

Perspectives on Spousal Patterns in the Select Novels of Anne Tyler and Karen Kingsbury

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Abstract

'Marriages are made in heaven' is a well known adage and the need to define how these marriages function rises from understanding marital bonds. The present scenario in civilized society records an increasing number of people seeking divorce due to various reasons. Misunderstandings between spouses have increased and the need to understand these problems has declined. The need of the hour is to identify the problem and uproot it before it bestows havoc on the family. Extracting lessons from the stories contrived by today's novelists is the objective of this study. Recent day novelists portray significant amount of pictures of real life instances in their novels and it is this portrayal that contributes towards better understanding of people and relationships. Ample opportunities are given to people to dissect, analyze and annihilate stumbling blocks in marital relationships and by recognizing the need to learn from mistakes, the paper focuses on instances that can help alleviate them in married life.

Keywords: Relationships, Anne Tyler, Karen Kingsbury, Marriage, Life.

Introduction

In the closing decade of the twentieth century, the crisis that endangers man's life is not the after-effects of wars or the depression that has defined recent years; it is the crisis of marital relationships. This battle, where spouses try to remain loyal to their wedded partners rages in the hearts and minds. However with years passing by, the need to remain loyal changes from deriving satisfaction and contentment to obligations required to be fulfilled.

Relationships

The essence of understanding marital relationships stems from the knowledge of contextualizing relationships. Anne Tyler and Karen Kingsbury are contemporary writers and novelists providing insight on endurance. *Digging to America*, a novel by Anne Tyler focuses upon "reflections on relationships" and "the changes in people" (Hagen 1). It tells the story of adults celebrating life. In the midst of celebration and happy child rearing, Dave Donaldson the patriarch of the Donaldson clan silently suffers from boredom and loneliness. While Dave is left to grieve the loss of his wife, people around him celebrate. Tyler describes her

characters' attempt to revisit their past and explore their feelings. Dave had secretly hoped for his wife's death. Among his reasons was a predominant fact; his wife had forgotten his love for her. For Connie, the simultaneous attempt to love Dave and fight cancer never existed. If it had, it would have been a comfort to Dave who was taking care of her. Dave had supported his wife financially, but her love for him was denied. As a result it could not heal his loneliness.

As Dave heals from the death of a spouse he is attracted to Maryam, an Iranian-American who finds the attraction a little distracting for her age. A critic asserts that "whether the woman is flying over culture or under it, she is, according to Sherry Ortner, 'both under and over the culture's hegemony'" (Quiello 63). Maryam fondly remembers her own wedded life with her Iranian husband Kiyam, and finds little comfort in the fact that the very ideals she had strongly believed in were getting old. Despite cultural differences, Maryam is influenced by American culture and by the time she realizes the outdated reality of her culture, and the subjectivity of her own nativity, her love for Dave is sparked.

Many married couples who believe in the purity of married life refrain from making wrong choices that can mar their relationship with their spouses. In fear of destroying the relationship closest to them they tend to eliminate reminders of bitter experiences. The solution however lies in destroying one's memories of such reminders. This is possible when God instills the assurance that better days are on its way. Dave's relationship with his wife Connie, presents the portrait of a grief stricken couple looking for the opportunity to escape from sickness; wrong choices were not made. However, Dave's efforts to pay for her medical expenses went unnoticed. In the event of Connie's death, Dave is left to dwell in the memories of the past and as he socialized, he encountered new prospects and decided it was better to forget memories of the past. Tyler provides insights seeking to explore feelings that corner couples in their love relationships. Karen Kingsbury, an inspirational writer pens novels which differ from Tyler's in one respect; faith. Her novels encourage spirituality and shed light on the possibility of healing from life changing scars, resulting from problems in relationships. Kingsbury portrays Michele in her novel *Oceans Apart*, struggling with the need to look picture perfect. Compared to Connie's struggle with cancer, obesity is not a serious health factor but when Michele wanted to reduce her weight she adamantly refused her husband's offer of help.

