

Pathos in “Die Ferienfamilie” by Barbara Frischmuth: An Affective Reading of Modern Family Relations

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Abstract

This paper studies the role of pathos in Barbara Frischmuth’s novel *Die Ferienfamilie* (1981), a significant work of contemporary Austrian literature that showcases the emotional intricacies in a modern patchwork family. This novel is often seen as one that deals with irony, humour, and a subtle narrative style. It generates emotional distress due to fractured relationships, especially among children, including insecurity, a longing for stability, and a fragile search for human emotional security. Through the arguments within the theories of pathos and affection, the author transforms the family's ordinary day-to-day situations into emotionally charged experiences that the characters experience, culminating in a melodrama. Pathos can be seen in the eyes and behaviour of the children, their helplessness, the protagonist Nora's emotional state, and the family's complex dynamics, where one can clearly see and feel the urge for a sense of belonging amongst the children.

In this paper, the focus is on the perfection with which the author has presented the psychological and emotional state of the children due to the insecure environment that has been created by the complex and damaged relationships of the parents. The paper showcases the family in particular and the Austrian society in the 20th Century. Thus, this novel, “Die Ferienfamilie” is a perfect example of presenting pathos through literature and critically analyses the social structure in Austria.

Keywords:

Pathos, Family Novel, Children and their emotions, Patchwork Family, Emotional Narratology, Relationships and their complexities

Barbara Frischmuth is an important figure in Austrian literature. In her works, she focuses on different aspects of the society through the eyes of the children, gender, insecurities, identity, evolving social structure, and gender amongst the many. The novel “Die Ferienfamilie” is a perfect example that showcases the emotional trauma that the children go through due to the broken relationships of parents and the evolution of a new family pattern, which is not a normal traditional family but a family that has arisen due to the given circumstances. The novel revolves around the protagonist Nora, her son Pu, her niece Laja, and Fenek, who are compelled due to unavoidable circumstances to spend a vacation together, thus building a temporary “vacation/patchwork family”. Initially, it looks like a normal family novel about children and their vacation with an elder,

but during the course of the novel, one can study the insecurities, longing for emotional stability, loneliness, and modern lifestyle in a very subtle way. This paper looks into the presentation and role of pathos in this novel. The classical understanding of pathos is the capacity of discourse, which evokes emotions in an audience. The literary studies bring out the narrative strategies that create empathy, compassion, sadness, and emotional involvement. In the novel, Barbara Frischmuth presents pathos in a subtle way with irony, and psychological observation rather than presenting sentimentality in a very dramatic way. The emotional challenges of the characters are presented precisely but with restraint.

The main argument presented through this study is that pathos is generated due to the distinction between the nontraditional alternative family structure and the constant human need for emotional security, affection, and continuity. In the novel Barbara Frischmuth discloses the vulnerability that comes out with social experimentation and the challenges of adults and the child characters.

There arises a question: What is Pathos in Literary Studies?

The term *pathos* comes from the Greek word *pathos* which means an element in experience or in artistic representation evoking pity or compassion. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, pathos is one of the three principal modes of persuasion, alongside ethos and logos. Pathos engages the audiences emotions influencing their judgement affectively. To the modern literary criticism, pathos is seen not only as excessive emotional expression but also as a cautiously created aesthetic effect that causes empathy and reflection. Pathos is very important in stories that showcase disturbed relationships, social oddness, or uncertainty of survival. It often arises through:

- Portrayals of vulnerability and misery
- Dissimilarities between optimism and dissatisfaction
- Emotional uncertainty
- Symbolic places and items
- Minimalistic narrative methods

In the present theory, experts like Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi highlight that the emotions are mixed by relationships and social arrangements. In "Die Ferienfamilie" pathos is not created through isolated dramatic incidences but through these relational changing aspects.

This stylistic limitation deepens pathos. The sufferings in the novel are not dramatized, rather they come up slowly through reflection, dialogue and viewpoints of children. The distinction between soft narrative surface and deep emotional vulnerability has a very powerful sentimental consequence.

Irony, understated humour and psychological understanding are also integral parts of Frischmuths novel. She narrates in such a way, that the situation look on surface very

ordinary, but when the readers delve deeply, they understand the depth of the emotional disturbances particularly amongst the children. The elders find solutions or options but for the children it becomes very difficult to come to terms with the emotional tensions. An expert study by Marie A. Stamp discusses that the readers need to accept uncertainty and doubts, in the literary works of Barbara Frischmuth, particularly in “Die Ferienfamilie”. In this novel specially the satire and emotional intricacy exist together.

