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الصفحة	فهرس البحوث	ت
1 - 13	Estimate of cold plasma on antibiotic resistance and biofilm formation in Staphylococcus aureus isolated from clinical cases Zainab Sabah Fahim      Majid Kadhim Aboud Al Shibly	1
14 - 23	The Subjugation of Bodies, Gender, and Biopolitics in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero Ali Mohammed Hasan	2
24 - 33	A Comparative study between Boundary and Finite Element Techniques for solving Inverse Problems Farah A.Saeed      Sarah F. Ghafel	3
34 - 47	Postcolonial Feminism and Political Injustice in Huda Barakat's The Tiller of Waters Afrah Abdul Jabbar AbdulSahib	4
48 - 60	Cordia Myxa Fruit Effect on Bacterial Adhesion to Heat-Cured Acrylic Denture Bases Noor R. Taha      Shorouq M. Abass	5
61 - 74	Prevalence and detection of Yersinia enterocolitica isolated from different clinical cases Baneen Maan Kareem      Hadaf Mahdi Kadhim	6
75 - 81	Molecular investigation of biofilm genes in Staphylococcus epidermidis Lamyaa Jabbar Abosaooda      Baheeja Abees Hmood Al-Khalidi	7
82 - 101	Salivary Thiocyanate Levels and Buccal Mucosal Cells Changes in E-cigarette Users and Traditional Smokers Mufeed Muhammad Jawad      Yas, Layla Sabri	8
102 - 142	The Metaphorical Representation of Coronavirus in Iraqi Newspaper Cartoons Hayder Tuama Jasim Al-Saedi	9
143 - 151	The Narrative Synthesis of Human Frailty and the Social Attributes of the Singaporean Society in Philip Jeyaretnam's Abraham's Promise" Rana Ali Mhoodar	10
152 - 161	Development of Thiadiazole and Schiff Base Derivatives: Synthesis, Spectral Characterization, and Antibacterial Activity Assessment Doha kareem Hussien      Rafid Kais Kmal      Haitham Kadhim Dakheel	11
162-172	Translating voices from the Tigris: The American Granddaughter as a case study Falah Hussein Hanoon Al-Sari	12
173 - 186	Synthesis and Characterization of Conductive Copolymer/MWCNT Nanocomposite via Chemical and Interfacial Polymerization Hajer A. Hussein      Mohammed Q Mohammed	13
187 - 205	Synthesis, diagnosis, and study of the electrical properties of some new iron-polymer complexes containing Schiff bases and study of their thermal stability Abduljaleel Muhammad Abduljaleel      Nadia Ashour Hussein Jassim Mohammed Saleh	14

206 - 221	Reptition in Surah Ghafir, Fussilt, and Ash-shura An - Applied Study Qusay Tawfiq Hantoush	15
222 - 233	The short story in the literature of Said Hashosh, with 'The White Rainbow' as a model. Rabab Hussain Muneer	16
234 - 249	Aesthetic functions in men's fabric and fashion designs Asaad Ati Halil Saad Al-Moussawi	17
250 - 264	Techniques and Methods of Deviation in the Poetry of Kazem Al-Hajjaj and Mohammed Al-Khafaji Imad Hameed Nassrah Al-Musaedi Danesh Mohammadi Rakati Yusuf Nazari	18
265 - 279	Assimilation and Its Impact on Morphological Structure A Phonological and Morphological Study of Poetic Samples from Various Historical Periods Suad Abbas Sayyid	19
280 - 302	The Degree to Which Middle School Mathematics Teachers Possess Creative Teaching Skills Saif Karim Muslim	20
303 - 317	Plantinga's Epistemological Justification for General Beliefs Sajjad Saleh Shenyar Abbas Mahdavi Mostafa Farhoudi Mohammad Keyvanfar	21
318 - 333	The effect of the situation on leaving out the forgotten non-metaphorical object in the Holy Qur'an Yassin Taher Ayez	22
334 - 349	Ambiguities and Their Role in Constructing Stylistic Connotation: A Reading in Ahmed Zeki Abo Shadi's Alyanbu'a Poetry Rania Ali Munim	23
350 - 368	The reality of Primary School Teachers' Practice of Social Sciences to The Contemporary Professional Criteria Qasim Jaleel Zayir Al-Ghurabi Ramla Jabbar Khadhm Al-Saedi	24
369 - 383	Rhythm techniques in the poetry of Hasab Al-Sheikh Jaafar Mayyada AbduLameer ISmael	25
384 - 393	Youm AlHashir in Holy Quran: Surat Alansan as A Case Study Ali Howair Swailem	26
394 - 408	Criminal Policy for Addressing Crimes of Disclosure of Occupational Secrets and Violations of Messages and Telegrams (Comparative Study) Mustafa Shakir Hussein	27