Michele thought again about her husband's offer for help and she justified herself: "his offers made her feel unattractive and self conscious, as though he was watching every bite she ate..." (OA 168). Her husband's confessions and protestations of love went unheard and her thoughts sank further into depression as her husband's concern battled against her pessimistic attitude: " 'What can I do, Michele?' The concern in his eyes had been genuine: 'You're still beautiful to me, but I can see how miserable you feel. Tell me how to help and I'll do whatever you need' " (OA 168). Michele's response was the product of irritation, and what she said resembles thoughts of despair and frustration: " 'Stop talking about it' " (OA 168). This is similar to Connie's response to her husband in *Digging to America*. When Dave had worried about a blood clot, Connie said: " 'Do you have any idea how trivial that sounds to a person in my condition?' " (DA 125). Tyler writes that Connie, "traveled farther and farther away from him. She swung into battle against each new malady that propped up now here, now there, just when she wasn't looking, just when some test result or consultation had raised their hopes, while Dave dealt alone with the insurance and the medical bills and prescriptions" (DA 124). Dave's daughter Bitsy remained silent, as her father gave an account of his feelings regarding his wife. He realized that his daughter's reactions were not of anger or feelings of sadness, it was a silent understanding of the conflict, fear and loneliness her father had endured.

The revelation discloses certain facts; Dave was "as lonely as God" (DA 106) secondly, he was looking forward for company. Even at the age of retirement Dave was beginning to look

forward to a better life even if it was short. The story of Dave is typical of "...lonely, confused members who long for connection and meaning in their lives, focusing on everyday occurrences instead of more dramatic events" (Schmitt 214) similar to other novels by Anne Tyler, like Macon in *The Accidental Tourist*, Delia in *Ladder of Years*, and Maggie in *Breathing Lessons*.

In *Digging to America*, the more Dave concentrates on the past and the absence of his wife the more he feels depressed and conscious of the reality of her death. In spite of the heaviness of neglect raging against him, he wanted to bring back the past and the normalcy of family life. As he focused on a memory he tightened the grip on the vision and willfully remembered the voice of his wife: "He closed his eyes again and willed her, willed her. He summoned up her most concrete details..." (DA 127) and as he floated in thought, he suddenly drifted to another memory: "He cocked his head to listen for a winding-up note in Connie's voice, but she wasn't speaking just then and he realized now that she had been silent for several minutes. Then he understood that the silence was real - the silence in the actual bedroom - and that Connie wouldn't be speaking ever again" (DA 128). Soon he conjured the presence of Maryam Yazdan to fill his loneliness. However, he did not know how his relationship with Maryam would fall in place. When the realization dawned, he felt all alone, and "lay for a long while staring into the dark" (DA 130). His marriage to Connie was in itself a reminder of memories. Memories mixed with happiness and sadness and her final days reminded him that he no longer belonged to it.

Man's Need for Companionship

Tyler's subtle preference for giving personal and final touches to her characters is remarkable. In *Digging to America*, she pens a beautiful situation which is attributed to couples who are courting each other but are unsure of their feelings. Maryam had written a letter to Dave conveying her feelings in a subtle way. Her words were: "I am having a very nice time here, but I think of you constantly and wonder what you are doing" (DA 263). Soon enough she felt remorseful and wanted to take back her letter. Her immediate thoughts were: "What have I done?" (263). Back home, she "tossed and turned all night mourning what she had seen to be her very last chance at love. Forever after she would be one of those resolutely cheerful widows carrying on alone" (DA 264). At the airport, Dave showed no exaggerated attention towards her and Maryam wondered silently. Dave came to her house the next day carrying her letter; it had arrived a little late but the romance they shared was clothed with genuine love. He said: "'Maryam, you thought about me constantly? You missed me?'" (DA 264). While the death of a spouse can bring back the desire to find a suitable partner, 'separation' also is a tool for kindling new relationships. Dave's separation from his wife has allowed him to think about and venture into the possibility of finding a soul mate in Maryam.

