

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

*By*

**RANI PAUL UKKAN**

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in English Literature  
to the University of Calicut*

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT  
SEPTEMBER 2002**

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SEPTEMBER 2002**

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### **CERTIFICATE**

Certified that the thesis entitled **A New Historical Reading of Anne Tyler's Fiction** submitted by **Rani Paul Ukkan** to the University of Calicut in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature is a record of the bonafide research work done by her under my guidance and supervision.

Place : Calicut

Date : 28<sup>th</sup> September 2002

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## **DECLARATION**

I, **Rani Paul Ukkan**, Lecturer, Selection Grade, Department of English, St. Joseph's College, Irinjalakuda, hereby declare that this thesis has not been previously published by me for the award of a Degree, Diploma, Title or Recognition.

Place : Calicut

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: An Approach to New Historicism and Its Possibilities in Anne Tyler's Fiction

#### 1.1 What is New Historicism?

New Historicism is a fascinating new critical practice which shows a resurgence of interest in history. It is a reconstruction of the past from a present perspective, and highlights the role of the present in remaking the past and making it more usable to the present. It “refers to a general reaction against unhistorical approaches, and a fresh interest in the specific social and political contexts of literary works” (Baldick 187). Louis A. Montrose in the essay, “Professing the Renaissance” calls it a return to history from the post-structuralist obsession with language and argues that New Historicism is concerned with “the historicity of texts and textuality of history” (Veeser, *Historicism* 20). The text has historicity as it is embedded in the social and cultural context, and history has a claim to textuality as we have no access to the full lived authentic past and only traces of it are preserved. It treats a work of literature not as a story worthy of analysis but as a representation of historical forces. This modern school of literary criticism considers the social, cultural, historical, economic and political implications of the text. Stephen Greenblatt defines New Historicism as “a shift away from a criticism centred

on ‘verbal icons’ toward a criticism centred on cultural artifacts” (Greenblatt, *Learning* 3), and comments on the mutually beneficial roles of the historical and the literary.

## 1.2 Origin and Spread of New Historicism

Carolyn Porter observes that New historicism springs forth from a diverse set of practices that are not in themselves new and attributes the origin of this practice to various figures as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams, Mikhail Bakhtin, Terry Eagleton and Hayden White (Porter 743 – 49).

The emergence of New Historicism was predominant in the 1980s, and its origin can be traced back to Raymond Williams’s Marxism and Literature (1977) which inspired the rehistoricization of literary studies in England and America, and Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) which gave a new impetus to the eurocentric cultural discourse and questioned the preeminence of Western culture. Though the term seems to have been coined by Michael McCannles, New Historicism rose to prominence with Stephen J. Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning : from More to Shakespeare (1980). His other works which delved into power relations in Renaissance culture, and propelled the New Historicist movements include The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance (1982), Shakespearean Negotiations : The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England

(1988), Learning to Curse (1990) and Marvellous Possession : The Wonder of the New World (1991). In 1982, the founding of the journal Representations also gave further momentum to the New Historicist scholarship. Other frontline practitioners of this theory include Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson and Marilyn Butler.

### **1.3 Paradigms of New Historicism**

#### **1.3.1 Historical Co-texting**

New Historicism involves a parallel reading or juxtaposition of the literary and the non-literary texts of the same historical period. Both are given equal importance and allowed to work as sources of information or interrogation with each other. This way, the non-literary text becomes not a con-text, but a co-text, along with the literary work. The literary text is placed within the framework of the non-literary text which is closely read. Previous writings about the text are ignored and the text is subjected to fresh scrutiny mainly from the historical point of view. For eg., Peter Barry speaks of Greenblatt's placing of the Elizabethan plays side by side with the historical factors which pointed to a colonialist policy in the Renaissance (Barry 173).

This sort of an analysis makes New Historicism establish a point of contact with Clifford Geertz's use of the term 'thick descriptions'. Colebrook explains that Geertz employs the term in the New Historicist way of analyzing a particular social event which has meaning for the people involved and

discovering the patterns of conventions, codes and modes of thinking that attribute those meanings to the cultural event:

Rather than seeking the meaning of a text in the intention or mental content of either the author or the work, we could focus on the effect of the text in a network of practices. We could see the text as an effective symbol: a social fact which makes action meaningful and is a part of a culture's way of performing its actions in an ordered and understandable way. Description of texts would be 'thick' if they referred to the social and cultural forms in which the text operated (Colebrook 75).

### **1.3.2 Employs a Documentary Method**

The typical New Historicist essay begins with a historical anecdote, doing away with the customary beginning with the literary interpretations. The critic Barry refers to Louis Montrose's essay '*A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, Form*' as an example of New Historicism in practice. The opening sentence of Montrose's essay is : "I would like to recount an Elizabethan dream – Not Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but one dreamt by Simon Forman on 23 January 1597 " (Barry 173). Barry goes on to say that these anecdotes have the force of the documentation with dramatic openings and

citation of dates and places, and give the reader the feel of a lived experience. A point to be noted in this connection is that the entire documents are not offered, but only extracts from them are provided for bilateral study.

### **1.3.3 Deconstruction and Remaking of the Text**

The canon of Deconstruction contends that a single or fixed meaning cannot be attributed to the word in the text. It allows the text to present a number of independent and often conflicting voices. In the same way New Historicism contends that a work is not an autonomous body of fixed meanings, but represents a diversity of dissonant voices and unresolved conflicts in a specific culture. It affirms the importance of the text, though it does so in relation to the context which becomes the co-text. While Post-Structuralism tries to effect the meanings from a 'close reading' of the text alone, New Historicism attempts it more from the cultural context in which the text is embedded.

It agrees with Derrida's view that there is nothing outside the text in the sense that what is available to us of history is, as Montrose observes, in the textual form. The text is deconstructed and remade by being subjected to the practices of its own time, those of our time, and the means of language. This has shades of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'dialogic' nature of the text overlapping with it, which constitutes a fundamental idea upon which New Historicism, too, seems to have been built.

### 1.3.4 Sharp Political Edge

New Historicism is liberal and accepts all forms of differences and deviances. However, it is different from the Marxist sense of emancipation which is centred on the working class. Mark Poster traces the point of contact between New Historicism and Michel Foucault, and observes that Foucault shifted the focus from the working class to the other social groups which suffered exploitation or alienation—the insane, the prisoners, the homosexuals, the women—oppressed by the modern society (Krieger 107– 30). In this sense there is a plurality of critiques effected by New Historicism which detects the oppressed and the marginalized voices in the text, and makes a political reading of it. The critic Paul A. Bove links Foucault’s ‘discourse’ with power and knowledge: not the Marxist power which implies “control by repression or exclusion. It means, rather, control by the power of positive production: that is, a kind of power that generates certain kinds of questions, placed within systems that legitimate, support and answer those questions; a kind of power that, in the process, includes within its system all those it produces as agents capable of acting within them” (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 54). In other words “it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions...” (Dreyfus and Robinow 220). This idea is echoed in the term ‘Cultural Materialism’ – with which New Historicism is closely linked.

New Historicism renders a political reading of the text by giving a venue to the culturally and psychologically oppressed and marginalized women in the society. Judith Lowder Newton contends that New Women's history is about the gap between the prescription of roles and women's actual behaviour. She argues that women's activities and struggles are seen as having a causative relation to the areas hitherto associated with men. New Historicism, in her opinion, juxtaposes the voices of men and women on the same social topics and movements and here the emphasis is not on organized women's voices, but on the lonely and individual struggles (Veese, *Historicism* 152 – 67).

New Historicism is also sympathetic towards the post-colonial way of thinking advocated by critics like Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It decries the inter contamination of language and cultures in colonial and post-colonial societies, and talks in terms of post-colonialism as a discourse and power. As Said puts it, "Orientalism is a 'discourse' in Michel Foucault's sense; that is, an institutionalization of a special language which gives its users powers to define others" (Baldick 186).

#### **1.4 Old Historical Approach versus New Historicism**

The Old historical method considered literature and history as text and context, while the New Historicism considers them as text and co-text, and refuses to distinguish between literature and history, the aesthetic and

the real. The Older historical method stated that literature was a reflection of a particular age's shared 'world-view'. New Historicism deviates from it in upholding that no age or culture has a single homogeneous world-view, but is internally diverse and hence heterogeneous.

Yet another difference between the Old method and New Historicism concerns the significance of the roles played by history and text/author. Says Greenblatt, "... the traditional historical approach to literature ... finds history to lie outside the texts, to function in effect as the object to which signs in the text point" (Greenblatt, *Representing* viii). Abrams endorses Greenblatt's view when he says, "the view that history, not the author, shapes a literary work and forges its meaning is indeed the crucial feature in the shift from traditional historical criticism both to the New Historicism and to the New Politicalism" (Abrams 365). The old historicism presented history as blocks of periods, one following the other and indicating progress and evolution; the New Historicism "projects a vision of history as an endless skein of cloth smocked in a complex overall pattern by the needle and thread of power. You need only pull the thread at one place to find it connected to another" (Porter 765).

A further distinction between the New Historicism and the older method is manifest in the shift of the focus from the old objectivity to the new 'object' and from history to 'histories'. New Historicism can be

distinguished from the historical method “by its lack of faith in “objectivity” and “permanence” and its stress not upon the direct recreation of the past, but rather the processes by which the past is constructed or invented” (Cox and Reynolds 4). Add Cox and Reynolds :

New Historicism tends to regard texts in materialist terms, as objects and events in the world as a part of human life, society, the historical realities of power, authority and resistance; yet at the same time, it rejects the idea of “History” as a directly accessible, unitary past, and substitutes for it the conception of “histories”, an ongoing series of human constructions, each representing the past at particular present moments for particular present purposes (4).

The older historical method was of lesser worth in comparison with New Historicism as it was a study of the text in the ‘background’ or ‘context’ of history. As earlier mentioned, in New Historicism, history becomes the co-text and is a record of written documents. It is these recorded facts in history which will be subject to a close reading earlier reserved for literary texts. As a result it becomes a witness in proving the textual facts. This makes New Historicism of greater worth than the old method.

### **1.5 Significance of New Historicism**

New Historicism has gained popularity as a critical practice because

of various reasons. One significant achievement of this method is in the ample scope it provides for innumerable interpretation of the literary work. As Greenblatt and Gunn observe, New Historicism has reminded us that “literature is not something given once and for all but something constructed and reconstructed, the product of shifting conceptual entitlements and limits” (Greenblatt and Gunn 5). This opportunity for reading meanings at different levels into the text is rendered possible also because of the points of contact it establishes with various literary theories as well as cultural and social concepts. We are confronted with “not a unified field at all but diverse historical projects and critical idioms that ... originate from a variety of sources, some of which lie outside the realm of literary study altogether and intersect one another often at strange angles” (3).

Another point of significance which has made New Historicism important lies in the fact that it has encouraged and effected a return to history and culture from the earlier preoccupation with the dry realm of pure theory. As Said observes,

..... texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted (Said, *World* 4).

New Historicism is also appealing because of the sense of novelty it injects into the reader as it analyses the text in the light of a historically documented extract. It avoids Post-structuralism's dense style and uses a more accessible style as it presents fascinating data and draws its conclusions. He feels that he has stepped into a new territory and has gained access to a whole world of histories which were hitherto relatively unlinked to the literary text. This sort of a study will be helpful in delving deep into the marginalized cultures, as well as into the marginalized aspects of the prominent cultures.

Carolyn Porter argues that New Historicism frees us from 'World Views' in criticism and allows us to "approach literary texts as agents as well as effects of cultural change, as participating in a cultural conversation rather than merely representing the conclusion reached in that conversation, as if it could have reached no other ..." (Porter 782).

### **1.6 Disadvantages of New Historicism**

New Historicism may have gained momentum as a new critical practice, but it has some drawbacks. New Historicism posits power as a constant entity functioning in all human relations and hence has done nothing new as it has only replaced the trans-historical term 'man' with 'power'. This is an argument raised by critics like Carolyn Porter. She argues that New Historicism seeks to propagate traditional humanist values instead of moving towards a postmodern, non-human-centred way of viewing the world.

Jane Marcus has found fault with New Historicism as lacking in 'truth value', and taken it to task for moving from the text to the context. Asserting the importance of the text, she criticizes New Historicism for paying too much attention to the context which she considers as only "an enhancement of the text", "the setting for the jewel", "the scenery for the play" (Veese, *Historicism* 132)

Brook Thomas refers to Greenblatt's practice of refusing to adopt the old strategy of beginning with a historical background and then moving to the analysis of a text which is revealed by or which reveals the background. Instead, according to Thomas, Greenblatt places all on the same plane and cuts from one to the other, creating "a field of energy between the two so that we see the event as a social text and the literary text as a social event" (Thomas 32). This, he claims, is a defect in that it results in "arbitrary connectedness". As New Historicism places all social practices on the same plane, the selection of one practice over the others and its juxtaposition with the particular literary text is rendered difficult.

New Historicism is not greatly valued by historians because it relies upon a single historical anecdote to testify as a witness for an apparently unrelated and seemingly marginal issue in the literary text.

One final argument raised against New Historicism is that in its obsession with power structure, it makes us adjust our sense of culture so

that what once appeared strange does not seem so now; as when New Historicism concentrates on the marginalized and the bizarre, thereby restoring their importance and paving the way for their resistance of absorption to the master culture.

### **1.7 Application of New Historicism : A Few Illustrations**

In his essay, "Towards a Poetic of Culture", Stephen Greenblatt refers to a paper by the political scientist and historian Michael Rogin, who "observed the number of times [the former U.S.] President [Ronald] Reagan has, at critical moments in his career, quoted lines from his own or other popular films" (Veesser, *Historicism* 6). Greenblatt concludes that Reagan "continues to live within the movies; he has been shaped by them, draws much of his cold war rhetoric from them, and cannot or will not distinguish between them and an external reality. Indeed his political career has depended upon an ability to project himself and his mass audience into a realm in which there is no distinction between simulation and reality" (6). Greenblatt also mentions the reaction of Anthony Dolan, a White House speech-writer, who was asked to comment on Rogin's paper. Dolan links Reagan's speeches to Nazism and Communism, the Cold War counter subversion in the 1940s and its revival in the 1980s as a result of the political replacement of Nazism by Communism. He concludes that Movies "heighten reality rather than lessen it" (6).

In “The History of the Anecdote : Fiction and Fiction”, the critic Joel Fineman (Veesser, *Historicism* 72 – 73) alludes to a very suggestive essay called “Fiction and Friction” by Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt mentions an anecdote about a certain Marie Le Marcis, a household servant in Roven in 1601, who surprises her fellow servant Jeane Le Febvre, by revealing that she was a man masquerading as a woman. This parallels with the situation of disguised identity and sexuality in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. In the anecdote Marie and Jeane have a sexual relationship and decide to marry, much to the shock and indignation of the then conservative community. The scandal raises medical and juridicial questions. A number of doctors are called in to resolve the questions and one specialist, Jacques Duvall establishes the fact that Marie is a man – the decisive evidence provided by Marie’s ejaculation caused by the friction of the doctor’s touch.

Greenblatt is led by this incident to questions of how the two sexes, in spite of the differences, stand to each other, with regard to the anatomy of the sexual apparatus, in a relation of the introverted homology. He cites galenic medical theory– “Turn outward the woman’s, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man’s, and you will find them the same in both every respect” (72). Greenblatt is interested in the ‘introverted collation’ of anatomical sexuality. This also leads him to the social and cultural differences between the two sexes (friction). This is fictionalized in Shakespeare’s Twelfth

Night in the playful, punning dialogue between Viola and the Clown in the III Act (lines 11 – 20).

Another example of a New Historicist reading of a well-known text is provided by the authors of A handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (Guerin *et al.* 327 –30). They refer to the reading made by Susan Bruce of Book 3 of Gulliver’s Travels. In her article, “The Flying Island and Female Anatomy : Gynaecology and Power in *Gulliver’s Travels*”, Bruce offers an explanation of why Swift named the flying island ‘Laputa’, which in Spanish means ‘the whore’. Bruce begins her article by describing a commentary on Gulliver’s Travels, published in 1727 by one Corolini di Marco who makes a dry reference to Gulliver catching rabbits for food in Book 4, “A voyage to the Houyhnhnms”. Di Marco ties this episode with the notorious scandal, involving the then royal physician St.Andre and the so-called ‘rabbet – woman of Surrey’, Mary Toft, who managed to convince various members of the medical profession in 1727 that she had delivered a number of rabbits, which, she had actually inserted into her vagina and then labored to deliver with the help of a midwife. This also allows Bruce to describe the hostility between not only midwives and men in the medical profession, but also women and men in general. Bruce connects the male outrage at the female power with Gulliver’s observations on women in Gulliver’s Travels. In this nauseating description of a tumour on a Brobdingnagian woman’s breast,

rendered repulsive with a number of holes into which a person could have crept and hidden himself, Swift implies not the appreciation of the female body but the horror and disgust generated by it.

Bruce then turns to Book 3 and describes the island of Laputa as “ a gigantic trope of the female body”. The circular island has a round chasm in its center through which the astronomers of the island descend. Bruce compares the floating structure of the island Laputa to a woman, with its central chasm comparable to the uterus and the vagina. Gulliver and the Laputians are able to enter the cavity at will and control the island. Bruce argues that this is synonymous with the male control over the female body, rendering the body the status of a whore – ‘la puta’.

As an illustration of New Historicism in practice, Peter Barry refers to an essay by Louis Montrose entitled “*A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture : Gender, Power, Form*” which had appeared originally in the American journal Representations. The author sums up Montrose’s thesis as one which creates the culture by which it is created, and shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped (Barry 130). The cult of the Virgin Queen as one with mystical and magical powers is fostered by literature like Spenser’s The Faerie Queene and a wide range of masques, comedies and epic poetry. This image in turn generates literature; thus life and literature play upon each other.

Montrose's essay, according to Barry, opens with an account of a dream by Simon Forman on 23 January 1597. Forman dreams of an erotic encounter with the Queen, whom he has just saved from the advances of 'a weaver, a tall man with a reddish beard'. Montrose relays Forman's account of the Queen's revealing style of dress. This enables the reader to project the Queen as the mother of the nation, and at the same time as a virgin, openly flirtatious and provocative.

Montrose then relates this to the tensions generated in a patriarchal society which is ruled by a woman. He refers to several such examples in Shakespearean plays, where the Queen who has absolute powers, is mastered and feminised. He refers to Hippolyta, the Amazonian Queen, defeated by Theseus; Titania, the Fairy Queen, who, after defying her husband, Oberon, is humiliated by him in having Puck administer the magic potion which causes her to fall in love with the first being she sees after waking up.

Thus Montrose argues that Shakespeare's comedy neutralizes the royal power and maintains patriarchy. Barry relates Montrose's thesis to the more recent political situation in England. Even under the rule of 'the iron lady', he argues, the Tory party could not revise its ideas about the role of women in society, but only served to reinforce the male ideas.

Commenting on recent changes in Shakespearian criticism, Claire Colebrook points out that Shakespeare is no longer the bearer of timeless

values, nor a picture of the Elizabethan age. (Colebrook 86 – 87). From the traditional point of view Othello has been the study of jealousy and evil, but more recently this approach has been replaced by a focus on how a culture produces evil to deal with certain historical particulars. Colebrook cites Dollimore and establishes that “Othello is an instance of cultural distancing in which Elizabethan England constructed other cultures as internally threatening in order to create a sense of its own national identity”(87).

Elsewhere in her book Colebrook refers to Stephen Greenblatt, who manages to present Iago not as a “morally reprehensible and ruthless manipulator”, but as “the consummate performer of self and the epitome of renaissance self-fashioning” Desdemona is won from her father by Othello’s rhetorical powers. But the narrative powers of Iago proves to be more persuasive than that of Othello in the end. “The ‘art’ of Iago is simply more explicit and calculating than the art of a supposedly more legitimate power. The distinction between the real and authentic power of the monarch, and the theatrical power of imposters and dramatists is itself a performance, a performance of sincerity” (210).

Colebrook also provides a political reading of The Tempest by shifting the emphasis from “the Renaissance awareness of the power of performance to the transition from feudal power as spectacle to modern power as internalised legitimation” (200). The crisis in the play is resolved when

Prospero gives up his coercive powers of magic and adopts another mode of performance : a royal masque and the staged performance of a royal patron for Caliban and the conspirators.

### **1.8 New Historicism and/or Cultural Materialism**

Cultural Materialism was initially claimed to be the British counterpart of the American New Historicism. Both are by no means unified theories which owe allegiance to any single theorist, but are practices which incorporate several theories and positions. Both cannot be clearly separated from each other. Many examples of contemporary critical practices draw upon both Cultural Materialism and New Historicism. Anthologies of one include references to works of the other. However, it is presently accepted that Cultural Materialism is not just the British name for New Historicism; there are subtle differences between the two which account for an ongoing family squabble between the two.

The word 'culture' in the phrase Cultural Materialism can be explained as inclusive of all forms of culture. Raymond Williams defined culture as "the entire complex of practices, significations, institutions, material forces and personal responses" (Williams, *Marxism* 94). Hence the movement involves a critical analysis of the production and reception of all forms of cultural products, and also looks into the power structures that determine the meanings, the value and the status of diverse cultural products.

It undermines the hierarchical discrepancy that exists between 'high art' which appeals to the elite and 'low art' which gains mass appeal. It devotes an equal attention to popular fiction, romances, magazine-writing, advertising, journalistic reports, comics, films, TV, Video and popular music. This also shifts to the center stage hitherto marginalized subjects such as the productions of women, the ethnic groups, the working class, the post-colonial and the Third World Cultures. It serves to replace the earlier traditional monoculturalism with a more diverse, multicultural perspective. The other word 'materialism' in the phrase is the opposite of 'idealism'. Unlike materialism, idealism believes that only high culture can be the product of a talented individual mind. Materialism argues that culture is not just a reflection of the economic and political system, but is also determined by the material forces and relations of production.

Cultural Materialism is anchored in the British left-wing critic Raymond Williams' term 'structures of feeling' which are concerned with 'meanings and values as they are lived and felt'. This is contradictory to the acceptance of the existing dominant values and beliefs in the society. This results in "a sense of disconnection between individual experience and cultural meaning, as well as a striving for reunification" (Williams, *English* 64). Cultural Materialism believes that the novel is not just a mirror reflecting the society. It is more than a mere reflection. It is engaged in achieving a sense of

cultural coherence by relating social and moral elements into the community. Cultural Materialism is a movement of optimism as it concentrates on the interventions whereby men and women create their own history. But New Historicism is comparatively more pessimistic as it focuses on the power of social and ideological structures which restrain men and women. This political pessimism of New Historicism is also attributed to its scepticism about the possibility of attaining 'truth' since it is aware of the risks and dangers involved in claiming to establish truths. The crucial difference between the two is that New Historicism produces a subversion in order to contain it, while in Cultural Materialism, traces of subversion remain even if it is contained. This is why Sinfield states that "even a text that aspires to contain a subordinate perspective must first bring it into visibility; even to misrepresent one must present" (Sinfield 48).

Yet another distinction between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism concerns the selection of the historical or non-literary documents for parallel study. New Historicism selects the co-text from the literary text's own period of time, whereas in Cultural Materialism, the non-literary text is selected from a different period of time into which the literary text is situated. Barry refers to an essay called 'Telmah' (Barry 187 – 89) which originally appeared in Terence Hawkes' book That Shakespearian Rag. This particular essay is centred on the Shakespearian critic John Dover Wilson, famous for

his text What Happens in Hamlet? The essay opens with an emphasis of the cyclic and symmetrical elements of the play, how the same situation is repeated several times. According to Barry, Hawkes's title is the reversed 'Hamlet' which is symbolic of the repeated motif of looking backwards in the play.

