

GOTHIC ELEMENTS AND FAMILY DISINTEGRATION IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE FIFTH CHILD*

Doris Lessing'in Beşinci Çocuk Başlıklı Eserinde Gotik Ögeler ve Aile Parçalanması



Doç. Dr. Mevlüde ZENGİN

Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Sivas, Türkiye. mzengin@cumhuriyet.edu.tr

Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article

Geliş/Received
19.09.2025

Kabul/Accepted
27.12.2025



Abstract

First appeared in 1988, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* is a short novel whose main action takes place in the 1960s and 1970s England. The novel portrays the disruption of the Lovatts' previously happy and harmonious family life following the birth of their fifth child, Ben, whose abnormal and unsettling nature introduces a Gothic sense of otherness into the domestic sphere. Once seen as a perfect family, the Lovatts begin to disintegrate under the pressure of Ben's "uncanny" and monstrous presence. What captures the reader's attention in the novel is not only its subject matter but also Lessing's modern adaptation of Gothic elements, which she employs to expose the problems of modern society. By employing the horror theme through both the monstrous foetus inside Harriet and the depiction of her son with his unfamiliar, frightening, and monstrous traits and behaviour, Lessing presents, in a modern setting, the horrors and violent situations surrounding the family. Through these Gothic elements, she reveals the deterioration of familial relationships, the destruction of domestic happiness and contentment, and ultimately the collapse of the family. The aim of this study is to identify the Gothic and horror elements in *The Fifth Child* to reveal how the novel reflects the theme of family disintegration, and the collapse of stability within a seemingly settled household, and the significance of unity and peace for the well-being of family members, particularly the children.

Keywords: *The Fifth Child*, Gothic, family disintegration, destruction of family bliss

Öz

Doris Lessing'in ilk kez 1988'de yayımlanan *Beşinci Çocuk* adlı eseri, ana konusu 1960'lar ve 1970'ler İngiltere'sinde geçen bir kısa romandır. Roman, Lovatts ailesinin beşinci çocukları Ben'in doğumuyla birlikte daha önceki mutlu ve uyumlu aile yaşamlarının bozulmasını konu alır. Ben'in anormal ve tedirgin edici doğası, ev ortamına Gotik bir "ötekilik" duygusu taşır. Bir zamanlar mükemmel bir aile olarak görülen Lovatt ailesi, Ben'in "tekinsiz" ve korkunç varlığının baskısı altında dağılmaya başlar. Romanda okuyucunun dikkatini çeken yalnızca konusu değil, aynı zamanda Lessing'in modern toplumun sorunlarını ortaya koymak amacıyla kullandığı Gotik unsurları modern bir biçimde uyarlayışıdır. Lessing, hem Harriet'in içindeki canavarımsı fetüs hem de oğlunun alışılmadık, korkunç ve canavarımsı yönleri ve davranışları aracılığıyla korku temasını işleyerek modern bir bağlamda aileyi kuşatan dehşet ve şiddet durumlarını ortaya koyar. Bu Gotik unsurlar aracılığıyla, aile ilişkilerinin bozulmasını, ev içi mutluluk ve huzurun yıkımını ve nihayetinde ailenin çöküşünü gözler önüne serer. Bu çalışmanın amacı, *Beşinci Çocuk*'da Gotik ve korku unsurlarını saptayarak, eserin aile parçalanması temasını, görünüşte düzenli bir evdeki istikrarın çöküşünü ve özellikle çocuklar olmak üzere aile bireylerinin refahı açısından birlik ve huzurun önemini nasıl yansıttığını ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Beşinci Çocuk*, Gotik, aile parçalanması, aile saadetinin altüst olması

Atıf/Citation: Zengin, M. (2025). Gothic elements and family disintegration in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*. *International Journal of Filologia*, 8(14), 159-182.

Introduction

Since the emergence of the novel in English literature in the 18th century, the novel as a genre has become a true cornucopia in English literature in general. Even though the novel has transformed itself in various forms, the Gothic novel has remained popular since its inception, which has contributed to the growth and the persistence of the genre over time: “One of the earliest examples of the Gothic genre is Tobias Smollett’s *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753) very probably the first novel [...] to propose terror and cruelty as its main themes. Much better known than this is [...] *The Castle of Otranto*” (Cuddon, 1998, pp. 355-356). Since the emergence of the Gothic novel in English literature with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Novel* (1764) written by Horace Walpole and, which gave the genre the name ‘Gothic’ with its subtitle, the Gothic novel has taken various forms, adapting to both the authors’ approaches and the needs of the time. As stated by David Mikics (2007), “[f]rom Walpole on, Gothic becomes a name for the literary genre trading in terror and fantasy – and for the ghostly, ruined, and morbid settings chosen by its writers” (p. 137). Meanwhile, though the Gothic as a concept has roots in antiquity, architecture and Romanticism, the rich history of the meaning of the term “Gothic” and the evolution of the Gothic genre will be excluded from this study due to its limited length. This study will focus on some of the prominent aspects of the Gothic novel, such as horror, ambiguity, mystery, the supernatural and the “uncanny”, decay and ruin, and on their direct as well as transformational appearances in Doris Lessing’s *Fifth Child*. The novel, owing to its Gothic elements, may be regarded as a valuable outcome of Lessing’s shifting focus in her literary career, which “spans nearly forty years [and bears] the evolution of her ideas” (Whittaker, 1988, p. 3). *The Fifth Child*, which, in 1989, “won the Grinzane Cavour Prize in Italy”, (Lessing, 1994, p. 176) is not replete with decaying Gothic castles, ruined chapels, underground passages, dark forests, gruesome monsters or revenants, and ghostly groaning – elements typically found in Gothic fiction. However, the novel exhibits Gothic elements in its own way and therefore it may be considered to be a modern take on the traditional Gothic novel. Hence, this study will primarily identify the Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child* and analyse how Lessing employs them to convey themes – one of the most prominent being that happiness and the appearance of a smooth life can be disrupted by unexpected challenges beyond human control.

Though Doris Lessing (1919–2013) is not generally characterized as a writer of Gothic fiction, she draws on several features of the Gothic and employs them intricately in her novel *The Fifth Child*. Although *The Fifth Child* has been examined by various critics for its Gothic qualities, including Isabel C. Gamallo’s (2000) interpretation of the novel as an exploration of motherhood and the fear of the Other, this study, while drawing on such critical perspectives, seeks to explore how Gothic elements such as horror, mystery, ambiguity, the “uncanny” and so on function to reveal the gradual disintegration of the family structure within the novel.

With its argument that the employment of Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child* is tied to the theme, family disintegration encompassing the destruction of family happiness and the idealized notion of domestic bliss, this study aims to offer a perspective in the critique of *The Fifth Child*, of which there has not been as much detailed analysis when compared to other works by Lessing. The study is also thought to add to the research on Gothic literature by uncovering the complex connection between the Gothic style and themes.

The Methods and Aim of the Study

In the analysis of *The Fifth Child*, a qualitative literary approach has been employed to explore the Gothic elements within the text and their connection to the destruction of family happiness, which subsequently leads to the disintegration of the family. Generally speaking, text analysis as a qualitative research method involves closely examining written texts or literary texts to extract meaningful insights and understandings. In the context of studying Doris Lessing’s novel, *The Fifth Child*, text analysis would entail a thorough examination of the novel itself to identify its Gothic elements that serve to uncover the underlying themes. The characters, action, setting and language employed in the novel would be analysed to gain a deeper understanding of how Gothic elements have been utilized to convey the theme of family disintegration and disruption of domestic bliss. The methodology adopted in the

present study comprises several key components, including a literary framework, textual analysis and commentary and synthesis.

In pursuing this aim, the study conducts a close reading of *The Fifth Child*, identifying and examining specific Gothic elements such as isolation, the “uncanny”, the portrayal of monstrosity, and elements of terror. This involves analysing the relevant scenes that exemplify these elements and show how they contribute to Lessing’s exploration of themes related to family dynamics.

To support this analysis, the study draws upon relevant literary terms and concepts from established scholarship, providing a foundational framework for interpreting the Gothic elements within Lessing’s narrative style and thematic concerns. Scholarly works on both Doris Lessing and *The Fifth Child* have also been consulted. The novel *The Fifth Child* serves as the primary source for this study. Insights from both primary and secondary sources, together with the author’s own interpretations, have been synthesized to deepen the understanding of the text. While existing scholarship has extensively analysed the Gothic elements in the novel, comparatively little attention has been given to the relationship between these elements and the novel’s central themes. This study aims to address that gap by demonstrating that the inclusion of Gothic elements functions as a significant means of exploring contemporary issues such as family dynamics and illustrating the breakdown of the family.

Commentary and synthesis are provided through the analysis of selected scenes – identified and discussed in subsequent sections – that are particularly rich in Gothic imagery and thematic relevance. Through this commentary, it has been aimed to illustrate, in *The Fifth Child*, how Lessing’s use of Gothic elements serves and reinforces the theme of the destruction of family happiness.

By combining these methods, the current study aims to offer a comprehensive examination of the interplay between the Gothic elements and the theme – family disintegration – revealed in *The Fifth Child*, contributing to a deeper understanding of Lessing’s novel.

1. The Gothic Elements in *The Fifth Child*

The Fifth Child was called, in an interview, by Lessing herself a “tense, stressful novel” that is “filled with an intense discomfort” (Newsletter 41, 2024, no pagination). Besides, since Harold Bloom considers Lessing’s later fiction as “rather grim ventures into speculative fiction” (Bloom, 2003, p. 4), *The Fifth Child* can be categorized in this way as well. In *The Fifth Child*, Lessing incorporates a number of Gothic elements adding a dark unsettling and startling atmosphere to the story. Even if the novel does not bear all the qualities of Gothic literature, it can be classified as a novel having some of the features of Gothic fiction such as the eerie events (represented, for example, by Harriet’s extraordinarily painful pregnancy), the monstrous character (Ben, the fifth child of the Lovatts), the Gothic atmosphere, the eerie and foreboding setting (represented by both the house becoming a place of isolation and fear for the family members excluding Ben and the so-called health institution where Ben is confined), manifestation of fear, gruesomeness and violence (represented by the rude and brutal actions of the outlandish child), psychological tension, inner conflict and isolation the mother, Harriet undergoes and the use of obscurity, suspense and the “uncanny”.