The main setting of the novel is a momentary holiday family consisting of persons who are connected through disturbed relationships, divorce, remarriage and previous relationships. This understanding showcases the changes that began to place in 20th Century in Europe, where nuclear family setups are constantly put in question. The holiday home is presented as a smaller version of modern family life. From outside it looks like a normal routine family life, which is flexible, but when analysed it is fluid and creates emotional disturbance. Relationships are temporary, roles are not balanced and fondness and love is subject to discussion. Pathos comes from inconsistency between the strong wish for stability and social testing. According to the study on family structures by Helene Kausl “Die Ferienfamilie” is a perfect example that presents alternative family structure revolving around the protagonist Nora and her extended arrangement.

Nora, the protagonist, represents the unsureness of the modern women. She professes independence and sovereignty but desires emotional strength and security in form of companion. She is unable to commit herself and have any intimate relation with an old friend, Lajosch, whom she meets after long time during the holiday. Nora’s pathos can be seen in her split awareness. She wants to have and maintain her independence but is also vulnerable to being lonely. Her emotional state suggests the feminist anxiety presented in the work of Barbara Frischmuth, where Nora struggles between the required and necessary independence, but she also does not want to leave her need for connection through relationship, partnership, friendship.

Barbara Frischmuth does not present the protagonist Nora as a tragic or jubilant individual; she projects her as an intense normal human being. People who read this novel have sympathy towards her, as they find that her wishes remain without any solution and inconsistent.

Pu and Fenek, two of the three children, play an important role in emotional structure of the novel. They are extremely observant, they observe with caution and intelligence all the happenings around them. They are also sceptical about the newcomers and new influencers around them, whom they test as they fear instability in the family relations might arise due to these newcomers. Their deceptive liveliness hides their profound need for assurance and emotional care.

The children’s distress and helplessness are one of the strongest projections of pathos in the novel. They develop different ways to protect themselves emotionally, as they have

accepted to multiple parental patterns. They are initially unable to trust Nora's friend Lajosch and fear that they will have to go through the stress again, but later on they start trusting him gradually and develop genuine liking.

Here Frischmuth presents the children as sensitive commentators of contradiction of the adults and not passive victims. This sensitive approach brings up the emotional impact, where divorce, that is hidden, and experimentation in relations are revealed.

Lajosch, Nora's old friend, signifies the opportunity of a new (re)start in life. His careful approach and struggle to enter the life of Nora are seen with both struggle and hope. He has a very tricky position: He is neither a proper family member nor is he a total outsider.

The pathos related to Lajosch comes from his helplessness. He asks for closeness but has to defy the emotional safeguards of adults and children in the same way. He is hesitant mixing into the group as it is difficult for him to develop trust again after his earlier experiences.

Through this character, the author shares that emotional repair is possible, but never can be certain.

What also makes this novel "Die Ferienfamilie" a special literary piece is the mixing and interchanging of humour and pathos. Chomic situations where the children test Lajosch and create humour, and at the same time, it also showcases intense emotional anxieties and fear. This interchanging and mixing do not make the novel too sentimental. Irony brings the distance, where the readers can reflect on the social and psychological settings underlying the emotions. In this way, the pathos is also understood in depth and not minimized. Frischmuth successfully brings out the emotions, reality, and fear, which are too strong when not presented carefully, in a very subtle manner with the use of humour.

The author uses a vacation setting as an important and symbolic arrangement. A vacation is the time when one tries to do everything that is not routine, such as leisure, hobbies, exploring new things, and possibilities. But contrary to that the vacation house in the novel is presented as a temporary lab to test new emotional, social, and psychological structures and forms, where coexistence can be made possible.

In this novel, pathos comes out through the soft portrayal of emotional susceptibility in a modern patchwork family, a concept of family that is made for a short period of time. Nora's uncertainty, the children's fear and insecurity, and Lajosch's combination of reluctance and hope show the basic emotional need of security, a sense of belonging, fearlessness, and peace

Frischmuth uses a very simple narrative style to present the most difficult, traumatic situations in a modern world through irony, humour, and avoiding sentimentality. The novel shows that in the modern world, family structures are changing, bringing

independence, liberating minds in many forms, but also bringing instability in emotions, especially amongst children. The novel also brings out the continuous urge for continuity.

Pathos is intensified through temporary nature. The concept of family exists in the modern world for a short period, highlighting the breakability of relationships formed within it. This condition reflects the temporary quality of the modern world itself.

Finally, “Die Ferienfamilie,” according to me, discloses pathos as a medium of understanding the human state in the modern world. Through unfussy but emotionally resounding narration, the author presents the universal struggle to make and prepare meaningful, successful relationships and bonding in a world where traditions and certainties in relations are rarely seen.

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