The second section of the essay is called 'To the Sunderland Station' which is a take off on the title of the well-known history of the Russian Revolution called To the Finland Station. Hawkes gives an account here of Dover Wilson on the train to Sunderland in 1917, sent by the government to resolve the labour problems in a munitions factory. Wilson is said to be reading W.W. Greg's article on Hamlet in which the focus is shifted from Hamlet to the king. Greg makes the reader claim some sympathy for the king. This is challenged by Wilson who seems to have a fanatical desire for order as evidenced in his writings about Russia as an organic feudal state. The essay, claims Barry, "creates a pattern of appearing and containing difference. Hence, a way of interpreting the play is placed among several co-texts from twentieth century life, and thus the play itself is culturally transformed" (Barry 189).

### **1.9 Anne Tyler and Her Achievements**

Although Anne Tyler has won several accolades with her literary and critical output, she is mostly regarded as an advocate of uncontroversial issues, and her fiction is considered more popular than appealing to the elite.

As a woman writer whose novels, which deal generally with the familial issues of the middleclass, are well-received by the public, she deserves greater scholarly attention.

Until recently, Anne Tyler, whose novels form the corpus of this study, was considered only as an upcoming writer from the South of the United States; but an unbelievably long list of laudable works she has produced, and the impressive number of awards she has won, have since then catapulted her to the rank of the front – runners of American literary figures. Tyler was born on 25 October 1941, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to a journalist-cum-social worker-father and a chemist- mother. Her family settled in Raleigh, North Carolina – one of the Southern states – when Tyler was still a small girl. She lived in various communes like Celo in the South, studied at Duke and Columbia Universities, and was employed for a time as a Russian Bibliographer at Duke and as a librarian at McGill University, Montreal, before taking up full-time writing as a career. In 1963, Tyler married Mohammed Teghi Modaressi, an Iranian Psychiatrist, whom she lost recently to cancer, and now lives with her two grown-up daughters Tezh (born 1965) and Mitra (born 1967) in Baltimore, the locale of most of her novels. So far Tyler has authored 16 novels, apart from a large number of short stories, – which have never been collected, republished or anthologized – articles and reviews published in well-known periodicals that include the New Yorker,

the Southern Review and the New York Times Book Review. Tyler's first novel, If Morning Ever Comes, was published in 1964 when she was only 23 years old. A series of novels followed – The Tin Can Tree (1965), A Slipping Down Life (1970), The Clock-Winder (1972), Celestial Navigation (1974), Searching for Caleb (1976), Earthly Possessions (1977), Morgan's Passing (1980), Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (1982), The Accidental Tourist (1985), Breathing Lessons (1988), Saint Maybe (1991), Tumble Tower (1993), Ladder of Years (1995), A Patchwork Planet (1998) and Back When We Were Grownups (2001) – all of which have captured the attention of the critics, as well as served to enhance Tyler's impressive fan-following. She has already won a string of awards which include 'Mademoiselle Award' for writing (1966), the 'American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award' (won in 1977 for "her past achievements and promise of excellent work in future"), the 'Janet Heidinger Kafka Award' (1980), the 'PEN/ Faulkner Award' (1982) and the 'National Book Critics Circle Award' (for The Accidental Tourist in 1985), apart from the coveted 'Pulitzer Prize' (for Breathing Lessons in 1988). The Accidental Tourist has been made into a motion picture by Warner Brothers, in which William Hurt, Kathleen Turner and Geena Davis Starred. Davis even won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in the role of Muriel in the film.

### 1.9.1 Tyler's Controversial Place Among the Contemporaries

Anne Tyler's growing critical recognition has made her readers and reviewers alike ponder over the possibility of placing her in any literary tradition. Alice Hall Petry calls her "something of an anomaly in contemporary American literature" (Petry, *Understanding* 1). She has been labelled variously – a feminist, a non- feminist; a realist, a romantic; a victorian and a post-modernist. Although her novels are strewn with a number of dominating women characters who deliberately set out to alter the destinies of others, Tyler is not a hard-core feminist who is against men and marriages. Her novels like Morgan's Passing may deal with the improbabilities one usually associates with romances, but for the most part, she does not shy away from the facts of life. She may be Victorian in some of her view points like that of sex which is negligible in her novels; but at the same time, there is a marked existentialist tendency in her fiction which is in keeping with her chronological position among the Post-modernists. Nevertheless, it exhibits none of the obvious stylistic traits and daring experimentalism one usually associates with Post-modern writing . As Gordon Taylor says, Tyler's fiction is "contemporary in literary – technical performance, but in ways deflecting rather than inviting distinctions between the 'modern', and various species of the 'post-modern' (Stephens 68). They are comedies of manners marked by compassionate wit and precise details of domestic life and stress, personal

isolation and difficulties of communication between people.

Apart from the pluralisms which are to be discussed in the various chapters of this work, there are quite a few instances of ambivalence pointed out in Tyler's fiction by her critics, reviewers and scholars, which underline the difficulty of placing her in any one literary tradition. Readers find that the family structures and relations in her novels are, at the same time, a source of isolation as well as bonding; members of her fictional families are simultaneously drawn to, and repelled from, one another. They "can be helpful in times of crisis" and also "prove disconcertingly ineffectual in a crisis" and also "prove disconcertingly ineffectual in a crisis" (Petry, *Understanding* 32 – 33). Her characters prefer to stay at home, yet are packed and ready to go; they are poised on the thresholds of their front doors, ready for escape; they are almost like Anne Tyler herself who admits in her essay, "Still Just Writing":

I like routine and rituals and I hate leaving home; I have a sense of digging my heels in. I refuse to drive on freeways. I dread our annual vacation. Yet I'm continually prepared for travel: it is physically impossible for me to buy any necessity without buying a travel-sized version as well. I have a little toilet kit, with soap and a nightgown, forever packed and ready to go (Sternburg 15).

Her novels, sprinkled with equal amounts of humour and pathos, deal with neither the upper class nor the lower; they are slices of middle America. She writes not about heroes or villains, but about average people who are a combination of both.

Doris Betts in her provocative essay, “Tyler’s Marriage of Opposites” investigates the titles of Anne Tyler’s novels and detects the sense of doubling and contrasts implied in them. In Earthly Possessions, Betts hears the obvious meaning and the reversed one, “What on earth possessed you!”. In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, the title is pluralistic with the meaning changing from sick *for* home and sick *of* home. The logo on Macon Leary’s guidebooks, “traveling armchairs” reminds Betts of the cliché “armchair traveler” and she even pounces on the oxymoron which is the title, The Accidental Tourist, and asks, “how can a tourist be accidental?” The title of Tyler’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, Breathing Lessons, “blends an action that is reflexive, autonomic, natural – “breathing” – with a process deliberate, cerebral, learned – “lessons” ” (Stephens 6 –7). Alice Hall Petry catches on the ambiguity in the title Celestial Navigation which combines elements of sky and earth. Petry refers to the protagonist of the novel, Jeremy, who is “terrified of the murky ocean of reality surrounding him”. He is guided by the heavenly stars which might mislead him. Petry says that he might be lost or waylaid and never get home again (Petry, *Understanding* 121).

This sense of ambivalence is also detected by the critic Katherine Whitemore who lists a number of writers and reviewers that support or criticise Tyler. The list is balanced in number and content on both the sides. Whitemore mentions the Tyler supporters thus:

Larry McMurtry is a fan. To a lesser degree, so is Edward Hoagland. Francine du Plessix Gray and Michiko Kakutani have given Tyler glowing reviews. Her friend Eudora Welty once said, “If I could have written the last sentence in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* I’d have been happy for the rest of my life”. The *Washington Post* book critic Jonathan Yardley – a fellow Baltimorean – was beside himself with adoration for *The Accidental Tourist*: It “cuts so close to the bone that it leaves one aching with pleasure and pain”, he wrote. “Words fail me; one cannot reasonably expect fiction to be much better than this”. Nick Hornby has called Tyler “my favorite writer, and the best line-and-length novelist in the world” (Whitemore 113).

The list of Tyler’s detractors is as long:

James Wolcott seems plain bored by Tyler’s work. Diane Johnson doesn’t like the fact that her brand of bitter-sweet tastes more sweet than bitter. Johnson berated *The Accidental*

*Tourist* for being a “Reaganesque dream novel”, because it “urge[s] a whole agenda of comforting, consoling ideas” that are “powerfully attractive”. She continued, “It’s just that they are not true”. Vivian Gornick, in her *Village Voice* review of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, conceded Tyler’s great talent but indicted her for what Gornick considers nothing less than “a paralysing immaturity” (Whittimore 117).

### **1.10 Aim, Procedure and Methodology of the Project**

According to New Historicism , literary texts should not be detached from the wider network of texts and other cultural activities. In his essay called “Invisible Bullets”, Stephen Greenblatt employed a ploy of beginning an essay by telling an anecdote that is far removed from literature, and then subjecting it to close reading. He then tallied it with similar structures extracted from literary texts of the same period. Judith Burdan claims that for the New Historicists, literature “acts as a participant within a larger system of cultural production” (Kowaleski – Wallace 288). She adds:

In order to achieve a fuller exploration of literary texts, New Historicists breakdown the barrier between literature and other fields of research, drawing upon the discourses of medicine, law, sociology, anthropology, religion, education and so forth (288).

Anne Tyler's novels have already been subjected to some interdisciplinary scholarship. C. Ralph Stephens, in his editorial introduction to the collection of some wide-ranging and insightful essays on Tyler, observes that scholars and critics in the U.S. have applied theories of anthropology, psychology, structuralism etc to her fiction, but there are many other promising cross disciplinary approaches that are to be used, to interpret her novels. He mentions 'new historicism' as one such approach yet to be used on Tyler (Stephens xi). The aim of this project is to apply the theory of New Historicism to the fiction of Anne Tyler. Tyler has written both long and short fiction, but this work attempts to study only the former in the light of this challenging and unorthodox practice of New Historicism. The essence of the thesis is the ambiguities and ambivalence glimpsed in Anne Tyler's novels, which seems to keep pace with the doubleness witnessed as regards issues in various spheres of life. An effort is made to resort to various historical, cultural, ideological and material reasons to account for the obviously pluralistic view points in the novels of this gifted writer.

This project hence attempts to produce a New Historical re-reading of Anne Tyler's fiction, drawing attention to the local devices, incidents and instances which form the basis of history. Breaking down the barrier between literary and non-literary texts, it aims to use anecdotes, artefacts, materials and events from historical and literary texts. Thus works outside the realm

of literary scholarship will be re-valued along with works of literary merit. The project thus tries to produce a critical analysis of contemporary culture by integrating the textual details, the literary interpretive methods and the frame works of collaborative disciplines like sociology, anthropology and religion.

As is the practice of New Historicism; the focus here is thus on certain incidents from various realms of history and culture which form the prime documents of interaction in the chapters of this dissertation. Each document is then traced to a similar or related incident or theme, in Tyler's world of fiction. Cross references are then made, and inversions and marginalities are discovered.

New Historicism is an area of critical theory not much experimented with by scholars; and Anne Tyler is an author whose works have not received due scholarly attention, despite her voluminous output, large fan-following and impressive critical recognition. This project makes a humble effort to rectify these shortcomings and invite more scholarly and academic attention to this recent critical theory as well as to this living recipient of the Pulitzer Prize. As is obvious from the title, this introductory chapter endeavours to make an approach to understanding the intricacies involved in the practice of New Historicism. It focuses on the traceable paradigms of New Historicism and explains the origin of this critical approach. It analyses how this theory

differs from the historical theory prevalent in the past and shows parallels with and differences from the related theory of Cultural Materialism. Illustrations of the application of this critical practice, are also provided from various sources in order to show both the possibilities and the difficulties involved in the New Historicist reading of any piece of literary work. A detailed account of the life and works of Anne Tyler is also given in this chapter, along with a profile of the awards and achievements of this novelist. Her dual life as an earlier commune-girl and a later city dweller, her cross-cultural marriage, her precarious position as both a popular as well as a serious writer, and her reputation as an author non-aligned to any fixed literary canon are pointed out along with the variations on the themes in her novels to add strength and substance to the analysis of the pluralisms discussed in the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter of this dissertation points out the ambiguous and ambivalent stand adopted by Anne Tyler on certain public and gender issues. This is juxtaposed with similar striking viewpoints from the public sphere which provide corroborative evidence to Tyler's stand. The chapter will open with incidents of anti and pro abortion protests reported by the media. Attention is drawn to surveys done which show that the majority of the public are fence-sitters who are not drawn into any camp. This, along with the ambiguous and ambivalent dimensions of the ideology, practice,

psychological and moral implications and the very terminology of 'abortion', will also be stressed in order to invalidate the standpoint of Tyler's women characters, which combines a belief in the practice of abortion as well as a hesitation on their part to practice it. Abortion is discussed in the chapter not merely as a national or political issue, but also as the focal point of the gender questions raised in Tyler's fiction. The chapter will allude to the material condition of women's lives manifest in this woman novelist's fictional world – their isolation, oppression, and the emergence of their assertiveness. This will be done in the light of the fact that in the 1980s, New Historicism spread over fresher territories and took a firm grip of the feminist way of thinking. The feminists adopted this mode to stress the dominance of the masculine power structure to alienate and weaken the feminine, as is effectively shown by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic by employing motifs of confinement and madness as part of the struggle against patriarchal definitions.

However, in this part of the dissertation, the ambivalent stand struck by the novelist and the public towards abortion also tallies with the changing trends in feminism towards masculinity and patriarchy, which has witnessed a shift from earlier confrontation to recent conciliation. Instances of fluctuating cultural attitudes of the society towards the motherhood and fatherhood mystique and the nurturing role of the sexes in child care will also be cited in

the chapter to account for the variations in the cultural consciousness of the novelist. Anne Tyler's heterogeneity is also obvious in her depiction of both the men and women characters. There are run-aways and stay-at-homes among both the sexes in her novels; her stereotypical females who perform the traditional roles of wives and mothers almost equal her willful, plucky and heterodox women. Her men characters are presented, on the whole, in a sympathetic light, as initiators of changes in gender hierarchy and 'subverters' of the sexual division of labour. The chapter will show many of them as inverted with feminine qualities and performing the roles of surrogate mothers beneath their masculine fronts.

The polarized public opinion concerning abortion is replicated in several other controversial issues including urbanization, violence, multiple murders etc. Documentation is also provided for the mixed response towards the effects of urbanization and towards the political hide and seek regarding gun control and arms race which has accounted for the escalation in incidents of violence and mass murders in the American society. Tyler's position as a novelist of the suburban milieu oscillating between pastoral dreams and popular urban culture will be brought home in the second chapter, with illustrations of both the milieu provided for authorization. Similarly the degree of restraint and sense of detachment shown by the novelist in the accounting of death and devastation in her fiction will also be highlighted, while alluding

to the sense of alienation and detachment experienced by her characters due to deprivation and violence in her fictional families. The absence of a homogeneous world view in Tyler's fiction will be underscored and the conclusion reached that there is more social concern in her recent novels, though it is not consciously and deliberately expressed. Tyler acknowledges this in her letter to this scholar, which is appended at the end of this dissertation: "Although of course these and other issues concern me, I have never felt comfortable using my fiction as a platform to discuss my political beliefs".

Detection of deviant traits constitutes an important feature of New Historicist interpretations of literary works. The third chapter of this dissertation will highlight the celebration of deviance in the behavioural patterns of Tyler's fictional characters. Many of them are ambivalently placed; they are not fully sane, nor are they completely insane. These borderline characters that are balanced delicately and dangerously between the extremes of sanity and insanity are in a line of progression with the ambiguities explained in the second chapter. The chapter on Tyler's eccentrics will open with the thawing in the previously horrified attitude of the readers and the viewers towards the demonic image of the fictional and filmy character of Dracula who is subverted from a diabolic villain to a more humane and caring person. This is projected as a reflection of the changes undergone by the public in their

attitude towards what is considered as the grotesque. Grotesque has come to be treated not as something crude and fantastic, but as something realistic and appropriate to the existential problems. Tyler's novels incorporate this change and present eccentricity not as a condition that invites revulsion, but one that invokes fascination and understanding. The chapter will show the novelist not as a champion of the causes of these idiosyncratic people; on the other hand, she will not be seen as denouncing them either; instead, they will be projected as deserving our sympathy and caring.

In the course of the chapter it will be established with the aid of illustrations from the primary sources that the oddities of Tyler's characters who are neither thoroughly villainous nor laudably heroic are more behavioural than physical. Instances of visibly obvious eccentricity in appearance are negligible in Tyler; what is more prominent is the waywardness conveyed through the gestures, actions and mannerisms of the characters. What is striking in the novels is that the deviation from the orderly ways only serves to heighten the individuality of these people, and enables them to deserve the readers' liking and sympathy. The chapter will also establish a biogenetic link between Tyler's characters and their eccentric tantrums. It will be depicted not merely as a familial trait affecting generations, but also as a means of empowerment for many of her fictional men and women. A part of the chapter will also be devoted to deal with the carnivalesque tradition

and the dress code referred to in Tyler's novels.

The presence of the large number of eccentrics in Tyler's fiction and the affinity that the novelist shows towards them and invites from the readers will be explained in the light of several literary and philosophical theories. These include the ideas of power-relations, containment and subversion, purity and dirt, disturbance of borders and margins, encounter and collision of one discourse with another, relation between madness and production, labour and idleness etc which are alluded to in order to substantiate the statements and arguments made in the chapter.

The fourth chapter entitled "Black, White and Shades of Colour ..." will deal with race and ethnicity in Anne Tyler's novels. The pattern of discussion followed will be the same as in the previous chapters. It will begin with the historical documentation of the irony manifest in cultural pluralism. This is obvious in the ambivalent attitudes of the people, especially the whites, towards racism. It reveals in their positive self presentation of understanding which conceals a negative impression of tolerance of the blacks and the coloured. This conscious or unconscious tactic enables them to avoid the risk of being labeled 'racists'. The chapter will make an account of the experiences of a white author in his attempt to cross over the colour line. It will also document his sense of helplessness and inadequacy in the face of the prevailing system which makes him look like a man of double

consciousness. This 'doubleness' will be evident even in the ambivalence of the blacks towards themselves and towards the issue of racism. All these dualities tally with the shades of ambiguity in Anne Tyler's stand on the matter of race and ethnicity. The peripheral and insignificant existence of the black people in her novels, and the fading memories of the Civil War will be stressed, which will make her novels seem to strike an attitude of offence. Yet the roles attributed to the limited number of blacks present as confidants, choral characters and as people sensitive to the sensibilities will show Tyler certainly as a humanist, if not a social crusader.

The chapter will also refer to the readings of the Colonialist and Post-Colonialist experts such as Fanon and Said to establish Anne Tyler's position of ambivalence towards the Asians and other ethnic groups present in her fiction. Their occurrence on the margins of Tyler's fictional universe will be illustrated along with their depiction as the eccentric 'other'. The novelist's tolerance and acceptance of these people will be pointed out towards the end of the chapter. Possibilities of the undertones of Post-colonialist tendencies in the novelist's vision will be checked and the conclusion reached that Tyler, perched in between 'the melting pot' and 'the mosaic', is, nevertheless, an ambassador of goodwill.

The heterogeneity in Anne Tyler's religious sense will be looked into in the penultimate chapter. Her novels are peopled with neither saints nor

sinners; on the other hand, even her saints are part sinners, and her sinners part saints. The various phases of religious surge in the American life will be summarized in the beginning of this chapter, and the evolution of the group called the “Jesus People” that practices ethical more than spiritual values will be traced. The oscillating nature of the religious revival in the country and the inconclusiveness of the religious situation will be studied. The religious pluralism based on an enthusiasm for humanity, and its origin in the mutually accommodative relationship between the various religions, will be dealt with. The various permutations ascribed to Jesus Christ, the divine – human figure, will also be shown to account for the pluralistic religious traits of Anne Tyler in her novels.

Anne Tyler’s religious background and upbringing will be alluded to in the course of the chapter to substantiate the nature of the religious awareness in her fiction. This takes the form of the presence of pastors, priests, and preachers among the laity, who are, however, situated only on the periphery of her novelistic art. The chapter will discuss her positive as well as negative treatment of religion and religious people. Also emphasized will be the ambiguity seen in the novelist’s use of religion as a means of humour, irony and satire. The chapter will conclude with an illustrative analysis of the ambivalent position adopted by Tyler’s texts as regards religious matters which echo the similar pluralities visible even in the cultural contexts.

The concluding chapter will wind up the debates and deliberations made throughout the thesis. It will commence with Michel Foucault's argument that the novel is marginally placed in the whole sphere of literary activity, that it is excluded from serious literature and compromisingly occupies an intermediate status between fact and fiction, that it caters to the middleclass and struggles to meet the formal standard of high art, and that it is characterized by some element of looseness and ambiguity. This argument is taken up as the starting point of the last chapter in order to pinpoint the ambiguities in Anne Tyler's novels which are difficult to be treated as either literary or popular, and which are ambivalently situated in the treatment of issues and people. The chapter will reinstate Tyler's position as a reader's as well as a critic's novelist who has been writing steadily for over four decades now. The escalation in her popularity rating and critical recognition, in spite of her habit of keeping a low profile and shunning publicity ploys in order to advertise and promote her novels, will be taken note of. Side by side, the need for more scholarly interest in her fiction, which has been surprisingly low, will also be pointed out. This part of the thesis will summarise the arguments made in the previous chapters and will conclude by taking a look beyond the limits of the thesis. The difficulties encountered during the scholarly research on the challenging and new critical practice of New Historicism will be mentioned, and possibilities of further research in

Anne Tyler suggested.

As New Historicism is an assimilation of concepts derived from various recent theories, this will also try to interpret Tyler's fiction by an application of theories and findings put forward by philosophers and critics like Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt, Mikhail Bakhtin and Edward Said. The main strategy employed will be the historicization of texts by documenting historical facts that echo the textual incidents and can be read from one to the other. However, as the various chapters deal with issues of cultural, political, racial and religious significance, research and reference materials pertaining to the same will be made use of throughout the length and breadth of the thesis, along with the incorporation of certain biographical, textual and sociological data, particularly with reference to the author and her personal as well as literary background.

"As we look back at the cultural archive", says Edward Said, "we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally" (Said, *Culture* 59). It is this sort of a reading that will be made of Tyler's novels in the thesis. It will provide an outlet for implications that remain hidden, and stress the texts' origin in social and cultural reality. Said also talks about an affiliated reading which enables the text to maintain itself as a text, the "status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held

tacit assumptions, presumed background and so on” (Said, *World* 174 – 75). Such an attempt will also be made here to show Tyler’s texts as a phenomenon in the world, produced by a network of non-literary and non-traditional affiliations.