In *The Fifth Child* “maternal concerns” and “domestic terrorism” are ascendant, as Margaret Moan Rowe (1994, pp. 93,103) suggests. The novel begins with the introduction of how Harriet and David meet at “a famous office party” (Lessing, 1988, p. 6) (The ensuing references to the novel will be given parenthetically by only page numbers.) in 1960s London but actually they are behind their age in the freewheeling society of the 1960s, owing to their stereotypical traditional way of thinking when the matter is love, marriage and having children. In other words, due to their wish of shaping an Edenic world for themselves by being a family of many children (“six (or eight, or ten) children”), as Harriet envisages (p. 19), they may be considered to be the outsiders in such a world in which sexual freedom is appreciated rather than monogamy and a family life. They are actually revolting against the world of the 1960s by means of their desire to have an extended and happy family life with a bevy of children, which they believe the people in earlier eras had. In this sense, especially Harriet, as Louise Yelin (1998) expresses, is a “white, middle class, heterosexual” woman who opposes “the most venial aspects of a corrupt and corrupting national culture” (p. 91). The Lovatts “try to resist the ordinary challenges posed

by a debased national culture” and “see their family as a bulwark against moral corruption” (Yelin, 1998, p. 101). They are seen out of fashion even by their close relatives. This idea can be illustrated by the views of James, David’s father, who is against Harriet. He says: “People are brainwashed into believing family life is the best. But that’s the past” (p. 28). Immediately after seeing each other at the party, Harriet and David fall in love with each other, marry and purchase a three-storey Victorian house with a big garden in the suburb of London and begin their perfect family life. As Rowe (1994) states “for a time their script produces just what they want: precious children, family parties at holidays, and smugness” (p. 103). Their happiness is described in some scenes in the novel, in which Harriet and David give parties during the Easter, Christmas and other holidays, give family dinners and enjoy having four children (Luke, Helen, Jane and Paul), who join the family with a rapid succession. The following scene is a good example to portray their happiness: “Listening to the laughter, the voices, the talk, the sounds of children playing, Harriet and David in their bedroom, or perhaps descending from the landing, would reach for each other’s hand and smile, and breathe happiness” (p. 18). Harriet and David, meanwhile, are supported by their parents and other family members financially, physically, practically and spiritually due to the mortgage of the house they bought, the expenditures of the children and the many chores in the house. The Lovatts appear to be achieving their dream of owning a home. While the family is leading a happy and fulfilling life, Mrs. Lovatt informs her husband of her fifth pregnancy although they had decided not to have any child at least for three years after the birth of their youngest son, Paul. Nearly since the beginning of her pregnancy, Harriet recognizes that her fifth pregnancy is not similar to her previous pregnancies. With Harriet’s fifth pregnancy, the family’s happiness is disrupted, “their utopia” begins to collapse (Majoul, 2016, p. 86) because Harriet becomes so sick and upset due to her pains; and as such she takes sedatives secretly, which gradually separates her from her family. The Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child* appearing both during Harriet’s pregnancy and after Ben’s birth will be discussed under four headings relevant with the character, action, setting and language in the remaining parts of this section of the study. The second part of the study includes the analysis of the destruction of family happiness in the novel.

1.1. Gothic Character in *The Fifth Child*

The Fifth Child is a novel that incorporates a range of Gothic elements, despite being set in a contemporary context. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the novel does not contain any Gothic element until Harriet’s unplanned pregnancy with her fifth child. At the beginning of her painful pregnancy, Harriet rightly believes that this pregnancy is different from her previous ones, for her womb is unusually hard and the foetus moves strongly and earlier than expected, something even her husband can feel by touching (p. 35), and she considers that “this new foetus was poisoning her” (p. 32). All this implies that there is something unnatural, something horrible in Harriet’s womb, which gives us the idea that it marks the moment in the novel when Gothic elements begin to emerge. Later in the novel, when the foetus becomes five months, Harriet goes to Dr. Brett and is observed to be appalled due to its abnormal movement, and she shows the doctor “her stomach heaved up, convulsed, subsided” (p. 39) and feels that the baby is “trying to tear its way out of her stomach” (p. 38). The baby’s “battering and striving” in the mother’s womb are so intense and its “fearful strength” (p. 39) is so felt by her that she almost always cries, moans and whimpers out of pain. Only with the help of the tranquillizers, she becomes relieved and sleeps just for one hour with the short effect of the drug on the foetus. In all these scenes, the reader cannot help asking what Harriet has got in her womb. At this point the foetus in Harriet’s womb may be considered to be a Gothic agent which makes the reader dismayed as well as the mother, the father and the people around them, creating the element of mystery.

Harriet’s fifth pregnancy is a scary one for her. She has a premonition that the fifth child would not be like her other children. She is disturbed incessantly by the baby inside her. She cannot sleep, cannot go on her normal life routine due to her very insufferable pregnancy. Her pregnancy causes misery and tears in Harriet and as such it lessens the happiness of the family. Only while moving or doing activities such as walking either at home or outside and doing hard chores at home, her pain is relieved; but walking and working incessantly are very tiring for her and prevent Harriet from showing love and affection to her children (especially to Paul, who is in need of maternal love since he is not over two

years old). Therefore, she resorts to drugs to alleviate her sickness and to ease her pains during the pregnancy. The following excerpt indicates Harriet's pre-natal combat:

If a dose of some sedative kept the enemy – so she now thought of this savage thing inside her – quiet for an hour, then she made the most of the time, and slept, grabbing sleep to her, holding it, drinking it, before she leaped out of bed as it woke with a heave and a stretch that made her feel sick (pp. 40-41).

The excerpt above also illustrates that Ben is different from his siblings even before his birth and is called “the enemy” and “this savage thing” by his mother, which is the first sign of Ben's monstrosity in the novel. In *The Fifth Child*, the Gothic terror is used in a similar way that is used by Ann Radcliff, as Nick Groom remarks. The Gothic terror is, for Radcliff, “a medium of sublime” through which she sustains intimations of “obscurity and suspense” (Groom, 2012, p. 58). Then it can be asserted that in a similar fashion, Lessing creates mystery and Gothic terror by means of the use of obscurity and suspense in her novel portraying Harriet's pregnancy as something weird. During the time of pregnancy, the mother is depicted as someone who thinks that she has a monstrous thing in her womb and the thing conceived in her womb is depicted as something outlandish and violent. Harriet's pregnancy is defined a sort of “endurance, containing pain” and according to Harriet, “phantoms and chimeras inhabited her brain” (p. 41). Thinking of the foetus inside her, Harriet imagines “pathetic botched creatures, horribly real to her, the products of a Great Dane or a borzoi with a little spaniel; a lion and a dog; a great chart horse and a little donkey; a tiger and a goat” (p. 41). The dread of the idea that a female human being can give birth to a monster-like creature is apparent. The intense of the horror is increased with the following expression in the novel: “Sometimes she believed hooves were cutting her tender inside flesh, sometimes claws” (p. 41). Even the father, David thinks that “what he felt there [in Harriet's womb] was beyond what he could manage with” (p. 39). All of these can be considered to contribute to the Gothic terror in the novel.

This depiction of Harriet's pregnancy echoes Julia Kristeva's concept of the “abject”, as the maternal body becomes a liminal space where boundaries between self and other, human and non-human begin to dissolve. Kristeva's theory of the “abject”, outlined in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), refers to that which is cast out or rejected to maintain one's sense of identity, particularly the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, or human and non-human. The abject is a phenomenon that “does not have, properly speaking, a definable object” and is “not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). It is distinct from the object of desire or understanding, for it is “not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Its defining quality is its opposition to the self: “The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I.” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Unlike a normal object, which can settle the subject within a desire for meaning, the abject is “the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where_ meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). Thus, the abject is that which we reject to define ourselves, yet it cannot be fully expelled, and its presence exposes the fragile boundaries of selfhood, confronting us with the instability of identity and meaning. In *The Fifth Child*, the foetus embodies the abject that provokes horror: it is both part of Harriet and terrifyingly alien. This blurs the boundaries between self and other, human and non-human. The half-human, half-animal images Harriet envisions intensify the sense of abjection, as they dissolve distinctions that define normality and order. Harriet's body becomes a site of horror, a space where the maternal and the monstrous coexist, illustrating Kristeva's notion of the abject as both repellent and compelling.

One of the important conventions of “Gothic atmosphere” as William Patrick Day (1985) points out, is “the presence of the supernatural or the monstrous” (p. 34). Although the child in the novel is not a monster, he bears some of the features of the traditional Gothic hero, which are, in some ways, monstrous features. Ben is depicted as a disturbing and almost monstrous figure, embodying the idea of the “uncanny” in Gothic literature. Hitherto, it may be argued that Lessing gave her novel a Gothic dimension through the character Ben, whose function in the novel is analogous to that of the traditional supernatural or monstrous Gothic character. His physical appearance and behavior challenge the

boundaries of what is considered normal and acceptable. To elaborate on this idea, the representation of Ben as a monstrous character and its function will be analysed.

After Harriet's eight-month pregnancy, which is a long agony, Ben is born (since the foetus is too big, he is delivered one month early). Harriet suffers greatly at his birth. Her pains are "strong wrenching pains, worse [...] than ever in the past" (p. 48) and she is sure that she has, in her womb, "one enormous black bruise" (p. 48) because the baby is fighting its way out at birth, and "internal bruises" (p. 50) due to the foetus's battering and striving during pregnancy. Ben is defined as an abnormal baby but what attracts the reader's attention is that his abnormality is close to monstrosity. The narrator describes the baby as in the following: "He did not look like a baby at all. He had a heavy-shouldered hunched look, as if he were crouching there as he lay [...] His hands were thick and heavy, with pads of muscle in the palms [...] [His eyes] were focussed greeny-yellow eyes [...] He was stiff and heavy" (pp. 48-49).

Harriet sees Ben as "a creature" who is trying to hurt her (p. 49) and so is he during the breast-feeding. Ben is also defined as "muscular, yellowish and long" (p. 48), "a troll, or goblin or something", "poor little beast" (p. 49), an "alien" (p. 50), "fighting creature" (p. 54), "Neanderthal baby" (p. 53), "nasty little brute" (54), "this phenomenon" (p. 56), "stubby squat", "a hobgoblin" (p. 63), "a squat little gnome" (p. 71), "a gnome" (pp. 73, 78) and "a throwback" (p. 120) throughout the novel. After his birth, Ben is drawn as a baby having qualities indicating his incongruity and monstrosity. He is a baby who roars or bellows and whose face becomes "yellowish white" when he gets angry (p. 51). Most of the time he has "raucous cries" (p. 60) and "thick, angry cries" (p. 61). He is a "preternaturally ugly and violent baby" (Giles, 1988: 52). As he grows up, he has a "hostile-looking teeth-bared grin" (p. 69), which is a sign of his sinister nature. He has cold eyes and malevolent gaze (p. 52) and a "cold triumphant grin" (p. 56). He has "cold yellow-green" and "stony unblinking" (p. 73) and "focused greeny-yellow eyes" having "a gleam of pure malice" (p. 71). Apart from these, Ben is a baby who causes "repugnance" and "fear" in his mother as Dorothy, Harriet's mother, observes (p. 52). Ben's appearance and behaviours arouse "fear" and even "horror" in the relatives who come to the Lovatts' for summer holiday (p. 57). Alice, who assists Harriet at home, also tells Dorothy that Ben gives her "horror" (p. 59). As can be inferred from all these examples, the novel depicts Ben as a violent, incomprehensible, disruptive and Gothicized child.

