

A Female Quest in Anne Tyler's *Breathing Lessons* and *Ladder of Years*

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Abstract

Anne Tyler, one of America's most acclaimed novelists creates her own world in her writings. She has beautifully conceived and masterfully executed the emotional confusions spawned by dislocated and dysfunctional families with women at the centre of her stories. Tyler's fiction is distinctive. Her characters are remarkable with their basic decency, essential humanity, and individual courage. Women, particularly are confronted with a difficult dilemma on how to cope under the oppressive rule, or the institution of marriage that makes them forget their dreams and goals, they once had. By taking care of the household chores, women completely forget themselves and their goals. The quest for self-identity begins at a very later stage for Tyler's women, when they could not change things any more.

Key Words: emotional confusion, women, household chores, goals, quest, self-identity.

Tyler's novel *Back when We were Grownups* (2004) begins with a middle-aged woman's search for her true-identity, "Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person" (1). Rebecca is the woman found with this confrontation, "how on earth did I get like this? How? How did I ever become this person who's not really me?" (21). Being called "Queen Rebecca" (15) by her college roommate for her golden braids, regal carriage, and serene sense of dignity, she finds at the age of fifty-three, being transformed into "Beck", a grandmother, and professional party-giver, "how come everyone calls me Beck? Beck is not my name! I'm Rebecca! How did I get to be Beck, all at once?" (270). Her quest to find her missing self, her lost past begins, as she realizes that it is not too late to rediscover herself. In this quest to find herself, she thinks of reuniting with her college sweetheart Will and writes a letter to him:

...everything started moving so fast! Everything was so chaotic! I had three little girls to take care of and more and more of the business falling on my shoulders; I was living in that crowded house with my ailing mother-in-law and an uncle-in-law in mourning and a very adolescent brother-in-law; and then my own baby came along. There wasn't a moment to think, even, ... It seemed I got onto a whole different path, got farther and farther away from my original self ... Who have I turned into? What's become of me? Why am I behaving like this? I'm an imposter in my own life! Or another way I could put it is, it's not my own life. It's somebody else's. (136)

Rebecca is not quite sure about how she had lost herself with her busy schedules at home. She was not a kind of person as she lived after her marriage and after all these years of marriage, having children and everything, she suddenly realizes one day that she is not living her own life. This is the case with not only Rebecca, but many women who are bound and tied up in the familial chores.

Living happily with her husband for only a few years, her life transforms from wife to widow when her husband Joe dies in a car crash leaving her alone to cope with his three daughters and her

own daughter. "Life went on" (45), but sometimes Rebecca feels that, "life had treated her unfairly" (52). Her daughter Min Foo is also found telling her, "You were dreaming how things would be if you'd chosen a different fork in the road" (40). Rebecca begins to consider what might have happened if she had not married Joe and continued her studies, thereby marrying Will after completing her studies, "I'd like to go home and sort of ... reconnoitre. Check out my roots" (58). Beck decides to go to her home town, Church Valley to begin her quest to find her real self.

Tyler's women in their quest may not know their destination, but they know that they must find themselves, spiritually, sexually, and personally. Tyler gives her women, an option to find themselves. They embark on a journey of quest by themselves on their own will and their heroic quest for self-discovery gives a great deal on the account of their lives and women's cultural oppression that strides the society. Literature is full of complications that arise from the traditional roles of the sexes, particularly with women being reduced to do the household chores alone.

The female quest is a common literary mode, and women are very much aware of the opportunities they have out of their homes, but are not eligible to take part on it, because of being female. Pope and Pearson in their work, *The Female Hero, American and British Literature*, speak the paradox of women, the female hero, who is from childhood taught to care for others before caring for herself:

Undertaking a heroic quest to discover the true self is less selfish than the more traditional role of selfless helpmate. Because the hero does not give up her life for others, she has no reason to entrap them, make them feel guilty, or dominate them. When she refuses to sacrifice her own self to others, she becomes more rather than less able to aid others in their search for fulfilment. (14-15)

Women were taught a myth that they should be selfless and serve as helpmates to her husband and children. Therefore, women who act like men seeking careers and job opportunities outside their homes are usually condemned for their heroic actions.

However, Tyler's women are bold enough to walk away from their homes if they find it, confining. "In British and American stories, the hero (woman) typically departs from a confining house, and once she leaves behind the angel in the home image, she is able to go forth in her journey of self-discovery" (Pearson & Pope, 79). In her quest, it is equally important that she sheds her dependence on men and take responsibility for her own life like Delia in the novel *Ladder of Years* (1996) does. Tired with menial chores, she sets out in a quest to find an identity for herself. Though the final result is not as expected, all women of Tyler come up with a discovery of their self-identity and the kind of person that they yearn to become comes out. This self-identity is vital for the survival of any individual.

Delia Grinstead begins her quest when she reaches a point that she can no longer deal with her monotonous and boredom existence. She feels that she had been smothered by her father's dreams and suppressed by her husband. When she can no longer tolerate her Slavic existence, she speeds away from her real life to embark on a quest of self-discovery. In her new life, far away from her own home, she learns more than she could ever imagine. She becomes Ms. Grinstead, who is no longer defined by a man. Her quest gets answered, as she realizes her real capabilities and her strength which stood hidden during all those years of her marital life.

With their boredom existence as mere caregivers and providers, the women at home have started to question more seriously about how they feel about their lives. After a moment of self-analysis these women embark on a quest to find themselves, but return, knowing that 5 their families would not survive without them. The women nowadays, are capable and strong enough to balance both household and career given the right opportunities. The women of Tyler are aware of the necessity of knowing oneself and being an independent entity. Delia and Rebecca on their quest, find their real strength beneath discovering themselves.

Works Cited

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