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

*By*

**RANI PAUL UKKAN**

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## **Chapter 2**

### **Public and Gender Issues in Anne Tyler :**

#### **Ambiguous and Ambivalent**

Anne Tyler's chief concern being the family, one primary criticism raised against her is the lack of social commitment in her novels. However, a close reading of her texts shows that Tyler does not altogether do away with matters of social and public concern. In her enthusiasm to explore the intricacies of familial and individual matters, she finds little scope for probing into the social issues that are of great concern to many of her contemporaries. Her novels allude to quite a few such issues which are not woven into the matrix of her main themes. This chapter highlights such public issues concerning which Tyler is rather ambiguous, and her opinions often ambivalent. This section of the thesis seeks to justify the novelist by recounting similar ambiguity and ambivalence even in the reaction of the public and the politicians towards controversial issues like abortion and gun-control. The conflicting nature of the polarized opinions is underlined and a parallel is sought in the novels of Tyler by tracing similar opposing responses towards these issues. A degree of ambivalence is also discovered in her characters' reactions to other issues of public concern such as effects of urbanization, shift in gender relations and escalation in mass violence and multiple murders.

The chapter endeavours to uncover how Tyler champions popular culture while also harbouring pastoral dreams; how there is a visible reconfiguration of gender attitudes and reallocation of gender duties; how a lavish sprinkling of murders, suicides and violence is camouflaged by a degree of restraint and a sense of detachment.

## **2.1 Public Reaction to the Issue of Abortion**

**75 Arrested at Protest** CHAMBLEE, Ga., May 2 (AP) – Scores of anti-abortion protesters demonstrated this morning at a Women's clinic that performs abortions, and 75 to 80 people were arrested, the police said. The demonstration at the Northside Women's clinic in this Atlanta suburb was part of a day of protests planned in the region by anti-abortion advocates. The demonstrators blocked the clinic's driveway and lay down in front of and under cars trying to get into the clinic. Ann Wiley, a police dispatcher, said most of those arrested would be charged with trespassing.

The above cited is a news item which appeared in 1987 in the May 3 issue of the New York Times (3 May 1987, I 36:6). It mirrors the moralistic outcry of a section of the public against the practice of performing abortions. The moral issue gained a political agenda, when, taking into consideration the increasing number of public demonstrations, the government proposed

regulations to block the funds supplied to the clinics giving abortion advice. The decision was reported by the New York Times special correspondent in its 1987 July 31 edition (I, 1:1)

U.S. PROPOSED CURB ON CLINICS GIVING  
 ABORTION ADVICE ————— FUNDS  
 WOULD BE BARRED ————— Groups  
 Assail Regulations as Illegal and Pledge a Fight in Court and  
 Congress ————— By STEVEN V.  
 ROBERTS Special to the New York Times WASHINGTON,  
 July 30 –

President Reagan proposed a new set of regulations today that would bar Family planning clinics that get Federal funds from counseling clients about abortion. Mr. Reagan, who has repeatedly failed to win Congressional approval of measures to ban abortions, drew prolonged cheers when he announced the regulations at a meeting of anti-abortion advocates at the White House.

The government decision provoked angry protests from the pro-abortion activists who denounced it “as illegal and at odds with the intent of Congress”, reports the paper. They threatened to sue the government in court. According to the same report, Douglas Gould, a spokesman for the

Planned Parenthood Federation of America, “called the rules ‘ a sop to the right wing’ and added: ‘They are trying to de-fund Planned Parenthood, period. They know we cannot abide by this kind of restriction, because we cannot do it ethically’ ” (31 July 1987, B8: 3) (contd from I 1:1)).

The issue was also taken up by the opposition parties who hoped to make political mileage out of it. They alleged that it was a reflection of the mood of growing urgency in the White House to win political support for the President whose popularity was dwindling along with the time left in his term. It was also a desperate attempt to appease the anti-abortion groups who were angry with the administration’s failure to make changes in the law and to win their support for the Republican ticket the coming year.

The regulations also sparked fierce medical and legal disputes. Critics said that as the rules deprived a physician of the right to advise a patient about all possible medical options, it would violate medical ethics. It was also criticized as illegal as it put curbs on a physician’s right to free speech. Family planning professionals argued that the regulations would severely limit the services rendered by more than 4,000 clinics in the U.S. to around 4.3 million people, particularly the poor and the teenagers who cannot afford the services of private doctors.

The issue of abortion has itself assumed ambiguous and ambivalent proportions in its ideology, practice, and in its psychological and moral

implications, not to speak of the very terminology itself. New terminologies are coined with a careful eye to remove whatever stigma is attached to it. Hence abortion has come to be termed as 'prenatal euthanasia', 'medical termination of pregnancy', 'deconception', 'fetal tissue removal' etc, and medical persons are instructed not to speak of the 'baby' in the womb, but to refer to it as 'fetal tissue' only. Medical opinions also vary as to when life actually begins in the womb after conception. In countries where abortion has been legalised, the governments, too, have done a 'volteface' ever since the abortion laws became liberal. Prior to legalisation it had been considered one of the greatest sins and a punishable act equivalent to murder. But since legalisation, overnight it has become the greatest national service. And when even values change overnight like shifting sands, with the politicians and the public divided in their attitudes, it is understandable when one reserves one's comments and sits on the fence about issues.

Judith Jarvis Thomson in her essay with a definite title, but an indefinite content, struggles to defend the practice of abortion, but manages only to offend it as well. She concludes that while abortion is not impermissible, it is not always permissible; while arguing for the permissibility of abortion in some cases, she claims not to argue for the right to secure the death of the unborn child; she concedes that though the fetus is a person and has the right to life, and though the mother has a special responsibility towards it, so

long as the responsibility requires large sacrifices, the mother has the right to refuse (Cohen, Nagel, Scanlon 3 –22).

Malcolm L.Goggin, in the introductory essay to Understanding the New Politics of Abortion (Goggin 1 –2) examines the nature of conflict over the issue of abortion and calls them religious, political, ideological, gender, class and racial. It is religious as it initiates a clash between the rights of a woman to the liberty to decide whether or not to have an abortion and the rights of the fetus to life. Hence it becomes a clash between those who are for or act against moral and religious values. The pro-choice group subscribes to Secular Humanism, which values more the life of the mother; the fetal-rights group follows the Judeo-Christian religious tradition which considers abortion as murder. It becomes a political conflict as it symbolizes a struggle for control and power over the ends and means of government. The author refers to the Republican Party's efforts to shed its anti-abortion image and project the image of a "big tent" capable of accommodating pro-choice as well as right-to-life members. The ideological conflict is essentially over the vision of what it means to be a woman: an emancipated or liberated woman taking control of her own body, or a traditional woman regarding motherhood as the most important role of a woman. The gender basis of the abortion issue rests on the problems of gender inequality and gender injustice. It draws attention to the problems of gender division of labour and gender

hierarchy, and the subordination of women in society. Abortion threatens the class and racial relations as well. The fetal-rights activist is, according to Goggin, poorer, less educated and less well-employed. Studies relating racial difference to abortion attitudes indicate that blacks are less supportive of legal abortion than whites.

The conflicting nature of the issue of abortion has prompted the majority of the public to sit on the fence without being directly drawn into any camp. The results of a survey based on telephonic interviews with a national sample of adults, aged 18 and above about their attitudes towards the legality of the issue are a pointer to the ambivalence of most of the public. The survey which covered a span of 14 years (1975 – 1988) saw the percentage of the fence-sitters ranging from 52 to 58, while that of those who wanted abortion to be legal or illegal in all circumstances was only from 21 – 25 and 17 – 22 respectively (4). Observes Goggin,

During the 1970s and 1980s, many Americans seemed ambivalent and uneasy about confronting the issue of abortion. But they appeared content with the status quo, preferring it to the two extremes of unrestricted access to abortion – abortion on demand – or making abortion illegal in all circumstances (2).

## 2.2 Tyler and Changes in Gender Issues

Judith Burdan salutes New Historicism for encouraging feminists to recognize that “gender is not an ahistorical and immutable category of difference”. Gender is, according to her, constituted in time and subject to temporal reconfiguration and hence, “just as history must be engendered, gender must be historicized” (Kowaleski – Wallace 289). The feminist New Historicists treat literature as a series of representations of Women’s lives and experience which can be measured and evaluated against reality. They place emphasis on the use of historical data and non-literary material. An effort is made in this part of the thesis to assess Tyler’s characters belonging to both the sexes as reflective of the reconfiguration of the attitudes towards them and towards each other in recent times.

Whereas the previous pages discussed abortion as a national and political issue, the thrust here is on the gender questions to which the issue takes us in Anne Tyler’s fictional world. Breathing Lessons, the novel in which anti-abortion protests figure, was written at the fag end of the eighties when feminism as an aggressive and militant activist movement was already on a downward curve. The rise of feminism had posed a serious threat to masculinity, with its challenging inroads into the foundations of patriarchy. This in turn has shifted the focus in recent years from femininity to the subject of masculinity. Consequently there has been a softening of the stance

taken by feminists against men. This change in the social attitude is what finds expression in Tyler's novels. Understandably, her fiction is devoid of vehement protests and unleashed passion, which constitute the trademarks of women-writers who subscribe to the feminist movement. There is no idolizing of womanhood, nor is there an outright condemnation of the male vice. Tyler adopts a via-media of conciliation rather than confrontation of the sexes, which mirrors the changing trend in the gender relationship in the society.

### **2.2.1 Changing Trends in Feminism**

Elaine Showalter points out three phases through which women's writing has transgressed and names them as 'Feminine' 'Feminist' and 'Female'. She describes the first phase as an imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, as a period when the norms and standards upheld by men were generally followed. The feminist phase saw the women writers toe the radical and separatist line, protest against the male standards and values and advocate minority rights. The last phase was one of self-discovery and inward-turning, when women in their search for self-identity began to look at female writings and female experience (Showalter, *Literature* 13). In his chapter on 'Feminist Criticism', Peter Barry hails women's writing, particularly criticism, for having come a long way since the nineteenth century when very few women were depicted as working for a living, and the focus

was on the heroine's choice of a marriage partner. He traces the ground covered by women's writing, especially in the last 3 decades. Feminism as a literary movement was directly connected with the Women's Movement which gained momentum in the 1960s, influencing the attitudes and behaviour of women. It made a critique of the universal domination of women by men. It reread the canonical male texts and highlighted the misrepresentation of the female within the literary tradition. Feminism of the 1970s was a natural consequence of that of the previous decade and exposed the mechanisms of patriarchy and perpetuation of sexual inequality. It stressed the importance of female writing and offered an alternative tradition in which women were more positively represented. Barry identifies a mood change in the 1980s when Feminist criticism began to incorporate ideas from other branches and shifted its focus from an all-out criticism of the male to the exploration and discovery of the female world and outlook (Barry 122). Showalter again, in her authoritative essay called 'Feminism and Literature' proclaims the decline and death of the women's movement and announces the birth of a subdued version of the same in the 1980s called 'post feminism'. She alludes to the New York Times announcement that "the Reagan and Bush governments' campaign ... against every advance of the women's movement from abortion to affirmative action" has helped literary feminism "to come of age" (Collier and Geyer Ryan 199).

The political interferences, along with the public's growing suspicions regarding the aggressive stand taken by the militant feminists as well as the feminists' own disagreement on its character for women, have served to shed the extremist edges of the feminist movement and take them to a path of moderation. Furthermore, the recent thrust on 'gender theory' in American feminist criticism, with the introduction of the subject of masculinity into feminist criticism, has also threatened to bring about a march out of feminist issues.

### **2.2.2 Changes in Cultural Attitudes**

In recent years men around the country have begun challenging both the motherhood mystique and the masculine mystique. They have refused to acquiesce to the stereotypical view of men that demands that they be second-class parents. They have become far more deeply involved with their children than were their fathers.

Over the last decade researchers and family therapists have noted that the involvement of fathers in child rearing is significantly increasing. Joseph Pleck has presented findings showing that young married fathers spend from 20 to 30 percent more time in child care and domestic work than did young fathers in the early 1960s. Pleck also finds that among

two-earner couples nearly one mother in five reports that the father is the primary caregiver while mother is working. The number of fathers staying home to take care of children, or modifying their work schedules to do so, has also increased significantly (Kimbrell 150 – 51 ).

The shift in the female role has had its counterpart in the role of the male as well. Changes in the cultural attitudes and tendencies of the society towards childcare and child rearing may be cited to illustrate the point. In earlier times it was assumed that men are better suited to protect and provide for children. Kimbrell argues that well into the eighteenth century, child rearing manuals were generally addressed to fathers and not mothers. Father was generally held responsible for the praise or blame attributed to the child. The law presumed that in case of family disintegration, the sole custody of the children would be awarded to the father (148). The main reason for this superior role of the male was presumably connected with the agrarian tradition to which they belonged. Their jobs on farms and estates more or less confined them to the location of their homes which enabled them to perform the duties as teaching and caring fathers. With the advent of industrialization, the scenario changed considerably, with the men moving from their homes to factories in towns and cities. Mothers who were cut off from work now began to assume responsibilities towards children, earlier fulfilled by fathers.

This resulted in what Kimbrell calls the “feminization of parenting and the household” (148). Thus, from the early twentieth century onwards, it has been assumed that women are better suited than men to love and care for children. Mothers came to be considered as “God’s own institution” for the rearing of children, and mother’s love began to be comparable to “heaven” itself (149).

So the prevailing cultural attitudes came to be regarded as the main criteria for awarding even custody rights to the male or the female parent. Whereas earlier the custodian was undoubtedly the father, now the mother came to be recognized by the courts as the primary caretaker, and custody questions were resolved accordingly. Thus, the concept of fatherhood – already undermined by increasing number of divorces and single-parent families – threatened to evaporate completely.

According to Kimbrell, the ambiguities implied in this situation is that even as contemporary men are challenging their masculine mystique and becoming more involved in nurturing their children – as evident in the data presented earlier in the beginning of this section – the law is still clinging to the motherhood mystique and its outdated notion that mothers are better caretakers than fathers; although men try to become surrogate mothers and make a serious effort to care for and love their children, the courts fail to catch up with the evolution in the men’s consciousness. The custody law is

apparently neutral, but one cannot ignore the disparity between fathers and mothers being awarded custody rights, and is tempted to denounce the unfairness of the situation, as done by the angry father, Rusty Peverell, who accuses the courts as “gender biased”:

“Why is it automatically assumed that a child is better off with the mother?” asks a frustrated and angered Rusty Peverell. In September 1992 Rusty lost the most important legal battle of his life. A Virginia judge allowed Karen Condor, Peverell’s ex-wife, to move to California and retain physical custody of their six-year-old daughter and five-year-old son. The judge denied Peverell’s notion for custody, even though two therapists and a child psychiatrist testified in court that the move would be harmful to the children (Kimbrell 145).

Thus, there has always been fluctuations in the cultural attitudes of the society. Men were in the past considered as chief custodians and caretakers of children, and women were for a long time discriminated against in this respect as in many other respects. With the dawn of industrialization, women began to be looked upon as natural nourishers and primary caretakers of children. The pressure of men in work places away from home automatically denied them the opportunity to teach and care for children; but with the increase in the number of working mothers in the latter half of

the twentieth century, men began to be involved once again in the intricacies of childcare, and strove to contribute even physically and emotionally to the upbringing of children. Similarly the last century has witnessed an upsurge of women, considered unequal and downtrodden. They have tapped all resources to bring to the attention of the world the injustices allegedly perpetrated against them. However, as seen in the preceding pages, of late, men also have begun to vehemently voice their protest against what they call gender bias against them.

Anne Tyler appears to take in all these variations in the cultural consciousness of the Americans. She seems to understand the issues concerning women, and at the same time tries to provide a sympathetic ear to the grievances of men. She realizes that both the sexes share virtues and vices, and a downright condemnation of one is unjust, just as an all out appreciation of the other is uncalled for.

### **2.2.3 Anne Tyler and Feminism**

Anne Tyler has never claimed to be a feminist, nor has she plunged headlong in her fiction into any public issues of significance to the female, except that of abortion. But even here, she has only skirted the issue and made her readers know that she is aware of and is concerned about the issue. However, her real concern lay in the family which has always been the focus of her attention. Worried about the power structures and the sexual

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politics within the family, she has been consistent in the depiction of the disintegration of the family system. Her characters are always thrown into some kind of dislocation, almost like the puppets that belong to Emily, the puppeteer, in Morgan's Passing, "stepping on each other's speeches, unsynchronized, ragged, or missing cues and gawking stupidly" (192).

Tyler's novels focus on a society with disintegrating love and tradition and deteriorating family structures. This has a lot to do with the conflicting pulls of the concept of the ideal family and the modern life style. This rift is apparent in the relationship between parents and offspring, between spouses, as well as between siblings, in her novels. Her men and women drift from marriage to divorce and then back to marriage. After twenty years of wedded life to Macon Leary, Sarah in The Accidental Tourist asks for a divorce, and Macon goes apart to build a new life with the incorrigible Muriel Pritchett. Macon's mother, we come to know, is a flighty woman who is onto her fourth husband towards the end of the novel. Both his brothers, too, are divorced when the book opens, Porter Leary's wife having eloped with a hippie stereo salesman. Beck Tull, in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant abandons his wife Pearl who is left to fend for herself and their three children. The much married Jenny Tull ends up being "Dr. Jenny Marie Tull Baines Wiley St.Ambrose", as her medical diploma certificate reads. Jenny's third husband Joe St.Ambrose expresses the modern, urban man's nonchalance

when he talks about his ex-wife Greta to the priest of his son's school:

“Left me flat ... Cleared clean out of Baltimore. Packed the kids with a neighbor one day, while I was off at work. Hired an allied van and departed with all we owned, everything but the children's clothes in neat little piles on the floor”(188).

The married life of Maggie and Ira Moran in Breathing Lessons, symbolized by the car ride they take to Pennsylvania with its pauses and diversions, seems to survive unlike that of their son Jesse's whose definition of marriage as the “same old song and dance” (157) rings true for most of Tyler's couples. If Tyler's spouses are “two opposites drawn together with a dramatic crashing sound” (246), many of her siblings are torn apart by rivalry. In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, this rivalry almost assumed the form of a disease in Cody Tull whose long standing animosity towards his brother Ezra makes him go to the extent of stealing the latter's fiancée and later, even suspect the paternity of his own son. The relationship between the parents and offspring, too, is rather strained. There is a generation gap between Maggie and her daughter, and Ira and his son in Breathing Lessons. Pearl in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, in frequent fits of rage, inflicts verbal and physical assault on her children so that they look like victims in a concentration camp. Jenny Tull often dreams “that her mother dragged her out of hiding to be exposed to the Nazis and informed her that she was

raising her to eat her” (152). Mrs. Dugan, in The Accidental Tourist, does not seem to have much love lost on her daughter Muriel which makes the latter cry out over the phone : “You can’t say a couple of words to your daughter just because your favourite song is playing on the radio? ‘Lara’s Theme’ is more important than flesh and blood?” (239).

Though more concerned about the lack of domestic stability, and not obsessed with women’s issues, Tyler’s novels are replete with women characters. Some of them are typical females who succumb to the specific codes and values of romance, fashion, beauty and pop culture. They are stereotypical and manage the household, restrict themselves within the four walls and wish to be protected. They are forgiving, and are characterised by feminine softness.

Women writers in recent years have started providing more insights into gender shifts. Tyler’s fiction also exhibits this shift almost to the point of gender-blurring. On the whole, her women characters are more dominant than the men characters. Many of them serve as bread winners and managers of the home front, and show greater guts and determination than her men, most of whom, generally drift along through life. Her women are quite capable of negotiating the male gaze, and are almost as patriarchal as men.

Tyler’s recent novels look at men through a more sympathetic gaze, though she has never depicted them as downright cruel or wicked. There

are husbands in her novels who run away leaving their wives and children to fend for themselves. 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.

### **2.2.3.1 Tyler's Stereotypical Females**

Anne Tyler's novels are all set in Baltimore, a city on the border South. The South has always had a conservative attitude towards its women and to quote Michael L. Mezey, "one would expect to find support in the South for traditional values that ...place women in the home and subordinate to their husbands " (Mezey 7). The system of patriarchy prevalent in the old South had made women appear chaste and powerless. A glance at the women characters of Tyler's novels makes the reader realize that there is a sprinkling of typical females who fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother here, old-fashioned, dependent, sheltered and protected by the menfolk.

Consider Joan of The Tin Can Tree. She is always managing the household, cooking, shopping and tobacco-tying. She harbours romantic aspirations about her neighbour, James, which is often thwarted by the latter's concern for his odd brother Ansel for whom he feels overly responsible. She seems fated to die an old maid, occupying herself with little chores all

her life. Another case in point is Charlotte Emory of Earthly Possessions. Gifted with the “ability of giving up”(75), she has always “enjoyed having somebody buy her things”(76). After her marriage to Saul, she shelters under his arm and allows him to plot her life. She agrees to everything, including his wish for six children and feels that it is easy to give herself up and let him lead her. Under his care, she “felt soothed and sleepy like a cat in sunshine” (79). Evie Decker in A Slipping-Down Life is married to a no-good musician, Drum Casey. In the beginning of the novel, she shows some determination when she chisels Drum’s initials on her forehead in a public act of jealous attention-seeking. But after her marriage to Drum, she succumbs to her husband’s wishes and stays at home making pancakes and baking-powder-biscuits. Always insecure, she is afraid that he would get tired and bored by her. She walks on tip toe and checks everything for stupidity before saying it. She is even prepared to forgive him for his one-night affair with her friend Fay-Jean Lindsay, which she chances upon while rushing in to break the news of her father’s death to her husband. Even a comparatively stronger ‘handy woman’ like Elizabeth in The Clock Winder shows traces of feminine softness when she refuses to kill the turkey. Mrs Emerson of the same novel is a typical aristocratic gentle lady of the South who is always used to being taken care of and proud to the core. Searching for Caleb has the fortune-teller Justine who, though eccentric in many ways,

retains her identity throughout the novel. But we find her daughter Meg, rebellious throughout, ending up as a mere ‘buffer’ of her priest-husband, meekly subordinating herself to the demands of her domineering mother-in-law and handling her husband’s duties as an obedient secretary.

### **2.2.3.2 Gender Shift in Tyler**

In the changing milieu of the South, it is inevitable that one glimpses changes in the stature of its women too. As Daphne Athas rightly points out, the contemporary women writers of the region are responding to “plebian urges” and acknowledging the changes that have happened to the consciousness of women since the sixties. Alluding to the notion of a ‘Southern belle’ waltzing through life on a bed of roses, Athas argues:

The point is that the Beauty lives, but her vitality is in the scrapping, spunk, schemes, determination, marrying, working and even in the slapping of other women who fail to have her guts (Prenshaw 300).

It is such women that one meets mostly in Tyler ‘s novels, and they supercede the ‘belles’ of the ‘genteel society.” Most of her women characters are much more wilful than even the men who inhabit the pages. This does not mean that Tyler is an all-out feminist who presents her women as great ‘achievers’. What Doris Betts says about the novelist is true:

Tyler understands the differences between male and female

consciousness more intimately than Gloria Steinem... [but] her heroines are seldom angry enough to star in the average Women's Studies Syllabus (Stephens 3).

It is simply that they are pluckier than her men, especially so when left to fend for themselves.