The conversation between Harriet and David indicates Ben's bizarre unusualness. David says: "the genes have come up with something special this time." 'But what, that's the point' said Harriet. 'What is it?'" (p. 53). This exchange highlights the parents' growing awareness of Ben's disturbing difference from normal human development. David's remark about the genes suggests an attempt to rationalize Ben's abnormality scientifically, while Harriet's anxious question exposes her fear and confusion. The dialogue intertwines everyday domestic reality with an atmosphere of Gothic dread, presenting Ben as something eerie and unnatural. As Sullivan and Greenberg (2011) recognize

[a]lmost from the moment of his conception, Ben is described as an ambiguous creature who is not entirely human. While discussing her child with Dr. Gilly, Harriet suggests that Ben might be a "throwback" to an earlier stage of human evolution, a member of a more animalistic subspecies whose genes somehow survived hidden in the human pool" (p. 120).

The detailed description of Ben's external appearance when he becomes six years old creates in the audience a horror effect:

He stood with his shoulders hunched forward and his knees bent, as if about to spring off somewhere. He was a squat, burly little figure, with a big head, the yellow stubble of his coarse hair growing from the double crown of his head into the point low on his heavy narrow forehead. He had a flattish flaring nose that turned up. His mouth was fleshy and curly. His eyes were like lumps of dull stone. For the first time Harriet thought, But he doesn't look like a six-year-old, but much older. You could almost take him for a little man, not a child at all (pp. 104-105).

This vivid physical description intensifies the sense of horror surrounding Ben, emphasizing his unnatural maturity and almost non-human appearance. By portraying him as more a "little man" than a child, the passage blurs the boundary between innocence and monstrosity, reinforcing the novel's Gothic atmosphere.

Consequently, all these attributes made to Ben are an indication of Gothicizing the child and they pave the way for the fear and horror arising step by step in the novel.

In *The Fifth Child*, Lessing has the narrator portray Paul, the fourth child of the family, to highlight the contrast between him and the new-born baby. In this sense, Paul functions as nearly a foil though he is not employed in the novel either as an antagonist or an important supporting character. As can be recalled, a foil in a literary work is a type of character who “functions as a contrast to a more important figure” (Quinn, 2006, p. 168), typically the protagonist, to highlight the qualities and traits of that main character. Therefore, Lessing seems to have provided the reader with Paul’s description in the novel to strengthen Ben’s monstrosity and make it more recognizable by the audience. For illustration, we can refer to Paul’s description given by the narrator through Harriet’s feelings while she is looking at him:

David stood at the end of the bed, holding baby Paul. Harriet yearned for this baby, this little child, from whom she had been separated so soon. She loved the look of him, the comical soft little face, with soft blue eyes – like bluebells, she thought – and his soft little limbs ... it was as if she were sliding her hands along them, and then enclosing his feet in her palm. A real baby, a real little child (p. 50).

In the above excerpt, Paul is drawn as the embodiment of the idealized image of childhood – soft, innocent, and cherished – while Ben later emerges as his unsettling opposite: hard, unresponsive, and alien. By presenting the reader with Paul’s warmth and normalcy, Lessing establishes a standard against which Ben’s difference becomes more pronounced. This deliberate juxtaposition not only reinforces the Gothic tension within the novel but also exposes societal and maternal expectations surrounding what is considered ‘normal’ or ‘lovable’ in a child.

Ben’s portrayal in the institution when Harriet visits him and resolves to take him home, is not the kind of depiction that would not be seen in Gothic novels. “He was unconscious. He was naked inside a strait-jacket. His pale yellow tongue protruded from his mouth. His flesh was dead white, greenish. Everything – walls, the floor, and Ben – was smeared with excrement. A pool of dark yellow urine oozed from the pallet, which was soaked” (p. 82). This vivid and unsettling description evokes the atmosphere of horror and decay typical of Gothic fiction, presenting Ben as both victim and monstrosity within a space that mirrors the Gothic dungeon. The imagery of Ben’s confinement transforms the institution into a modern Gothic space. Through such a disturbing imagery, Lessing draws on Gothic conventions of confinement and bodily corruption to emphasize Ben’s dehumanization and Harriet’s confrontation with the ‘abject’.

Ben’s depiction as a monstrous figure with his strange, disruptive and shivery appearance and behaviours makes him an embodiment of the “uncanny”, which is a concept in psychology introduced by Sigmund Freud in his influential essay “The ‘uncanny’” in 1919. To indicate that Ben’s “uncanny” nature aligns with Freud’s concept of the “uncanny”, it is first necessary to examine the concept itself. The “uncanny” is described by Freud as a feeling of discomfort or unease arising when something familiar becomes strange or unsettling. It is “the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud, 1919, pp. 1-2). It is a feeling of “dread and creeping horror” (Freud, 1919, p. 1) evoked by something both familiar and strange. Making a distinction between what is “fearful” and the “uncanny”, Freud suggests that the “uncanny” is strangely familiar yet also unsettling or eerie. One may be scared of the unknown and frightening but in the “uncanny” the case is different from that of the fearful as uncanniness comes through the known or the familiar in the second instance. The “uncanny”, for Freud, refers to situations, objects, or events that evoke a sense of discomfort or unease because they seem to defy logical explanation or challenge our understanding of the world.

The concept of the ‘uncanny’ is commonly associated with Gothic literature exploring the themes of the supernatural, the subconscious, and the unknown. The Gothic fiction and the ‘uncanny’ are closely intertwined, as both explore the themes of the mysterious, eerie, and unsettling aspects of human experience. The interplay between the Gothic and the ‘uncanny’ creates a rich tapestry of eerie and unsettling narratives in literature. In Gothic literature, elements such as haunted houses, dark landscapes, supernatural beings, and psychological terror, etc. are used to create an atmosphere of fear and suspense. These elements often evoke feelings of unease and discomfort in the reader, blurring the boundaries

between the natural and the supernatural. Similarly, the 'uncanny' emerges when the familiar suddenly reveals itself as unfamiliar, producing a profound sense of discomfort or strangeness. This feeling is often evoked by the elements that challenge one's sense of reality and provoke deep-seated fears and anxieties. In Gothic novels, the 'uncanny' can manifest through characters such as doubles, doppelgangers, ghosts, or other supernatural beings, or supernatural situations blurring the line between reality and fantasy. Thus, they disrupt the natural order of things and create a sense of disquiet and uneasiness. Characters or situations that are 'uncanny' often blur the line between the familiar and the unfamiliar, disrupting the natural order of things and creating a sense of disquiet and uneasiness in the reader. The reader feels a sense of disorientation and psychological tension.

The 'uncanny' operates in *The Fifth Child* by means of the abnormality of Ben. He is described as strange, unsettling, and as different from his siblings, who are "the proper offspring of Harriet and David" (De Vinne, 2012, p. 16), eliciting a sense of unease and discomfort among the other family members and those around him. The feeling of the 'uncanny' is created in the novel by his abnormal behaviours, appearance and violent tendencies that create a disturbing atmosphere. There is a blurring of the familiar and the "alien", as Ben, being a child (familiar), displays abnormal traits that render him unfamiliar. It is apparent that the collusion of familiarity and strangeness in the character of Ben corresponds to Freud's definition of the "uncanny". He is portrayed as an outsider, a misfit within his own family. His strange and disruptive behaviours set him apart from his siblings and parents, creating a sense of unease and otherness. Both his physical appearance and behaviours are a challenge to the boundary of normalcy. Consequently, the figure of a child idealized by the Lovatts and by the society is challenged and threatened by the 'uncanny' Ben.

Likewise, the image of Ben when he becomes a teenager and joins a gang in the city, aligns with the 'uncanny'. Through the end of the novel, Ben "takes up with a gang of delinquents, who go off to unnamed places to engage in riot and rape and then return to occupy Harriet's house" (Yelin, 1998, p. 103). Seeing Ben in the crowd on TV, Harriet describes him as "a stout schoolboy" with "a jacket with its collar up, and, a scarf" (p. 131); she faces the prospect of Ben's involvement in illegal activities. She thinks that one day, Ben may be caught by the police or may be sacrificed to science for his "cudgel-like bones", "his eyes" or his "thick and awkward" speech (p. 132). This scene underscores the full manifestation of Ben's otherness and the persistence of the 'uncanny' in his character. His association with violence and chaos extends his monstrosity in his earlier years into adolescence. This gives one the idea that his difference cannot be assimilated into normal society. Harriet's thoughts of anxiety reveal both maternal fear and societal rejection, reinforcing the Gothic tension between the human and non-human.

When Ben is close to adolescence, David asks Harriet whether it has occurred to her that "in a couple of years' time Ben will be adolescent" and "he'll be a sexual being" and Harriet replies 'yes' and states that "the thought of Ben sexual scares" her (p. 113). As Ben reaches puberty, Harriet is terrified by the idea that he may have engaged in sexual activity. She worries that his genetic traits could now be passed on to a potential foetus, a thought that also instills fear in the reader. At that time in his life, Ben lives outside more than at home and the family has no idea of what he is doing outside. Harriet asks herself:

Did his people rape the females of humanity's forebears? Thus making new races, which had flourished and departed, but perhaps had left their seeds in the human matrix, here and there, to appear again, as Ben had? (And perhaps Ben's genes were already in some foetus struggling to be born?) (p. 130).

In the above extract, it is believed that Ben's genetic traits originated from his ancestors who passed them on to the Lovatt family. This raises concerns about the potential for future generations to inherit genetic disorders like Ben's, which is a frightening prospect. Essentially, the idea that any couple might produce a child with traits akin to Ben's at any point in time is unsettling. This speculation deepens the novel's Gothic anxiety by linking Ben's abnormality to a primordial and uncontrollable genetic legacy, suggesting that the monstrous may resurface unpredictably within humanity itself.

Consequently, Ben, as a child figure, embodies the 'uncanny' in the novel due to his incompatible nature with the prototypic innocent child. The way Ben disrupts the harmony of the family and challenges

societal norms adds to the feeling of the 'uncanny' in the novel. Therefore, the 'uncanny' causing the fears and emotional distress functions as an important Gothic element in *The Fifth Child*. The function of Ben's uncanniness in the destruction of family bliss in the novel will be handled in the relevant part of the study.

1.2. Gothic Horror in *The Fifth Child*

Gothic as a type of fiction is also characterized by its actions of horror and violence. As can be recalled, Gothic fiction "develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events that are 'uncanny' or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states" (Abrams, 1999, p. 111). In *The Fifth Child*, the action in the plot may be explored to detect to what extent the action contributes to its Gothic nature. Hitherto, it becomes evident how Lessing utilizes Gothic elements for the conveyance of the theme of family disintegration.