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## "The Narrative Synthesis of Human Frailty and the Social Attributes of the Singaporean Society in Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise*"

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the issue of human frailty in Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995). It attempts to demonstrate how human frailty is synthesized by three inextricable factors, namely, disappointment, family disintegration, and loss of idealism. Therefore, the study analyzes the novel's protagonist weakness as an indication of human frailty that exemplifies a collective representation of the Singaporean social life. It follows a qualitative methodology of the selected novel's characters and narrative structure. Therefore, the discussion of disappointment is reinforced by interpreting the protagonist's feelings of despondency. Furthermore, it highlights family disintegration and loss of idealism as crucial factors of human frailty depicted in the novel. As such, the study unravels these social impasses via identifying the Singaporean society portrayed through Jeyaretnam's fictional setting. Thus, the study's theoretical side is enhanced by scrutinizing the narrative attributes of the Singaporean settings and characters.

**Keywords:** Family disintegration, Human Frailty, Jeyaretnam, Loss of idealism, Narrative, Society.

### 1. Introduction:

Human frailty has different and diverse meanings due to its common discussion in anthropological studies (Gratzer 62). Human frailty is associated with some kind of defects in the human personality. It reflects the literary characters' loss of self-confidence since they could not cope with their social surroundings. In some cases, it is caused by wishful thinking or imaginary craziness that makes the characters live in loneliness as they are not able to emulate the other people in the same society. The analysis of human frailty is deduced from the way the characters are motivated by weakness in their personality, which appears in their decision making or social interaction. In essence, literary works offer various fictional characters that suffer from this weakness. However, they follow a defense mechanism to justify their failure that represents the essence of their personal meekness (Toms 86). For this reason, authors provide meticulous details about the personal and subjective traits of their characters because they exemplify the

authorial aim to reflect these characters' personal reality. Human Frailty, moreover, originates in the personal self-evaluation, especially when the characters tend to behave in a purposeful way, yet, they could not fulfill their wishes or purposes. As a result, a great gap between them and reality; and, consequently, they become detached from their intentional purposes.

There are several factors of human frailty. Nevertheless, there is a common consensus that it comes out of the characters' personal experience (Haines 131). That is, it originates in their personality. Here, there are external and internal factors of human frailty. On the one hand, the external factors relate to the social circumstances that do not meet the expectation of the characters. On the other hand, the internal factors of human frailty, as we have just argued, relate to the characters' personal experience (Rupnik 47). Sometimes, it refers to the human inability to make decisions at critical situations. In other cases, it includes weak positions of a person or a group of people who cannot cope with the wave of humanity progression. In this way, human frailty is a kind of lack of strength to achieve personal or community's purposes (Fowers 109). In many cases, human frailty relates to the characters' weakness, and they become responsible for their personal failure. In terms of (Jasim 26) for authors and poets, society serves as a model. To put it another way, the authors primarily aim to portray their society's reality in their works, thereby confirming the intimate connection between literature and society. In the current study, we will focus on three factors of human frailty, namely, disappointment, family disintegration, and loss of idealism as factors of weakness in the protagonist of Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995).

## 2. Literature Review:

Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) is studied from different critical perspectives. Michael Bodden traces the historical dimension of the novel in order to explore Jeyaretnam's the influence of the Japanese colonialism upon the Singaporean society. He argues that the novel is an authentic historical recount of how the Singaporean native culture is deeply influenced by the presence of the Japanese foreign culture which had left its apparent impact upon the native culture. Strikingly, the Singaporean individuality exemplifies this foreign influence since people are profoundly affected by cultural assimilation; and the "novel presents history through the lens of an individual's perceptions, and illuminates the life-account of an individual character with the light of actual historical developments" (125). In this sense, Bodden attempts to explore the core conceptual insights of cultural assimilation created by the novel's fascinating narrative structure. He concludes that the novel embraces an anti-historical attitudes against the cultural and colonial residuals in the Singaporean society; and these residuals could be mitigated.