Consider Pear Tull of Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant. Domineering and reproachful, full of rage and unpredictable, she, nevertheless, brings up her children single-handedly and helps them amount to something in life. Her critics may argue that it is her bossy, intimidating presence that drove Beck Tull, her husband, from her. But that is no excuse for a man of three children to declare one fine day that he is leaving because he has had enough. In the wake of her husband's desertion, Pearl assumes paternal duties as well. She becomes a cashier at "Sweeney's Bros; Grocery and Fine Produce", much against her conservative upbringing, so that for a long time she pretends that she is going there as a customer. Clever with tools, she can patch cracks, glaze windows, mend lamp switches and paint kitchen cupboards. Willing to help keep her family together, she is, nonetheless, unsentimental enough to walk out – more than once – of the family dinners organized by her son, Ezra. A shrewd woman, Pearl had "seen it coming" between Ezra's fiancée and Cody, while Ezra himself had no inkling about it. She is so intimidating even to a grown up Cody that he

has to invent lies to ward off the danger of talking to her over the phone. Pearl has an almost omniscient presence and with her children she is “just like God” (154). Her deliberate, carefully-thought-over, well-planned invitation to her deserter-husband, Beck, to attend her funeral, which she arranges before her death with her son Ezra, has nothing sentimental about it. It is just a revelation of her feminine pride that makes her want him to know how well she has managed her family without him.

Pearl’s daughter, Jenny Tull, has inherited something of the mother’s resourcefulness. She is the only person among the Tulls to “fall in step” with her mother. Determined to be a doctor, Jenny single-mindedly pursues her ambition and realizes it against all odds. “Her future was always clear to her; a straight-forward path to a paediatric practice in a medium-sized city, preferably not too far from a coast” (83). Jenny is one of Anne Tyler’s ‘believers-in-making-their-own-luck.’ With a string of failed marriages behind her, she recovers from the brink of a breakdown and courageously forges ahead to assume a maternal role by marrying a man with a number of children.

If Jenny Tull is not afraid of marriages and glides from one to the next smoothly, Rose Leary of The Accidental Tourist is one who shies away from wedlock and finds comfort in her family of siblings, which she manages admirably. There is something about her that causes her brothers – Macon,

Charles and Porter – “to act put-upon and needy whenever she chanced to focus on them” (61). Macon wonders why his sister remained “unemployed, unmarried, supported by her brother”, but when the occasion demands it, it is she who provides the support and remains the mainstay of the family. Even the worldly-wise Julian seems to be in awe of her as he declares to Macon his intention of marrying Rose: “ I am thirty-six years old, Macon, but I tell you, I feel like a school boy about that woman. She’s everything those girls in my apartment building are not. She’s so ....true” (206).

It is this same appealing originality and lack of artifice that draws Macon Leary to the unpredictable, sometimes unlikeable and totally irresistible Muriel Pritchett. Abandoned by her boy-husband and left alone with a small, sick child, she takes on an odd assortment of jobs, and survives like a typical Tyler- heroine. Muriel declares, “I’ve had to be inventive. It’s been scrape and scrounge, nail and knuckle, ever since Norman left me” (189). An experienced dog-trainer, she ends up giving a lesson or two to Macon as well, so that the hapless man becomes totally transformed under her influence. Systematic to the core, and reserved almost to the point of being a recluse, Macon can finally do away with his ‘Miss McIntosh’, the thousand- odd-page novel he persists in packing along as a precaution against strangers during his forced travels as an author of guide-books. Muriel exhibits a “pugnacious fierceness” in her relentless pursuit of Macon, and he doesn’t

stand a chance of keeping her at bay forever. “He felt awed by her, and diminished” (28), which is the effect most of Tyler’s women have upon the men in the novels.

Yet another enterprising and stubborn woman of perseverance in Tyler’s fiction is Maggie Moran of Breathing Lessons. She is obsessed with her well-meaning plans for reuniting her long-divorced son Jesse and beautician daughter-in-law Fiona. Too obstinate to give up – even after a series of failed attempts- she keeps on plotting, right to the last page of the novel. The novel covers the events of a single day in the life of the middle-aged couple Maggie and Ira Moran, with the past unfolded in flashbacks and reveries, even as they journey by car to attend the funeral of Max, the husband of Maggie’s girlhood friend, Serena. For all that we know, it might be Maggie who is driving the car, though it is Ira who is in the driver’s seat. The readers feel that it won’t be long, before Ira becomes like the black driver – of the Chevy that the Morans overtake – who lost the “last few wits he had” upon Maggie’s honking the horn.

In Searching For Caleb, Tyler creates another interesting woman character in Justine, the fortune-teller. Herself careless and slipshod in many ways, Justine is the almost eccentric, but lovable caretaker of the fortunes of the local people. She was the only one, as acknowledged by her grandfather, who could act at a moment’s notice, go anywhere, talk to anyone and interpret

all the mumbled answers. She is eccentrically resourceful to go on her own to Box Hill, Louisiana and steal away her granduncle Caleb from the Home for the Elderly without even informing the authorities. Grandfather justifies her waywardness as “the natural result of failing to give a woman any permanence in her life” (159). Even her maverick husband Duncan, who is always on the move, pays her a tribute when he says that if he didn’t have Justine “he wouldn’t even know how to see things, what to look at; nothing would exist for him if he couldn’t tell Justine about it” (300).

Although Tyler’s novels are full of plucky women, it is Elizabeth in The Clock Winder who takes the cake for being bold enough to jilt her bridegroom literally at the altar. She develops cold feet at the last moment and refuses to marry her long-standing boy-friend, Dommie. When Shakespeare’s hero Claudio did it in Much Ado About Nothing, the critics were unanimous in decrying the dastardly act and calling Claudio more heinous than any of the other Shakespearian villains. But half a millennium later when Tyler’s heroine does it to her man she is forgiven and her act is even applauded as a mark of courage. She is justified in refusing to dive headlong into marriage with a man for whom she is doubtful of her love. After all, why rush into marriage and create damages one cannot repair? Elizabeth’s pulling out from the verge of getting married may create doubts in some readers about the sanity of her act, but the novelist highlights the

incident for the positive effect it has. It paves the way for Elizabeth's subsequent marriage with Mathew and also helps to clear up her friend Margaret's mind from doubts about her second marriage and obtain a better perspective of her life. In Ladder of Years the heroine Delia leaves her husband and three grown up children and goes away from a family vacation. Her daughter Susie changes her mind about marrying her long-standing boy friend on the wedding day (276). But unlike Elizabeth in The Clock Winder she backs down and agrees to reconsider going ahead with the marriage once her frivolous demands are met with. And this brings to the notice of the reader the apparent ambivalence in the attitude of the novelist herself towards this issue of desertion which takes on a feminist agenda.

The majority of Tyler's women characters may exhibit a dominant streak in their personalities, while her men are comparatively docile. Though the novelist metes out a sympathetic handling to men, her sympathy only serves to highlight their inadequacies and project the strength of the women. Her men are muffled like Ezra, temperamental like Cody, isolated like Macon, compromising like Ira and foot-loose and fancy-free like Jesse. "DR.TULL IS NOT A TOY", reads the varnished wooden plaque on the wall in Jenny Tull's consultation room; and that goes for all Tyler's women as well. They are not 'toys', not even in the hands of fate.

### 2.2.3.3 Tyler's Men as Caretakers

Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French writer who has made her own distinctive contribution to feminist historicization, interprets the male urge for self-production as a compensation for the female's roles he leaves by the way-side. She calls it "a search for equivalents to woman's function in maternity" (Irigaray 23). Anne Tyler makes some of her men characters go one step further. They do not just look for equivalents to maternal function; they, in fact, go ahead and perform woman's functions in maternity. Irigaray contends that in the past, in order to be taken seriously, women used to imitate men; but now it is the turn of men to mime maternal functions.

While all along 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. We come across the depiction of men as care-givers and surrogate mothers. With this, the gender shift, which is in keeping with the changing times and which Tyler initiated with her women characters, has come a full circle. The study of sexual stereotyping and gender shifts is not a new pursuit in American literature. Women writers more than their male counterparts, have provided greater insights into this shift. In her 1989 essay, "Psychoanalysis, Gender and Fiction", Patricia Waugh had called for a reallocation of gender duties in today's culture that will enable both the sexes to "achieve a sense of identity

which consists of accepting both connections and separations, so that neither is experienced as a threat" ( Waugh 86). 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. This shift in the gender roles has traces of the Renaissance cross-dressing plots which Claire Colebrook talks about in her chapter on "Stephen Greenblatt and New Historicism". She argues that sexual identity is the result of social acts of representation and agrees that the dependence of sexual identity upon dress in cases of disguising the gender was foregrounded by the Renaissance practice of using boys to play female characters. This in turn was allegedly motivated by the cultural fear that the visual presence of women could effeminate the audience (Colebrook 201). We have come a long way since the Renaissance, and the cross-dressing regarding the assumption of gender roles in Tyler's novels, particularly in the more recent ones, is indicative of the blurring of the boundaries between genders in the modern age. Several sociocultural and technological reasons such as the stress of work, the decline of the institution of marriage, economically independent females, and the availability of sperm banks, test tube babies, surrogate fathers and mothers have made possible the acceleration of this gender shift. Recent studies by social scientists have sharpened our awareness of this shift in the gender roles. Carol Gilligan in her study of

women's development, In a Different Voice, refers to this shift in American life: "The discovery now being celebrated by men in mid life of the importance of intimacy, relationships, and care is something that women have known from the beginning" (Gilligan 17). Studies such as Gilligan's have been the basis of Joyce R. Durham's article "Anne Tyler's Vision of Gender in *Saint Maybe*", which is all about the blending of gender roles and the treatment of how fictional families can be male affairs instead of female affairs (Durham, *Gender* 143 – 52).

Saint Maybe narrates the story of Ian Bedloe, a man haunted by guilt over his brother's suicide, which, he thinks, is the result of his provocative remarks about the loose morals of his sister-in-law. Seeking solace in God's all forgiving mercy, Ian is drawn to the Church of the Second Chance, where he learns from its founder and sole leader that to earn complete forgiveness, he must offer practical reparation. 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 urges, 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).

Stephen Heath, one of the few male writers interested in Feminism, considers the specific relationship of men to feminism, in his essay called “Male Feminism” (Eagleton 193 – 223). According to Heath, it is doubtful that men can be feminists, but can only be at least pro-feminists. He believes that men can take feminism seriously, but not appropriate it. He comments that men’s relation to feminism is a necessary, if impossible, one. “Men have a necessary relation to feminism – the point after all is that it should change them too, that it involves learning new ways of being women *and men* against and as an end to the reality to women’s oppression –” (194). Ian Bedloe in Saint Maybe is not a feminist in the strict sense of the word; far from it. But he has established a necessary relation to feminism in the sense that he learns ways of being woman and man. He becomes a caretaker, a nurturer, a surrogate mother; but he is man enough to undertake this new role in order to perform the traditional duty of protecting the orphaned children. One must note that he assumes this pro-feminist role only as a humanist, and not as a feminist. The conscious desire to put an end to the

oppression of women does not come anywhere in the picture of Ian's attempts to be the caretaker. It is only his guilt that activates him into the female role and his love for the children that eventually affirms it.

In her analysis of the problems involved in the female ethics of care, the critic Daryl Koehn calls for a shift from the emphasis on the perspective of the caregiver to that of the person at the receiving end of care. It is dialogical ethics which involves both the parties. She observes, "For the care ethicist, true caring – or at least caring in the highest and most interesting sense – is an affective stance in which both the caregiver and cared-for put themselves at risk as part of a process of committing to the forging of a shared self" (Koehn 25). According to her, true caring involves experiencing anxiety for the other person and "receiving" the other in his or her 'otherness'. When we relate Koehn's thesis on care to the caring shown by Ian Bedloe in Saint Maybe, we can observe this 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. He is burdened and bored by the prospect of spending years looking after the three children, the eldest of whom is only seven years old, and the youngest, a mere toddler. His sense of boredom is evident in his reaction to the reading of the children's story, The Sad Little Bunny, to the kids. "Ian had never realized what a repetitive book this was.

He swallowed a yawn. Tears of boredom filled his eyes. The effort of reading while rocking made him slightly motion-sick.... He felt he was traveling a treadmill, stuck with these querulous children night after night after night” (96). Ian is not only bored, but is also angry with what the fates have thrust on him. He is understandably unhappy about dropping his college education, severing ties with his girlfriend, and 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). He feels that he would have taken the decision to forgo his own interests and devote himself to looking after the children anyway even if it had not been prompted by the priest at the ‘Church of the Second Chance’. The decision was half made during the funeral service of his sister-in-law when as he listened to the prayers and the singing of the church choir, he was overwhelmed by a sense of relief and an abating of his sense of guilt. “He felt that everything had been drained away from him, all the grief and self-blame. He was limp and pure and pliant as an infant. He was, in fact, born again” (102).

Within a few months of his taking on the new responsibility, Ian’s sense of boredom and guilt and anger give way for a sense of commitment and 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 doting 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. And the children, on the other hand, trust their uncle completely and put themselves under his caring protection and guardianship. They clash with him as with a natural parent, and are indulgent of his whims and fancies. 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). It is a credit to Ian that all the three children grow up to become confident, self-sufficient and reasonably successful human beings. We can only imagine what their fate would have been, had they been thrust into some foster homes or orphanages. They realize that, too, and that is why they try their best to return a part of the love and care that he had lavished on them. They lovingly nag him on his unkept ways, and worry about his loneliness. They even match-make and trap him into marriage with Rita, a sensible and sound woman. So the risk each party took has paid off, and the anxiety has been rewarded.

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. In Earthly Possessions, Charlotte Emory's brother-in-law, Amos, applauds her efforts to bring some order into their insane family of strays and sinners: "Now I see everyone grabbing for pieces of you, and still you're never diminished. Clutching on your skirts and they don't even slow you down... You sail through this house like a moon, you're strong enough for all of them" (175). Even Morgan, the eccentric protagonist of Morgan's Passing cannot imagine life as a bachelor - an indirect tribute to the two women who manage his life : His wife Bonny who takes charge of the home front with an unreliable husband, senile mother-in-law, spinsterish sister-in-law and seven daughters at various stages of growing up, and his lover Emily, the puppeteer who becomes the bread winner, while her own husband Leon floats with his head in the clouds, never realizing his ambitions and eventually falling back upon his rich parents.

In her very first novel, If Morning Ever Comes, published as early as 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.

Another earlier prototype of the nurturing male is Ezra Tull in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, published in 1982. Overcome by guilt, like Ian in Saint Maybe, for committing a mistake for which his brother is blamed, he holds himself responsible for the dissolution of his family, and spends the rest of his life trying to piece together his broken family. He becomes a 'male mother' to his own mother and to Mrs. Scarlatti, the aged restaurant-owner whose 'Homesick Restaurant' he takes care of. Like Ben Joe Hawkes, he "was always so quick to catch his family's moods, and to offer food and drink and unspoken support" (73).

Anne Tyler's fourteenth novel A Patchwork Planet has a number of dominant women characters, like the small but tough Martine, the managerial, bossy and too definite Sophia and the class-conscious upstart, the sophisticated mother of the hero, Barnaby Gaitlin. But the reader tends to be more sympathetic towards the reformed juvenile delinquent Barnaby than appreciative of the capable women in the novel. He falls short of the

expectations of his rich parents. He is divorced from his wife Natalie, and often fails to express his affection properly to his daughter, Opal, on the few occasions he sees her on visitation day. He is just a labourer who is way down in the rung of the social ladder. He stays in a rented basement that could hardly be classed as a respectable home. He is the laughing stock of his own contemporaries. The black sheep of the Gaitlin family, he is suspiciously regarded by parents, neighbours and everyone in general. Yet he endears himself to his clients at the work place called Rent-a-back Inc. He serves them selflessly, bringing order into their lonely lives and coming to their aid whenever they needed him. He is so helpful that of all the workers at Rent-a-back, he is the one most in demand. So much so that his clients rally behind him even when he is wrongly accused of theft. To show that they did not believe it and that they trusted him, they loaded him with more assignments than he could handle – a point noted by his boss, Mrs.Dibble in her conversation with him:

“They love you, Barnaby”, Mrs.Dibble told me, and now the laughter had faded. She was using a solemn, treasuring tone that embarrassed me. “It hasn’t escaped their notice how you’ve cared for them all these years.”

“So”, I said. “You’re not firing me?”

“Firing you!”

“Well, I know I didn’t return a few of your phone calls –”

“Barnaby. I would never fire you. Did you really think I would? You’re my best worker! I tell everybody that! ‘Barnaby’s going to end up owning this company’ I say. ‘You just watch: When I’m old and decrepit, it’s Barnaby who’ll buy me out’” (201 – 02).

#### **2.2.3.4 Conciliation, not Confrontation**

New Historicism stresses the role of history in defining literature, and the role of literature in redefining history. Joyce R. Durham observes in the concluding part of her article on Saint Maybe that the reallocation of gender responsibilities in Tyler’s novels is only aimed at “evoking the reader’s compassion, pathos, and humour than in eliciting political or philosophical responses” (Durham, *Gender* 150). This is in tune with Gullette’s comment that “Tyler presents the ideal pattern not so much as one chosen for us by our gender, or even determined by our stage in the life course, but as each one of us is bound to disclose in the course of our own peculiar journey” (Stephens 108 – 09). This is precisely what dawns on Barnaby Gaitlin in A Patchwork Planet. After witnessing and reflecting on the long-standing marriages and sustaining companionships of many of his old customers, he arrives at a compromise philosophy about his own marriage. Though it was

too late to mend his broken marriage, he wishes that he had been wiser earlier, and had not let his marriage fall apart:

..... I was beginning to suspect that it made no difference whether they'd married the right person. Finally, you're just with who you're with. You're signed on with her, put in half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself or even better, and she's *become* the right person. Or the only person, might be more to the point. I wish someone had told me that earlier. I'd have hung on then; I swear I would (234).

The importance attached to kindly and warm gender relationships in Anne Tyler's novels, is attributed not only to the recent changes in the gender scenario, but also to the happy experiences the novelist herself has shared with the men in her life. Says Paul Binding:

I know of no woman writer who writes more sympathetically about men than Anne Tyler; she can describe them with affection as well as with stronger emotions and sees them not as objects of desire or embodiments of impersonal forces but simply as individual beings. She said she had always had happy experiences of men; she enjoyed good relations with her father and three brothers and is now happily married (Binding 202).

Tyler leaves everything to the conscience of the reader, or the reader's point of view, and does not impose any moralistic rules on him. Durham applauds writers like Anne Tyler who "are recognizing, capturing, and even creating social attitudes toward masculine and feminine behaviours that merit our attention to their points of view" (151). Years ago, Harold Rosenberg denounced the "post-Hemingway he-man" and hoped that "with the cult of masculinity put aside, maleness might have a better chance to develop in the United States" (Ashton- Jones and Olson 71 – 72). His view is endorsed by Margaret Atwood:

What is there, when we're talking about new, is a state of change, new attitudes over-lapping with old ones, no simple rules anymore. Some exciting form of life may emerge from all this (Atwood 428).

The emergence of Tyler's males who can tap the feelings of the opposite gender will hopefully help redefine gender responsibilities and further smoothen the conciliatory path trodden recently by the two sexes.

### **2.3 Tyler's Stand on Public Issues**

The divided attitude of the public regarding controversial public issues like abortion discussed earlier in this chapter finds an echo even in Tyler's fiction. She either skirts these issues, or on rare occasions while acknowledging them, refuses to take a firm stand. Mary F. Robertson comments on this

aspect of Tyler's writing:

On first opening Tyler's novels - and perhaps until having read several - a reader is apprehensive that he or she has only encountered still more domestic dramas, seemingly oblivious of the public dimension of the life of men and women in society. A social critic might feel that Tyler's very limitation of subject matter confirms an ideology of the private family to the detriment of political awareness, and a feminist reader might think that only female actions having more public importance than Tyler's seem to have, can help the cause of women (Rainwater and Scheick 119).

Tyler's novels are more personally than socially conscious. They are full of "characters living in oblivion of sexual or political revolutions, characters whose problems are described in psychology texts, not news clippings", observes Susan Gilbert (Inge 252). Even sexual passion with its implications - personal, moral and social - which forms a predominant force in the works of most of the modern writers, is fleeting in Tyler. With the exception of that one episode in Breathing Lessons where Ira and Maggie are caught making love in her friend's bedroom, during her husband's funeral reception, Tyler's novels are devoid of explicitly erotic scenes. It makes the reader wonder whether she is old-fashioned in her prudishness regarding such matters.

Tyler's practice of stinting on and shying away from sex is pointed out by Brad Leithauser: "Not much seems to happen in her bed rooms, and when it does, the door is likely to be shut and the curtains drawn" (Leithauser 54).

Political awareness also, is significantly subdued, though political issues find occasional and peripheral references. In Breathing Lessons, Tyler does mention politics. But she does not reveal what she really thinks of it. Maggie Moran's boy friend Boris Drumm speaks of his ambitious plans about going in for law and then into politics because "only in politics ... did you have the power to right the world's wrongs"(93). A contradictory picture of politics is presented to the reader when Tyler writes almost immediately: "But Maggie had never seen politicians as powerful. She saw them as beggars. They were always begging for votes, alternating themselves to satisfy their public, behaving spinelessly and falsely in pathetic bid for popularity" (94). When World Wars and Vietnam have formed the subjects for many a novel in the postmodern era, they occupy only the peripheral sphere of Tyler's novelistic vision. Even in Tyler's most recent novel, Back When We Were Grownups (2001), Rebecca, the protagonist, who was an activist in her youth, can barely bring herself to vote now. She is a professional organizer of parties, and spends the rest of her time bringing order into her dead husband's large family of grandparents and grandchildren, uncles and aunts, daughters and step-daughters and sons-in-law and step-sons-in-law. She had once been

very political. “She had marched against the war in Vietnam; she had plastered the door of her dorm room with anti-nuclear stickers” (139). In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Ezra Tull is drafted to the army and sent to Korea, but he is not haunted by ravages of violence or death. Nor does Tyler put across her stand on the American involvement in Vietnam, regarding which also, the Americans in general were divided in their opinion as to whether it was right or wrong. Ira Moran in Breathing Lessons is an ex-soldier from Vietnam. His wife Maggie’s acquaintance with him starts from her misunderstanding that Ira was killed in the war. Impulsive as most of Tyler’s women characters are, she writes a note of condolence and sends it to Ira’s father, but within days, is surprised and full of shame to encounter Ira, very much alive, practising at the Church Choir. But as in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, here also war does not play any psychological havoc in the lives of the characters and is not taken up at any time in the succeeding pages of the novel. In The Clock Winder, Peter Emerson is just back from Vietnam at the end of the novel. Tyler holds war responsible for accentuating his already gloomy disposition and adding “ a touch of fear and a sense of being out of place” (287).

Tyler also seems to be aware of the menace of drugs, environmental pollution and the hazards of the rock cult. In Morgan’s Passing, the protagonist’s youngest daughter Kate gets arrested for smoking marijuana,

and his wife is upset about their family name getting besmirched and the news spreading every where (172). In A Patchwork Plannet, Barnaby Gaitlin confesses that he had smoked the harder stuff when young. He expresses his fear that the envelope handed over to Sophia by a stranger, presumably containing the stranger's daughter's passport, could as well contain "loose diamonds and crack cocaine" (12). Her characters sometimes voice their concern about issues like the eco-friendly environment and evils of deforestation. Melissa in The Clock Winder reads a wayside signboard in the countryside enroute to attend the heroine's wedding: "Keep North Carolina Green". She then quips sarcastically, "get it green, first". Tyler even alludes to the 'Rock Cult' which shook America in the 60s in A Slipping Down Life. Evie Decker, the heroine, chisels her favourite Rock Singer's name on her forehead with a pair of nail – scissors and stands with her face streaming with strands of blood. She does it in an impulsive act of jealousy and attention – seeking.