Ben has an eerie voice, behaviours and manners throughout his babyhood and childhood. He cannot have any eye contact with even his mother; he is always unresponsive, asocial and unfriendly (55). He is always strong and big for his age. When Harriet shares some time with him, Ben never subsides into a loving moment (56). When he is only two months, he drinks ten bottles of milk every day because Harriet has to wipe Ben off breast feeding due to the bites and bruises in her breasts. In this sense, Ben, as defined by Gillian M. E. Alban (2016), "seems rather like the violent child of the legendary snake woman, Melusine, called Horrible, who bites off his nurse's breasts, kills [...] animals while still an infant" (p. 39). When he is nine months old, Ben bangs all his toys against the ground and walls; he breaks them (p. 59). He sleeps very little and should always be kept under control (p. 62). He cannot begin speaking at the typical developmental time or in the usual manner of ordinary babies (p. 68). Ben hardly speaks when he is two years and a few months old. Ben's eating voraciously does not conform to the social etiquette and his devouring food, even the raw food, implies his bestial side. In one instance, Harriet sees

Ben squatting on the big table, with an uncooked chicken he had taken from the refrigerator, which stood open, its contents spilled all over the floor. Ben had raided it in some savage fit he could not control. Grunting with satisfaction, he tore the raw chicken apart with teeth and hands, pulsing with barbaric strength. He had looked up over the partly shredded and dismembered carcass at Harriet, at his siblings, and snarled (p. 97).

Ben's monstrosity comes out in all his relationships with people. Ben is a child who does not conform to the family; his incongruity is always felt by the family members; and due to his abnormality, no sibling of his wishes to spend time with him even if they sometimes attempt to do this. Being a misfit, Ben is made the 'Other'. Luke says: "[Ben] is not one of us" (p. 76). Owing to his shouts and screams, Ben also causes discomfort among guests; therefore, restlessness and silence prevail at home. When he attends a school, Harriet painfully understands that Ben could not learn anything at school (p. 107); besides, he is incongruent at school as the headmistress, Mrs. Graves observes (pp. 99-100). In another instance, the reader is told that something that Harriet was dreading happens at school. Ben performs hurtful and violent behaviours there. He causes a girl student to get injured, which is also a frightening situation for both children and families. This is an incident pointing out the extent of Ben's violence. Ben's dreadful action is described in the following scene: "Ben had suddenly gone berserk and attacked a bigger girl in the playground. He had pulled her down, so that she fell heavily on the asphalt, bruising and grazing her legs. Then he had bitten her, and bent back her arm until it broke" (pp. 100-101). In a setting like school, which is traditionally viewed as a sanctuary for children where they can learn and grow in a supportive environment, the presence of violent behaviours – including bullying – adds to the Gothic effect in the novel. The above scene introduces a disturbing contrast between what is supposed to be and what is reflected, which amplifies the Gothic effect in the novel. This juxtaposition underscores the unsettling reality that the very place meant to train and protect children and youth can also harbour fear and aggression.

Apart from this, the prospect of Ben's killing someone is horrendous enough to consider him as brutal, which creates a horror effect in the novel. In a particularly vivid example, Ben is caught by Harriet and Alice while he is twisting little Paul's arm. Both women observe that Paul's arm badly sprained and Ben

has done this deliberately because he is pleased with his achievement although he is just six months old (p. 58). In another instance, Harriet finds Ben trying to reach up Paul's throat probably to kill Paul and grinning "vindictively, full of triumph" (p. 109). Earlier in the novel, the reader is told by the omniscient narrator that Ben kills "a dog, a little terrier" of a guest of the Lovatts. Upon this, Harriet becomes horror-stricken, and a terrible idea comes to her mind: It is also possible that Ben could kill a child. The Lovatts' old grey cat's being killed in the same way strengthens her belief (p. 62). After Paul's incident, the parents are afraid to leave the children alone with Ben. Likewise, they never allow Amy, who is Harriet's sister's daughter with down syndrome, to be alone with Ben lest Ben strangle and kill her (p. 66).

Among many, one grisly behaviour of Ben is depicted in another scene of the novel, in which Harriet wakes up and sees that

Ben was always on his feet, and had to be watched every second. He slept very little. He spent most of the night standing on his window-sill, staring into the garden and if Harriet looked on in him, he would turn and give her a long stare, alien, chilling: in the half dark in the room he really did look like a little troll or a hobgoblin crouching there. If he was locked in during the day, he screamed and bellowed so that the whole house resounded with it, and they were all afraid the police would arrive. He would suddenly, for no reason she could see take off and run into the garden, and then out the gate and into the street. One day, she ran a mile or more after him, seeing only the stubby squat little figure going through traffic lights, ignoring cars that hooted and people who screamed warnings at him. She was weeping, panting, half crazed, desperate to get to him before something terrible happened, but she was praying, Oh, do run him over, do, yes, please ... She caught up with him just before a main road, grabbed him, and held the fighting child with all her strength. He was spitting and hissing, while he jerked like a monster fish in her arms (pp. 62-63).

In the above scene, Lessing intensifies the novel's Gothic atmosphere by portraying Ben as an unsettling presence within the family home. Through Ben, she exposes the Gothic horror embedded in the breakdown of maternal control and the collapse of domestic harmony. Later, Lessing transforms what should be an ordinary scene of motherhood into one charged with Gothic terror. A mother chasing her child – usually an image of care and protection – becomes frantic, dangerous, and almost monstrous as affection collapses into fear and chaos. The everyday setting of "traffic lights," "cars," and "people" is charged with menace. The domestic and familiar become 'uncanny' as Harriet's frantic pursuit of her son through city streets turns the modern city into a Gothic site of panic and fear. The child's animalistic behaviour – "spitting and hissing," "jerked like a monster fish" – evokes the Gothic figure of the monster, blurring the line between the human and the inhuman. Harriet's desperate inner prayer – "Oh, do run him over, do, yes, please..." – is one of the most chilling moments in the novel. Her conflicting emotions, torn between saving her child and secretly wishing for his destruction, reveal the psychological horror at the heart of the novel, where maternal love coexists with dread, guilt, and revulsion. The Gothic often thrives on inner moral conflict, the intrusion of forbidden desires or thoughts. Harriet's simultaneous instinct to save her child and her unconscious wish for his destruction captures the Gothic theme of the divided self – the coexistence of love and horror, motherhood and monstrosity. As Fred Botting (1999) observes, the Gothic became "part of an internalised world of guilt, anxiety, despair," where external terrors mirror "psychological disturbance" and "uncertain subjective states" (p. 7). Gothic writing articulates the anxieties and desires that culture represses, and Lessing channels these repressed emotions through Harriet's psychological torment, revealing the terrifying instability beneath the surface of ordinary motherhood.

Almost all of Ben's actions and abnormal behaviours are scary for both the characters in the novel and the audience. Yet, Ben's actions are not the only horrendous actions taking place in the novel. The reader witnesses some frightening actions of the others, too. The scene in which the personnel in the health centre bath Ben, who is drugged, arises the feeling of terror:

He took Ben's shoulder and the girl Ben's feet [...] They lifted Ben thus [...] They put Ben on this shelf, unwound the strait-jacket [...] He lay like drowned fish on the slab, was turned over several times by the girl, [...] was finally carried by them both to another slab, where they dried him and then took a clean strait-jacket from a pile and put it on him (pp. 82-83).

This scene exemplifies Gothic elements through its portrayal of Ben both human and monstrous. The need for drugs to regulate his behaviour, combined with the detailed depiction of his restrained and manipulated body, evokes the 'uncanny' by highlighting the blurring of the familiar and the threatening abnormal. The scene's intensity and the vulnerability of his body also generate a sense of horror typical of the Gothic. His body becomes a site of anxiety and fear; the description of his immobilization and care heightens the sense of dread.

W. P. Day (1985) points out a feature of the action that is very important in Gothic novels but for the most part not mentioned. It is that although there is always physical action in a Gothic novel, "the action can never be progressive" (p. 44). In the Gothic, for Day, "no action can ever achieve its intended result. Meaningful action, action that moves from point a to point b, physically or psychically, is impossible" (Day, 1985, p. 44). Day (1985) also writes:

The Gothic world, like a black hole in space, allows no energy to escape, but traps it in a closed system. Action can never be progressive, only circular; whatever the protagonist tries to do, his actions must result in his own disintegration. The more energetic his motion, the sooner this will occur. Gothic fantasies portray actions that move from point a back to point a, except that in this movement, the identity of the actor erodes. The Gothic protagonist achieves only the illusion of meaningful action, for every movement is in fact the same movement: a downward spiral to destruction. Whenever the protagonist in a Gothic fantasy attempts to accomplish anything, we recognize almost immediately that he is doomed to failure (pp. 44-45).

By focusing on Harriet as the protagonist in *The Fifth Child*, we can draw a parallel between her futile efforts to mold Ben into a typical child and the stagnant actions found in Gothic fantasies as described by Day. Harriet's ineffective and directionless endeavours are evident in various scenes throughout the novel. The following is an extract illustrating this:

She did make a point of going to him every day when the other children were out of the way, and taking him to the big bed for a time of petting and play, as she had with all of them. Never, not once, did he subside into a loving moment. Her resisted, he strove, he fought – and then he turned his head and closed his jaws over her thumb (p. 56).

The scene ends with Harriet's feeling her bone bend and seeing "his cold triumphant grin" (p. 56). Although Harriet is fully aware that Ben is dramatically different from her other children, she tries hard to make him ordinary probably due to her maternal instinct. When Ben is two years and a few months old, Harriet still treats him as she would any other child of hers. The following scene indicates her efforts: "She sat on the floor with building blocks and toys you could push about. She showed him colourful pictures. She sang him little rhymes. But Ben did not seem to connect with the toys or the blocks" (p. 67).

Harriet's endeavour to hold the family together is all in vain. After spending a week in France without Ben, she recalls the good old days they had spent together before Ben was born. She states firmly: "I'm not going to let you destroy us, you won't destroy me ..." (p. 65). Beforehand, she heard herself say with a similar resistance: "You aren't going to do me in, I won't let you" (p. 57).

When Ben is brought back home by Harriet from the health institution, she "works tirelessly to keep [Ben] integrated into some form of family life, to socialize him as much as possible, and to find him a place in the human community, however marginal" (Rowen, 1990, p. 46). Yet, Harriet's efforts to re-educate Ben, who is constantly strait-jacketed and often drugged in the health institution and, who has forgotten the simple manners and habits she had taught him with difficulty, are also partially in vain. To re-educate Ben takes the mother days and nights (pp. 89-90). Through time Harriet gives up trying to read to Ben, playing with him and teaching him anything because "*he could not learn*" (p. 97). Though Ben makes friend with John (a teenage who helps the family with the garden in return for some money) and his gang, and even when he begins school, he spends "the hours between school's end and bedtime with the gang" (p. 98), Harriet fails to prevent the family from falling apart.