Shanthini Pillai and Sharenee Paramasivam, furthermore, approach the novel's treatment of cultural identity. They contend that the novel comprise the Malaysian and Singaporean Indian identities. They add that these identities embody the essence of Indian Christian beliefs with regard to the colonial diaspora. Moreover, Pillai and Paramasivam claim that Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) incarnates the imaginary attributes of colonial diaspora since it results in drastic changes in the Malaysian and Singaporean Indian identities. As such, Jeyaretnam uses

the novel's fictional characters to achieve portray these identities in the light of Christian backgrounds; Pillai and Paramasivam write: "characters are Singaporean Indians grounded in the Christian faith. In each of the separate encounters between Abraham and the aforementioned characters, we witness the pageantry of the interpellation of Indian Christian identity politics as discussed in the section before" (78). Being so, Pillai's and Paramasivam's study contributes to the understanding of the Indian identity in diasporic places, namely, Malaysia and Singapore. Thus, the study's finding is the discovery of identity syncretism in terms of diaspora and Christianity which play crucial role in shaping diasporic people's cultural identity.

Though these studies relate to the topic of my research, we will follow an in-depth thematic analysis of human frailty discussed in the selected novel. Unlike, the aforementioned studies, my discussion does not focus on identity and its religious and ethnic contexts. It sheds light on the by which the Jeyaretnam approaches the cultural and social attributes of human frailty in relation to disappointment, family disintegration, and loss of idealism.

### **3. Methodology:**

Human frailty and culture embody a distinctive duality after the World War II. Human frailty has an extricable view concerning human lives and existence. It accentuates the condition of the nations that were severely harmed by the societies. As a matter of fact, the great societies, and indeed their destructive traditions, negatively influenced people. People could not imagine their future because they were still threatened by calamitous, especially the colonial matters. Colonialism, for example, hindered any optimistic aspiration concerning the future. Culture plays an efficient role in the human thought due to the key circumstances representing the nexus of society and culture. Culture is fundamentally the core of any society's appropriation of political trend. Human frailty demonstrates how culture and society are intertwined midst the intricate political hypnoses. For all that, human frailty levitates politics as a potential structure of supreme culture and society. Social fragmentation would, inexorably, empower the existing political regimes to procure behemoth military ammunition. Here, the concept human frailty emphasizes tremendous transitional culture as the main impetus of postmodern insights projected in literary works.

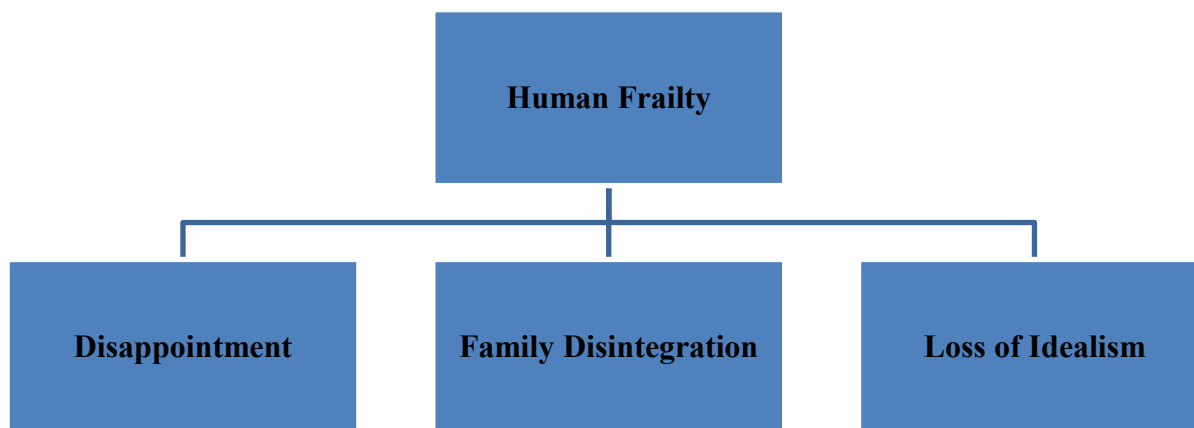
Furthermore, multiculturalism is quite fitting to conceive the culture in relation to the concept of human frailty. The concept elucidates multiculturalism vitality that sustains society; whereby multiculturalism leads to subjective identity; and hereinafter, self-esteem. Identity and self-esteem reinforces social political regimes to appreciate the conditions of human beings; and they could fulfill their needs. In doing so, they can improve their power by gaining people's support. As people have certain degree of self-esteem, they endorse their political regimes since they get respect them. In other words, their culture helped them to achieve their identity. Culture, in turn, gets people's support to accomplish their interests.