### **2.3.1 Effects of Urbanization**

His move into industry produced the largest and steadiest income my family had ever enjoyed. My father's new job was not by any means an unmixed blessing, forever. As a farmer he had often worked a dawn-to-sunset day during the planting and harvesting periods. Yet eight hours at an indoor, sit-down

job left him drained and listless, and he so obviously dreaded his daily toil that his morning “good byes” to us were protracted and almost pathetic.... On his tractor he had been the master of his domain ... In the factory, however, he fought a losing battle with machines that mystified and humiliated him often to the delight of some of his younger and crueler co-workers .... Certainly as a family we felt we were experiencing progress. Yet for my father there was an important sacrifice of both status and, unfortunately, self-respect (Cobb 3-4).

This is an account of the mixed response of James C. Cobb’s father to the transition from the less profitable farm work to the more rewarding factory job, in the early 1960s. The aftermath of industrialism provided better opportunities and a more prosperous future to the Southerner, but gave him no job satisfaction, even though his working hours were considerably less. And as Cobb says, he now wanted to be saved from industrialism whereas earlier he had believed that only industrialism could save him. The effects of urbanization which came in the wake of industrialism changed the face of the American South. “The mischief is that, in its transfiguration into What-a-Burger drive-ins and apartment wastelands, the South is being etherized, subtly rendered pastless, memoryless and vague of identity”, observes Frady (Larsen 157). The man of the South realized that

the urban life had many things deplorable about it, and it also resulted in a corresponding loss of rural values. This led to a new awareness of the rural virtues. "Levels of antiurbanism increased in direct proportion to the movement of people from farms to cities" (118). The Southerners "feared a loss of something nebulous but at the same time associated with traditional values; they sought to reaffirm the South's religious heritage, the uniqueness of the landscape, and the heroism of Confederate leaders" (157). During this period of change, they sought to preserve old values even as they acquired new changes. They tried to recapture some of the old rural charm while at the same time enjoying most of the modern comforts. As a result, 'string cities' and 'megacountries' emerged. "For those who could afford it, southern suburban living represented a relaxed and congenial way of life, complete with barbecue grills, two or more cars, above-average schools, carpools, volunteer activities, and all sorts of opportunities of outdoor recreation" (156). They could thus enjoy more 'sun' and more 'fun' simultaneously, and partake in the best of both the worlds. This transcending of the urban-rural boundaries is also alluded to by Harlan Hahn: "... clashes between urban and rural interests often are clouded by urban residents who may sympathise with rural objectives and by rural inhabitants who may identify with the needs and aspirations of cities" (Hahn 15).

### 2.3.2 Urbanization in Tyler's Novels

Yet another issue of public dimension that can be traced in Anne Tyler's novelistic vision is that of urbanization. As in the case of the other burning issues expounded and examined in this thesis, regarding this issue also, Tyler effects a rather ambivalent standpoint. A writer from the Southern border, the novelist seems to depart from its old agrarian tradition and adopt an urban life-style, but in the process, strikes a balance between 'pastoral dreams' and 'popular culture'. The reputation of the old South as generally 'poor' and with its well-stratified upper, middle and lower classes is replaced by Tyler in a new-found classification which is typical of the changing South: "Upper middle class, middle middle class or lower middle class", as Jacob – Jenny Tull's son by her husband's previous marriage – queries to Jenny in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (201). It is to this urban middle class that most of Tyler's families – the Pecks, the Tulls, the Emersons, the Learys and the Morans – belong to.

The old South which was a rich mixture of culture and climate, race and dialect, belles and cavaliers, courtships and duels, cotton blossoms and imposing mansions is invisible in Tyler's novels. There is a sense of place which weaves a web of kinships and closeness, but this is not supplemented by the strong attachment to the land that the Southerner owes to the agrarian tradition – an attachment which is quite often mirrored in the literature from

the South. Unlike in William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses where it has formed the ground for the hunting stories, the land does not constitute a concrete symbol in Anne Tyler's novels. "The hallmark of Southern writing was open resistance to the illusion of unlimited progress" (Kazin 143), says Alfred Kazin, referring to the adamant stand of the writers from the South against the portrayal of the changes that have come over the region. But Frederick J. Hoffman, another famous critic on the South, finds two changes, " .... The shifting of scene from the land to the city, and the intellectual and moral change, from the Southern past to the contemporary universal .... " (Hoffman 10) that are reflected particularly in the fiction from the South.

Anne Tyler's novels, too, incorporate these two changes. There is no trace of land-owning families here that one finds in Allen Tate's The fathers; nor does one come across the swampy countrysides of Louisiana and Mississippi of Truman Capote's Other Voices, Other Rooms, with its lacquered carriages, verbena-scented ladies and leathery cotton-rich gentlemen. Tyler's novels are a long way from Faulkner's Light in August set in the background of a tiny hamlet too small to accommodate even a post-office. On the other hand, we find in Tyler all the markings of an advanced, contemporary South; not an ultra urban one, but more of a suburban South.

### 2.3.2.1 Urban Life–Style

Bruce Cook quotes Reynolds Price and calls Tyler “the nearest thing we have to an urban Southern novelist” (Cook 40). Mary F. Robertson goes one step further and asserts that “Tyler’s novels are emphatically urban” (Rainwater and Scheick 137). The truth lies somewhere in the middle. Paul Binding, in Separate Country attributes Tyler’s urbanity to the geographical proximity of her Baltimore to Washington D.C. and New York. Many of her characters have little to do with the old South in their professional and personal life. Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, acclaimed as one of Tyler’s best novels, has Beck Tull of the older generation who works as a traveling salesman with the ‘Tanner Corporation’, and is often transferred to various cities like Richmond, New Jersey and Montreal. Ezra, one of the three Tull children, becomes a restaurateur and owner of ‘Scarlati’s Restaurant’ which he renames ‘Homesick Restaurant’. His elder brother Cody, shoots ahead through different corporations, branches out on his own and becomes an ‘efficiency expert’, a man of the world, showing off his possessions and wishing to keep everyone in debt to him. He is forever “running on a schedule”, and drops briefly at home on his way to Delaware, New York or Ohio. Jenny, the third of the Tull children realizes her childhood ambition of becoming a doctor, and that too a busy one. Even Pearl Tull, the mother, deserted by her husband Beck Tull, has to secure a job in a local stationery

shop, and with a resilience typical of the modern woman, raises her children and makes them “be” something in life.

Ira Moran of Breathing Lessons, with his shattered dreams of becoming a doctor, ends up running his father’s Frame shop; and his son, Jesse, is a singer with a band of rock musicians. But the novel which is most urban in its milieu is The Accidental Tourist. The protagonist of the novel, the “wonderfully perfectly efficient” Macon Leary, is a writer of guidebooks for ‘Businessman’s Press’. His books are aimed at capturing the attention of commercial travellers who are forced to travel on “whirlwind dashes”, who “didn’t see the countryside at all”, and who have to check their hotel stationery to find out which city they are in. Macon is always on the move, making brief forays into cities at home and abroad, ever ready for travel with his packed suitcase containing every necessary item in “travel-size packets”. Macon’s boss – and later his brother-in-law-, Julian, an interesting character in his own way, is a typical urban executive occupying an office with its “desk laden with a clutter of advertisements, pamphlets, unpaid bills, unanswered letters, empty Chinese carry-out cartons and Perrier-bottles” (118). All these characters in Tyler’s novels are fitting examples of people who lead an undeniably urban life-style, though not too progressively so. They reflect the general trend in the pattern of living of the Southerner in the changed South of the contemporary times.

### 2.3.2.2 'Popular Culture' Vs. 'Pastoral Dreams'

If most of Anne Tyler's characters are of the urban milieu, career-wise, the geographical setting and way of life depicted also appear to vouchsafe for the "tenuous balance Americans have struck between pastoral dreams and urban realities" (Allen 51). One comes across ample references in the novels to 'computers' and 'population-explosion', 'professional counseling' and 'consumer reports', 'percolators' and 'electrical skilletts', 'distant time-zones' and 'decaffeinated cofee', 'non-perishable groceries' and 'lukewarm softdrinks'. Her novels may be old-fashioned in their all-too-familiar theme of familial crisis, and portrayal of 'run-aways' and 'stay-at-homes', yet "she .... is of our time. The brand names, the fads, the bastardized vistas of our great homogenized nation glint out at us from her fiction with a cheerful authority" (Updike, *Hugging* 287).

The Accidental Tourist provides the reader with samples of the national and international milieu with its "King-sized Beautyrest mattresses" in Madrid, "Sweet'n-Low" in Tokyo, apart from "Mc Donald's", "Taco Bell", "Chef Boyardee ravioli" and "Pita Bread". The novel has description of hotels for out-of-town and in-town clients, menus with "astronomical prices" and rooms with "impersonal lushness". It "provides convincing, characteristically perky versions of London and Paris, Edmonton and Vancouver, as well as some vivid airplane rides. Trans-atlantic jet-travel is

authoritatively sketched” (Updike, *Leaving* 106) with its “usual mellifluous murmur from the loudspeaker about seatbelts, emergency exits, oxygen masks” as The Accidental Tourist narrates (12). The pervasive city atmosphere is brought out convincingly by Tyler in the narration about “the tight focus of its drivers, the brisk intensity of its pedestrians drilling their way through all obstacles without a glance to either side” (153). Macon’s horrified feeling of being “trapped in this spire in the heavens” (153) when he is in the restaurant on the top of a modern skyscraper is typical of the claustrophobia that modern man experiences in the maddening world. But Tyler’s locale is not just the posh suburban Baltimore where her people like Macon Leary reside but also down-the-ladder places like his girlfriend Muriel’s ‘Singleton’, so much a part and parcel of any city set up:

Driving through the labyrinth of littered, cracked, dark streets in the south of the city, Macon wondered how Muriel could feel safe living here. There were too many murky alleys and stairwells full of rubbish and doorways lined with tattered shreds of posters. The gridded shops with their ineptly lettered signs offered services that had a sleezy ring to them : CHECKS CASHED NO QUESTIONS, TINY BUBBA’S INCOME TAX, SAME DAY AUTO RECOLORING. Even this late on a cold November night, clusters of people lurked in the shadows

– young men drinking out of brown paper bags, middle-aged women arguing under a movie marquee that read CLOSED (198).

The decadence of the city is also seen through Emily's eyes in Morgan's Passing : “ ... the city continued to strike her as narrow and confining: all those gloomy rowhouses, some no wider than a single room; those alleys choked with discarded tires and bottles and bedsprings; those useless-looking, hopeless men slumped on their stoops” (74 – 75). When viewed through the eyes of Morgan Gower, too, the city loses its focus. The rowhouses are “each more decayed than the one before” (41). “Neon signs blurred into rainbows, and the tail lights of cars, sliding off into the fog, seemed to contract and then vanish” (55). The surroundings of the trailer park where he sets up his home are littered with “items of scrap all around them – discarded butane tanks, a rust – stained mattress, a collapsed sofa” (315). In the life of disarray that Morgan leads in the city, his assortment of friends are typical city specimens: “Potter, the musical-instrument man, the hot dog lady, the Greek tavern keeper on Broadway, and Kazari, the rug merchant” (117). The dichotomy posed by the city is observed by Morgan who sees that “apartment buildings were sprouting all around them, and the other houses were splitting into units and filling up with various unsortable collections of young people” (31).

Anne Tyler's preoccupation with suburban city life does not make her totally do away with rural settings. Of all her novels, The Tin Can Tree has, perhaps, the most rural background. The streets here are lined with trees, outlying houses and sunstricken tobacco fields. Tall grasses, wild daisies and bachelor's buttons bask in the rural sunlight. Acres of land are packed with rows and rows of tobacco with "gossipy women engaged in tobacco tying and men in tobacco picking"(92). In Earthly Possessions, Tyler describes the countryside as "peaceful and well-ordered as an illustration from a Dick-and-Jane book" (29). Even Morgan Gower of Morgan's Passing makes occasional excursions to the beach house which is the novelist's substitute for a pastoral set up. As Hoagland says, Tyler "loves the city with its pearly-tinted sky." He says she also loves "the whinnying of sound-track horses from the windows of the houses, the women who sweep their stoops even in the midst of a snow-storm and the lilac-color of the air while they do so" (Hoagland 43). When one tries to talk about the "limp carrots", "waxy cucumbers" and "tomatoes that taste like they spent six weeks on a window sill"(117) shipped in from out of state and brought to Ezra Tull's restaurant in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant by Mr.Purdy, the handyman, it may sound like going too much out of the way to find deliberate traces of agrarianism. It can be argued that Cody's purchasing of a farmhouse in Baltimore country with forty acres of land, and considering his New York

apartment “temporary” are more like a cramped and busy city dweller’s yearning for some space and solitude than a Southerner’s longing for the rural past. Nevertheless, there are plenty of passages in the novels, as in Breathing Lessons, where references are made to men splitting logs in clearings, trees changing colour and fields girdled with wooden fences, as noticed by Maggie Moran enroute to attend the funeral service of her friend’s husband. Maggie can appreciate the drive along the woods in the springtime; the sight of the ranch houses with weedy flowers lining the edge of the front yards and the distant chirping of birds make her filled with a sudden longing for the peace of the countryside: “She’d lived her entire life with the hum of the city, she realized. You’d think Baltimore was kept running by some giant, ceaseless, underground machine. How had she stood it?” (34). Maggie has a country woman’s sensitiveness which makes her wonder – after she meets and falls in conversation, with her usual talkativeness, with Mabel, the “Waitress at Nell’s Grocery & Café” – about what has become of all the ‘Mabels’; but she also has a city-dweller’s scorn upon hearing her grand daughter’s name being pronounced “Lee-roy” which she thinks is “country”. A similar sentiment is expressed by Charles Leary in The Accidental Tourist when his brother Porter voices his plans about starting what he calls a “chicken straddle” to avoid income-tax; “Besides”, Charles says, “Chickens are really not, I don’t know, very classy animals. I would hate to go round saying I’m

a chicken magnate” (209). This ‘doubleness’ reflected in Tyler’s novels is evident also when she makes Morgan Gower say proudly in Morgan’s passing : “We are city people. We have our city patterns, things to keep us busy” (154). This duality is seen when the novelist makes Elizabeth in The Clock Winder denounce nature, “ ..... if there’s one thing I don’t like it’s nature, standing around admiring nature” (42).

### **2.3.2.3 Changing Social and Familial Structures**

Another aspect of the urban milieu in Anne Tyler’s novels is the changing structure of the Old Southern society and family in the urban set up. As James C. Cobb observes, “..... the social structure characteristic of the older feudal and agrarian South is being dismantled and left behind in response to the demands of urban living” (Cobb 144). True that Tyler’s comments on the social and cultural aspects of the Southern life surface only in the context of her familial dramas. But there is a random scattering of social consciousness here, as revealed in the depiction of characters like Justin Montague Peck of Searching for Caleb who deliberately sets out to gain entry into the upper strata of the high society through his marriages. Elizabeth Abbot of The Clock Winder, – though without any social machination – marries into the wealthy and aristocratic Emerson family. Muriel Pritchett of The Accidental Tourist wins her way from her impoverished ‘Singleton’ background into the heart of Macon Leary from

the high Baltimore society. Pearl Tull of Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant has inherited the ingrained Southern social sensitivity when she reminisces about the changes in her immediate surroundings of the past: “The house where she was born was sold to a man from Michigan; cousins married strangers with last names she’d never heard of; even the street names were changed so she’d be lost if she ever went back” (8).

Yet another effect of urbanization that one notices in Tyler is the decline in the long-standing virtue of domestic stability. This is evident in the strenuous relationships between members of her fictional families and the breakdown of many marriages in her novels. The rift between Macon and Sarah in The Accidental Tourist, Beck and Pearl in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Saul and Charlotte in Earthly Possessions, Morgan and Bonny in Morgan’s Passing, Drum and Evie in A Slipping Down Life, Barnaby and Natalie in a A Patchwork Planet, not to mention the deteriorating ties between many parents and children, brothers and sisters provide illuminating case studies of this point.

To conclude, Burton Pike’s comments on the city perspectives in literature ring a bell on Tyler’s ambivalence regarding the depiction of city life in her novels:

When a writer looks at the city from above, he is placing himself  
(or his narrator) and the reader in an attitude of contemplation

rather than involvement. The elevated observer is within the city but above it at the same time, removed from the daily life taking place on the streets and within buildings (Pike 54).

Tyler's city characters observe the city from the street level or high-rise level, but at the same time remain suspended from above; they are not active participants in the complex city life, but remain as mere viewers. Joyce Durham pinpoints this paradoxical element in Tyler's city-characters. According to her, they are projected as images of despair and corruption, vitality and possibility. They grasp both the appeal and the repulsiveness of their city surroundings:

Most readers agree that modern novelists generally share an ambivalence to the city and a resulting divided assessment of city influences on their characters.... In Tyler's fiction, the city simply is; the author neither celebrates the city nor denounces it (Durham, *City* 43).

### **2.3.2 Multiple Slayings: Political Hide and Seek and Polarised Public Opinion**

In the United States, just as the world over, multiple slayings have marred the nation's recent history of economic progress. It has posed a serious threat to the safety and welfare of its citizens and challenged the law and order system. The 1984 July 19 issue of the New York Times reports a

rampage at a McDonald's restaurant in the town of San Ysidro, California, which killed 20 people and wounded 16 others (1, 1:1). The tragic incident occurred when an unemployed security guard armed with three guns strode into the restaurant on the Mexican border and fired indiscriminately at adults and children. According to the newspaper reports, the United Press International records showed that the killings were the largest toll by a single gun man in a single day in the nation's history. The paper also came out with a list of similar massacres in the long history of the nation's mass slayings and serial murders ( 19 July 1984, 1, 24:1).

Every time such incidents occur, the world is united in raising its voice in condemnation and outraged shock and calling for protecting people from those who go over the line. There is no ambivalence in the attitude of the governments or the public about the prevention of such dastardly acts from occurring in the future. However, controversies flare up when attempts are made to delve into the causes of such crimes. The massacre that left 15 dead at Littleton High School, Colorado in a shoot-out by 2 teenage boys in April 1999 is a case in point. Condemning the 'Culture of Death' that has come to grip the nation, former President Bill Clinton then called for new gun control laws that would "hold parents responsible if their children use guns to commit crimes..., would ban imported clips that allow assault weapons to fire more than 10 rounds without reloading and would require

background checks on people seeking to buy explosives.” (Hindu, 29 April, 1999: 13). The proposal was expected to be voted down by the Republican majority in the Congress, which has the backing of America’s powerful pro-gun lobby. The President and the Democrats wished to make political mileage out of the issue by forwarding the proposal immediately after the massacre, hoping to shame the opposition into supporting the measures.

The fact remains that as the game of political hide and seek continues, the massacres go on unabated. The issue in question is forgotten or sidelined as more politically sensitive issues crop up. It is only when a repeat performance occurs later that the issue is taken up again with vengeance. This has been the case ever since the setting up of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1968, soon after the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The Violence Commission had concluded that “firearms facilitate rather than cause violence, but that in this way the widespread possession of handguns contributes substantially to violence in American society” (Curtis 9). The Commission had recommended the legislation to encourage state licensing of hand guns, but the proposal had been convincingly defeated in Congress. Franklin E. Zimring in his essay “Violence and Firearms Policy” in the same volume predicts on the strength of opinion polls a national policy of handgun restriction rather than restrictive licensing (133 – 50). In the early part of the essay, he talks about the dramatic

increase in the number of citizens who care deeply about gun control policy, and points to the extent of public concern expressed as evidenced by the increase on both sides of the question. Even the restrictive policies adopted at the state levels, points out Zimring, were uniformly unpopular, and the issue remains unresolved even as the crime rate escalates. Lobbying on both sides has increased the level of public consciousness, and efforts to reform the law has polarized public opinion. The number of people who support gun control has increased, but then, so also has that of people who oppose it.

#### **2.3.2.1 Depiction of Death and Violence in Tyler's Novels**

Critics themselves seem to be at cross roads regarding Tyler's views on public issues. Ralph C. Stephens refers to Tyler "as a writer who hovers above life .... Whose point of view wavers between bemused detachment and 'life-affirmation' which largely ignores its reality" (Stephens xi). However, others – like Susan Gilbert – in her essay "Private Lives and Public Issues" – have traced Tyler's awareness of the scorching public issues in her more recent novels, while at the same time conceding that her fiction refuses to enlarge upon them in its preoccupation with questions of family and difficulties of human relationships:

*The Accidental Tourist* and *Breathing Lessons* though still in the main domestic novels, direct three glancing blows and one

very palpable hit at the most volatile political issues of the eighties; gun control, crime in the streets, the failures of American, public education, and abortion (Stephens 137).

Ethan Leary's death in The Accidental Tourist in a shoot-out at an outdoor camp draws attention to the vexing problems of armed robbery and meaningless violence. Earlier in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Tyler has made pointed references to these which she has incorporated into the fabric of The Accidental Tourist as an integral part of the storyline. Pearl Tull shudders at the possibility of Cody and his wife Ruth murdered in their apartment in New York, "victims of a burglary or some bizarre, New York-type accident, their bodies undiscovered for weeks" (174). The woman in the 'Dodge' who offers Cody's son Luke a lift in her car when he runs away from his intimidating father, reprimands him on his hitch-taking rides, and unfolds a "catalogue of dangers" that include "Sex Crimes! Muggings! Murders!" She drops him off at his uncle Ezra's Homesick Restaurant with this warning:

"You listen, Luke", she called to him. "Everything is changing; things aren't safe like in the old days. Every alley in this city is full of muggers, are you hearing what I say? Every doorway and vacant building, Luke, every street in Baltimore " (243).

Tyler depicts very little evil in her fictional world, and even on the

few occasions when she does, she refrains from employing violence in explicit details – a point noted by the critic Leithauser:

Tyler's world has little room for what may be the central preoccupation of so many contemporary novelists: violence. She springs on us few acts of brutality. Her marital discords may run deep, but they are unlikely to end in physical blows; her generational rivalries may be fervent but they are not murderous (Leithauser 54).

Tyler makes an almost casual reference to street violence in Saint Maybe. Daphne's amused account of the attempted assault on her by a miscreant youth, which was thwarted by the electrical device her uncle Ian had gifted her with, which emits a siren at the press of a secret button and Ian's warning to her "about the neighbourhoods she hung out in" (298) voices the novelist's concern for this issue of violence. The chill and horror one experiences while reading In Cold Blood with its gory murder scenes and psychotic criminals is absent in Tyler's fiction. There is no lustful ferocity or ardent desire as in Other Voices, Other Rooms. But there is a consistent presence of death and occasional suicide hovering in the margin of her familial drama. The Tin Can Tree opens with the funeral of the six-year-old Janie Rose Pike, killed in a tractor accident, and Celestial Navigation with that of Jeremy Pauling's mother. Woven into the fabric of The Clock Winder

is the death of Timothy Emerson. Timothy does have a streak of violence in him as evidenced by his act of hefting the axe and chopping the turkey's head off when provoked by his quarrel with his mother. He is eventually killed when the gun with which he threatens Elizabeth explodes in his hand as she tries to extract it from him. It may have been an accident or a suicide or an unintentional murder. Tyler does not investigate. On the other hand she dwells on the heavy burden of guilt which Elizabeth is made to carry for a long time to come. The reader suspects that the violent streak runs in the Emerson family. Timothy's brother Andrew has a frightening habit of picking guns. Once he claims to have picked one off a policeman at the parade. He writes threatening letters to Elizabeth, swearing to come for her to avenge his brother's death for which he holds her responsible. Andrew soon fulfills the threat and shoots Elizabeth. One is not sure whether he intended to kill her or not, but the bullet only grazes her arm, and she escapes with only a few stitches(28). Tyler uses the violent incident to serve the purpose of bringing about a change in Andrew's attitude towards Elizabeth. It also effects to cancel the debt Elizabeth owed the Emersons by being instrumental in Timothy's death.