Harriet's attempts to comprehend Ben and to develop an idea about why he behaves the way he does seem futile. Her attempts to detect Ben's real problem, which even the doctors cannot diagnose, and teachers and educators could not detect, as well as to gain insight into his thoughts are Harriet's other

useless endeavours. The reader is told that Harriet “could not read the look in those cold yellow-green eyes. But then she never could! Sometimes it seemed to her that she spent her life trying to understand what Ben was feeling, thinking” (pp. 66-67). It is apparent that Harriet notices the uselessness of her effort to try to understand Ben. In another instance, Harriet tries to understand what Ben is thinking when he stands at the door of the couple’s bedroom waking up Harriet and looking at them. Harriet’s thoughts are given through the free indirect speech: “What was he thinking as he stood there, watching them sleep? Did he want to hurt them? Was he experiencing a misery she could not begin to imagine [...] Did he want to put his arms around her, like the other children, but not know how? (p. 96). This moment reflects Harriet’s deep uncertainty and fear. Lessing exposes Harriet’s conflicting emotions, her fear of Ben’s potential for violence and her lingering maternal compassion. The scene also evokes a distinctly Gothic unease, as the familiar domestic space becomes charged with dread, and the child, who should embody innocence, becomes a source of mystery and terror.

The action referring to Harriet’s efforts in *The Fifth Child*, at the end of which the destruction of the Lovatt family is indispensable, is futile and fails to bring about progress. This lack of progress in the nature of the action serves as a significant Gothic element in the novel.

1.3. Gothic Setting in *The Fifth Child*

In a Gothic work, the place, in which the action unfolds, plays a crucial role and is closely connected with the Gothic architecture. As Botting (1999) notes, the term “Gothic” originally referred to a medieval architectural style known for its cathedrals, pointed arches, and vaulted ceilings. The architecture’s dark corridors, towering walls, and hidden chambers became natural settings for tales of terror and the supernatural. When Horace Walpole applied it to *The Castle of Otranto*, he deliberately evoked the mysterious atmosphere of such medieval structures (pp. 1-3). Gothic settings are typically characterized by “isolated and ruined castles and abbeys, old chateaux with secret vaults and passageways, dark forests and spectacular mountain regions populated by bandits and robbers” (Botting, 1999, p. 41). These features collectively evoke a sense of fear and suspense, and create an atmosphere of mystery, decay, and danger that defines much of Gothic fiction.

Although *The Fifth Child* does not abound in such overtly Gothic locales, the Lovatt’s family home and the health institution function as modern equivalents, embodying unease, dread, and alienation traditionally associated with Gothic settings. Most of the action in *The Fifth Child* takes place in the Victorian house in which the Lovatts live and some in the medical institution where Ben is taken. The Lovatts’ house does not appear as a Gothic element thoroughly in the novel; however, particularly after Ben’s birth, it takes on a sinister and oppressive atmosphere. In other words, the house seeming to be a convenient place until the couple has their fifth child and especially until Ben becomes a strange and difficult child bringing turmoil into the family, becomes a place of isolation and fear for the family members. It turns out to be a frightening and disturbing place especially for Ben’s siblings. Their house is not the same anymore, the atmosphere of the house radically changes and there is “a constraint and wariness in everybody” (p. 60). Referring to Freud’s idea of the “uncanny”, one could argue that the Lovatts’ family home becomes the “uncanny” – once a warm and familiar sanctuary for the family prior to Ben’s birth, it transforms into a bizarre and unsettling space after his arrival, particularly for the children and David. Ben’s grasping and spraining the wrist of Paul, who is just two years older than Ben, indicates that home is not a safe place for children anymore especially when Ben is alone with the other children (p. 58). Paul is sent to a nursery school to get him away from Ben (p. 67) though he is so little. Sarah’s daughter with down syndrome, Amy is always looked after when they are the Lovatts’ guests; everyone tries not to leave Amy alone with Ben (p. 66). When Ben is five years old, the eldest children of the family, Luke, who is thirteen, and Helen, who is eleven, want to go to boarding school because they do not like Ben (p. 96). It is also possible to say that they cannot see Ben as one of them and they do not want to live in that house anymore because Ben was taken back from the health institution and Harriet does not intend to send Ben there again.

The attic in the Lovatts’ family home, in which once Ben hides and Harriet tries to find him – a vain action of Harriet because she cannot find him – may be taken as a part of the Gothic setting in the novel.

The mentioned scene parallels to the scenes in which the Gothic character is found in the frightful attics of big, old, isolated and/or haunted houses in the Gothic literature:

She went on quietly up to the attic. The door was open. From the high skylight fell a distorted rectangle of light, and in it stood Ben, staring up at dim sunlight. She could not make out what he wanted, what he felt ... He heard her and then she saw the Ben that this life he had to lead kept subdued: In one leap he had reached the dark at the edge of the eaves and vanished. All she could see was the obscurities of an attic that seemed boundless. She could hear nothing. He was crouching there, staring out at her ... She felt the hair on her head lift, felt cold chills- instinctive, for she did not fear him with her mind. She was rigid with terror.

"Ben" she said softly, though her voice shook [...] on this wild dangerous attic where he had gone back into a far-away past that did not know human beings.

No reply. Nothing. A blotch of shadow momentarily dimmed the thin dirty light under the skylight (ellipsis in original) (pp. 116-117).

Ultimately, the Lovatts' home blurs the line between safety and danger, the familiar and the 'uncanny', transforming what should be a haven of comfort into a site of domestic horror.

In *The Fifth Child*, it is the health institution with its gloomy, cold, and dim atmosphere that aligns with the Gothic ambience in the traditional sense, and functions as a second Gothic space in the novel. "The most impactful and horrifying sequences in the novel occurs when Harriet arrives at an institution for disabled children" (Sullivan and Greenberg, 2011, p. 121-2). Ben is confined in this institution for some time and a small part of the action in the novel takes place there. As it is defined by Yelin (1998), it is a place where "'freaks' and 'monsters' [...] products of genetic mutations are drugged, starved, warehoused, and expected to expire" (p. 102). The description of the place is given in the novel with Harriet's arrival there. When Harriet first goes to the institution to which Ben has been sent away with the consensus of the family only to be drugged into submission by the indifferent and unqualified personnel there, a Gothic atmosphere is created by means of the description of the building which is related to the reflection of Harriet's fear. Though lengthy, this description is worth quoting:

She entered a small entrance lobby [...] She rang and waited, and nothing happened. Her heart was beating. She still surged with the adrenaline that had given her the impetus to come [...] and this oppressive building was telling her nerves [...] that what she had feared was true. Yet she did not know exactly what that was. She rang again. The building was silent: She could hear the shrill of a bell a long way off in its interior. Again, nothing, and she was about to go around to the back when the door abruptly opened to show a slatternly girl [...] She had a pale little face [...] She seemed tired [...] The girl glanced around [...] went on into the dark caverns of a corridor that had small ceiling lights all along it, hardly disturbing the gloom. There was a small of disinfectant. Absolute silence. No, after a time Harriet became aware of a high thin screaming that began, and stopped, and went on again, coming from the back of the building (pp. 78-79).

Some elements of the Gothic, such as darkness, mystery, and suspense, are also present in the subsequent scene:

Nothing happened. Harriet went out into the vestibule, which was already darkening with the approaching night. The rain was now a cold deluge, silent and regular. The moors had disappeared.

She rang again, decisively and returned to the corridor.

Two figures appeared, a long way off under the pinpoint of the ceiling lights, and came towards her [...] Both looked tired and uncertain (pp. 79-80).

Along with the horror evoked by the place, a sense of mystery emerges in the description of the orderly, who appears to oversee the children abandoned by their parents and doomed to death by the drugs given to them. There is certainly a mystery in the man as Harriet observes:

There was something desperate about him, as if he contained anger, or hopelessness [...] He might be a rather pitiable young man [...] the weight of his position – the unhappy weight of it – was speaking through him, and his expression, and his reddened, smoke-tired eyes were severe, authoritative, to be taken seriously (p. 80).

This depiction of the man – with his desperate, burdened demeanour and severe, haunting presence – reflects Gothic themes of isolation and inner torment, contributing to the tense and unsettling atmosphere that permeates *The Fifth Child*. The girl who works in the ominous institution is equally mysterious for both Harriet and the reader (pp. 80-82). The mysterious movements of the girl, coupled with Harriet's anxious pursuit and the eerie setting of the institution, create an atmosphere of suspense and uncertainty, typical of Gothic fiction. This shared sense of mystery surrounding the girl emphasizes her role as an enigmatic figure, enhancing the novel's Gothic tension.

Throughout the time that Harriet spends in the institution, the dynamic nature of Gothicism is sustained and felt. The scene in which Harriet enters into the ward and sees the other children lying in their cots and beds can be given as a dramatic example:

In the cots were – monsters. [Harriet] was able to see that every bed or cot held an infant or small child in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern, sometimes horribly, sometimes slightly. A baby like a comma, great lolling head on a stalk of a body ... then something like a stick insect, enormous bulging eyes among stiff fragilities that were limbs ... a small girl all blurred, her flesh guttering and melting ... a doll with chalky swollen limbs, its eyes wide and blank, like blue ponds, and its mouth open, showing a swollen little tongue. A lanky boy was skewed, one half of his body sliding from the other. A child seemed at first glance normal, but then Harriet saw there was no back to its head; it was all face, which seemed to scream at her. Rows of freaks, nearly all asleep, and all silent. They were literally drugged out of their minds. Well, nearly silent: there was a dreary sobbing from a cot that had its sides shielded with blankets. The high intermittent screaming, nearer now, still assaulted her nerves. A smell of excrement, stronger than the disinfectant. Then she was out of the nightmare ward (ellipsis in original) (p. 81).

In conclusion, the health institution evokes mystery, confinement, and the fear of the unknown. The elevation of terror is sustained throughout the novel via both the Lovatts' house, which turns out to be a site of domestic terror, and the health institution. These eerie and foreboding places in which the action is put act as an agent providing the Gothic in *The Fifth Child*.

1.4. Language as a Gothic Element in *The Fifth Child*

In Gothic fiction, language plays a significant role in setting the tone and atmosphere of the story. As Anne Williams (1995) observes, "In Gothic, language is multifarious, duplicitous, and paradoxical. Words may be both supremely significant and horribly 'literal' " (pp. 67-68). Writers of the horror genre sometimes use elaborate and descriptive language with the aim of creating a sense of unease and suspense. The Gothic ambiance is often constructed through richly detailed language, in which the careful choice of words contributes to the creation of mystery and a sense of foreboding. Some writers may employ words associated with fear and horror – evoking brutality, violence, and terror – to heighten emotional tension. Dialogues between characters can also reveal dark secrets or convey a sense of abnormality, obsession, or insanity. Ultimately, language plays a crucial role in Gothic fiction, as it is employed to evoke a haunting and immersive experience for the reader.

