

Procuring Selfhood in Anne Tyler's Novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*

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Abstract

Self-identity is mixing up the different roles that people play throughout their life to build their self-perception. Individuals can determine their priorities in terms of belief, values activities and life goals by building self-identity. This paper aims to focus on the different perspective narration of the characters in Anne Tyler's novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* about fruition of their lives and how they contour themselves to form a self-identity after facing the difficulties of life.

Keywords: Identity- personal identity – self-identity – impediments – attainment.

Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.

(George Bernard Shaw)

According to Oxford dictionary identity means the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. Identity gives a name for a person, it adds value to life, it defines his behavior, character etc. Society respects a person only with the identity the person has created for himself. Identity gives respect, fame, and confidence to an individual and emboldens him.

Personal identity is the sum of a person's personality traits, beliefs, values, physical characteristics, talents, goals, and other identifiers. It is more expansive and all-encompassing than their sense of self. Self-identity is just the interpretation of own unique identity. Some of the characteristics that make up one's personal identity may be overlooked or undervalued, thus they are not included in one's self-identity. In simple terms, personal identity refers to who one is, whereas self-identity refers to whom one perceives or defines oneself to be.

One such author who gives importance to self-identity is Anne Tyler. Anne Tyler a prolific American novelist, short story writer and literary critic was born into a Quaker family. All of her novels' primary conflicts and core themes stem from a concern for the family and an individual's relationship to the community. Tyler's books, in their concern for familial ties, explore philosophical questions of freedom and devotion. Significantly, hers is a sympathetic art that avoids clear moral judgment—a flaw that some critics have criticized her for. The irony of Tyler's soft treatment of important subjects is that her characters' troubling failure to comprehend fully and to be understood by people they love is counter-balanced by a funny, meticulously researched manner.

Her novel *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* portrays the life of a woman abandoned by her husband raising three children Cody, Ezra, and Jenny as a single mother. At the threshold of the novel the author shows Pearl Tull at her death bed recollecting memories from the past. She married a salesman whose work tosses him from place to place and poor Pearl had to follow him. Initially the family was happy but later Beck abandoned and left abroad. She also did not disturb the children's mind and managed to give them a reason that he was on a business trip and promised he would come back. Cynthia Propper Seton in *The Washington Post* describes the Pearl's position in these words:

Without roots, without friends, peckish to the outside world, she narrows grimly to the task of rearing her children, leaving them with very few memories of a light and gay order--Cody, the eldest, remembers there were no pictures on the wall, no perfume bottles on a bureau, no friends welcomed to supper, and even at Christmas, no turkey. (1)

Shattered Pearl gained confidence and the fighting spirit to live in the challenging world made her to work and raise the children as a single willed mother. As a mother, Pearl realized that bringing up three children was a difficult task as they were out of control and did not listen to her as they grew up. Her feelings are pertinently expressed thus:

‘Children. Dear ones,’ she would say. ‘There’s something you should know.’ But she wouldn’t be able to continue; she might cry. It was unthinkable to cry in front of the children. Or in front of anyone. Oh, she had her pride, she started to lose her temper, patience and she was not a tranquil woman, she often lost her temper, snapped, slapped the nearest cheek but in every situation she thanked god for what she was living (Tyler, 15)

She is incredibly resourceful and independent, often at her cost. Pearl waits nearly 48 hours to receive medical attention after breaking her arm because she doesn't want to leave the kids with the neighbors. When Beck leaves, Pearl doesn't wallow in misery; instead, she looks for a dull work as a cashier at a grocery store and decides to raise the kids by herself. Out of so many difficulties she brought up her children. But as mother is always a symbol of sacrifices she started working hard, she became out of date kind of woman, frail boned, deep bosomed. “As she was travelling throughout her life she wished to have a house on her own.” (16) Pearl’s achievement as a woman and a mother is that even though there were rifts between mother and children she as a mother got her self-identity in the society as a woman

who boldly brought up three children and gave identity for them. At her deathbed everybody was with her, that's her achievement. A dysfunctional family got united at last.

Benjamin De Mott in The New York Times has mentioned that, Beck was always a busy business man working in Tanner Corporation as a salesman. All the time he was fuming over his business, in his workplace he was grumbling for attention from everyone. He wanted to have an identity, eventhough he did not wish to agree for the transfer, he thought his family made him emotionally weak and he was jaded of Pearl and so he did not want to stay with Pearl nor the children. He thought Norfolk would give him a new identity which was even more important than anything. At the end of the novel Beck attends Pearl's funeral to meet his children, Cody loses his temper and questions his father, "You think we're some jolly, situation-comedy family when we're in particles, torn apart, torn all over the place, and our mother was a witch." (294) Beck disappears when everyone's attention is suddenly drawn to Jenny's step son who is choking. At last the father and the son sit together for a long chat, Beck explains his departure as he could not deal with the greyness, greyness of things; half – right, half- wrongness of things. At last this led to forgiveness and a bond formed between them resulting in the family members heading back to the restaurant. His behaviour is possibly the cruellest unconscious occurrence in the story, despite the fact that he is not truly a wicked character.