In the recently published novel A Patchwork Planet, the protagonist, Barnaby Gaitlin, is a reformed renegade, a misfit who strains to survive in the contemporary world. In his young days, he was a juvenile delinquent,

who had cultivated a bad habit of breaking into other people's homes, primarily to read their private letters, and gloat over their personal photo albums. However, he had progressed from the seemingly harmless misdemeanours to more serious crimes as locking his parents out of the house and setting fire to the dining room. Fortunately the fire was doused before it could spread, and the reader sees the incident more as a sign of Barnaby's revolt against his upwardly mobile parents who wanted their young son to toe the family line than as any indication of rebellion against the society.

Earthly Possessions is another case in point. In this novel, the marital conflict and familial alienation unfold in the backdrop of an armed robbery and kidnap. Charlotte Emory, on the verge of breaking away from her husband, is kidnapped from the Maryland Safety Savings Bank by Jake Simms, Jr., at gunpoint, and taken on a ride for days. But Tyler does not denounce the incident or sketch the kidnapper as evil. On the other hand, she describes the man in sympathetic tones as "ordinary, calm-looking, with a tousle of oily black hair and black-rimmed, pale gray eyes"(5). The kidnapper manages to win our sympathy further when the novelist makes us peep into his pitiful past – his turbulent youth, his thwarted efforts to secure a job to provide for his pregnant girl-friend, and his attempt at the bank robbery for the same purpose. The reader is made to appreciate the streak of honour and nobility in him not only in his dealings with his victim,

but also in his decision to stay attached to his girl friend, Mindy, and even his plan to marry her. Charlotte, his victim, also feels that she is well taken care of by her kidnapper. There is no attempt at rape or sex. He only engages in philosophic conversations with her and she wishes that she could mail her husband a post card indicating that she was having a wonderful time. She feels she is “going on a trip” (7) and making “an escape to the outside world” (15). She is not alarmed or outraged even when the gun is slammed between her ribs, she is only glad that she has the window seat, and she is going somewhere after years(16).

There is death and description of a funeral service in A Slipping Down Life. Searching For Caleb has the suicide of Caroline Peck Mayhen, and there is suspense in the very title. There is reference in Morgan’s Passing to Morgan Gower’s father who commits suicide “for no discernible reason”. He had rented a room in a motel and slit his wrists with a razor blade. The novel also describes Morgan’s brother-in-law Rob Roberts attempting to welcome death by walking into the sea when his wife refuses to go back to him; and Morgan retrieves him not so much as to rescue him, as to defeat him in his purpose (177). In Back When We Were Grownups, Rebecca’s father-in-law’s death was a suicide(74). Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant begins with Pearl Tull in her death-bed, and ends with the family dinner at her son Ezra Tull’s ‘Homesick Restaurant’, immediately after her funeral.

Breathing Lessons progresses from Maggie and Ira Moran's journey to Deerlick to take part in the funeral of Max, the husband of Maggie's oldest friend Serena. Tyler devotes quite a few pages to describe the funeral service and the reception which follows.

### **2.3.2.2 Degree of Restraint and a Sense of Detachment**

Though there is a fine sprinkling of the gothic elements of death and suicide in Tyler's fiction, she exercises a degree of restraint in their use. There is no glorification of, or indulgence in, cruelty and brutality. The reader is protected from horror, and the possibilities of dismay are curtailed. "Gothic fiction is first and foremost, literature where fear is the motivating and sustaining emotion. The fear is shared by the characters within the story and the reader" (Gross 3). Tyler's novels do not evoke such fear either in the characters or in the reader. There is nothing bizarre or eerie about the characters or situations here, despite the focus of the novels on the unpleasant aspects of life. Even the senseless murder of Ethan Leary in The Accidental Tourist is penned with the least minimum details by the novelist:

He was murdered in a Burger Bonanza his second night at camp. It was one of those deaths that make no sense – the kind where the holdup man has collected his money and is free to go but decides, instead, first to shoot each and every person through the back of the skull (18).

The tragic incident is penned with almost clinical precision and a sense of detachment. The violence does not hound us like the dead man's eyes hound Tarwater in Flannery O'Connor's "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead." As Larry McMurtry rightly points out in his review of The Accidental Tourist, Tyler "is brilliant at showing how the living press upon one another, but less convincing when she attempts to add the weight of the dead." (McMurtry 36). The reader is told that it was their son, Ethan's death that was instrumental in the alienation of Sarah from Macon. But it could very well be Macon's obsession with a methodical life that drove Sarah off; and Ethan's death may have only served the purpose of an excuse to bring about the inevitable show-down. The random occurrence of death and violence does not provide anything hideous to Tyler's family sagas fraught with humour and pathos, at once cheerful and pathetic. In The Tin Can Tree or Celestial Navigation, The Clock Winder or A Slipping Down Life, Searching for Caleb or Earthly Possessions, The Accidental Tourist or Breathing Lessons, the sprinkling of the elements discussed only forms a fragile framework upon which the novelist builds her families with their complex and unfathomed understandings and misunderstandings, love and lovelessness.

### **2.3.2.3 Familial Violence leading to Alienation and Detachment**

On the other hand, we find Tyler drawing upon the mental and physical

violence within the household which brings about the alienation and detachment of the members of her fictional families, as in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant. The streak of cruelty in Cody Tull which instigates him to break windows, create scenes, and shoot arrows, has its source in his mother Pearl Tull whose fits of rage have had an inhibiting influence upon all of her children, even as they acknowledge her role in their upbringing. This is exemplified by the memories of Pearl's daughter, Jennie about her mother:

Which of her children had not felt her stinging slap, with the claw-encased pearl in her engagement ring that could bloody a lip at one flick? Jenny had seen her hurl Cody down a flight of stairs. She'd seen Ezra ducking, elbows raised, warding off an attack. She herself, more than once, had been slammed against a wall, been called "Serpent", "Cockroach", "hideous little sniveling gutter snipe"(70).

This violence is not depicted in detail by the novelist further in the course of the novel; but she leaves it to remain indelible in the tortured psyche of the Tull children whose personalities are made or marred to a great extent by the treatment they receive from their mother. Similar to this is the situation in Breathing Lessons, where Max's death is not designed to evoke any tragic dealing. It merely forms the backdrop of the oddities of her

married couples, Maggie and Ira, Serena and Max, Fiona and Jesse. The funeral scene can be viewed as an occasion for reaffirming the novelist's exhilaration in the existence of life not bogged down by the pervasive gloom of death. Tyler illustrates the point when she leaves Maggie and Ira to their impulsive and spontaneous love-making in the bedroom of the diseased immediately after Max's funeral and the screening of the wedding film of Max and Serena during the reception which followed.

There is violence of a different kind in the novel, Searching for Caleb. This violence, more psychological than physical, is inflicted on young and newly-married Meg by her mother-in-law, Mrs. Milsom. She is a dreadful woman, a self-proclaimed faith-healer. But she is incapable of healing her own son's headaches. The son, the Reverend Arthur Milsom, is silly and spineless in character, anaemic in appearance and miserably subservient to his domineering mother. Mrs. Milsom tactlessly and deliberately refuses to let her daughter-in-law be alone with her visiting parents, and even refuses to listen when Meg explains that her mother could not drink iced tea if sugar is added. Mrs. Milsom heaps sugar into the tea and maliciously watches her daughter-in-law's mother struggling to drink it. Meg becomes a captive wife in the Milsom household. She loses her name which is changed to Margaret, and even loses her individuality. Her mother-in-law does not even allow her to make up her bed, and at one point, Meg exclaims to her mother, "I live

among *crazy* people” (229).

Tyler’s 1995 novel Ladder of Years opens with a newspaper report of a housewife’s disappearance in Baltimore.

Baltimore woman disappears During family Vacation

“Delaware State Police announced early today that Cordelia F. Grinstead, 40, wife of a Roland Park Physician has been reported missing while on holiday with her family in Bethany Beach”.

The one-column report with the catching headline forms the preface to the novel proper, and provides the novel with the initial intrigue that promises to lift it to a true suspense–thriller. It conjures up images of abduction and violence, ransom and investigation and retribution. However, as the chapters unfold, the reader realizes that this is yet another of Tyler’s familiar dramas of internal violence and distancing within the family. In this case the alienation fringes on the heroine Delia’s ambivalence regarding her feelings and behaviour towards her own family. She leaves home because she thinks she is treated there as someone who is “expendable” and “an extra” (127). But at Bay Borough, the small town where she lands during her flight from home, Delia becomes popular with her new friends, particularly with Joel and Noah, the father and his twelve-year-old son in whose family she becomes a live-in woman (160). She considers herself as “dizzy” and

“disoriented” with her own children (201), whereas with Noel, she is an effective “surrogate” mother, a care taker and a care giver. There is ambiguity even in her confession that she never meant to “leave” her home, but was only “unintentionally separated” (293). She is angry with her husband for she feels unappreciated and cramped by him, but is overcome by jealousy upon hearing that her own sister is making a play for him (211). When informed of her daughter Susie’s forthcoming marriage, she grabs the chance to return home. She leaves for the wedding presumably on a day’s leave, but takes all her clothes (303) and it is obvious that “she’d ended up back where she’d started” (326).

#### **2.4 Absence of ‘World View’**

Anne Tyler has justified her preoccupation with day-to-day family affairs and neglect of issues related to larger interests by declaring that she has no ‘World View’ and that reading Eudora Welty in her early years has showed her “that very small things are often really larger than the large things” (Michaels 43). It is not that she emerges as totally ignorant of the “larger things”, national and international, which canker-like, eat into today’s social system. Her novels do allude to many of these burning issues. We get the feeling that many of her characters and some of the incidents in her novel are taken from communities and households which she might have known herself; and, as Paul Binding observes, many of these come up in

the course of ordinary gossip:

Gossip or the local newspaper do not seem incongruous in connection with Anne Tyler's work, highly sophisticated though her art is, any more than in the work of Peter Taylor or Eudora Welty. Indeed, the central action of *A Slipping Down Life* (1970) sprang from something that Anne Tyler wrote about a wild Elvis Presley fan. It would come as no surprise were we to learn that the kidnapping of Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions* originated from a similar source, or that Anne Tyler wrote about the eccentric Emerson family in *The Clock Winder* or the individualistic Pecks in *Searching for Caleb* (1977) because she had overheard local gossip about real people (Binding 200 – 01).

The critic Elizabeth Evans has more information on the source of the character Evie Decker who carves her rock-idol's name on her forehead in jagged letters. Evans claims that Anne Tyler has based this story on the incident about a Texas girl who carved 'ELVIS' in her flesh out of misguided information. Evans also remembers that Tyler has referred to this incident of name carving even in her 1966 unpublished novel "Winter Birds, Winter Apples" where the character Bridget remembers a classmate named Lola Wilson who carved her boy friend's name on her wrist with a pocket knife

(Evans 72 – 73). Though her novels touch upon several burning issues, Tyler's greater concern for private issues of the domestic front makes her turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to their causes and consequences. She is like a physician who conveys the diagnosis, but refuses even to propose a remedy. Elizabeth Beverly raises the following questions in her review of Breathing Lessons: "Does the novel owe the reader a kick in the pants? Should a reviewer criticize a gifted novelist for seeming to refuse the high moral charge of art?" (Beverly 120). The reader is tempted to join in Beverly's emphatic denial, "No, no and no!" It is very rarely that one encounters a writer as candid as Tyler whose confessions regarding her lack of "World View" and obsession with the "small things" show that she makes no pretensions and is far from being a hypocrite.

#### **2.4.1 Later Works More Socially Conscious**

The Indian scholar Dasgupta divides Tyler's novels into two categories, with the year 1985 as the turning point in her novelistic vision. She attributes greater dynamism to Tyler's later works compared with the "unpretentious format" of her earlier domestic-psychological novels. She considers Tyler's emphasis on the need for a sense of harmony "as a positive step towards a more integrated self and society" (Dasgupta 71), and regards Tyler's fiction "as a felicitous fusion of social and individual consciousness with emphasis on the latter, a common characteristic of the post modern

literary art” (71–72). The distinguishing feature of Tyler’s fiction is the concentration on the portrayal of “self in the society” unlike most of the modern writers who depict “self divorce from society” (72). Dasgupta drives home her arguments by quoting Anne Tyler herself in one of her letters to the scholar, “I would tend to agree there’s more social concern in my later books, just because as I grow older I see more to be concerned about – but it has not been a conscious literary development”(75).

Tyler does refer to some pressing public issues that require urgent attention. Whereas other writers would relish incorporating these issues and enlarging upon them, and even proposing remedies, Tyler pushes them to the margin of her familial plots and seemingly remains contented with focusing attention on the inner dilemmas of her characters. Look at the scene in Breathing Lessons where Maggie Moran takes her son’s pregnant girlfriend away from the clinic picketed by slogan – shouting anti-abortion activists (238). Considering that Tyler published the novel in 1988, at the peak of the anti-abortion riots that raged throughout the decade, the reader is almost tempted to blame the author for letting an opportunity to delve deeper into an issue that plagued the nation slip through her fingers. One knows that Maggie Moran’s gesture of dissuading Fiona from having an abortion is not motivated by either moral reasons or any political sympathy for the anti-abortion lobby. She is a representative of the average public, who,

ostrich-like, wishes to escape temporarily from the turmoil that rages around. The same indifference that Tyler reveals in refraining from delving deep into the sociological causes and effects of violence is manifest here also, and the reader is left to wonder which side the novelist takes. Emily, the heroine of Morgan's Passing, when she realizes that she is pregnant with Morgan's child while living as Leon's wife, says "I do believe in abortion" and adds, "but I don't believe in it for me" (235). Emily's words obviously sum up the novelist's own viewpoint regarding this and many other controversial issues.

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

*By*

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## Chapter 3

### **Celebration of Deviance: Anne Tyler's Eccentrics**

In Coppola's version Dracula is not coherently or consistently presented as a sublimely imaginary figure of evil, despite the melodramatically demonic dress and the bat costume that seems to be inherited from Batman, another ambivalently Gothic hero. Not entirely an antichrist, vicious aristocrat, bad father or beast, Dracula is less tyrannical divided form in the way it explains his passions and violence as an effect of being tragically robbed of love by the untimely and unnecessary death of his wife (Botting 178).

#### **3.1 From the Demonic to the Humane**

The above reading made by Fred Botting about the latest film version of Francis Ford Coppola's gothic character, Dracula, appears in the chapter entitled "Twentieth Century Gothic". Botting comments on the much publicized film *Dracula* (1992), billed as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The film simulates authenticity by the reconstruction of dress, settings and images from the past, and is designed to evoke violence, death and dissolution. However, it emerges as more humane than horrifying, and Dracula is projected as devoid of sublime horror. The epigraph to posters advertising the film,

'Love never dies', reduces or lifts it from gothic horror to sentimental romance, and advocates a more humane approach to vampirism, based on caring, love and tolerance. Confirming the end of the true gothic, Botting concludes: "With Coppola's *Dracula*, then, Gothic dies, divested of its excesses, of its transgressions, horrors and diabolical laughter, of its brilliant gloom and rich darkness, of its artificial and suggestive forms" (180).

In recent times, the reaction of people to the gothic has varied from shock and revulsion to delight and fascination, with the conservative experiencing the former set of reactions and the more liberal taking delight in the unusual and the deviant. Even the creators of such characters consider the quality of abnormality or unnaturalness as an essential characteristic of the grotesque and dally both playfully and seriously with the absurdities of existence. They associate the grotesque not with the fantastic but with the realistic, making it clear that it is not an artistic device but is something that exists in nature and in the world around us. Says Philip Thomson:

Where previous ages had seen in it merely the principle of disharmony run wild, or relegated it to the cruder species of the comic, the present tendency – one which must be welcomed as a considerable step forward – is to view the grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate

expression of the problematical nature of existence  
(Thomson 11).

The preceding chapter has dealt with the compromising stand adopted by Anne Tyler not only on various public issues including abortion but also on the gender related questions to which the issue of abortion takes the reader. In this chapter also, Tyler is projected as striking a similar intermediary note as regards the depiction of the temperament, mannerisms and behaviour of her people, irrespective of what sex they belong to. In Tyler's fiction, hardly do we come across people who are diabolic or demonic like Dracula. Nor do we encounter characters who are stark, raving mad. On the other hand, there are characters who think, talk and act as normally as anyone. But the fact remains that the majority of her people lead a precarious existence, balancing on the borderline between sanity and insanity. They indulge in many excessive actions considered unnatural and opposed to the physical laws by most of us. They often subvert rational codes of understanding and engage in fanciful ideas or fantastic flights. Again, the fact is that Tyler does not applaud these people for their line. Nor does she present them as venturing into diabolical acts of vice, corruption and depravity. Tyler's eccentrics do not resort to lust, murder, incest or forms of atrocity. They do not evoke in us any morbid or macabre images or any sense of a grotesque and menacing presence pervading the everyday existence. Tyler

does not paint them in eerie colours as to make the readers despise or fear them. To her, they are just endearing and lovable, and they are tools created to remind us of the possibility of veering to one or the other extreme of the sane-insane line.

### **3.2 Containment and Subversion**

To find an answer as to why Anne Tyler resorts to creating such border line characters, one may as well turn to Michel Foucault's theory of "power-relations". In any society, this constitutes the concepts, oppositions and hierarchies of its 'discourse', and thus determines what is considered as normal and what is regarded as abnormal or deviant. Foucault in his Madness and Civilization points out the 'otherness' of the madman, but at the same time concedes that this 'otherness' serves to confirm our own sanity and reason. The creation of eccentric characters – a celebration of deviance- in Tyler can further be explained in the light of two terms, "containment" and "subversion", which have been widely established in New Historicist studies. Louis Montrose regards these terms as "residues of a cold war ideology", and refers to them as "significant indicators of a shift of perspective within Anglo-American literary criticism and its ambient political culture". This shift in emphasis is "from unity, reciprocity, and consent to difference, domination, and resistance". In this context, Montrose cites the New Historicism as "an academic site of ideological struggle between containment

and subversion”. He goes on to say:

This struggle may be reduced to the following scenario. Critics who emphasize the possibilities for the effective agency of individual or collective subjects against forms of domination, exclusion, and assimilation have energetically contested critics who stress the capacity of the early modern state, as personified in the monarch, to ‘contain’ apparently subversive gestures, or even to ‘produce’ them precisely in order to contain them. According to a now notorious argument in Greenblatt’s essay “Invisible Bullets”, the ability of the dominant order to generate subversion so as to use it to its own ends marks “the very condition of power” (Greenblatt and Gunn 402).

### **3.3 Disturbance of Borders and Margins**

The celebration of deviance one comes across in Tyler’s fiction can further be explained in the light of New Historicism’s focus on the disturbance of borders and margins. In this connection one remembers the works of several thinkers and anthropologists. Michel Foucault has shown that institutional divisions such as housing of the insane in asylums are connected to the conceptual ordering of the opposition between reason and madness. Stephen Greenblatt has stressed the concept of hybridity, examining the ways in which cultures produce, and are produced by, borders and boundaries.

When alien elements are encountered by a culture, they are reorganized and assimilated through processes of symbolism and representation, and are characterized by hybridity (Greenblatt, *Marvelous* 4). Mikhail Bakhtin's example of a peasant urinating from a cathedral spire underlines the process of sustaining and subverting the social order, and highlights the conceptual division between purity and chaos represented by the opposition between the church and the market place.

Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger is an influential work which argues that our basic moral divisions are thought through material boundaries, and we try to organize ourselves by creating such boundaries. Douglas' discussion of dirt and the system of purity proves this point:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity (Douglas, *Purity* 35).

According to Douglas, cultures are systems of order and organization; and a sense of order can be achieved only by boundaries which marginalize disorder. An illustration of this theory can be found in John Brannigan's New Historicist reading of Richard Jefferies' 'Snowed Up'. This piece of criticism tries to expose the crisis which threatens a civilized society to fall back into barbarism. Brannigan argues that exposing the danger of lapsing back into barbarism is a means through which the value of civilization is validated by power: "Following Foucault's ideas on how the self is constructed by defining it against what is alien or 'Other', sanity determined by institutionalizing and defining insanity, freedom established by imprisonment, the New Historicists posit that power secures the value of its order by sanctioning glimpses of disorder" (Wolfreys and Baker 167 – 68).

Claire Colebrook talks of divisions or boundaries in texts which are now read as acts of delimitation. According to her, critics of Renaissance texts have focused on stage-plays as symbols which divide the just from the unjust. Colebrook explains:

Thus in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* the mob is associated with misrule, while the virtuous Romans are associated with the mind, the respect of proper boundaries and order. The play therefore has as its condition certain material divisions but it also ritually re-enacts and grants further symbolic meaning to

those divisions. The play is a cultural event both in its replication of materially ordering boundaries and in the symbolic weight it grafts onto those divisions (Colebrook 80).

New Historicism focuses on the marginal cases which disturb the conceptual ordering of a culture. Just as the order is threatened by the deviance, the order is also reinforced by the occurrence of deviant practices. The liberal presence of eccentrics in Anne Tyler's fiction serves to prove this point. They show the existing deviant culture which seems to threaten the sanity of the normal dominant culture; but this deviance, when juxtaposed with the other, succeeds in reinforcing the need for order and balance.

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the greatest theoreticians of literature, regards the concept of dialogue as central to an approach to literature in general and to the novel in particular. He comments: "The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 254). David Patterson agrees with Bakhtin that creation always goes with new meaning. According to him, creations required encounter, the coupling or collision of one discourse with another. He considers the creative act as a free act, and the freedom it enjoys is the freedom to be 'other'. So the fundamental task facing the

author is to become 'other' to himself, to look upon himself through the eyes of another. This means to assume the discourse of another. Here the author is transformed from a man into a creator. In Bakhtin's theory this is evident in the development of the rogue, the clown and the fool, people who are free to be 'other' in this world. Bakhtin argues that these figures "influenced the positioning of the author himself within the novel .... as well as the author's point of view (160). He explains further that "the novelist stands in need of some essential, formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public. And it is precisely here, of course, that the masks of the clown and the fool (transformed in various ways) come to the aid of the novelist" (161). What David Patterson speaks of Bakhtin's rogue, clown or fool as playing a major role in the dialogical dimensions of the novel is applicable to Tyler's creation of the eccentrics as well. They provide the occasion for the encounter between word and alien word, and set the scene for the free release of laughter. Patterson links this to the importance given by Bakhtin to the Menippean satire in the evolution of the novel. Bakhtin has pointed out that "the 'inappropriate word' – inappropriate because of its cynical frankness, or because it profanely unmask a holy thing, or because it crudely violates etiquette – is .... very characteristic for the menippea" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 118). Patterson calls the inappropriate word

as “a form of the alien word, the word that comes into collision with a standing discourse, and official *monologism*, that is a “party line” or a movement of dialogue that is essential to the novel” (Patterson 83).

