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Time Of Loss And Dismay: Dislocation, Disconnection And Distortion Of Family Values In Tyler's Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant

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Abstract

The paper intends to investigate the concepts of sex, gender and motherhood at a time when the Dick-Jane principle of an idealized society began to fade. Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant questions the place of a father at the dinner table. He no longer stands to support the family or look into the emotional and the financial needs of a family. As a result, the mother has to take the place of a father. The novel explores the changing roles with the changing times and its effects on the present day American family. To Tyler, the family would begin to become a unit of nothingness in case its members do not come together to put together the broken pieces of disintegration.

Key Words: Dinner- Sex- Gender- World Wars.

INTRODUCTION

Anne Tyler, a writer of from the conservative Calvinist matrix has always given primacy to the institution of a family. All her novels evolve around the structure, the changing texture of American families especially after the second world wars. It goes without saying that marriage and family are the most integral part of any society. They square the circle by bringing together the social and moral values to a more common ground. Although many of the speculative fictions and research has predicted the end of family as an institution, it was only been a hypothesis because family as a unit transcends time and has continued to offer support, in terms of physical, emotional and social terms to all and sundry. In other words, they have been existent since time out of mind.

A child learns his basic life lessons primarily from his family. He or she is taught to become equipped for the battle of life when he is instructed by the members of his family. Tyler therefore wants her readers to come out of the fractured, dysfunctional families which offer no hope and scope for individual

or familial progress. After having relocated to Baltimore and having permanently settled there, all her novels make the place as her regional milieu. All the novels of Tyler discuss the importance of tracing one's own identity from a large family. As a writer, she is an ardent observer of families and make her novels more captivating by introducing the changing patterns and shades of relationships which come to primacy as an effect of culture vulture problems. All the problems in a society spring from incompatible marriages whose by products are dysfunctional families and their repercussions. Tyler is strictly against the most common and the most oft repeated myth that problems surface only after a woman comes to a family. She wants to show the other side of the coin where women have proven their mettle in understanding and acclimatizing the various problems men confront in a family and try to help them get over it. In her own words, she writes because it gives her the ability to be herself and transform into a many characters beginning with a blank paper and ending up with a well-knit plot. Her first stint into writing crept in when she was a student at Duke University. One of her professors Reynolds Price gave her moral and intellectual support to write. She then began and the rest is history. In one of her interviews she has recorded the reminiscences of her writing at her undergrads and says,

Reynolds Price's special gift to me was his encouragement, and his enthusiasm about writing in general. He used to sit cross-legged on his desk and in a great gust of boyish

Zest (he was about 23 at the time) read his own stories aloud to us the class, and then we'd all rush off to write ourselves. I don't know why, but that method worked far better than any of the more conventional ones. Also, he more or less donated an agent to me when I was a senior, at a time when I didn't even know what an agent was for, and I've been grateful ever afterward for that. (34)

The primary clash between the ancient and the modern family structures arose after the two world wars. The Dick and Jane primer was considered the Bible for all American family. It meant the father being the bread winner of the family, the mother almost always stayed at home and the children had their space and opportunity to discuss their problems with their parents at the dinner table. The system of Dick-Jane familial archetype had been suspended for a while with the wars ensuing. It was expected for the men to be at the war front and the women had to temporarily become the earning members of the family. When they became the heads of house hold they no longer wore their traditional gender bender hats but rather reversed gender roles. After the world wars, the attitude to bring back the same Dick and Jane syndrome did not succeed. The novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* brings to the forefront the changing cultures and the changing values of the family and the post war set up with women unrelenting to take back their traditional gender roles and get back to subjugation as they used to be back then. The novel explores the fissures and fractures which cropped up in a family causing a dissolution in its very structure after the world wars. The traditional tenet of the Dick and Jane set up needed a revamp and a restructuring because the society was not what it used to be then. In a scenario where families had lost the need to be together and began to disintegrate, Tyler became the voice of the women caught up in the conundrum between culture and changing gender structure. Tyler looks into the struggles of a family which went dysfunctional after the members lost hope on their father figure. The novel also explores the dinner table which was once used to be the ground to resolve problems has now become the cause of contention. Eudora Welty in her article, "Place of the Fiction: The Eye of the story" comments on the ambivalence which the novel offers with respect to place she says, "Place is one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction" (117).

The word place has a very dual inference in the work of Tyler. The first is the dinner table, a place where the family fixes appointments with their parents to discuss their problems. The other is the absence of the father-figure in the family and the aforesaid place is being taken over by the mother. When the father's place is taken over and replaced by the mother in the family, the family and its structure begin to dissolve

and become dissolute. Tyler wants to drive home this very idea of absence which causes many families to disintegrate in distant trajectories in the novel. Sigmund Freud has always contended the very idea that the driving force behind any human action is decided by two contrasting forces, one is pleasure and the other is pain. All humans are hedonistic by nature and would enjoy only the things which give them pleasure and the activities which involve pain are all the time done away with. The same idea is proposed by Jeremy Bentham, a renowned philosopher of English who in his treatise, *Principles of Utility* observes, "Nature has placed mankind under the guidance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone, to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (1).

Pearl the central character of the novel always wishes to evade the dinner gatherings, be it at home or at other social events. This is because she does not want to experience the pain of living her life without her husband. She also wishes to avoid the inconvenient truth about her husband who has abandoned the family. Ever since he left the family for good, Pearl had been trying to convince her children that her father is away on a business trip and would soon be back home. The same was the answer which she gave when her neighbors enquired about her husband. On the whole, she was driven by the pain-pleasure principle which is the driving force of all the human instinctual actions. Tyler brings home the dual roles of mother-woman within the framework of the Tull family where she is subjected to subjugation not only as a woman but also as a mother. The society and her children do not give her the due respect and acknowledgement she deserves. As a teen, she was asked by her granddad to take up any course at college so that she could seek some employment and have a decent living. She declined the proposal and thought that she would rather be the most suitable sitting at home as an ideal wife who would take care of the family and her children. When she married Tull, his income was barely enough to make both ends meet and she therefore had to meet out the expenses with the meager income he earned as a salesman. When Tull announced separation, she was shell shocked because she had to take care of all the children with none to support her. The entire scenario in the novel tries to bring about the changing gender roles which came to existence after the two world wars. The first is the failure of the traditional Dick- Jane Primer which the country boasted of to define a typical American family. The next is women taking charge of the house with men abandoning homes for they do not wish to run the rat race and realize the materialistic American dream. When the novel opens one comes to witness the lamentations of an eighty five year old woman, which is Pearl herself, ruminating on the tenets of motherhood and the pains she bore after having married Tull and having three children together with him. The novel questions the role of mother, motherhood and the reversal of gender roles with its repercussions on the dynamics of family relationships.

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