Human frailty, similarly, approaches the relationship between people and political regimes in the light of traditional culture. People are susceptible to some cultural impasses. As a result, they depend on their political regimes to exalt their social conditions. The concept of human frailty divided the characters and social classes into public and private divisions of social and political

system. People are argued as the private subjectivities that need the regimes' support; and these regimes are the public part. He acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between people and their political proponents in the copious purviews of political dominance. The concept of human frailty evinced diverse boom in various scientific fields. Yet, there had been a prevailing thought that some science is ridiculous. In a striking way, the concept of human frailty features culture that played in influential role in turning imagination into reality. As such, culture and science go concomitantly with social elevation of cultural prosperity. In respect to this, new cultural branches came into prominence.

Moreover, the concept of human frailty tackles the literary trends affected by the social exuberance. As such, the lurking reason of the appearance of new literary forms in postcolonial literature. Nonetheless, postcolonial writers relied on their modern precursors to establish new avant-garde forms in the light of post-colonialism (Marks 35). On the whole, culture contrived the basic human relationships in postcolonial literature due to the necessity of expressing people's needs and raising public awareness regarding the new changes in the world. Therefore, the political momentum stimulated writers to project the genuine spirit of postcolonial humanistic vanguards in the insights of the concept of human frailty (Bailey 14). Postcolonial culture, furthermore, is conveyed in the context of the fictional works' plot; and it ascribes the appearance of this postcolonial genre to the theory of power forged by contemporary social trends. It parades culture and society as contiguous i.e., it exemplifies the postcolonial and social aspiration of having perfection.

The concept of identity, when viewed from different textual points of view, offers genuine meanings about the behaviors of people in their national communities (Gallois 28). In Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995), the ideas of human frailty is going to be further elaborated in close relation to disappointment, family disintegration, and loss of idealism in order to explore the author's terse depiction of social independence as a means of avoiding human frailty depicted in the selected novel. In this regard, the figure below illustrates the interrelationships among these factors:



**Figure: 3.1 Disappointment, Family Disintegration, and Loss of Idealism**

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion:

##### 4.1 Disappointment and Human Frailty:

Disappointment is an obvious factor of human frailty because it highlights a person in a depressed state (Lindenfield 119). It comes out of the deteriorated personal self-confidence which is very necessary for developing the literary characters. It indicates the internal personal state that does not benefit from the society or people. Here, disappointed people have personal defects in their characters depressive that they could not be aware of society's or people's reality. On that account, they develop false consciousness about the society and the surrounding people. Human frailty, accordingly, manifests in the characters' false perception of such reality; and they become different from people or the common social norms. Similarly, in Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995), the protagonist, Abram, feels disappointed at different situations, especially when he recalls his previous love for Rose. As a matter of fact, he thinks that all people are good; and he could satisfy his love easily. This is because he still lives in the state of wishful thinking to be a great man. For this reason, does not succeed in making a parallel between his realistic life and personal needs. The protagonist is also disappointed when he is only haunted by past negative experience that were not successful as he hoped. He could not escape from his obsession with achieving his goals when he was young, and he now confronts the bitter reality that is devoid of such promising future. One last indication of his disappointment is his surrender to reconcile with reality as he grows mature. Such disappointment, suitably originates in a weakness in his personality as he simply believes that he could fulfill his ambition peacefully and easily. Later on, he discovers the bitter reality that there is social rivalry among people to be the best by gaining luxurious life. This appears when he meets people who only look for satisfying their needs and desires without regard to perfect academic life. He wonders why people are so confused; and they do not have plans for their future: "They don't grow up on a steady diet . . . so they lack a clear reference point - Jaffna cooking, Cantonese, whatever. It's just a jumble . . . Thai, French, hamburgers. No wonder everyone is so confused" (57). In this way, Jeyaretnam portrays Abraham's human frailty in terms of personality weakness that takes the form of disappointment. Abram does not cope with the real impression of social life and people's habitual desires. He detaches himself from them by thinking that academic life and political attitudes are key survival tools for his life. Hence, he has such personal weakness in his personality that culminates in disappointment as he could not previously get along with people and society.