### **3.4 Abnormality and the Inversion of Values**

In the chapter called “Madness, Death, and the Birth of Reason”, Alan Sheridan discusses the origin of “madness as a focus of exclusion” in the European consciousness. Prior to the middle ages, madness had been considered as an experience undifferentiated from that of reason. Though it started gaining attention in the middle ages, it was after the seventeenth century, he argues, that madness really took over from leprosy and venereal diseases as an illness that generated reaction of isolation, exclusion and purification. “At this time mad men were not generally interned. They were often expelled from the city itself, but allowed to wander freely over the countryside. To prevent their return, they were often entrusted to groups of merchants and pilgrims, who then deposited them at a safe distance from their place of origin” (Sheridan 17). In the modern times, the mad man is taken from the countryside and other safely secluded open spaces and actually confined in asylums and institutions where they are excommunicated. This excommunication is also commented upon by Foucault himself:

In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the mad man. On the other hand, the man

of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of diseases; on the other, the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity (Foucault, *Madness* xii – xiii).

Foucault goes on to add that from the classical age onwards, madness was associated with idleness and condemned by the community of labour. “It was in this *other world*, encircled by the sacred powers of labour, that madness would assume the status we now attribute to it” (58).

In this context it is interesting to note the change in society’s view and treatment of mad men. This change was effected according to Sheridan at the close of the eighteenth century. Earlier madness had been judged in terms of animalism. But an inversion of values took place in the late eighteenth century when madness and abnormality were judged not in terms of animalism but in terms of the human society and the environment which repressed man’s natural animalism. Madness was seen as the reverse side of progress, the result of man’s removal from nature. This shift in the society’s view of abnormality put the blame on the civilized society and not on the mad man. As a result, abnormality began to be considered as an object of sympathy.

The borderline eccentrics in Anne Tyler's novels are treated with sympathy by the novelist. These quirks are not entirely shunned or excommunicated, but are handled endearingly and tolerantly. At the worst, they are only viewed with an amused sense of resignation.

### 3.5 Tyler's Endearing Eccentrics

In her notes to the chapter where she analyses Tyler's novel's Earthly Possessions and Morgan's Passing, Alice Hall Petry refers to Robert Towers' argument that the modern readers can understand and enjoy the normal or the completely abnormal, perverted or even mad, but they cannot enjoy the slightly abnormal or quirky type. Petry quotes Towers: "... twentieth century psychology has largely tainted the comfortable Victorian enjoyment of eccentric characters in fiction .... Today readers and writers alike can accommodate any degree of weirdness, neurosis, perversion or madness, but tend to jib at the droll, the quirky, the harmlessly odd" (Petry, *Understanding* 183). Towers lists Tyler as one of the two writers of the twentieth century – the other being V.S. Pritchett – who have "successfully evaded the ban on colorfully eccentric characters". Joseph Voelker alludes to Tyler's own protestation during a panel discussion held at Duke University in 1975 on the lives of young novelists, that "she never takes more than two steps toward madness" (Voelker 68).

Many of Anne Tyler's characters stand out because of their 'oddness'

which does not stretch towards 'madness' as Voelker comments. None of them possess that degree of insanity which requires that they be interned in secluded institutions. Most of them go through the 'sane' activities of life such as marriage, parenthood and employment. Take, for instance, Duncan in Searching for Caleb and Morgan in Morgan's Passing. Both men are married and have offspring. Both are employed, though they are not necessarily the 'bread-winners' of their respective families. Duncan is restless and unsteady in any enterprise he undertakes. He is always on the move with no system to his moves. His mind is "an intricate, multigearred machine" (20) jumping from one abstract idea to another, arriving at one hypothesis or the other, without making any progress in any endeavour. Morgan Gower, too, goes into bouts of enthusiasm in which he sinks into other people's lives and performs various roles. Absconding from his job as a salesman – where he often actually discourages customers from buying things – he becomes a spinner of yarns of fantastic but authentic-sounding tales and indulges in unbelievable and unnecessary feats. These men cannot be described as idle either. They are not incapable of working, but work as and how they please, without any due care for monetary gains and advancement in the society. In Foucault's world of madness, the madman communicates through the intermediary of the physician. In Anne Tyler's world of eccentricity, Morgan Gower 'becomes' the physician and actually helps deliver a baby. He is

considered odd, because he performs a role not allotted to him, however successfully he manages it. It is not the role as such that accounts for his eccentricity. It is the society's concept of who should enact that role which makes him out to be an eccentric.

### 3.5.1 Oddities of Behaviour

The oddities of the richly idiosyncratic characters who populate Tyler's fiction are more in their behaviour than in their appearance. Physically incapacitated characters like the cross-eyed mannish female giant, Miss Amelia, or the womanish crook-backed dwarf, Cousin Laymon, in Carson McCullers' "The Ballad of the Sad Café" are rare in Tyler. One does come across people like Dorrie, Ira Moran's sister, in Breathing Lessons, who is frail and jerky, buck-toothed and awkward, and whose left leg is partially paralysed after a seizure, with the result that she "hobbled grotesquely". Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant has Josiah Payson, Ezra's over-grown friend, tall like a gorilla, but considered retarded by the folk of the locality. But in a psychological framework where the physical handicap is viewed symbolically as a manifestation of the mental incapacity to love and be loved, Tyler's rare grotesques do not really fit in. Ira feels trapped with his sisters and eccentric father, but loves them anyway. Jenny Tull almost falls in love with Josiah, and like her, the reader, too, understands him. One loves Tyler's grotesques, because they are pathetic and pitiful, not eerie and repulsive.

The underplay of the grossly gothic features like madness and physical deformity is amply compensated for in Tyler's fictional universe by the liberal presence of characters who are simply eccentric. Even her most sane characters often exhibit tendencies of behaviour which take them on to the verge of eccentricity; and the novelist seems to revel in the idiosyncrasies of the people who fill her novels.

However, it should not be mistaken that Tyler's characters are all hopelessly mad. There is nothing decrepit or scary about them; they often nurse the readers' sympathy. They deviate from our orderly ways and rational assumptions, yet do not offend us by providing a garish vision of life. At their worst, they are only bewildering, and can be best termed 'endearing eccentrics'. They lean more towards the self-absorbed and slightly imbalanced characters than to downright grotesques. It is just that Tyler has the ability to see people in terms of their similarities as well as dissimilarities with others. They are draped in a sense of reality, though a casual reader might be surprised at their fantastically wayward behaviour and imaginative drives. Almost all of them are ordinary and unremarkable, and it is the touch of oddity which Tyler bestows upon them that makes them stand out far apart from the usual run-of-the-mill characters that inhabit many novels. Margaret Morganroth Gullette comments:

Tyler's people need to be a little eccentric in the external things (as

every reader notices they are) to defamiliarize what they're about, which is so homey and familiar, and yet at the same time so serious and crucial – growing up through the psychosocial stages, answering philosophical questions in their plain concrete language and modern literalized ways: getting on an Amtrak car, lugging around their family bureaus (Gullette119).

Beneath their eccentric, weird exteriors, they have a good heart, and we do not wish them to be any different. They are all the more lovable because they are what they are.

### **3.5.2 Eccentric in Appearance, Mannerisms and Actions**

In Tyler's novels, one can trace a linear progression of eccentric characters whose eccentricity is conveyed through their appearance, gestures and actions. Ben Joe Hawkes in If Morning Ever Comes reads a newspaper holding it upside down. He hates telephones and feels panicky and breathless speaking to others without seeing them. The brainy child of the Hawkes family, Ben could not decide whether he wanted to go in for Science or Arts or Philosophy, and finally ended up reading nothing but murder mysteries. Ben's sister Joanne, according to her husband Gary, is the only mother he knows of that keeps on waking the baby all the time, instead of the baby waking her, and making milk shakes at 2 a.m. Ben's grandmother, Gran, is another colourfully eccentric character who at the ripe old age of eighty goes about wearing black tennis shoes and works in the attic at making a

gun belt. She upsets the family budget by buying minced clams and pickled antichoke hearts when what was needed were plain meat and potatoes. Her views are outrageous. She regards education as “rubbish” and is pleased with her granddaughters for not seeking a college education.

It is his tendency to be an introvert that gives Jeremy Pauling of Celestial Navigation - a character to whom Tyler admits to feel a special empathy - the base for his eccentricity. The artist-protagonist is a very complex and somewhat crazy man whose life is immersed in art. His work habits are eccentric and he suffers from a high degree of insecurity which is reflected in his behavioural aberrations. He seems to be suffering from an acute dose of agoraphobia. He is terrified of the outside world and is locked inside his studio most of the time. One of the rare occasions when he leaves his artist’s den is to accompany Mary Tell, and then, he is overcome by terror. “Nausea came swooping over him, and he buckled at the knees and slid downward until he was seated flat on the sidewalk with his feet sticking out in front of him” (110). Alice Hall Petry accuses Jeremy of suffering from some “psychic split” which is why, according to her, Tyler makes the chapters narrated by him be presented in the third person, whereas the rest of the chapters, narrated by other characters, are presented in the first person (Petry, *Understanding* 109). Petry refers to the ambivalence in Jeremy’s love for privacy and his fear of the outside world, and concludes that

it raises a problem:

Where does one draw the line between an artist's being "private" and "anti-social", between his being "off-beat" and "insane"? The lines between these categories are indistinct. And though they are labels imposed by a society that cannot itself always agree on their precise nature, they nonetheless are real mind-sets that are potentially dangerous to the creative individual (104).

The nomadic and free-spirited Caleb Peck of Searching for Caleb who disappeared one "Saturday afternoon in the spring of 1912", sixty one years before the book opens, exhibits the odd traits of the Peck house-hold. This oddity is also manifest in the carefree lifestyle of his fortune-teller grand-niece Justine, considered as the "local seeress", who takes up fortune-telling, regarded as a disreputable profession, and reads the future, not the past, as the past is more complicated. Her husband, Duncan, suffers from "chronic dissatisfaction", and accumulates peculiar scraps of knowledge. Never steady in anything he undertakes, he flits from farming to antique trade to machines to health-food stores, making each run into a profitable proposition, and then allowing them to turn into loss. In a period of twenty years he had begun and ended half-hearted ventures such as goat-farming, photography and cabinet-making. He had worked in a pet-store, a

tobacconist's, a record bar, a gourmet shop. Things fizzled out to a spout of drinking bourbon, playing solitaire and delving into deep silence in which he reflected upon his own imprisoned soul. He entertained eccentric ideas of inventing a perpetual motion machine made of screen door springs, or breeding sting less honeybees, or entering a contest for a one-man flying machine no bigger than an arm-chair (35). He once suggested that they borrow a wayward girl from the police station. He does not hesitate to cut off the phone-cord with iron clippers irritated by the constant ringing of the phone. He paints half the kitchen yellow and then quits, plants rhododendron bushes all around the yard in the wrong season. Justine and Duncan do not care for the dislocation of their daughter Meg's education as a result of their constant shifting. To Meg's complaint, they preach that the best education they can give her is to teach her to adapt. Meg herself is embarrassed by her parents' unorthodox and unnatural behaviour and is either on the defensive or indifferent.

This kind of waywardness is most predominant in Morgan's passing in the behaviour of Morgan Gower. Tyler introduces Morgan to the readers thus:

You could say he was a man who had gone to pieces, or maybe he'd always been in pieces; maybe he'd arrived unassembled.

Various parts of him seemed poorly joined together. His clean,

hairy limbs were connected by exaggerated knobs of bone; his black-bearded jaw was as clumsily hinged as a nut-cracker. Parts of his life, too, lay separate from other parts. His wife knew almost none of his friends. His children had never seen where he worked; but wasn't in a safe part of town, their mother said. Last month's hobby – the restringing of a damaged pawnshop banjo, with an eye to becoming suddenly musical at the age of forty two – bore no resemblance to this month's hobby, which was the writing of a science-fiction novel that would make him rich and famous. He was writing about the death of earth (23).

Elsewhere in the novel, Tyler describes the odd appearance and mannerisms of her protagonist thus:

His manners were atrocious ... scattered ashes down his front, chewed his cuticles, picked his teeth, meddled with his beard, fidgeted, paced, scratched his stomach, hummed distractingly whenever it was someone else's turn to speak; he was not a temperate person. He wore rich men's hand-me-downs, stained and crumpled and poorly kept, and over them an olive drab, bunched nylon parka, its hood trimmed with something matted that might be monkey fur. He smelled permanently of stale

tobacco. When he wore glasses, they were so finger printed and greasy you couldn't read his eyes. He was excitable and unpredictable, sometimes nearly manic... (211).

Morgan, a middle-aged married man with a large family that consists of his mother, sister, wife and seven daughters, masquerades in various guises, throughout the length of the novel. He impersonates a tugboat captain, a Mohawk Indian high-rise worker, a member of the international brotherhood of magicians, seller of crabs etc. One day, passing through the identity of a doctor, he helps deliver a baby, that of the road-side puppeteer Emilie, with whom he falls in love. After Emilie's husband leaves her, Morgan moves in with her and this time, assumes the identity of Emilie's ex-husband. When the reader feels that he has finally stopped 'passing' from one guise to another, having attached himself to the predictably mundane chores of settled life, comes the revelation in the last lines of the novel: "Everything he [Morgan] looked at seemed luminous and beautiful and rich with possibilities." With knowledge of Morgan's track record, the reader can well guess what these "possibilities" are and does not need to ponder much to realize that Morgan will soon be back in his romantic realms, 'passing' on to yet another guise.

Unlike the situation in Morgan's Passing, there is little that is so blatantly eccentric in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant. Perhaps there is just the

slightest trace of it in Ezra, which is what makes him tear down the partition separating the kitchen from the dining hall in his Homesick Restaurant, and wonder about the prospects of running a restaurant devoid of table-service, where people can come and carry away whatever they want straight from the refrigerators. There are occasions when one doubts his sister Jenny's sanity too. Not so much when she takes on a large family by her third marriage, as when she sails through the hurdles posed by her ready-made family with an indifferent, all understanding ease that borders on the unnatural. Her coping with the tantrums of the eldest stepson, and her meeting with the school teacher certainly make one think that she is extraordinary if not downright eccentric or abnormal. Apart from instances like these, the stress in the novel falls not on the oddities of the characters, but on the violent interactions amongst the members of the Tull family.

Maggie Morgan of Breathing Lessons and Muriel Pritchett of The Accidental Tourist also fall into this category of sane-insane characters. Their waywardness arises out of the willful streak in their personalities. Neither of them runs away from life and "the world they live in is no never-never land" (Davis 19). Full of courage, they deal with the realities in their own inimitable ways; but the reader is struck by their 'differentness'. One may be taken aback by Muriel's looks – her very high heels, dark-red-painted nails, blackish lipstick and frizzy hair. But "the effect is not of derision, but of a celebration

of eccentricity, communicated by visual signals, as on a TV screen” (Johnson 16). She tags along with Macon to Paris as an unwanted encumbrance, and on a shopping spree, treats herself to hordes of articles without any thought whatsoever as to how she could transport them to Baltimore from where she hails. But the reader rests assured that she would cope with the situation as she had earlier done when her husband had deserted her and left her alone with a sick little son.

Barnaby Gaitlin, the central character in A Patchwork Planet – one of the recent novels by Anne Tyler – is also cast in the mould of those characters who stand out because of the peculiarities in their behaviour. Gaitlin, a thirty-year old quirky character, is a kind-hearted misfit who is struggling to find his place in the world. He hates being in an appointed place at an appointed time, and looks for ‘angels’ to sort out his problems. A renegade, he had indulged himself in petty crimes in his early youth, breaking into his neighbours’ houses to steal and read their personal letters, diaries, and browse through their photo-albums. His self-analysis sums up his waywardness best:

Back in the days when I was a juvenile delinquent, I used to break into houses and read people’s private mail. Also photo albums. The other kids who broke in along with me, they’d be hunting car keys and cigarettes and booze. They’d be tearing

through closets and cabinets all around me, while I sat on the sofa poring over somebody's wedding pictures. And even when I took stuff, it was always personal stuff. This little snow globe once from a night-stand in a girl's bedroom. Another time, a brass egg that stood on scaly claw feet and opened to show a snapshot of an old-fashioned baby inside (8).

Barnaby considers himself as "no more than a manual laborer", with "the fashion sense of a Hell's Angel", and rates his prospects for advancement as flat zero (128). Early in the novel, Barnaby is disappointed at being sidelined by the stranger who is looking for help from someone to carry his daughter's passport to her at Philadelphia. Though he had wanted the stranger to approach him and ask him for the favour, he grudgingly concedes that his out-of-the-way appearance may have put off the man.

No doubt I struck him as iffy, with my three-day growth of black stubble and my ripped black leather jacket and my jeans all dust and cobwebs from Mrs. Morey's garage. But still he could have given me a chance. Instead he just flicked his eyes at me and then swerved off toward the bench at the end of the room (3).

Later in the novel, he wears a pajama top and appears unshaven, with both knees poking through his jeans, for his birthday dinner hosted by his affluent

parents.

The customers, mostly old, whom Barnaby serves in his capacity as a labourer with rent-a-back Inc., is also peculiar in many ways, though some of it may be attributed to the eccentricities of old age. Barnaby describes his favourite customers with their quirky ways to his girlfriend Sophia:

.... – the unstoppable little black grandma whose children phoned us on an emergency basis whenever she threatened to overdo (“Come quick! Mama swears she’s going to wash her upstairs windows today!”); and our ‘Tallulah’ client, Maud May, who smoked cigarettes in a long ivory holder and drank Martinis by the quart and called me “dahling”. Then the weird ones. Ditty Nolan, who was only thirty four and able-bodied as I was but couldn’t face the outside world; so everything had to be brought to her. Or Mr.Shank, a lonesome and pathetic type, who took advantage of our no-task-too-small, no-hour-too-late policy to phone us in the middle of the night and ask for someone to come right away for some trifling, trumped-up job like securing a bedroom shutter that was flapping in the wind (57).

But as pointed out by Claire Messud in her article on the novel, it is these errant characters who enable Tyler to fashion her narratives of hopefulness

and endurance. Messud observes, “. . . . But, for all their idiosyncrasies, these inventions reflect their creator’s consistency. They are fundamentally good, giving people, who learn to live with their errors and foibles, who are granted the opportunity for grace, and who are able, ultimately, to accept the small wonders of their lives with love and gratitude” (Messud 25)

### **3.5.3 The More the Eccentricity, the Greater the Individuality**

As their eccentricities stand out in sharper focus, Tyler’s characters attain greater individuality. Maggie Moran in Breathing Lessons has no qualms about ramming her husband’s newly-painted and repaired car into a pepsi truck on her way from the workshop. She simply drives away from the scene of the accident without so much as a backward glance in her rear view mirror, oblivious of the understandably upset driver of the truck and the curious passers-by; she merely thinks that it “was only one of those little, like, kind of things that just happen” (9). Maggie, a “whiffle head” in her own words, is not ashamed to poke her nose into other people’s affairs. Her continued efforts to bring about a reconciliation of her son and daughter-in-law expose the trace of waywardness in her, along with her good intentions. She progresses through life in a “knobby, fumbling way” (40), and goes along the pages “collecting strays who stuck to her like lint and falling into heart-to-heart talks with total strangers”.

Ira thought she was a klutz. Everybody did. She had developed a sort

of clownish, prat-falling reputation, somehow. In the nursing home once (where she worked) there'd been a crash and a tinkle of glass, and the charge nurse had said, 'Maggie?' just like that: not even checking first to make sure: and Maggie hadn't been anywhere near; it was someone else entirely. But that just went to show how people viewed her (36 – 37).

If Maggie is “full of good intentions but meddlesome, pawky, curious, scatterbrained, a charming mixture of shrewd and daffy” (Flower 133), then, some of her unusual combination of waywardness and shrewdness seems to have rubbed off on her “oldest dearest friend” Serena, who adds to the long list of Tyler’s eye-catching eccentrics. Wildly inventive, Serena had organized her wedding in such a way as to make it appear “a mish mash of popular songs and Kahlil Gibran in an era when everyone else was still clinging to ‘O Promise Me’” (50). Her husband’s death becomes for her an occasion for “class reunion”. The elaborate arrangements she makes for the funeral – the singing of romantic songs and the screening of a movie of her wedding – are so unconventional and inappropriate that they almost shock the reader as they do her old school-day friends invited for the funeral. As in the case of most of Tyler’s characters, it is the ‘unusualness’ that catches the readers’ attention and leaves Serena implanted firmly in their mind.

Judith Caesar’s observation about the foreigners in Saint Maybe applies for most of the other characters in Tyler’s fictional world as well:

Tyler makes these characters lovable, craziness and all. She also makes them worthy of respect, craziness and all, and thus she never condescends to cure them. They never deliberately hurt anyone, and their quirks inevitably come out of an inability to show love in a way that their beloveds can recognize (Caesar 72).

Take, for instance, Mr.Brant, the hearing-impaired, deformed character in the novel; he is the owner of the carpentry shop where Ian works, and lives in a sealed-off world! There is Claudia, Ian's sister, who looks "a little bit crazy" and who names her children in the alphabetical order; Lucy, with her very short dresses, too harsh make-up and her conspicuous 'differentness', Daphne, her younger daughter, who is at one stage eleven but looks as if going on eighty. All of them leave an indelible impression on the reader's mind. Even Ian, inspite of his 'saintliness', his sense of responsibility and his serene acceptance of his fate as the caretaker of his brother's children, looks "slightly out of step ... so often his jokes just missing, his churchy language setting strangers' eyes on guard, his clothes inappropriately boyish and plain, as if he had been caught in a time warp" (242). One cannot blame Agatha when she refers to him as her "eccentric middle-aged .... uncle" (273).

Rita diCarlo, whom Ian marries later in the novel, is another odd

character from Saint Maybe whose individuality catches the reader's attention. She is a "rangy sauntering woman" close to six feet tall, with frizzy, clotted hair, who impresses with her capacity as a caretaker, inspite of all her oddities of appearance. Rita's mother Bobbeen who is "batty" with her "crackling bleached-out fan of hair and snapping gum and staticky barrage of advice", harbouring romantic ideas on Reverend Emmett, and reciting most bizarre stories of "umbilical cords kinked off like twisted vacuum-cleaner hoses, babies arriving with tails and coats of fur" (314) is yet another example. The Middle-Eastern foreigners in the novel also provide the reader enough food for thought along with instances of comic relief. Judith Caesar attributes their presence to the American acceptance of 'otherness' and applauds them for contributing to the richness of American multiculturalism (Caesar 72). But they also fit into the mould of Tyler's lovable eccentrics. "Electronics-crazy" and "hare-brained", they are not even alarmed while causing fires, and have no qualms about using the wall as a Telephone Directory. "They would be the kind who set off without filling the gas tank first or checking the tire pressure.... Chances were they wouldn't even have a road -map", describes their neighbour Doug Bedloe after watching their general behaviour (168).

Even Tyler's second novel, The Tin Can Tree, is not without its share of characters who are "a whole generation removed" (16). No children

in the family marries. The father refuses to speak on the telephone considering it as a “precarious instrument” (254). The oddest one is, perhaps, Ansel, whose oddity is endorsed by everyone including the tobacco-tying Mrs. Hall. He is too serious most of the time, tactless in doling out unwanted sympathies, possessive about the couch with its view of the road outside, constantly philosophizing about the shrunken world and the imminent death; he “hung limp and heavy in the brother’s living room and expected to die any day although, actually he was stronger than any of them” (82). Occasionally he wanders away from home without informing his brother and often returns in the small hours singing loudly, with the worried brother, James, lying awake waiting for him. Everyone avoids Ansel like the plague.

