

Marital Odyssey in Anne Tyler's *Breathing Lessons*

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Abstract

Anne Tyler is a leading American writer known for her literary realism. Her famous novel *Breathing Lessons* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1989, the central theme being the dynamism of modern American families. The characters portrayed in the novel are all real stoicists who try to endure despite of all failures and disappointments. Tyler gives more importance to marriage trying to prove that a successful familial bond could be found only through some compromises that should be made between the husband and wife. This compromise could be easily made if there is gender equality, a feeling which is present naturally in her characters.

Key Words: family, marriage, gender equality

The Gender theory according to Simone De Beauvoir states that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (6). According to this view in gender studies, the term 'gender' is used to refer both masculinity and femininity and not the state of being either male or female. Though there are many oppositions, Tyler stands up with this. She tries to bring out gender equality and both the sexes are given due priorities in the novel. Taking *Breathing Lessons* the protagonist is not one, but two- the husband and the wife. This couple Maggie and Ira also share the view that they are happy only if they are together like how they were in their good olden days.

The novel covers the events of a day as the couple start their journey to a funeral. The day starts with Maggie driving the car getting it ready for the day's long journey. In her words, "driving a car is nothing, nothing compared to living day in and day out with a husband and raising up a new human being" (182). Thus, the novel itself begins with breaking the southern tradition of women shut inside the house taking care of her husband

and children doing nothing but the household chores. Their journey is a long one where they get chances of thinking about the past. Within the context of family, a recurring theme is the exploration of the idea of an ideal marriage. Everyone has a different theory about marriage. Maggie marries when she falls in love with Ira, without whom she felt lost. Her friend Serena marries Max as she has “come to the end of the line” (108). She thought it was time to marry and settle. The voice on the radio whom Maggie assumes to be Fiona states that marriage is a kind of security where love has no role. Jesse considers marriage as the “same old song and dance” (157). He is bored with his married life whereas his parents Maggie and Ira lead a steady life as strong as a tree. They too fight, quarrel and blame each other but their bond is very deep as the roots of a tree since they have realized the fact that marriage is a journey, not a destination.

Before getting married, Maggie and Serena as friends had made several promises to each other. They had promised that they would not wash the dishes right after supper because that would take them away from their husbands. Also, that they would not be dependent on a man. Serena dreamt of a husband who would stick to her like glue, and that’s what exactly Max was like. Maggie as she dreamt of a happy life, never bothered to take care of Ira’s ailing father, his mentally retarded sister Dorrie and Junie who suffered from some kind of phobia. His mother had died early and the whole family depended on him and he was the backbone of their lives. Even after his marriage he took good care of them while Maggie was always by his side. She strongly believed that what she gives would come to her in return as well. She is such a caring woman who tries to correct her familial issues and tries to change everything and everybody that even Mr. Otis refers to her as a fine lady and a real angel of mercy.

On the way to the funeral the couple meets an old man Mr. Otis, who had a terrific married life. His wife Duluth who mistook her dreams for real life was the troublemaker. It is now that she had a dream where Mr. Otis had stepped on her crocheted shawl and her embroidered petticoat with his shoes dragging the lace and ruffles and bits of ribbon. In the morning, she had a fight with him and he leaves the house taking his belongings on her demand. Initially, he had been living in his car for the past few days wandering everywhere until he meets Maggie and Ira. They take him to his nephew who advises him to reconcile with his wife. He neither blames the two. Rather, he tries to convince him telling that they are too old who are coming to the end of their lives. Soon one of them would die and the other would say, “why did I act so ugly” (169). But then, the time would have flown off and regretting would be a waste. Mr. Otis also feels guilty for leaving his aged wife alone at home and decides to ask for forgiveness though he has not done anything wrong. There is gender equality even with this old couple and Mr. Otis does not try to show his superiority as it is clear that he would reconcile with his wife.

Maggie and Ira raise their family in a very good manner giving birth to two healthy children Jesse and Daisy. After they had grown up, they chose their own life, Jesse although being a failure in his career. Jesse chooses to be a pop musician despite his father’s wishes and Daisy chooses her higher studies in the University of Maryland which is far away from their hometown Baltimore. She has determined not to settle down with an ordinary life. Jesse starts bringing his girlfriend Fiona to home when no one was at home. Maggie notices it but does not take it seriously until one day Jesse tells her that she is pregnant with his baby and that she has decided to abort it. He tells her that he wants her to keep the baby as he had

decided to marry her and move to a new apartment. Only then, Maggie realizes that her son is a grownup man who can lead a family without the support of his parents. But, unfortunately even this decision becomes a failure.

Even without a word to her husband, Maggie decides to change things and meets Fiona at the abortion clinic and takes her to home. Both marry at a very young age and their life turns up. It is not smooth as they have expected it to be. Fiona's implication about marriage right from the beginning was that everything would be perfect only for six weeks after marriage and later it is not so. Without a prospective career, always worried both emotionally and physically, Jesse shouts a lot at Fiona for which she too responds immediately. Ira becomes docile to the happenings and Maggie being the caretaker of the family, tries to change things by uniting Jesse and Fiona, but in vain. In the words of Nazarian, "A woman is human. She is not better, wiser, stronger, more intelligent, more creative or more responsible than a man. Likewise, she is never less. Equality is a given one. A woman is human"(36). Anne Tyler shows that there is a lot to know about a marriage- the expectations, the disappointments, the way children can create storms in a family, the way to show love, the way that everything and nothing changes.

Primary Source

Tyler, Anne. *Breathing Lessons*. London: Vintage, 1988.

Secondary Source

De Beavoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage. ISBN978-0-333-77612-4.

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