Jeyaretnam's writing dexterity embodies experiences undergone by Singaporean people during interment. In general, his writing styles are precise presenting critical themes via erudite narrative expressions. In so doing, he copes with the cultural requirements regarding the contemporary literary vogues. Reading Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) provides a significance of tracing these styles which, presumably, would illustrate the way by which he tells the stories of real events and people in a fictional plot. Moreover, understanding these styles might explain the diverse facades of Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995); whereby narrative

descriptions represent the treatment of disappointment in the plot that is extremely limited to human frailty exemplified in the theme of disappointment; and how the plot's fictional women seek their identity amidst several problems caused by such disappointment.

#### **4.2 Family Disintegration and Human Frailty:**

Family disintegration is another factor of human frailty caused by the sense of "aversion" (Abu Jweid 7). This is due to the fact that the fictional characters confront certain obstacles in dealing with other people in the scope of family and its members (Farrell 78). This is because family members feel that they do not have a sense of belonging to family because of some problems. In Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995), this factor relates to Abraham's sister, Mercy, who is stubborn. Jeyaretnam depicts human frailty by means of unravelling Abraham's personality weakness created by his negligence and lack of care for his wife, son, and sister. Another reference to family disintegration is Abraham's stay away from his beloved wife, Rani, whom he loves so much. However his job – as a teacher of Latin – distracts him from being close to his wife. Therefore, work makes him estranged from his family belonging and close contact with wife or his son Victor Isaac. He only has a direct contact with the external social world: "I don't understand all these new restaurants, all these new tastes. No wonder young people are so confused today" (57). In fact, Abram incurs human frailty upon his personality because he neglects and does not take care of his family. He is obsessed with his job and idealism. This results in a great gap between him and his family members, especially his, wife, son, and sister. Therefore, the sense of human frailty relates his inability to make a balance between his personal family life and job. Consequently, his character's weakness lies in his indifferent attitude to his beloved wife, son, and sister who are very necessary for his supporting his familial and social status.

This relation lays the premise of the novel's treatment of human frailty. Therefore, this cultural encounter is an indication of the characters' ethnical identity that is greatly affected by family disintegration. This is due to the fact that the author is from a Singaporean tackled in a chaotic atmosphere. Such social background exemplifies Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) exemplifies the theme of family disintegration through different phases, especially when they interact with other characters. The protagonist faces the problem of family disintegration and they are evident in the novel's fictional events. He is not like the other characters who do not play any effective role in the story. Consequently, this bitter experience, alongside personal interactions with people in the same social circumstances, leads to family disintegration as well as its hindrance of independent and mature personality.

#### **4.3 Loss of Idealism and Human Frailty:**

Loss of idealism is a type of human frailty as it denotes people's inability to achieve goals or plans (Franck 46). Furthermore, human frailty is one integral role in shaping the individuals' "identity" (Abu Jweid 530). Abram is very ideal, and he holds many promising political attitudes that make him very optimistic. Furthermore, he is very ambitious, and he wants to instill in his students the sense of determination stamina. However, his dreams and great expectations collide

with reality. He could not understand people's purpose in life. As such, he thinks that his academic abilities would reinforce his position as a great man. On the other hand, he still does not know that he lives in a contradictory condition since he does not realize the true reality of society and people who only seek satisfaction and personal contentment only in material pleasures. At this point, he recognizes reality and exaggerates saying that idealism is lost since many centuries ago. He loses his idealism to be a proud citizen, and he could not get along with reality. This is because such reality is devoid of any sense of idealism, it only pursues fame, power, reputation, and money: "I am not nor will ever be truly free. Why is it that I still feel this is a battle I might have won, when surely it was lost centuries ago?" (40). At this situation, Abram gradually realizes the contradiction between his idealism and reality. Such contradiction, in fact, is the incarnation of his personality weakness which exemplifies his embodiment of human frailty depicted in the plot; and literary works typically portray human frailty within the characters "intersubjective" qualities (Al-Fartoosi *et al.* 4466).

