

CHANGING GENDER ROLES IN ANNE TYLER'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America in 1941. Much of her work centres on family relationships and ordinary small-town characters bound by prescribed roles. In 1964 at the age of twenty-two Tyler published her first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*. In 1988 she won America's most prestigious literary award, the Pulitzer Prize, for her novel, *Breathing Lessons*. The aim of this paper is to depict the male caretaker of the family in two of Anne Tyler's novels *If Morning Ever Comes* and *Saint Maybe*. Anne Tyler handled these two novels in a different manner. Comparing her all other works, these two novels present the responsibilities of a male role which is not their task. In the first novel *If Morning Ever Comes* Tyler's main character is male. Ben Joe Hawke's life and story emerge from a world of women. The home he has left remains occupied by eight of them: his mother, his grandmother, and his six sisters (one moved away to marry but has come home because she left her husband). Ben Joe is a very convincing character. Ian Bedloe in *Saint Maybe* becomes a caretaker, a nurturer and a surrogate mother. Being a young man in his family he takes new role in order to perform the traditional duty of protecting the orphaned children. The mistake he committed that activates him into the female role and his love for the children that eventually affirms it. Ian Bedloe in *Saint Maybe*, we can observe the shift from himself to his brother's orphaned children whom he takes under his wings. His decision is initiated by his consuming guilt that he is responsible for the suicide of both his brother and his sister-in-law. Ben Joe and Ian Bedloe representing the male nurturer of the family. Being an adult they never give up the family and family members. They take the responsibility of the family. Eventually, the orphaned children get the parents and learn to be patient in *Saint Maybe*. The same way, the young man in *If Morning Ever Comes* plays the role of father and solves the problem of his sister besides he gives shelter to his father's other family members. Thus these two characters sacrifice their life in order to protect their family members.

Key Words: Gender role, paternal role, male attributes, caretaker, surrogate mother.

Gender role is generally defined as a set of attitudes, behaviors, and self-presentation methods ascribed to members of a certain biological sex. This includes norms for behavior, which some researchers have started to call “the rules of masculinity” or “masculine ideology.” Both within and across different cultures we find great consistency in standards of desirable gender-role behavior. Males are expected to be independent, assertive, and competitive; females are expected to be more passive, sensitive, and supportive. These beliefs have changed little over the past twenty years within the United States and apparently around the world as well. This paper examines the changing gender roles in two of Anne Tyler’s novels *If Morning Ever Comes* and *Saint Maybe*.

In the very first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), Anne Tyler has created a male protagonist who is conscious of the evolving changes in the gender responsibilities. Ben Joe Hawkes, raised in a house full of women, leaves home, his mother and sisters for New York to study law at Columbia. But soon he hates the campus, dislikes law and yearns for the warm things back home - the strong smell of cooking, the quibbling arguments. Ben's father had left home and chosen to live with another woman; and Ben, the only male left in the family now visualizes himself in his father's shoes and feels responsible for his family of women. He takes this sense of responsibility too far when he offers to help Lili Belle, the other woman in his father's life. He meddles eternally in his sisters' affairs, and is exasperated when they won't let him take care of them (145). Eventually the androgynous parental figure that he becomes, he feels old and tied down and enormous.

In her another novel *Saint Maybe* Anne Tyler focuses on the difficulties and responsibilities of single parenting through the male protagonist Ian Bedloe. Ian's life is fully combined with more complicated traditional male role of breadwinner and the traditional female role of nurturer for his dead brother's three children. At the age of nineteen, Ian quits college and becomes father and mother to Agatha, Tom, and Daphne. Ian Bedloesheltered into new responsibilities that is totally different for his adult age. Anne Tyler portrays the difficulties and responsibilities of the nurturing male in these two novels.

Saint Maybe narrates the story of Ian Bedloe, a man troubled by guilt over his brother's suicide. He drops out of college, gets a job, and takes charge of his brother's three orphaned children. As pointed out by Durham, Anne Tyler has combined masculine and feminine attributes and invested them in Ian Bedloe. Prior to his new found life of celibacy, abstinence and self discipline, Ian had been in possession of typical male urges. He had been conscious of muscles, competitive in sports and games, and interested in girl friends. But soon he becomes a 'nurturing male', a surrogate 'female care-giver'. He sacrifices his male wishes, baby-sits dutifully, drives the children to church camps, supervises their home works, takes care of the laundry, the gift-wrapping and turns appreciative of the awesome duties of the female role: "Women were the ones who held the reins, it emerged. Women were up close to things. Men stood off at one removed and were forced to accept women's reading of whatever happened" (26).