In *The Fifth Child*, there are numerous words, phrases, expressions, sentences and conversations evoking the appalling, the shivery, or even the blood-curdling, all of which help to create the Gothic atmosphere within the novel. However, in order to serve the main purpose of this study, it is appropriate to focus only on those elements that serve the invalidation of the concept of the blissful family.

In the exploration of the language use indicating that the Lovatts' happy family life is menaced and thus concerning the destruction of the family life and bliss, a wealth of examples can be found in the novel. To give a few ones, firstly the scene in which David and Harriet confer and agree about Ben, may be taken. In the scene, they agree what they should do with Ben, who is not even six months old, to protect their family bliss:

David and Harriet conferred, in the low, almost guilty, incredulous voices that Ben seemed to impose. This baby was not six months old yet ... he was going to destroy their family life. He was already destroying it. They would have to make sure that he was in his room at mealtimes and when the children were downstairs with the adults. Family times, in short (ellipsis in original) (p. 59).

Here the prediction about the violation of the Lovatts' domestic bliss is explicitly made within the narrative. Although the language is not as dark or gloomy as in traditional Gothic fiction, the tone – marked by low, guilty, and incredulous voices – conveys a sense of unease and foreboding. This subtle use of language serves as a Gothic element, reflecting the underlying tension and impending collapse within the family. A similar foreboding is given in the following expression: “the children’s attitudes to Ben were already formed: they had discussed Ben and knew what to think about him. Luke, Helen and Jane went away upstairs silently, and it was a bad moment for the parents” (p. 58).

The language that is used both by the narrator and the characters invoke the idea of the mystery and of the eerie. The narrator’s reference to the unborn baby, which moves too much in the mother’s womb and gives the mother no peace, as an “enemy” (p. 40), and Harriet’s thinking of her unborn baby as a “monster” (p.47) when talking to Dr. Brett are just two examples of the creations of the Gothic connotations in the language. Harriet feels a tapping in her belly (p. 36), David feels, when he touches her belly, “a jolt under his hand, quite a hard movement [...] the thrust” (p. 35), and the foetus feels like a hard lump. “Imperative beats” and “hard movement” (p. 35) of the thing in the womb arise mystery making one wonder what is in her belly. The words used in the description of the mother such as “her moan, or whimper”, “she would cry out of pain” and she “groaned” (p. 39), the words showing her suffering throughout her pregnancy, and the narrator’s words describing the foetus as “the savage thing inside her” (p. 41) are the other examples to the Gothic connotations. These and similar expressions all evoke the idea that the family will no longer be the same by the participation of the fifth child even if it does not evoke the destruction of the family. Similarly, the language in the earlier scene, where the five-year-old Ben is described as tearing a raw chicken with his hands and teeth (p. 97), makes him seem almost cannibalistic. This disturbing image blurs the boundary between the human and the animal, reinforcing Ben’s role as a symbol of the primitive or monstrous forces that lurk beneath the surface of civilized family life.

There are also quite a few scary words and expressions in the description of Harriet’s observation of Ben and his gang – as she calls them – when they watch action films on TV feeding themselves from the refrigerator. Ben is eleven and a student in the secondary school when this happens. Harriet observes that

[t]hey were unconsciously tensing and flexing, faces grinning, or triumphant or cruel; and they let out groans or sighs or yells of excitement; “That’s it! Do it!” “Carve him up!” “Kill him, slice him!” And the moans of excited participation as the bullets poured into a body, as blood spurted, as the tortured victim screamed (p. 122).

The fact that such a loving family as the Lovatts has a child who is thought to be performing criminal actions such as “muggings, hold-ups, breaks-in” (p. 122) is frightening enough for both the family and the reader. Lessing’s language here is Gothic not because of the mere presence of crime, but because of its linguistic portrayal of fear, suspicion, and social decay. In the description of Ben’s alleged involvement in criminal acts, Lessing adopts a terse, report-like diction reminiscent of crime journalism, evoking an atmosphere of paranoia and dread. Her choice of blunt and journalistic diction also evokes an unsettling realism that contributes to the Gothic atmosphere. Harriet’s reflections, prompted by reports of “rapes, too, among those news items” (p. 123), are not merely plot devices but linguistic expressions of moral panic and social pessimism. Although these are everyday words, their placement and tone have a distinctly Gothic effect. Through this stark and factual language, Lessing transforms ordinary vocabulary of violence into symbols of corruption and dread, reducing Ben to an embodiment of urban monstrosity. Thus, the novel’s language – its tone of anxiety and its collision of domestic and criminal registers – becomes a key Gothic element, revealing Ben as both a familial and societal menace.

As the above examples demonstrate, language functions as a significant Gothic element in *The Fifth Child*, serving not merely as a medium of narration but as a vehicle through which fear, moral decay, and social anxiety are articulated. Lessing’s use of terse, factual diction, coupled with her evocation of fear and suspicion through everyday words, transforms ordinary domestic life into a scene of unease. In this way, language itself becomes an instrument of horror, shaping the reader’s perception of Ben not only as a disruptive force within the family but as a manifestation of broader social and moral collapse.

2. The Destruction of Family Happiness: Gothic Elements and Disintegration in *The Fifth Child*

Bearing significant relations to Gothic fiction, as discussed in the previous sections, *The Fifth Child* can be characterized as a narrative in which Gothic elements are employed to convey the destruction of family happiness and contentment. The novel depicts how the birth of the Lovatts' fifth child, Ben, disrupts their previously harmonious family life, showing how a happy marriage and the well-being of a family with four almost angelic children are overturned by their eerie fifth child. *The Fifth Child* beginning with Harriet and David's vision of a perfect family ends with the reflection of the disruption of ideal family life. It is Ben who is introduced as the agent of horror and mystery and who is 'uncanny'; and therefore, he is an important Gothic element in the novel that brings chaos and challenges the ideal of perfect family. The Gothic elements – such as the eerie atmosphere created by the existence of the fifth child, Ben and the tension in the household – serve to highlight how quickly this dream can unravel, illustrating the fragility of perceived happiness. The Lovatt family, as Chia-chen Kuo (2014) suggests, is “a perfect model of an ideal middle class family: a diligent couple who want nothing but a perfect home” (p. 12) at the outset. Harriet and David “rather than experimenting with alternative lifestyles and freedoms promised by the cultural liberalism of the 1960s, wish only for a traditional happy marriage, complete with a large brood of children” (Rubenstein, 2014, p. 67). The spouses' happiness is described in the novel with their revolt against the concept of the freedom of sexuality in the 1960s. The narrator says:

Happiness. A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family. It was what they had chosen and what they deserved. Often, when David and Harriet lay face to face, it seemed that doors in their breasts flew open, and what poured out was an intensity of relief, of thankfulness that still astonished them both: patience for what seemed now such a very long time had not been easy, after all. It had been hard preserving their belief in themselves when the spirit of the times, the greedy and selfish sixties, had been so ready to condemn them, to isolate, to diminish their best selves. And look, they had been right to insist on guarding that stubborn individuality of theirs, which had chosen, and so obstinately the best – this (p. 21).

The couple's happy family life is also described in the following scene: “Listening to the laughter, the voices, the talk, the sound of children playing, Harriet and David in their bedroom [...] would reach for each other's hand, and smile, and breathe happiness” (p. 18). Additionally, the family's surname reminds the English word, “love” and it may be associated with the Lovatts' being full of love. They have four children, a beautiful big ancient house, the love of friends and relatives, enjoyable times and dinners with them. For Harriet and David, the concepts such as loyalty, love and family life are not out of fashion even in the 1960s. They lead a peaceful life with their children in their family home. However, the Lovatts' happy family life is menaced by even the unborn baby. The fifth child, Ben even before his birth, begins to deteriorate the happiness and bliss of the Lovatt family. Their paradise on earth is literally destroyed by him; the family goes through days full of tension.

As some of the scenes by which the destruction of the Lovatt family and their happiness is either evoked or reflected have already been previously discussed, a few examples would suffice here. One of them is the scene in which the reader is directly told that Harriet is ostracized by her children, which invokes the destruction of the family unit: “The children, the way they did these day, were looking at each other, excluding her in some understanding of their own” (p. 66). Likewise, the Lovatts' children's otherness of Ben (p. 76) exemplifies the destruction of the family unit.

Harriet's psychological deterioration as a mother, feeling herself in a dead end, her dedication to Ben, and negligence of her other children (p. 65) all cause the family happiness to be destroyed. Harriet and David feel saddened as their children, Helen, Luke, and Jane, choose not to return home during summer vacations as they grow older and attend boarding school, opting instead to stay with their grandparents or at friends' homes. This shows that the family falls apart because of Ben's presence (p. 107). The family rift should certainly be attributed to Ben's influence. Harriet's mother, Dorothy, who was so helpful to Harriet when the other children and Ben were born and when they were young, now visits them very rarely (p. 107). This indicates that Dorothy's approach to the couple has changed over time, which results in a sense of loneliness, particularly for Harriet. Paul is seen as the child most affected by Ben's existence and his mother's years of neglect. This effect is not only related to Ben's constant fights

with Paul and his attempts to kill him (p. 109); it is also related to Paul's psychological deterioration. Paul has become a whiny, constantly restless unhappy child. Since he is not yet old enough to go to a boarding school, he must stay at home; therefore, he is the child in the family most exposed to Ben's existence and his mother's negligence. When Ben is brought back from school on John's motorbike, Paul becomes so distressful. The following scene exemplifies Paul's distress: "When he heard the roar of the machine that was bringing Ben back home, Paul might burst into tears, or bang his head on the wall with frustration"; this is because Paul "had not had a mother at the proper time, and that was the trouble" (p. 99). In another instance, when he is six, Paul is described as a dissatisfied child:

Paul spent hours watching television. He escaped into it, watching restlessly, moving about as he watched, and ate, and ate – but never put on weight. Inside him seemed to be an unappeasable mouth that said, Feed me, feed me. He craved, every bit of him for what? His mother's arms did not satisfy him (p. 107).

Paul is in a poor psychological state, and unable to learn at school; so, he is sent to a psychiatrist in the hope of recovery. To cover the cost, David must take a part-time job added to his "already heavy load of work", which causes him "be hardly ever at home" (p. 108). All this shows how the family is affected by Ben's abnormality, which causes the deterioration of the bonds in the family.

The character of Ben in the novel embodies elements of the 'uncanny' and abnormal as has already been detected in the relevant part. Ben's monstrous, violent, and odd qualities have been reflected through a detailed analysis there. Thus, we have created a ground to connect Ben as a Gothic element to the broader theme of the destruction of family bliss in *The Fifth Child*. Consequently, we can focus on the idea that Ben's very existence disrupts the idealized notion of family happiness that the Lovatts strive for. Ben with his unknown and uncontrollable nature causes fear and dread in the family. His presence elicits fear and discomfort in those around him including his siblings due to his strange behaviours and physicality. His weirdness evoke horror, which, in turn, shatters the family's dreams of a perfect, blissful household.

