



CELEBRATION OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY IN ANNE TYLER'S *CLOCK DANCE*

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ABSTRACT



Anne Tyler, a well-acclaimed 'Southern' writer, strongly influenced by Eudora Welty, living in Baltimore and known for her fiction dealing with family relationships and marital ties paints a remarkable image of women's unity and empathy among themselves in her novel *Clock Dance* (2018). In order to pursue a reason and break free from the monotonous clutches of her everyday life, the protagonist Willa, in her early sixties takes the biggest decision as soon as she gets a call for help from son's ex-girlfriend's neighbor. She is asked to come for assistance because Denise witnessed an accident and her daughter and dog need to be looked after. Without knowing anything about the family, Willa sets out immediately for Baltimore to help. Her stay with Denise and Cheryl shows an impeccable bond that is formed among the women showing solidarity and gleeful enjoyment forgetting the patriarchal framework for the while.

Keywords: Anne Tyler, *Clock Dance*, Female bonding, Patriarchy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The life of a woman upon marriage changes drastically when compared with that of a man. A man gets the privilege of staying with his kin and maintaining the relations as he was doing before. Yet for a woman the case involves a shift with her move from one family into another. The woman's entry into a territory where the man already exerts his power leaves her in a submissive role. Socio economic research in the United States, for instance indicates that "women represent nearly half of the U.S. workforce...[yet] they still devote more time than men on average to housework and child care and fewer hours to paid work, although the gap has narrowed significantly over time" (Parker). This dominant social structure ensures that men and women occupy distinct spaces in the public and the private spheres.

Anne Tyler, an acclaimed and prolific American novelist deals with the ways in which women function in the public and private spheres within an overall patriarchal system. Tyler produces strong images of characters that seem to be life like and so open in their emotions that the reader feels deeply engrossed in their stories. Baltimore, the main setting for Tyler's novels, despite being real seems like a fictional town. Life here appears to be monopolized by certain characters who are barely concerned with the civil structure that exists around them. Belonging to the Quaker community, Tyler's accentuation of the ubiquitous influence of the "aesthetic of simplicity" and "impulse towards democracy and egalitarianism" gets unveiled through her works (Bail 15). This feature of subtlety can be discerned in her novels especially in the female characters that remain bound to the homely setting and look for their freedom while confined to the familiar milieu. Her novels are home based where money matters are usually not discussed and household life is depicted consistent with the contemporary realities.

Tyler describes sympathetically how her female protagonists within the oppressive structure, at some stage gain the ability to break free of the ties and look for a meaning in life that stood absent after

marriage. These protagonists accept the ways of the contemporary woman they meet on their journey and for the time being bunch together shoulder to shoulder creating an environment secure from oppressive control. The bond may be the final result of the association and its effects or it may develop its own strength even as the association itself evolves. The resulting female solidarity in Anne Tyler's fiction is an affirmation of liberation from patriarchal conventions. As Beauvoir argues, "women's exploitation is historical Liberation must be women's work. It is not a matter of appealing to men to give women their freedom... a matter of women discovering their solidarity..." (Bergoffen and Burke). In the novel *Clock Dance*, through the lead character Willa and her link with Denise and Cheryl, Tyler develops such solidarity; with Willa involving herself in their routine while overlooking her husband Peter - emancipating herself from the prosaic everyday concerns.

2. MAJOR TRANSITION AFTER MARRIAGE AND ABSORPTION INTO GENDER ROLES

At the age of twenty-one, with a scholarship and a bright future ahead, Willa decides to accept her boyfriend Derek's proposal and gets married. She then travels to California sets aside all her aspirations. Her decision seemed relevant to her depending upon the "structure [to which she belonged that] lasted from 1830s to 1980, when the US Census no longer automatically denominated the male as head of the household...[but he was presumed as the head naturally]" (Bernard, 1981). Derek assumes the role of the provider and Willa, who had intended to finish her degree after marriage, shifts from this thought after her first pregnancy is declared. For twenty years Willa continues to lead a routine patriarchal life that she conveniently adopts to be a good mother to her children and an obedient wife.

Derek's untimely death in his forties leaves Willa bereft and anxious about the future including her graduating sons. Marriage had put her under some bonds that forced her to be a conventionally 'good' housewife, whilst as a mother she forgot about her 'real' self. The bereavement, and the



departure of her children to whom she dedicated half of her life, led her to confusion about what her existence meant. While playing the role of a good mother, "she was the only woman she met whose primary purpose was to be taken for granted" (93). Initially, having a family gives a woman an identity; she feels she has built her world and no one else is needed. Yet much later the revelation comes to a halt as what happens to Willa when she discovers she was in fact robbed off her identity.

3. REMARRIAGE AND DOMINANCE BY MEN THROUGHOUT LIFE

In her work *The Widows' Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America*, Vivian Bruce Conger builds on the Anglo-American perspective which notes that a widow loses "half of her life" after her husband's death and remains the sole caretaker of herself and her children (28). She claims it is this widow's remarriage that can "restore order" in her life again (28). For a woman, her husband is a pillar of strength and a key decision-maker of the family. His death leads to ill effects on the physical and mental health of the wife. Willa's predicament after Derek's passing is observed in her condition as she feels that "with a husband you could turn and fling an arm across him, set your cheek against his back, and nestle into sleep again. Alone she could only reflect, and worry, and wince at something she said yesterday and dread something she had to do tomorrow" (93-94).

At first, the lack of a husband seems like an opportunity for Willa, as she presupposes that she has freedom and time to pursue her dreams that she had left behind, but these she lets go of this idea. The sudden absence of emotional support and the fear of living an isolated life were haunting for Willa and could have been one of the major reasons why she remarried, and this time to a man eleven years elder to her. Peter, just like Derek had dominance in the relationship and lived on his conditions but Willa again dissolved in the similar pattern where she had to move along with him "[leaving] behind an ESL teaching job that she loved" (110).