The protagonist's human frailty, therefore, is constructed by his loss of idealism. To clarify, he believes that he lives in an ideal world full of opportunity and self-development. At the beginning, he thinks that he could archive his goals by being ideal when he teaches people. This is because he feels that he lacks something in his personality. As a result, he wants to compensate this lack and frailty in his personality by doing his best to be a supreme example for his students and people. However, he does not consider the negative effect of too much aspiration because the society does not resemble his ambition. Consequently, when he interacts with people, he could not figure out their goals. This means that he has a personal weakness, and he wants to empower it, yet, he fails. This also means that he lives in a society is seemingly devoid of idealism. In this manner, he leads human frailty experience since he is detached from reality that radically differs from his expectation. He interacts with people on the grounds of idealism and great humanistic sense depending on his academic background. But he confronts people who pursue fame, power, reputation, and money. This certainly makes him lose his stout belief in academic idealism as a way of enhancing his social position. Being so, idealism is a kind of weakness inherent in his personality. By time, it becomes a defect in his personality; and he fails to archive his goals since human frailty affects the "psyches" of people (Al-Fartoosi 33).

In Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995), the characters undergo the experience of the loss of idealism. Accordingly, they become a victim of their inferiority complex since they bitterly meet the problem of loss of idealism since it is very vital for their social stability. The novel treats the social poor traditions of loss of idealism due to the deteriorating social stability and its negative influence upon the future of the fictional characters. To explain, the author tries to expose the defects of the traditional social system in Singapore.

In Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995), the experience of the loss of idealism is portrayed via the characters' social conditions concerning their relatives and kinship. As such, they neglect their relatives and they do not get along with them. They practice their powerful superiority over them. The novel only shed-light on their future through the theme of loss of

idealism. The novel embodies the notion of loss of idealism in narrative fictional discourses. Being so, the author's belief lies in the fact that the Singaporean people cannot gain self-independence which can be maintained and empowered by obliterating the presence of human frailty in the entire society.

## 5. Conclusion:

This study has focused on human frailty in Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by discussing three interrelated human factors. The factors of human frailty, discussed in the course of this essay, are disappointment, family disintegration, and loss of idealism which are tackled in the novel. By explaining disappointment, the essay examined the protagonist's social state when he feels that his great goals and achievements could not be easily fulfilled. The essay further identified family disintegration as a product of his sense of non-belonging as he suffers from his stubborn sister and his nature of his work that makes him stay away from his wife and home. The third factor of human frailty was deduced by exploring loss of idealism. Abram has ideal political attitudes that have influenced his personality since youth. Yet, they could not cope with the current status quo, and he begins to feel that he lives in a vicious circle when his political idealism is not regarded well. Therefore, the discussion of human frailty has identified the way by which the protagonist develops personal failure that does not match his ambition and aspiration. Such factors are inherently related to his interaction with his social milieu. However, he collides with the social circumstances that do not meet his expectation to be ideal thoughts. Disappointment for example, is a feature of his native beliefs in people's ability to make him a great person. Family disintegration, furthermore, is a kind of human frailty because it is caused by his negligence and lack of care. As for loss of idealism, it is also a kind of human frailty as it indicates his loss to be a great politician or an academician. Therefore, these factors are the core of weakness in his personality.

The paper has also focused on human relationships in Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by discussing the interconnection among the novel's characters. Human relationships relate to the social ties among people who interact with each other and share the same life conditions. As for relationships, the novel deals with severe struggles that reveal the advancement of society towards modernity. Furthermore, it includes direct references to the British colonial mandate when the colonizers interacted with the natives, which is a clear indication of human relationships. Human relationships connects to the protagonist, Abram, who searches for stability and independent lifestyle. This is true to his previous passionate love for Rose whom he could not marry. One last feature of human relationships is the protagonist's political attitudes. He has different political points of view, which makes him vehement to other people; and finally he loses his job due to such attitudes.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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