Benjamin De Mott in The New York Times has reviewed that, Cody Tull, the eldest of the children, is driven by a rage to dominate from an early age. Cody the first child of the family, was born late but became a trouble maker and a difficult boy. Cody is undoubtedly the novels least sympathetic character. Tyler devotes more chapters to his point of view than any other character. A tumultuous childhood abandoned father, abusive mother shaped some of his worst tendencies including cruelty, selfishness and jealousy especially towards Ezra the

mother's favorite. Cody's emotional development pushes him into a trait of dominating others. As a result he is an authoritarian as his father was unreliable, he becomes a very successful efficiency expert, which is an excellent career for a control freak who does not appreciate being in the present moment. It is not out of love, but to compete with Ezra's devotion for his mother that he bought her the Baltimore row house she had previously rented. Cody engineers a number of plans to make his tranquil, non-competitive brother appear silly, but his cruelest adult deed is marrying Ruth, his brother's fiancée. Cody's intense competition is to win the love of a mother he previously described as "a raging, shouting, unpredictable witch".(63) Cody is endlessly cruel not only to his brother Ezra but also to his own wife and son, emerging in middle age as a rich, time-obsessed efficiency engineer whose embitterment stops just short of self-destructiveness.

Ezra appears gentle, his mildness as a youngster turns into positivity as an adult, which is both his weakness and his saving grace. Ezra simply lets life happen to him, taking his mother's enraged love, his mentor Mrs. Scarlatti's generosity and even his tragic loss of Ruth to Cody, the one woman who has ever roused him to passion without unquestioning allegiance. Initially, Ezra joined in the army but he was chased out of the army because of sleep-walking. After coming out he was pushed into great depression. Ezra's mood has changed over time as he started working in Scarlatti's and soon announces his family members that he became a partner with Scarlatti and subsequently, the owner after her death. "Afterward, he was glad to go to the restaurant. It helped to keep busy- stirring and seasoning and tasting, stumbling over the patch in the floor where the center counter had once stood."(158) In his aptly titled Homesick Restaurant, Ezra comes to life, creating recipes to lure his customers and pouring out his curiously maternal humanity into hearty soups and tenderly prepared dinners. Here he prepares the kind of food that people are homesick for, the kind of food that they had at home. In preparing food for others Ezra found the utmost joy

and peace of work. Ezra's tendency to only see the bright side of things makes him passive. Unlike his siblings, he never went to college, never married and never truly left home, living with his mother all through his life. Ezra, on the other hand, is less affectionate than usual when he sees Pearl's frail side, he trusted his mother to be everything for him. When she cut her finger with a paring knife, he had felt defeated by her incompetence.

The second kid, Jenny, is a pediatrician who has been married three times. She is bright, vivacious, and straightforward in her speaking, yet she is skeptically detached from the people who ought to be closest to her. Jenny the only daughter of the family suffered after the deserted father, she was physically and psychologically abused by her mother. She describes her mother as, "pale hair could crack electricity from its bun..." and whole "eyes could get small as hatpins". She recalls her against a wall and calling her a "cockroach" and a "hideous little sniveling gutter snipe" on several occasions. Some of her memories appear in her dreams, including one in which Pearl states, "her mother told her in a informative and compassionate tone of voice that, she was raising Jenny to eat her".(84) Jenny finds that they have certain things in common after witnessing her mother at her worst as a youngster. Jenny walked into her first marriage with the same recklessness and spirit of adventure as Pearl did. Both are intelligent, intense ladies who have a tendency to harm children in difficult situations. Jenny is an excellent illustration of a character who has survived a challenging upbringing and does not view herself as a victim.

Every youngster in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* yearns for and tries to construct the perfect family for him or her. For instance, Cody yearns for a mother who stays at home and socializes with other housewives. Later, he purchases a farmhouse and fantasizes relocating there with his family, something he did not really accomplish. At his restaurant, The Homesick Restaurant, Ezra romanticizes the idea of the family supper. He repeatedly recreates the incident throughout the novel, despite the fact that someone (often Pearl)

invariably loses her cool and snaps at him. Instead of raising a family of his own, he feeds and cares for others. In an effort to create the ideal family, Jenny gets married three times. She meets her perfect partner in her third marriage, a man with six children who has been dumped by his wife. The sheer busyness of parenting so many kids shields her from developing an emotional attachment to them.

Throughout the novel the characters sail completely different from each other in the same family. Having grown without the love and care of the father it is difficult for the children to survive in the society because father is the hero for every single child. The article throws a lesson to the humanity that, Children will become enriched and groomed only when they go inside the maze and unravel themselves without the guidance of their parents. It is only through sheer experience a person's life will be molded. The characters after going through many hardships, whether they stand as optimists or pessimists in the society, but as individuals they have achieved something in their life that gave them identity not because of their ancestors or parents but out of their own and hard earned self-identity.

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