The age-old traditions still remain where women were believed to devote themselves in

service of men, not receiving anything from the other end. This is extensively discussed in *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir, where she cites Balzac in the chapter "The Woman in Love" and says,

Among the first rate, the man's life is fame, woman's life is love. Woman is man's equal only when she makes her life a perpetual offering, as that of man is perpetual action. (632)

Willa sticks to this trend without ever questioning the dominant role of patriarchy in her life that had never allowed her to feel and live freely. When she receives a call at the age of sixty-one and is asked for help as her son's ex-girlfriend Denise was shot and her daughter Cheryl and dog need to be looked after. Here onwards we witness change in the character of Willa and her willingness to be the master of her own life for once. She begins to plan her travel but Peter maintains his power on all important issues and claims it as his right to take all decisions related to his wife. It's a journey for Willa in which she needs to be independent for once in her lifetime and find her worth and here too Peter tags along with her.

4. INDEPENDENCE FROM PATRIARCHAL CLUTCHES AND BUILDING UP OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY

In her autobiographical work, *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir mentions an incident during which she was strolling in a park with Sartre and says

There was a kind of balustrade which served as a back-rest, a little way out from the wall; and in the cagelike space behind it a cat was miaowing.... a woman came up to the bench, a paper in one hand, and produced some scraps of meat. These she fed to the cat, stroking it tenderly the while. It was at this moment that Sartre said: 'Let's sign a two-year lease.' (23)

There is no connection between the woman who came to feed the cat and Beauvoir, but she still feels an inner connection with the lady when she sees the affection she showed for the cat. At the other hand, Sartre remains incompetent in this context, and all he utters is his tinkering decision about their



relationship. Beauvoir's conscious observation of the woman shows "herself as the other who perceives the response of another to need, and in so doing, she participates in that same response to the other... contrast to the self absorbed presence of Sartre" (Ward 37). Beauvoir believes herself to be the 'other' in contrast to the male counterpart. She feels a sense of empathy shared along with another woman. This creates an imperceptible bond which develops the concept of female solidarity among the ladies.

Willa wished to have grandchildren but the fact that her sons may never have been going to settle made her sorrowful. When she travels to Baltimore, her experience with Cheryl and Denise instantly creates a deep connection between them. Cheryl mixes up with Willa and considers her as grandmother. Willa also feels a strong sense of responsibility towards her. For a nine-year-old, Cheryl was a smart child capable of being by herself but Willa treated her as a kid and wanted to protect her. When planning for supper with Sean, her only concern remains that she may have to take Cheryl along "if Denise is not home by then" (148).

A wife is not supported by her husband when it comes to pursuing her independence and self-development, while in effect she is absolutely vigilant in helping him in his goals. Willa was aware that "marriage was often a matter of dexterity" (162). She felt that "she'd spent half her life apologizing for some man's behaviour" (187). Arriving to Baltimore and living by her choice welled up a new courage in Willa. Watching Cheryl's favourite series "Space Junk" with her, Willa finds a perpetuating resemblance between the two women that distinguishes them from the male partner as Peter continues to receive texts and is indulged in work. Cheryl responds with a passing remark "I hate when people get texts" and Willa identifies with her easily saying "me too" (159). She lets Peter leave Baltimore alone and feels "...very light hearted...it seemed strange without [him], but at least she could stay out as long as she liked without worrying she was neglecting him" (204). She gets so engaged with Denise and Cheryl that when Denise says she has a life of her own and is going to be unable to take care of her for too long, Willa responds "not really...I

don't" (187). She was living according to her wishes for the first time and she had no intention of going back to Peter any time soon.

She finds a daughter in Denise that she longed for after seeing her sons' wavering disposition, and Denise too sees a mother figure in her and says "Why, Willa, I'll be your daughter any old time" (256). When Denise says that "you're just going to... keep on being my chauffeur a while longer" (262), this idea regales Willa and she's glad to be counted as a worthy person in the life of someone during their hard times. She helps Denise walk with her cast, prepares food, and enjoys daily hours of Cheryl's favourite show. She hadn't changed her attitude and repeated the everyday tasks of life but here the feeling was one of fulfilment and joy, her definition of adventure was the warmth she found in the company of these two ladies.

5. CONCLUSION

Margaret Fuller suggests in her work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a woman should not rely on men for their permission and stop "being influenced by them" (108). They should...

retire within themselves, and explore the ground work of life till they find their peculiar secret. Then...come forth again, renovated and baptized... (108)

When a woman moves beyond her limits, she is more likely to embrace her identity, putting current relationships behind to enter a world where she feels fit. And she can step back into those relationships after knowing what suits her best, as a stronger personality without immersing herself in them.

When Willa prepares to leave Baltimore, "she begins to look at everyone here with an eye to losing them.... Denise's dark—blond hair, shining like bands of satin... Cheryl's dear, soft, pudgy cheeks... she dwelt on them, committing them to memory" (263). Denise never thought she would leave them one day, and had even planned for her to "go on living in the guest room forever.... you and Cheryl all lovey-dovey, with your private secrets" (281). Willa wants to stay longer but she knows she has to return to her real life where she belongs. As Delia in *Ladder*



of Years, after getting her retirement for a while and realizing her actual place is her husband's house, returns to her hometown Baltimore. Similarly, Willa also returns to Peter having found her redemption among strangers. During this time she realized her significance and learned to value herself above all and ideally in any male-controlled world she will continue to do so too.

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