Tyler portrays Maryam's orthodox views of remarriage. Iranian custom and tradition requires her to be a woman of honor, intact of her commitment to her dead husband but American lifestyle has guided her to be a fortunate woman, fortunate enough to get a companion and friend in Dave. Once she thinks about Dave she is cornered to think about her own husband. The death of her husband has allowed her to live life to the fullest and experience the American trademark of getting acquainted with friends belonging to different culture. However, once the realization dawns on her, she breaks away from Dave.

Though Dave and Maryam's relationship was short, it portrays the possibility of bliss at old age. Macon Leary and Sarah in Tyler's *The Accidental Tourist* contradict the need for love and comfort. With the death of their only son tugging at their hearts, they lose the need for togetherness, comfort and support. They cope with the loss in their own separate ways. Having little to do with comforting each other, the couple could not loop themselves into their marital relationship. Tyler describes "the progress toward divorce by Macon and Sarah as

‘those months when anything either of them said was wrong, toward that sense of narrowly missed connections’ ” (Schmitt 227). Kingsbury’s *Where Yesterday Lives* opens with the hand of ‘death’ also playing a crucial role in the Barrett family. John’s death runs parallel with relationships requiring mending in his family. His daughter Ellen is on the verge of a marital breakdown. However, John’s final memories are penned carefully indicating the complex bond parents share with children and their spouses. When John Barrett had a second heart attack “he squinted in agony, staring at the people in the photos, seeing them when they were young...He wondered if they knew how much he loved them and suddenly a million memories fought for his attention” (WYL 9). The necessity to draw inspiration from fictional characters stems from the habit of understanding and recognizing one’s personal attachment to it. These stories bring to heart the delicate threads of family life woven to form a remarkable tapestry. In an era where one’s relationship with people is carefully analyzed and scrutinized, it has become essential to draw positive inspiration from characters, who through their life have taught people to revive from their broken past.

Hope and Life

The bond of love is an intricate design and when man’s behavior seeks to reduce life to ashes, there is ‘hope’ constantly reinforcing mankind to seek redemption. In Kingsbury’s *Where Yesterday Lives*, Diane, John Barrett’s wife who was left to deal with the problems in the family, whispered the words audible only to her ears: “ ‘John, my love,’ ... what am I going to do without you?’ ” (WYL 173). The frustration of a wife grieving the loss of her husband and trying to fix the broken relationships of her children are burdens carried with an enduring spirit, but unlike Connie who had “joined an inner circle of fellow sufferers who sought each other, out in waiting rooms...” (DA 124), Diane hoped and worked desperately to breathe life into her family. She did not shut them out of her life.

Death is inevitable and as Tyler and Kingsbury portray in their respective novels, it is in fact pivotal in understanding relationships. For Dave it was significant in self analysis; for the Leary’s it was revelatory in comprehending the fact that distance had grown between them, and for Diane it was an attempt to fight the battles of family life and move on with hope. In her letter to readers, Kingsbury writes that “there can be no growth for today and tomorrow by remaining where yesterday lives” (WYL 402). The problems of ‘yesterday’ do not matter when ‘today’ has been given as an opportunity to live with dignity.

Sam George brings out vital concepts about marriage in his book *Before the Wedding Bells* which is also co-authored by his wife Mary. He uses the following lines to describe the underlying fact for building strong relationships: “if you want a princess, you’ve got to be a prince charming, and if you are looking for a prince charming to come riding to you on a horse, you’ve got to be a princess”(22). *Where Yesterday Lives* also portrays the story of a young woman of thirty-one named Ellen Barrett married to Mike Miller, a broadcaster. Both of them love each other deeply and feel physically and emotionally satisfied with their relationship. However, as days turned to years, their commitment was directed towards their career.