At the outset, he felt bored spending time with his brothers' children. His sense of boredom is evident in his reaction to the reading of the children's story, to the kids. "Ian had never realized what a repetitive book this was. He sacrifices his sleep for the children. Tears of boredom filled his eyes. Ian is not only bored, but is also angry with what the fates have plunge on him. At first, he is not happy to drop his college education and breaking ties with his girlfriend. He feels bad about dumping the children on his old parents and his married sister. He feels angry with his father for letting him go through with this (125).

On taking a new responsibility within a few months, Ian's sense of boredom and guilt and anger give way for a sense of commitment, care and love. In the course of time, he becomes deeply attached to Daphne, the youngest niece, who brought out "laughter and an ache" (255) in him and suffers with the miseries of Agatha, the eldest, who is "alone and friendless" (191). Like a loving parent, he sees all her virtues and is angry with "those callow high-school kids who couldn't see how special she was, how intelligent and witty and perceptive" (191). He notices indulgently when Thomas' voice is cracking and shadows are darkening his upper lip when he goes through all the turmoils of growing up.

Agatha and Daphne being orphaned children they have faith and love on their uncle. They never worried of having no father and mother to brought them up. They completely come under his caring protection and guardianship. They share anything with him as if a natural parent, and they never miss the love and affection that is shown only by the real parents. But they "loved him and winced for him, both. They kept a weather eye out for other people's reactions to him, and they were constantly prepared to bristle and turn ferocious on his behalf" (242). Ian Bedloe brought up the children with more confident, self-sufficient and reasonably successful human beings. Tyler has, in some of her early novels, too, created male protagonists who are concerned about relating to the intimacy of family life and are full of admiration for the role of the female.

It is no surprises to find this interest culminate in a masterful gender blending in her another novel *If Morning Ever Comes* in which a young male leaves his education behind to assume a parental role usually attributed to the female. But of late, her men characters seem to initiate changes in the gender hierarchy and subvert the sexual division of labour. They seem to be more concerned about the family, and are inverted with many feminine attributes. They tend to be devoid of the typical male urges, and some of her nurturing males act as surrogate mothers.

In Anne Tyler's first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964), the action begins as Ben Joe Hawkes flees his lonely New York life as a law student to return to his hometown, Sandhill, North Carolina. His sense of responsibility as the only surviving male in a family of his mother, grandmother, and six sisters compels him to return and help with a minor family crisis. On the night train ride back, Ben Joe's daydreams of past and present family events reveal that he is as anxious about how they will react to his homecoming as he is about finding out if "everything is really alright" at home. As his week-long visit unfolds, some of Ben Joe's worries about what might happen in the family are confirmed while his other fears prove imaginary. Ben Joe Hawkes returns home from law school because he could not concentrate; he worried what was happening at home while he was gone. The only man in a family of women, Ben feels he must play the role of substitute father. But after only day back, he is oppressed with the responsibilities he at least partially imposes upon himself.

Ben Joe Hawkes is a law student at Columbia University who hails from Sandhill, North Carolina, and keeps himself in a state of chronic anxiety about his family back home. Prior to the novel's opening, his father, Philip Hawkes, abandoned the family to move in with Lili Belle Mosely, a truly decent woman of lower social status. He has since died of a heart attack. A letter from Jennifer, the most businesslike of Ben Joe's six sisters, informs him that his oldest sister Joanne has left her husband in Kansas and returned to the family home with her baby, Carol. Joanne's return inspires Ben Joe to take a train south in order to combat an emotional waywardness in the family that he finds threatening. Once in Sandhill, he confronts the degree to which the women are happily independent of his support and protection. Idled by their indifference of his rescue attempt, Ben Joe visits his father's former mistress and decides to use some of the family savings to help her pay the bills for the hospitalization of young Philip, his

father's illegitimate son, who has pneumonia .Joanne's husband, Gary, arrives and persuades her to go home with him. Ben Joe, out of Nostalgia and a sense of personal irrelevance, proposes marriage to a sympathetic but insipid former girlfriend, Shelley Domer , and returns to Newyork with her in tow," his own piece of Sandhill transplanted" .

Ben Joe is Tyler's first step toward the discovery of the gentle, agoraphobic male figure who will provide the center vision of fully visualized novels as *Celestial Navigation* and *The accidental Tourist*. *If Morning Ever Comes* is an experiment in the rendering of that remarkable consciousness, with its anxiety and humor, and Tyler presents Ben Joe's Dreams startlingly well.

