

Anne Tyler's *The Amateur Marriage* as a Domestic Tragedy – A Study

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American literature in the twentieth century was reshaped by the effects of the Civil rights movement and Women's Liberation Movements on the American society. The fiction written by women in the twentieth century was the reflection of the position of women in the American culture. Women who wrote modernist fiction were no longer bound within the boundaries established by their predecessors. Changes were implemented in form and content by approaches that were new and focus was more on the expanding world. Women began to write about a number of taboo subjects such as adultery, abortion and divorce, simultaneously exposing the myth of familial perfection. Particularly, Anne Tyler is considered as one of the best novelists of the modern American fiction. Her fiction, focus on dysfunctional family relationships. Critics and reviewers often compare Tyler to the key figures of the South and she is seen as a representative of the Southern Writers.

Anne Tyler was born on October 25, 1941 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She spent her early childhood in various communes in the Midwest and the South with her three younger brothers and her parents, who were active members of the Quaker community and also long-time activists for liberal causes. Initially she was educated at these communes and only at the age of eleven, she attended Public school in Raleigh, North Carolina. Later she attended Duke University on scholarship and graduated from Phi Beta Kappa at the age of nineteen with a degree in Russian. For a year she continued to study Russian at Colombia University. In 1962 she worked in the Duke University as the Russian Bibliographer. In 1963 she married and moved to Montreal with her husband when she wrote her first novel while looking for a job in Montreal. In 1967 she moved with her family to Baltimore and began to concentrate full time on writing. The urban locales of Baltimore became the setting for most of her novels.

Anne Tyler began her career with writing short stories. Her literary career spans almost four decades with more than 20 novels to her credit. Her first novel '*If Morning Comes*' was published in 1964 followed by many significant and noteworthy works such as *Celestial Navigation* (1974), *Earthly Possessions* (1977), *The Accidental Tourist* (1985), *Breathing Lessons* (1988), *Digging to America* (2006). She received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1985 for the novel *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) and in 1988 she received the Pulitzer Prize for her eleventh novel *Breathing Lessons* (1988).

Anne Tyler has been compared with the great Southern writers like Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Flannery O' Connor and Carson McCullers by John Updike. These writers explored the gothic genre, dealt with themes of loneliness and isolation and also gave a different glimpse of the American life. However, violence and the gothic which characterize the Southern literature are lacking in the works of Tyler.

The Amateur Marriage (2004) is Tyler's 16th novel which covers a time span of six decades. Michael and Pauline meet as youngsters and fall in love. The novel focuses on the ups and downs in their marriage which ends in its dissolution after 30 years. In December 1941, the 20 year old Michael meets Pauline, who comes to his mother's grocery store, at downtown. Pauline, wearing a red coat enters the store demanding a band-aid for the cut in her forehead which was the result of jumping off a street car, to

join the parade of youngsters who were heading to enlist in the army. Michael is smitten by love at the very first sight of Pauline, who was tall and slender, with dark blond hair.

Like a fairy tale Michael is bewitched by her beauty, and says he will enlist in the army when Pauline asks him: "Will you be going, Michael?" (6). Unmindful of his mother's need of his presence at the store he joins the army, from which he is sent back after a freak accident which leaves him with a limp. They marry after he is discharged from the army, on the surface they look like a perfect couple but in reality they are mismatched. Pauline has doubts about their ill-matched temperaments even before their marriage, she even changes her mind not to proceed with the marriage. The reason was: "...says all they do is fight... says he never wants to go any place and ...always so unsocial and ...such a different style of a person from her, so set in his ways, won't budge..." (36). But, she goes ahead and marries him.

Her disappointment in life begins when Michael disapproves her suggestion of moving out to an apartment after their marriage. He says they cannot afford it and decides to stay along with his mother in the apartment above the grocery store. He is prudent when it comes to spending money, whereas Pauline was extravagant. She squanders money buying decorative objects with no practical use. They frequently quarrel about money, about top priorities and also, about their cramped apartment. Pauline wants to move out to the spacious county side and escape the suffocation of living in a small apartment, with their three children. She manages to convince Michael to move to Elmview Acres.

Pauline, nags Michael about his unromantic gift of giving her a canning kettle, and his failure in making her feel special on her twenty third birthday. He feels deeply mortified and wonders: "Oh, women were so mystifying... Did other men have this problem? Was there anyone he could discuss this with?"(41). Unable to adjust to the mood swings of Pauline he wonders, his life would have been simple and calm if only he had married someone else. Michael is exasperated as he does not have any friends except the customers who come to his store. Pauline's inconsistency, her irresponsible and unpredictability makes him tell her that he is fed up and disgusted with her. He says, "I never should have married you."(54)Pauline too shares the same thought when she lists out his failings. She is not able to bear with his rigidity, his caution, his dislike of social occasions, his tendency to pass judgment and his infuriating patience. Even their belief about marriage was so different, for Pauline it was "the interweaving of the soul", but for Michael it was "two people travelling side by side but separately".

Michael remains calm even when he knows, that Pauline is deceiving him. He merely listens to her when she says that she went to her mother's place, but in fact she had actually gone to meet Alex Barrow, on whom she had a crush. He does not reveal to her that her mother had called in the afternoon, the same time she claims to have been with her. In spite of all the differences in their nature they manage to pull along for thirty years.

The constant bickering and blaming each other make a lot of impact on the lives of their children. Lindy, the eldest turns out to be a rebel. She never shows any respect or obedience to her parents. She lands in trouble always. Her parents are inefficient handling her. Unfortunately they blame one another for her attitude and behaviour. When Lindy goes missing, they are so engrossed in finding fault with each other. As parents they are of little help to the policemen when they come to make enquiry about Lindy after she was reported missing. Least bothered about their daughter who has been missing for more than twenty four hours they criticize the policemen and their way

of enquiring. Karen the youngest feels that her parents are self centered. She is filled with anger towards her parents for their callousness in not checking whether Lindy came home or staying up waiting for her like other parents do. She wonders how they could be trusted to raise their children to adulthood when they themselves were not showing any maturity.

Michael feels that Lindy's defection was a hard blow on their marriage. It makes the other two George and Karen muted and withdrawn. Michael has been wondering where they failed as parents. In 1968 they get to know the whereabouts of Lindy. Lindy was admitted in a hospital in San Francisco and her son Pagan, was in the care of her landlady. Both Michael and Pauline go to San Francisco to bring her back. But they come back only with her son, their grandson, as their daughter was under treatment for drug addiction. The next four years is spent on the upbringing of Pagan, but not without their usual fights. At times Michael felt that they were more like brother and sister always competing and elbowing. He was sure other couples did not behave like that, it was only Pauline and himself who are still as inexperienced as ever.

Michael and Pauline, celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary with a small family dinner, they begin to recall the first time they met, followed by other events which were mostly the quarrels in their life. Michael regrets the fact that all their "remember-whens were quarrels." (194) Pauline refutes this, and an argument erupts, which ultimately leads her to say: "Why don't you leave, then...If you are so miserable, leave!..." (195). Michael takes his car keys and leaves. She expects he will return but he leaves her for good. When Michael says that he has rented an apartment, does it dawn on Pauline that he is serious about leaving her. What bothers her is why he chose to leave for such a trivial matter when there had been hundreds of things earlier? Though she was upset she never showed it .

Tyler has clearly listed out the reason for the failure of their marriage. It is important for the couple to have a strong understanding and the willingness to make compromises to make a marriage successful. What began like a fairy tale did not end like one. Pauline and Michael lived unhappily after their marriage all their efforts to make it look fine was in vain. Through their separation they have liberated themselves.

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