The Gothic qualities attributed to Ben make him a contrasting character with the other children of the Lovatts. He is dramatically different from his siblings as well as other people around him and this shows that how Ben's characteristics contrast sharply with the conventional family values such as love, nurturing, joy and unity. Ben's presence disrupts the family's notion of normalcy. Therefore, Ben represents a break from the societal norm about what or who a 'normal' child is, which highlights the destruction of the Lovatts' family happiness.

In this sense, Ben embodies once again Kristeva's notion of the "abject" through his disturbing presence as both part of and alien to the family and the human community. From his birth, Ben is described in terms of animalistic strength, inhuman appearance, and primal appetite. These qualities place him outside the human order and blur the boundary between human and non-human. His existence unsettles Harriet and David's idealized domestic world, contaminating their vision of bourgeois normality with something primal and uncontrollable. As an "abject" figure, Ben forces those around him to confront what they would expel to preserve their sense of purity and order: the monstrous, the instinctual, and the non-rational. In this way, Ben becomes a Gothic element, embodying the resurgence of what has been suppressed, the intrusion of the unnatural, and the unspeakable within the supposed safety of home and family.

Additionally, Ben's birth and presence generate fear, resulting in the isolation and alienation of the family members. No matter how hard the family, especially, the mother Harriet, try to cope with the uncanniness of Ben, they fail in their attempts to maintain happiness in their family. Isolation of the family members from home and from each other becomes inevitable due to Ben. The feelings of guilt, entrapment, disillusionment and despair become effective on especially Harriet and David, which results in their negligence of their other children and their inability to perform parental responsibilities. Ben's almost grotesque nature obviously challenges traditional family structures and societal norms. This challenge constitutes a direct threat to the family's happiness and bliss, forcing Harriet and David to confront their values and beliefs. In all scenes, where Ben is depicted as abnormal, the "uncanny" and monstrous and the like, and which have been previously discussed, the idea that this child with his

weirdness and monstrosity would cause the family destruction is evoked. Ben's presence disrupts the idyllic family life the Lovatts experienced till his birth.

Ben's not only traits but also actions serve the destruction of family happiness as significant Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child*, by creating a high tension. Ben's violent actions constitute a great deal of Gothic actions in *The Fifth Child*. His unpredictable and often violent behaviours instil fear and psychological strain both in the family and the other people around him. The Lovatts' attempts to maintain happiness and normal daily routine are constantly thwarted by Ben's horror actions, which causes alienation in the family. The Lovatts' friends and relatives are also frightened by Ben's actions, which isolates the Lovatts further. This isolation contributes significantly to the disruption of family happiness as the lack of support and understanding from others deepens the family's despair. The violence in Ben's actions is observed during his childhood; however, his actions he takes when he is adolescent are reflected in the novel as equally threatening not just for the family but for the society as well. It could be concluded that the horror and violent actions in the novel are reflected as important elements interrupting and destructing family happiness.

The language used in many scenes in the novel reinforces the idea of that the relationships between family members will deteriorate and that disruption of happiness and harmony in the family is imminent because Ben increasingly causes unrest and ruptures in the family, which makes it difficult for the family members to live together. In this case, Harriet, as a mother, cannot treat all her children equally, and her husband, as well as the other members of the extended family appropriately, as she used to. Below is one of the scenes foreshadowing, via the language used, the destruction of the family bliss. The narrator describes the scene as in the following:

[Harriet] begged tranquillisers from friends, and from her sisters. *She did not tell David how many she was taking, and this was the first time she had hidden anything from him.* The foetus was quiet for about an hour after she dosed herself, and she was given a respite from the ceaseless battering and striving. It was so bad that she would cry out in pain. *At night, David heard her moan, or whimper, but now he did not offer comfort, for it seemed that these days she did not find his arms around her any help.*

"My God," she said, or grunted, or groaned, and then suddenly sat up, or scrambled out of bed and went doubled up out of the room, fast, escaping from the pain.

He had stopped putting his hand on her stomach, in the old companionable way, for what he felt there was beyond what he could manage with. It was not possible that such a tiny creature could be showing such fearful strength; and yet it did. And nothing he said seemed to reach Harriet, who, he felt, was possessed, had gone right away from him, in this battle with the foetus, which he could not share (emphases are mine) (p. 39).

The language, especially in the emphasized parts, suggests that the relationship between husband and wife is beginning to deteriorate. This may be taken as a harbinger of the destruction of the family that will occur later.

The scenes where Harriet's feelings of guilt and shame are expressed foreshadow the collapse of the family. For instance, when Dorothy tries to persuade Harriet that Ben should be sent to a health centre for Dorothy is aging and no longer has the strength she once had, implying that she could no longer help them with the care of the children, Harriet feels guilty for she has not noticed it. The conversation between the mother and daughter gives one the idea that the happiness of the family is not experienced as it should be:

"I'm getting on, you know," said Dorothy. "I can't go on like this, or "I'll get ill."

Yes, Dorothy was rather thin, even gaunt. Yes, Harriet thought, full of guilt as usual, she should have noticed.

"And you have a husband, too," said Dorothy, apparently not knowing how she was turning the knife in her daughter's heart. "He's very good, you know, Harriet. I don't know how he puts up with it" (p. 70).

The words chosen and the expressions used in the section where Harriet's inner voice is heard clearly indicate the destruction of the family:

Who had not let Ben be murdered, she defended herself fiercely, in thought, never aloud. By everything they – the society she belonged to – stood for, believed in, she had had no alternative but to bring Ben back from that place. But because she had, and saved him from murder, she had destroyed her family. Had harmed her life... David's ... Luke's, ... Helen's, Jane's ... and Paul's. Paul, the worst [...]

A scapegoat. She was the scapegoat – Harriet, the destroyer of her family (emphasis in original/ellipsis in original) (p. 117).

In the passage above, Lessing deepens the Gothic dimension of the novel by turning Harriet's maternal act of compassion into a source of guilt and self-condemnation. Her internal monologue reveals a haunting sense of moral isolation, as she becomes both saviour and destroyer. The language of persecution and sacrifice ("a scapegoat") evokes the Gothic theme of entrapment within oppressive moral and social systems. Here, the terror Lessing evokes is inward and emotional, as Harriet is overwhelmed by guilt and the painful awareness that her effort to save a life has ultimately brought about ruin. Lessing thus transforms ordinary motherhood into a site of tragic moral conflict, where love, duty, and horror converge.

The narrator's explicit statements such as "the family had – as she felt it, saw it – fallen apart" (p. 98) both saddens and frightens the reader as it gives the clear reality about the fate of the family. One of the dialogues between the couple reflects Harriet's realization of the fact that Ben has dashed Harriet and David's hopes of a happy family. Harriet understands that they had a misconception that they could be a happy family. She shares, with her husband, the thought ensnaring her from time to time. She says: "We are being punished [...] For presuming. For thinking we could be happy. Happy because we decided we would be" (p. 117). Despite David's disagreement with Harriet and his statement that it was just a chance, Harriet "stubbornly" holds on: "We were going to be happy! No one else is, [...] but we were going to be. And so down came the thunderbolt" (pp. 117-118). The scene depicts that Harriet and David are disillusioned and that their dreams are all invalidated.

The family's destruction and disintegration unfold not only during Ben's childhood but continue throughout his teenage years. It is ironic that as David and Harriet, by rejecting the values of the freewheeling society of the 1960s, strive to uphold their conservative and traditional values, they are challenged by Ben, who embodies many negative traits associated with the 1960s, particularly in his adolescence. The couple's dreams of having a large family and enjoying a joyful life together in their family house are ultimately undermined, highlighting the theme of the destruction of family happiness. As Susan Watkins (2010) suggests being conservative is "the core value of the couple", who "represent family and suburban commuter values" (p. 126). The couple adhere to "family values and traditional sexual propriety during the 1960s (when the novel opens), a decade where such values were being challenged" (Watkins, 2010, p. 126). But on the other hand,

[Ben] is born with the opposite inclinations: he has an aggressively animalistic, violent and physical nature, coupled with, as he gets older, an affiliation to youthful gang or street culture that represents an antifamily and stereotypically urban stance [...] Ben represents everything the couple repudiate in their rejection of the urban: sexuality, violence, the city, the gang and the animal (Watkins, 2010, p. 126).

As the Lovatt family grapples with Ben's strange behaviour, they become increasingly isolated from each other and from the outside world as indicated earlier. The family's dynamics become increasingly strained, mirroring classic Gothic themes of isolation, alienation and entrapment. As is known, such themes as isolation and alienation are common in Gothic literature. In the novel, the protagonist, Harriet, who is often under the heavy burden of parenting alone, experiences the feeling of isolation, especially as she seeks to maintain the ideal family life despite Ben. It is Harriet, too, who is "overwhelmed with guilt at having given birth to such a shocking child" (Giles, 1988, p. 52). The feeling of isolation amplifies the sense of entrapment that she feels. The more Harriet attempts to maintain a facade of happiness, the more alienated she becomes. Isolation and alienation characterized as important aspects

of Gothic fiction are not observed in just Harriet but also Ben, who “does not belong with the Lovatts” (De Vinne, 2012, p. 19), which is made apparent by the end of *The Fifth Child*. Ben is “lost to his family by mutual exile at the end of the novel” and becomes an “alien” (De Vinne, 2012, p. 20). Lessing once again undermines the family unity in the novel, this time through Gothic features such as isolation and alienation.

A considerable amount of the horror in *The Fifth Child* stems from the psychological tension within the family. Harriet's fear and anxiety regarding Ben's nature reflect deeper themes of motherhood, societal expectations, and the fear of the ‘Other’. The psychological horror that unfolds in the family dynamics reflects the tension between societal expectations of motherhood and the dark realities of parenting a child who is perceived as the ‘Other’. The Gothic elements evoke in the audience a sense of dread, which mirrors Harriet's emotional turmoil. Harriet's internal conflict – her love for her children versus her fear of Ben – deepens the Gothic atmosphere. The novel, with its reflection of Harriet's fears, conflicts, isolation and alienation, also refutes the traditional concept of the ‘mother’; and this is an illustration of the annihilation of family happiness. According to Emily Clark (2011), who reads *The Fifth Child* as also Harriet's motherhood story, “[n]ever uncomplicated nor unproblematic, Harriet's story is of her desire to be a mother on her own terms. She refuses the social and class conventions that dictate small families” (p. 175). With the destruction of the traditional motherhood concept, which is adopted by Harriet, the imagined and aspired family paradise implodes in the novel.