The novel focuses on a young man who solves the problem of his family in the position of his father .Ben Joe returns to his southern hometown from his Northern University for two reasons. One is that to take care of his father's second family and another one is for solving his sister's marital issues. He has never resolved the meaning of his father's sexual waywardness, and he wants to prevent his sister's repetition of it. One has only to remember that Ben Joe was promised a Haward education –denied him when his mother refused to accept the tuition money from a wandering husband-to sense that the Faulkner of *The Sound and the Fury* was as yet an unexercised presence for the young Tyler.(There is another Faulknerian echo when Ben Joe delivers support money for his father's illegitimate child in person to his father's mistress, recalling Ike McCaslin's visit to Fonsiba in *The Bear*.)*If Morning Ever Comes* reflects its author's early sense of obligation toward the grand southern themes by taking up the temperamentally alien issues of inherited sexual guilt.

In Tyler myth, as the emergence of eleven novels allows it to be described, begins with an absconded father, a circumstance often established prior to the opening events of the novel. *If Morning Ever Comes* is the first instance of paternal abdication, and terms of that act have not changed very much subsequently. Here is how Ben Joe describes his father's death to Joanne.

"Two weeks before he died," Joanne said, "he was at Home. I know he was Now, where was he when he died? Still at home?"

At Lili Belle's," Ben Joe said.

"At-Oh." She shook her head." Lately I've stopped thinking about her by her name. She said Ben Joe "He'd been drinking a little, is all. Went out to get ice cubes

And then forgot which home he was supposed to be going back to. Mom explained that to Lili Belle."(77)

Ben Joe Hawkes is visibly upset that his sisters, mother, grandmother, and niece nether need him or want him in their lives: "Why can't they all just let me take care of them?" (145) he moans to Shelley, as he recounts how they "forget" to write to him about important events in the Hawkes family circle. Ben Joe has difficulty accepting that the historical era has passed when he, as the sole male in the family upon the death of his physician –father, would automatically have become its de facto father figure: long gone are the days when Ben Joe, as a "Carolina white man", would necessarily be living in a particular kinds of meals, and enjoying the deference of a particular kind of a family (26).

Demographic and socioeconomic changes have inverted that romantic, man-centered world. His mother and sisters have jobs and incomes, thereby making his pursuit of a law career a meaningless gesture. His state of mind over this is conveyed through his encounter with a game token on the living room floor: "His heel crushed something; it was the flatiron from the monopoly set. He scraped it off his shoe and kept going"(161).The annoyance ("He scraped it off his shoe"), determination ("kept going") and veiled violence ("crushed") implicit in this

encounter suggest his painful awareness that the Hawkes women (flatiron) hold the power (monopoly) in his family, a power based on “real” money: they support him at Columbia, sending him a check every month and expecting a receipt (14). No wonder Ben Joe cannot figure out how old he is: “ He felt unsure of his age ; in Newyork he was small and free and too young , and in Sandhill he was old and tied down and enormous”(34) – old from feeling compelled to play the role of a father to a family that had driven away the real father to die of a heart attack, un mourned and unmissed, at the home of a mistress.

In the course of the novel Ben Joe comes to face, if not accept, that the role is an inappropriate one, and that the pursuit of it in an unreceptive family can only continue to exhaust him. So he will do the next best thing: he will marry family-less Shelley Domer and take her to New York, where they will live in presumed familial bliss with a baby boy. Ben Joe will get to be a father and a head of household after all, even if not as he had originally planned .Family roles do die hard.

Now- a -days Women used to play the role of men,at the same time menalso represent maternal functions. In Anne Tyler's novels we come across women who assume patriarchal roles and act as bread-winners and caretakers, there has been a visible change in her recent fiction regarding the gender roles.The social and cultural changes brought about by the modern times demand that men and women shed their stereotypical roles and each assume responsibility to fulfill duties hitherto performed by the other. Several socio-cultural and technological reasons such as the stress of work, the decline of the institution of marriage, economically independent females, and, test tube babies, surrogate fathers and mothers have made possible the acceleration of this gender shift.

In these two novels, Anne Tyler focuses on the paternal role of the male protagonists Ben Joe and Ian Bedloe. Being a young men, they maintain their family members and take the responsibility of household activities and child rearing. From the very beginning, these two activities can only be performed by the women in this world but Ian Bedloe and Ben Joe playing the role of father and mother of the family. Since nurturing the children left to the mother , it is very difficult to brought up the children by men .Like Ian in Saint Maybe , Ben Joe becomes the head of the family, and he solves the familial problems that can be solved by the father .Since his father left the family members Ben Joe takes the paternal role and convinces the family members. Certain duties which is only assigned to the women also can be played by the men. In *If Morning Ever Comes* a young adult Ben Joe bear the all the family issues and solve the problems. Ben Joe and Ian Bedloe shifted from their patriarchal role in order to be a nurturer of the family.

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