Marriage is about making commitments meant to last for a life time. Researchers state that, “the most important characteristics of what we have called loyal relationships...were: lifetime commitment to marriage, loyalty to one’s spouse and strong moral values” (Sells 59). In the novel *Where Yesterday Lives*, Ellen Barrett faces the crisis of identifying herself amidst confusion. Who she is, is chartered out clearly by her decision to remain loyal to her husband but Mike, puts his career over his relationship with his wife and does not desire to be with her when she is grieving the loss of her father. Here are a few lines:

“You obviously need time to accept the facts.” Mike’s voice was measured and forced. “Your dad’s dead. Nothing I can do can bring him back. You have family and friends in Petoskey, and you don’t need me tagging along for a week of funeral preparations. I can probably get out there for the funeral. But that’s all. Otherwise the topic’s closed.”

(WYL 28)

Mike is not able to comfort his wife and his straightforward approach almost ruins his relationship with his wife. He is not aware of the risk he is taking because he takes his wife’s feelings for granted. Ellen demands attention like a young bride but Mike can afford to spend time with her only for two days. An international speaker writes: “spiritual maturity and emotional maturity are integrated” (Hughes 51). Both characteristics come together. With the priority towards God being lost, and with their career taking primary control over their lives Ellen and Mike lose the ‘spiritual’ and ‘emotional’ connection.

Mike does not want to be a substitute for love and his decision to stay back leaves Ellen facing the tide alone. At Petoskey, Ellen, to lessen the stress of loneliness ushers the presence of her old boyfriend Jake Sadler. She justifies her actions with the word “a friend” (WYL 210) and entertains thoughts that are not appropriate: “What would Jake look like after so many years? Would he still have that same smile, the one that had always warmed her all the way through? Would his eyes still sparkle? Did he still have that deep and unrestrained laughter?” (WYL 210). These thoughts suggest the breakdown of marital ties and sheds light that in the society where expectations are required to be met there requires someone greater who can help mend the broken pieces of marital relationships.

Counselor’s advice couples looking forward to a committed relationship, to strongly believe in the fact that it is not necessary to think about the past when a new life has just begun. However, when ‘emotional insecurity’ arises, a need crops up. It is the need for a friend or maybe a listening ear. A critic writes: “Both spouses have to find their footing again, having lost a sense for where they are, where they were heading toward, and who they are as a couple” (Sells 227). Ellen justifies her need for comfort by making a phone call to her ex-boyfriend. Many would articulate supporting Ellen, justifying her need for a friend, but it inevitably sows the seed for adultery. As the story ends in *Where Yesterday Lives*, Ellen’s husband feels remorseful for his harsh words and becomes concerned about his wife. He attends his father-in-law’s funeral and reconciles with his wife. The confessions of his wife demonstrates his folly and negligence in misunderstanding his wife’s needs and portrays that in the midst of confusion, hope is the only element that can help revive marital love.

Comparing Kingsbury’s *Where Yesterday Lives* with Tyler’s *Digging to America*, there are references to couples struggling with marital disharmony. Diane had been a wonderful wife to her husband who had suffered from a heart condition and like Connie, John Barrett did not rave in anger. He was kind and the only feeling Dave could derive from his wife’s sickness was immense pleasure: “The jolt of outrage her question gave him was almost enjoyable” (DA 125). The reason was apparent. Dave had nobody to console him or support him for the efforts he had been taking for Connie and his life had become a shadow. Tyler attempts to allow her characters revisit the past despite the grievances they had faced in their marital life. Similarly, Kingsbury draws a strong line for her characters requiring them to take a certain path. These traits allow readers to decide which path they would choose if it was them.

Conclusion

The lives of Diane, Ellen and Dave are examples of people who emerge victorious after battling problems in their personal lives. Diane moves on in life as a widowed woman and so does Dave. Ellen is happy to accept the final verdict. The characters in Tyler’s and

Kingsbury's novels feel distraught and perplexed in trying circumstances but they overcome them. They may have been silent at times, but they recover as time allows them to heal and become people, happily looking forward to having better relationships with the people around them.

Abbreviations

Where Yesterday Lives - WYL

Digging to America - DA

Oceans Apart - OA

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