The themes of decay, ruin and deterioration are prevalent in Gothic fiction. In Lessing's novel, these themes are reflected in the relationships among the family members. Ben's presence disturbs the family's harmony, starting with the connection between the husband and wife, followed by the interactions between Ben and the other children. This disruption extends to the relationships between parents and their children in the nuclear family, then to the grandparents and Harriet-David, and finally to the wider family dynamics with their relatives. The ideal that the couple, especially Harriet, aspires to thereby collapses and this causes the decay of their dreams and disintegration of the family unit. This is exactly the destruction of family happiness.

The decay also emerges in the setting, though metaphorically. We see the decay of the domestic space in *The Fifth Child*. The Lovatts' family home, which is initially a symbol of safety and happiness, later becomes a site of fear, unhappiness and isolation. In Gothic literature, setting is often exploited to create a horror effect, which is essential in the genre. In the case of *The Fifth Child*, the family house transforms from a nurturing environment and a lovely place for both parents and children as well as relatives and guests coming there to a space filled with dread and anxiety, mirroring the family's decline in happiness. The “uncanny” appears in the novel, for a second time, by means of the family house of the Lovatts. Before Ben's birth, the house aligns with the typical family house that offers warmth, safety and love to not only the family members but also the relatives existing there as guests; however, it turns out to be an unfamiliar unsettling place after Ben's birth and as Ben grows up. Therefore, the decay of the setting further emphasizes the breakdown of familial bonds. The physical environment – like the language – serves as a Gothic device, driving the decline of family relationships and the erosion of family happiness, while reflecting and heightening the underlying fears that permeate the narrative.

It can be suggested that the Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child* work together to evoke a feeling of unease and highlight broader societal anxieties. The Gothic in the novel is manifested within the boundaries of everyday reality. Shadian S. Fahim (1994) pinpoints the realistic realm of the novel saying, “it is an example of a child of violence; portraying the nightmare of that experience in an essentially realistic frame” (p. 268). Lessing creates a horror effect in her novel, via not the employment of things that cannot happen in the real world, on the contrary, via the employment of things that can happen in the world we live in. Reading the novel, one has the idea that such kind of a thing may happen to anyone, or in any family for it is a matter of chance. The novel proclaims that a Ben is likely to appear anywhere in any family or at any place such as a school, an institution, on a road or a street. And this is more frightening, more appalling, more terrifying than that which is manifested by the imaginary, invisible and unreal things and situations in the traditional Gothic literature, provided by the supernatural, the mysterious, the unrealistic and the unbelievable.

In conclusion, the Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child* examined throughout this study appear to have been skilfully employed by Lessing to explore the destruction of family happiness and contentment. By incorporating these Gothic features into a contemporary domestic setting, Lessing transforms the modern home into a site of psychological and moral unease. Through the unsettling figure of Ben and Harriet's growing sense of alienation, she reimagines the Gothic not through haunted castles or supernatural forces, but through the disintegration of ordinary family life. *The Fifth Child* is a work of Gothic fiction set in a contemporary context, conveying themes that reveal how family dynamics are changeable, happiness is fragile, and human life is often beyond control. Through this modern reworking of the Gothic, Lessing exposes the precariousness of domestic harmony and the volatile nature of human emotion, suggesting that beneath the surface of modern ordinary happiness persist the same fears, desires, and conflicts that have always haunted the Gothic imagination.

Conclusion

The Fifth Child explores themes of family dynamics, societal norms, and the challenges of raising a child who is perceived as different or, more accurately, abnormal. This study has argued that *The Fifth Child* contains a series of Gothic elements through which Lessing conveys the theme of familial disintegration. Aiming to analyse the Gothic elements that reflect the breakdown of family happiness, the study has examined their employment in the novel under four headings: character, action, setting, and language. Elements such as the "uncanny", fear, dread, mystery, suspense, ambiguity, horror, violence, psychological terror, isolation, alienation, decay, and ruin have been identified as significant Gothic elements throughout the novel.

In order to highlight the Gothic and horror dimensions of the novel, the qualities attributed to Ben have been foregrounded. His monstrous nature and animalistic traits have been examined, emphasizing how they have contributed to his portrayal as a Gothic character. Ben has been analysed in terms of both his physical attributes and his abnormal personal traits, behaviours, and manners. He has been interpreted as a figure embodying both the "abject" and the "uncanny" in the section on character as a Gothic element. Ben's presence in *The Fifth Child* embodies the concept of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva – the disruptive force that unsettles the boundaries of the human, the familial, and the social. His difference provokes horror precisely because it exposes the fragility of the norms that define domestic harmony and moral order. Through Ben's exclusion, Lessing reveals how society's impulse to reject the "other" stems from a fear of what cannot be assimilated or understood. This horror is most powerfully located in Harriet's own body, which becomes a site of abjection where the maternal and the monstrous coexist, illustrating Kristeva's notion of the abject as both repellent and compelling. Through this fusion of motherhood and monstrosity, Lessing exposes the deep anxieties surrounding the maternal body and its potential to generate what cannot be controlled or understood. Ultimately, Ben's abjection serves as a mirror to the family's and the wider culture's own repressed violence and unease, transforming him from a mere monstrous child into a profound symbol of the limits of human acceptance.

Ben's presence also evokes the Freudian notion of the "uncanny", as he embodies what is both familiar and alien within the domestic sphere. In *The Fifth Child*, the 'uncanny' pervades the narrative, and the study has demonstrated how it has functioned as a key Gothic element, adding a dark and disturbing mood to the story. His existence blurs the line between the human and the non-human, unsettling the very space that should represent safety and belonging. In Ben, the familiar figure of the child becomes a source of fear and estrangement, revealing how the 'uncanny' emerges when the home itself turns hostile. Alongside Ben's embodiment of the 'uncanny', his impact on the family and family life has been scrutinized to support the argument that, through his "uncanny" nature, he plays a central role in the deterioration of family ties. This includes the isolation, inner conflict, and psychological terror experienced by Harriet, ultimately resulting in the destruction of the family's unity and domestic bliss. Through this "uncanny" disruption, Lessing exposes the hidden, invisible or unnoticeable instability underlying the idealized image of family life.

The use of Gothic elements in the novel is further reinforced through the depiction of actions that evoke terror, horror, and violence, as discussed in the section "Gothic Horror in *The Fifth Child*." This analysis

also considers the absence of progressive action, particularly through Harriet's character. Since the scenes of horror and violence in the novel play a crucial role in undermining family happiness by introducing a pervasive sense of dread and unease, their contribution to the theme of destruction has been analysed in detail. By disrupting the narrative's sense of stability and domestic harmony, these events reinforce the novel's central theme of destruction and the fragility of family ideals.

In the study, the shifting setting has also been identified as a source of fear and horror, gradually intensifying throughout the novel. The Lovatts' seemingly idyllic suburban home, initially portrayed as a space of comfort and familial fulfilment, gradually becomes a claustrophobic environment that mirrors the family's psychological disintegration. The transformation of the family home from a once safe haven and blissful sanctuary into a perilous environment for all family members has been examined in the study, considering not only Ben's birth but also his monstrous traits and actions. For this reason, the Lovatts' family home is cited as an illustration of the 'uncanny'. The study further demonstrates that the institution where Ben is sent not for treatment, but rather to remove him from home and provide a more manageable life for the family also functions as a Gothic space. The eerie ambiance of this setting, where Ben is constantly strait-jacketed and numbed by drugs, and Harriet is portrayed as a terrified mother desperately trying to save her son at all costs, sends shivers down the reader.

While space establishes much of the novel's Gothic tension, the atmosphere of dread is further intensified through Lessing's manipulation of language. The language in *The Fifth Child* has been identified as one of the key Gothic elements that serves to undermine the illusion of the domestic bliss at times through direct indications and at other times through subtle evocations of fear and unease. The words, expressions and sentences used by characters, as well as the direct expressions of the narrator, have been analysed in detail in the fourth sub-section of the second part of this study. Additionally, the inferences drawn in this section have been supported by an analysis of how language, as a Gothic element, contributes to the destruction of family happiness and unity in the part of the study titled "The Destruction of Family Happiness: Gothic Elements and Disintegration in *The Fifth Child*". It has been suggested that the language of both the narrator and the characters reinforces the novel's pervasive sense of mystery and eeriness. In the novel, language operates as a Gothic force. Lessing exposes the fragility of domestic harmony and reveals the latent monstrosity within the ordinary. Thus, the study argues that Lessing's manipulation of language operates as one of the novel's most powerful Gothic devices. In depicting the collapse of domestic harmony, Lessing also turns to language itself as a tool of Gothic expression. Throughout the novel, Lessing deliberately infuses ordinary domestic language with undertones of fear, violence, and social decay to evoke an atmosphere of unease and moral tension. Through her use of terse, report-like diction reminiscent of crime journalism, Lessing evokes an atmosphere of paranoia and unease that extends into the domestic realm. Everyday words and expressions acquire a chilling resonance, transforming familiar language into an instrument of dread. This collision between the domestic and the criminal exposes the fragility of family life and happiness.

This study reveals how the Gothic elements in *The Fifth Child* combine to evoke feelings of unease and tap into broader societal anxieties. In the novel, the Gothic is woven into the fabric of ordinary life, merging the familiar with the 'uncanny': it first presents Ben as disturbingly abnormal, then portrays the family home as eerie, while the use of everyday language evokes a persistent sense of unease. Lessing achieves a sense of horror not by fantastical events, but by incorporating a story that could realistically occur in our own world. While reading the novel, one gets the impression that such events could happen to anyone or in any family, as it is simply a matter of chance. The novel suggests that a figure like Ben could emerge in any household, school, institution, or even on the streets. This possibility is far more unsettling and horrifying than the fantastical, invisible, and unreal elements typically found in traditional Gothic literature. Briefly, the Lovatts' story is not scary or chilling because it is fantastic; it is scary because it is real. *The Fifth Child* is a novel that prompts reflection on the complexities of family relationships. Its thought-provoking nature may be attributed in part to the notion that the mundane aspects of everyday life can appear to us as some of the most mysterious and the 'uncanny'.

Ultimately, Lessing's novel challenges readers to confront the thin line between normality and abnormality, showing how the ordinary can harbour the terrifying. By situating horror within the familiar, the narrative encourages reflection on the fragility of social norms and the unpredictability of

human nature. The novel can thus be regarded as a frightening reflection of the world we live in, conveying, through Gothic elements, the story of a family with a disabled child – a scenario not improbable for parents today. *The Fifth Child* demonstrates how Gothic elements in a modern setting function as a vital tool to explore the theme of family disintegration, creating an eerie and unsettling atmosphere that underscores both personal and societal anxieties.

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Sorumlu Yazar: Doç. Dr. Mevlûde ZENGİN

Çıkar Çatışması ve Finansal Destek: Yazar çıkar çatışması olmadığını ve finansal destek almadıklarını beyan etmişlerdir.

Étik Beyanı: Yayımlanan makalede araştırma ve yayın etiğine riayet edilmiş; COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics)'nin editör ve yazarlar için yayımlanmış olduğu uluslararası standartlar dikkate alınmıştır.