Christopher Lasch, Heaven in a Heartless World : The Family Beseignd, New York, Basic Books, 1977, p. 189.
7. Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1951, p. 89 for "fact", "image" and "reality".