Deviance becomes a means of empowerment for some of Tyler’s eccentric characters, where the personal sphere is transformed to a space for power. Morgan Gower, for instance, loves reading the classified columns and writing long letters to anyone he chooses because it posits him with a sense of power to know about the private lives of others. The numerous identities he assumes in various guises also underscore this fact. Or take the case of Evie Decker who cuts the name of the small time night club singer Drum Casey’s name on her forehead in A Slipping Down Life. She is proud of doing it – “something out of character. Defenite. Not covered by insurance” (40) – something that helps her assert her independence and individuality,

and her rebellion against her father. Concludes Alice Hall Petry: “Evie’s self-mutilation, based on an actual incident in which a Texas teen slashed her forehead with “Elvis”, is thus much in keeping with the bizarre norm conveyed by teen-targeted media” (Petry, *Understading* 57 – 58). It is an unnatural act which is questioned even by the physician who attends to Evie and who thinks she is insane. Petry comments: “To an earlier society, it would have seemed the act of one possessed; and that would appear to be Tyler’s intent in presenting Drum-strings Casey as a figure as old as literature itself, the “demon lover” (58). The eccentricities enable these and other such characters to become more individualistic as well as more powerful than most of the saner people in Tyler’s novels.

Anne Tyler’s thirteenth novel, Tumble Tower (1993) deserves special mention in the context of the discussion of deviances. It is Tyler’s first book for children, and portrays a world of fantasy and make-belief. It differs from Tyler’s other novels in its size, texture and content. Hard-covered, big-sized, large-printed, glossy and slender, this miniature novel is hardly one thousand words long. The major portion of each page is taken up by eye-catching illustrations by Tyler’s daughter, Mitra, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. It is the story of Princess Molly the Messy who is the black sheep of a royal family consisting of the father, King Clement the Clean, the mother, Queen Nellie the Neat and the brother, Prince Thomas

the Tidy. Molly spends her time in the haven of her sloppy room in the tower of the palace, which the king contemptuously refers to as 'a pigpen' and as 'the den of disorder'. Molly's 'tumble tower' is sketched by the novelist as follows:

But the tower belonged to Molly, and the tower was a disaster.

When Molly took off her dress every night, she tossed it on the floor. Some of her clothes had lain there so long that she had outgrown them.

When she brought food to her room for a snack, she never, ever carried the dishes back to the kitchen. A seed from an old orange had sprouted into a tree beside her window.

And when she felt sleepy while she was reading a bedtime story, she just dropped her book among the blankets. Her bed was all bumpy and knobby with half-finished books.

The disgraceful mess that is Molly's room is starkly opposed to the neatness and perfection of the rest of the palace. Molly is ignored and ridiculed by her own family where she is happy with her existence as an outcast. The turning point of the novel comes when the palace is flooded in torrential rains. The resolution occurs when the family seeks shelter in Molly's Tower where they are extended warmth and nourishment from the accumulated throwaways.

The point of contact between this children's novel and the other adult fiction by Tyler is in the nature of the protagonists and in the attitude of others towards them. Molly's waywardness and carefree disposition can be compared with the eccentricities exhibited by Morgan Gower of Morgan's Passing or Barnaby Gaitlin of A Patchwork Planet. Molly provides solace and succor to her family in their moment of need just as Morgan offers assistance to deliver Emily's baby and Barnaby renders a helping hand to orphaned and sick old ladies. Similarities also exist in their backgrounds and in their defiance of these backgrounds. Molly's defiance lies in innocent and unintentional indifference whereas Morgan and especially Barnaby are at times rebellious and outspoken. All three of them hail from rich families and share an aristocratic lineage. In the fairy tale world of fancy, such deviances as exhibited by Molly are rewarded. However, it is rarely so in the factual world. So Morgan and Barnaby are forced to leave their families in order to pursue their borderline existence in more congenial circumstances, while Molly is allowed by the novelist to live a messier life, now supported by her own royal family. Perhaps the genre of fairy tale literature gives the novelist greater freedom to extend a more sympathetic ear to the eccentric people than done in her other novels.

#### **3.5.4 Eccentricity, a Familial Trait**

The idiosyncrasies of Tyler's people seem to run within their families;

they seem to be inherited, last longer than lifetimes and affect generations. This biogenetic link is recognized by Elizabeth Abbot in Peter Emerson in The Clock Winder. She is quick to notice the familiar trait of oddness in Peter, which makes her mutter to herself, “Emersons”(310). The familial similarity can also be detected in the expression and gestures of Jesse Moran in Breathing Lessons when he holds his face “in a way that caused his chin to lengthen, just as Ira always did when he was trying to keep back a smile” (307). The inherited similarity in the appearance and behaviour of members in a family is also seen in The Accidental Tourist where the women roll their eyes and “go on and on about the Leary men” 914). “Tyler is very good at showing how neurotic traits ricochet off one another in a family and are passed on to the next generation”, observes Mary F. Robertson (Rainwater and Scheick 123). This point is best illustrated by the behaviour of the members of the Leary family in The Accidental Tourist. Macon Leary’s grand father just before his death spoke of “setting sail for Lassaque”, “become an inventor” and announced “that he’d just finished welding together a motor cycle that could pull a plow” (147). He raved about his motorized radio that followed him from room to room, his floating telephone, his car that came when you called it, and flowers that closed in the presence of tears.

It may be deduced that Grandfather Leary’s eccentricity is senile, but

there is no excuse for the strangeness in the behaviour of the others in the family, with the ridiculous card game they play which no outsider can fathom, the household projects they plot “to a system” and the incoming phone calls they leave unattended. The Learys are eccentrically attuned to their excessively systematic way of life. Rose, Macon’s sister, keeps a kitchen “so completely alphabetized, you’d find allspice next to the ant poison” (14). Back from her honeymoon she shifts to the Leary household – leaving her husband to fend for himself – seemingly to patch a crack in the side of the house and to feed her divorced brothers whom she calls “boys”. The brothers are no less eccentric than the sister. After his son’s death and wife’s departure – the latter to a great extent due to Macon’s adherence to a too-systematic life – Macon draws himself into an almost “agoraphobic” eccentricity. He rearranges his life to a rigorously systematic pattern, sleeping in underclothes to save the laundry, and follows a new eccentric schedule. He allows dirty crockery to pile up in his dish-washer, allows his cat, Helen, to use the exhaust tube of his clothes dryer as her personal pet door, and keeps his coffee-maker and popcorn-popper by his bed to save walking. After he breaks his leg and returns to his family home to be looked after by his sister, he actually enjoys his immobility and dreams of a permanent state of incapacity: “Sometimes he wished he could stay in his cast forever. In fact, he wished it covered him from head to foot. People would thump

faintly on his chest. They'd peer through his eyeholes. 'Macon, you in there?' May be, he was, may be he wasn't. No one would ever know" (125). Macon's brother Charles mirrors the family's neurotic trait when he advises his dentist to "try and polish his teeth with a T-shirt". Their much-married mother Alicia, reappearing during Rose's wedding, with her hair dyed "a dark tomato red", wearing "a long white caftan" and "a whole culvert of metal bangles clattering and sliding down her left arm" (268), is as much eccentric in her behaviour as in her appearance. "Her enthusiasm came in spurts, a violent zigzag of hobbies, friends, boyfriends, causes. She always seemed to fall over the brink of something" (65). She used to yank the children out of school and enroll them in experimental learning communities where no one wore clothes; she herself dressed like a witch and "went trick-or-treating" with the children. Sarah, Macon's separated wife, scoffs at the behaviour pattern of her in-laws, the Learys, which hints at a genetic sharing of waywardness:

Playing that ridiculous card-game no one else can fathom ...  
 Plotting your little household projects .... Cruising hardware  
 stores like other people cruise boutiques .... Picking apart  
 people's English .... Hauling forth the dictionary at every  
 opportunity. Quibbling over *method*.... (137 – 38).

Most of Tyler's fictional families seem to have this trait of oddity in

the family line. The entire Green family in The Tin Can Tree is odd. Even the eccentricity of Morgan Gower in Morgan's passing is partly inherited. His wife Bonny discloses the queer nature of his father who had slit his wrists, and of his great-great uncle, who, when he first landed on the shores of America from Wales and saw the Statue of Liberty, had become so excited that he jumped up and down so close to the railing of the ship that he fell over-board and was drowned. The Emersons in The Clock Winder have the reputation of being a "crazy" family (26). They are as high-strung as the clocks that fill their house, striking the hour and the half-hour. It required someone who understood the complete system to operate both. Mrs. Emerson is recorded to have gone to pieces once because she thought her first baby had got mixed up in the hospital. She had made her husband drive her back and had created a scene at the hospital demanding for her real baby. Her daughter, Margaret, is considered moody and presumed to go into a depression often. Her sons, too, have inherited this trait from her. Mathew is downright peculiar, slow and too serious. Timothy boasts nonchalantly to his ex-girlfriend upon her enquiry about his pet cat that he flushed it down the toilet, and gleefully admits upon her expression of horror that he has a cruel streak, and the readers might just believe him. Peter, right from childhood, bumps into people and says the wrong things. He simply "forgets" to inform his family about his marriage and fails to introduce his wife to

them. Andrew is described as unbalanced and violent and in the care of a doctor in New York. He is allegedly “frantic and overexcited” and suffering from “some jerkiness of mind”.

The behaviour of the Emorys in Earthly Possessions provides another illustration of the sharing and inheritance of familial eccentricity. Their neighbours thought that the Emorys were peculiar: “The men in that family were wicked and mysterious; ... Amos kept running away; Saul got in trouble with girls a lot. Linus was subject to unexplainable rages and Julian had a tendency to gamble” (64). There wasn’t a day in their lives that something complicated wasn’t happening to them. Alberta, the mother, was a gypsyish type of woman, going barefoot often in summer. She could keep no secret and told her news between breaths of laughter- scandals, disasters, miracles and mysteries. She finally eloped with her father-in-law.

The heroine of the novel, Charlotte Emory, married to Saul, brings into the Emory household her own share of quirky behaviour. She is tired of her ‘earthly possessions’, and always on the look out for an opportunity to escape from the ‘closed-in-spaces’. She first left her husband in 1960 after an argument over her mother-in-law’s furniture which cluttered the house and made it look overstyled and crazy. But the town had a bus to New York City only twice a week and so she had to rent a room in a local motel where her husband tracked her down. Plotting to leave eventually, she always

carried a hundred dollar traveller's cheque in the secret compartment of her bill fold. Her kidnapping by the bank robber provides to her an opportunity to escape. She cast off her encumbrances and retained the bare essentials. "Possessions make me anxious", she says (37). She considered even her husband and children as encumbrances. Her important belonging is a pair of excellent walking shoes in which she could escape from one encumbrance to another. Charlotte has apparently inherited her eccentricity from her mother who always sweated and puffed and broke whatever she sat upon. The mother has thought that it was a tumour when she was pregnant. When one night she woke up with abdominal spasms, she was convinced that the tumour had split open. She was rushed to the hospital where she gave birth to "a six-pound baby girl" (10). The mother went on to believe that Charlotte was not really her daughter, but was probably the result of a mix-up at the hospital, and that her real daughter was growing up somewhere with a false name and a false identity.

### **3.5.5 Quirks as Mothers-in-law**

Theresa Kanoza, in her critical essay, "Mentors and Maternal Role Models ..." recognizes the absurdities in the character of the mothers-in-law of Tyler's fictional families. She comments thus: "The outrageously unconventional mother-in-law is a recurring character in Anne Tyler's novels. Typically a footloose eccentric and often a widow, she lives outside the

society's mainstream, and her existence does not depend on a man" (Kanoza 28). Kanoza cites Alberta Emory, Charlotte's mother-in-law in Earthly Possessions, Pamela Emerson, Elizabeth's mother-in-law in The Clock Winder, Gloria, Mary Tell's mother-in-law in Celestial Navigation and Maggie Moran, Fiona's mother-in-law in Breathing Lessons as examples of the above type.

Tyler describes Alberta in the novel as a "gypsyish type .... Carelessly dressed ... surprisingly young" (64) who abandons her husband to marry her father-in-law. Gloria is described as a "peroxide blonde forever in shorts and a halter" (71). She spends her days shopping or watching Television or reading romance novels or going on a drinking spree. Pamela is, on the other hand, a high society lady who tries to project an air of competence and class by dressing up everyday and holding her stomach in (110). Maggie is yet another eccentrically forceful mother-in-law who interferes in her daughter-in-law's affairs, including whether or not the latter should have an abortion. However, these mothers-in-law, in spite of being wayward and quirky, are relied upon with affection and admiration by their daughters-in-law, all of whom are antagonistic towards their own mothers.

### **3.5.6 Carnivals and Carnavalesque Characters**

Bakhtin considers the carnival as the supreme grotesque event, the place where the common people indulge in and relish physical excesses.

This is used to effect a shock treatment, to enable us to perceive the world in an unaccustomed way. Mixed with familiar elements of reality, this enhances the shock. The public ritual of the carnival inverts values and questions them, and according to Bakhtin, that is what the novel also does. The characters in a novel are presented ambivalently as helpless victims of power and as powerful agents who subvert the existing tradition. Carnivalising is a subversive strategy used to sabotage accepted notions of hierarchy and invert all norms and conventions. Bakhtin points out that the carnival is “a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 89).

In Anne Tyler’s fiction also, the reader comes across references to and descriptions of carnivals and carnivalesque characters such as fortune tellers and vagabonds. In Searching for Caleb, the novelist introduces Alonzo Divich, the owner of a carnival company, who is seven times married and six times divorced. Alonzo has had his fortune read by over a thousand women:

He had not only had cards read but also his palms, his skull, his moles, his fingernails, his dreams, his handwriting, his tealeaves and coffeegrounds. He had been to astrologers and physiognomists, not to mention specialists in bibliomancy, clidomancy, crystal-gazing, and ouija boards (41).

His carnival company is currently named 'Habit Forming Entertainments'. It travels from one small town to another, providing entertainment for the inhabitants. In between trips, the company lives in trailers in corn pastures, or sets up tents (36).

Justine, the heroine of the novel who hails from a respected family background opts for the not-so-respected carnivalesque tradition when she becomes a fortune teller, learning the trade from 'Madam Olita'. Her father, Sam, admonishes her and calls her a disappointment and even refuses to attend her wedding. She seeks futuristic advice from fortune tellers with exotic names such as 'Magic Marcia', 'Serena', 'Mistress of the Occult' and 'Madame Azuki'. Her husband, Duncan, is a modern gypsy, leading a nomadic life, always migrating from one town to another, one enterprise to another. He constantly rebels against his family, and had in his youth opted for Arts when they had pressurized him to go in for Science. At the end of the novel, Justine and Duncan are found with their minds made up to go to Parvis, Maryland, where Duncan would be a "fix-it-man" for a carnival and they would live in a purple trailer.

Alberta, Saul Emory's mother in Earthly Possessions, who revels in disasters, scandals, miracles and mysteries, who walks barefoot and finally elopes with her father-in-law, is as earlier mentioned, described as a "gypsyish type". Even religious fairs are reminiscent of carnival life in Tyler's novels.

The Easter Fair at the Presbyterian church in Morgan's Passing recalls this culture with its tents, booths, machine rides, popcorn and jellybeans – selling carts, organized-games like the egg hunt and music floating everywhere. Emily, the heroine of the novel, who had entered college on full scholarship as a Mathematics Major, ends up conducting puppet shows. Her lover Leon, who rebels against his class-conscious family eventually stages shows in nightclubs – requesting ideas from the audience to extemporize upon – and conducts impromptu acting tours. Morgan's act of volunteering to doctor the process of Emily's delivery when she goes into labour in the middle of a show smacks of quacks and tribal medics. He uses newspapers for antiseptics and cuts the placenta with Emily's Swiss Army Officer's knife.

Anne Tyler's eccentrics, with their inappropriate actions, provide a carnivalistic base to her fiction. They are means by which the barriers of hierarchy are broken down. These characters are debased or subjected to profanation in the Bakhtinian sense. They are thus humanized and made familiar, and their debasing does not make them be devoid of their heroic core.

### **3.5.7 Dress Code and Eccentricity**

Many of Anne Tyler's characters are larger than life in their eccentricity and have a total disregard for convention. This is clearly seen in their behaviour and attitude as in the numerous instances cited earlier in this chapter. It is

also visible in their dress code. This fact is pointed out by Ruth Saxton:

Costume is important in Anne Tyler's novels, and nearly every novel has one outrageously outwitted character who stands out among more traditionally garbed family members and friends. Everyone else seems to have internalized a generally shared notion of appropriateness regarding dress, determined by class, role, occasion. But the eccentric character dresses without apparent regard for any of the shared assumptions of others (Salwak 65).

This disregard for convention does not mean that these characters strut in shockingly outlandish clothes. It is just that their choice of colour, size, fashion and nature of the costumes is just unorthodox enough to make the saner characters and readers raise their eyebrows.

Consider Muriel Pritchett of The Accidental Tourist, for instance. The woman is obsessed with clothes, and most of the time is garbed in short and skimpy, glaring and attention-seeking costumes. When in France with Macon, she goes on a shopping spree and returns with a lot of clothes, "a shiny black cape, a pair of brown jodhpurs, a bouffant red net evening dress sprinkled with different-sized disks of glass like the reflectors on bicycles" (333) Maggie Moran of Breathing Lessons wears her best dress, "blue and white sprigged, with cape sleeves – and crisp black pumps" (3) to the funeral

of her best friend's husband. On another occasion the crotch of her panty hose slips, so she has to walk unsteadily and unnaturally like a wind-up toy. Charlotte of Earthly Possessions even contemplates getting married in her black lace slip. Her mother-in-law Alberta wears voluminous and voluptuous garments. Gypsy-like, she is slouchy and carelessly clothed. Justine of Searching for Caleb does not care for fashion, and roams about in threadbare and faded clothes. The fat Evie Decker in A Slipping Down Life, like most heavy people "had long ago stopped expecting anything of her clothes" (8). She usually dresses herself in old-fashioned, wide-shouldered and voluminous coats. In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Pearl Tull normally wears a housedress disliked by her son Cody very much. It is a "cream colored one with deep red streaks across it like paintbrush strokes". It had "triangular pads at the shoulders" which made her look "sharp and scary" (42). In Morgan's Passing, Morgan Gower's eccentricity is determined as much by his manners and mannerisms as by the clothes he wears. In fact the very identity of his assumed roles hinges on his dresses. "He thought of clothes – all clothes – as costumes .... He snapped on the closet light and stood deciding who to be today. Next to Bonny's wrinkled skirts and blouses the tumult of his clothes hung, tightly packed together – sailor outfits, soldier outfits, riverboat-gambler outfits. They appeared to have been salvaged from some traveling operetta" (27). While watching the puppet show at the Easter

Fair of the Presbyterian church, he wore “a shaggy brown suit that might have been cut from blankets, and on his head he wore a red ski cap – the pointy kind, with a pom - pom at the tip” (5). On another occasion he wore “a pair of argyle socks that didn’t go at all with his Klond like costume”, and “crusty leather boots” and “an olive-drab parka” (36).

### **3.5.8 The Essential Humanity of Tyler’s Eccentrics**

As already illustrated in this chapter, most of Tyler’s people are vagabonds and mavericks, providing many instances of curious, almost unbelievable behaviour. But none of them are presented as raving mad. One may even wonder at times that they are far from reality. This is not surprising because Tyler herself unabashedly admits:

None of the people I write about are people I know. That would be no fun. And it would be very boring to write about me. Even if I led an exciting life, why live it again on paper? I want to live their lives. I’ve never quite believed that one chance is all I get (Michaels 13).

The eccentric lives the characters lead in the novels may be the lives their creator herself wants to lead in her fantasy. But the border-line existence of these characters is not just a mirroring of the author’s yearning for a fantastic life, but is also a pointer to the thin line that separates sanity from insanity, normality from abnormality. Tyler has reiterated this point in her letter to

this scholar: “All of the characters in my novels are completely invented. I don’t intend to make them eccentric; it’s just that when you look closely at almost anyone, I believe, you’re bound to find some eccentricity” (Tyler, *Letter*).

They do not frighten or disrupt the social structures or cause major social upheals, but - as Catherine Clement points out in her analysis of hysteria – clowns, charlatans, crazies and all sorts of odd people “occupy challenging positions foreseen by the social bodies, challenging functions within the scope of all cultures that doesn’t change the structures, however. On the contrary it makes them comfortable” (Eagleton 128). Tyler’s eccentric people may be fictional, seemingly plucked from the realm of imagination and fantasy but such people also exist in real life and this shows the essential humanity of her characters. This point is noted by the critic Sarah English, who teaches English at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina. English first studied Tyler’s The Accidental Tourist as a companion piece to The Odyssey. She explains in the ‘Notes to the Text’ of her essay “*The Accidental Tourist and The Odyssey*”:

The second time I taught *The Accidental Tourist* without *The Odyssey*, the novel still worked well. I tried a teaching technique this time that was too much fun not to tell someone about. After the students had discussed how “weird” the Leary family

was, I asked them to “freewrite” a list of everything about their families that would seem odd to outsiders. Then each of us read one item from our lists. Some of the funnier disclosures were that people had grandparents who saved used paper napkins, Styrofoam plates, and the wax-paper bags from inside cereal boxes; that one student’s family was partial to rhyming names – she had (I am not making this up) aunts named Novella, Rosella, and Sareystella, and cousins named Purcesee, Earthedee, and Bularee; that one student heated her dog’s food in the microwave and fed him by hand, and when her husband fed the dog, he used a fork. I hope this exercise showed students the essential humanity of the Learys. I am sure it was fun for its own sake (Salwak 212).

Just how much Tyler herself loves and tolerates the eccentricities of her characters is revealed in the following conversation from Morgan’s Passing, between Emily and the mother of a child whose birthday celebration is highlighted by Emily’s puppet show of “Beauty and the Beast”:

“Just one thing puzzles me”, said Mrs. Tibbett

“What’s that?”

“Well, the Beast. He never changed to a prince”.

\* \* \*

“Prince?” Emily said.

“You had her living ever after with the Beast. But *that's* not how it is; he changes; she says she loves him and he changes to a prince.”

“Oh”, Emily said. It all came back to her now.

She couldn't think how she'd forgotten. “Well....” She said.

“But I guess that would take too many puppets”.

“No”, Emily said, “it's just that we use a more authentic version” (82 – 83).

Anne Tyler would not change them for anything. With all their eccentricities which posit them ambivalently on the outer periphery of sanity, but not into the center of insanity, they are, to the author, more authentic than the completely normal or the sane.

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

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## Chapter 4

### Black, White and Shades of Colour:

#### Racial and Ethnic Groups in Anne Tyler's Novels

##### 4.1 Irony of Cultural Pluralism: A Historical Document

I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you .... (*The Merchant of Venice* I . iii : 27 – 30)

This disclaimer by Shakespeare's hateful Jew reportedly expresses the exact feelings of Horace Kallen towards Alain Locke as narrated by Werner Sollors in his essay, "A Critique of Pure Pluralism" (Bercovitch 263 – 76). Kallen was a German Jew who came to the United States of America at the close of the nineteenth century. From his childhood, he was raised on stories of the suffering and slavery of Israel, and to him, as to every Jew subjected to relentless persecution, freedom was "an ideal ceremoniously revered, religiously aspired to" (264). Sollors documents that when Kallen entered Harvard at eighteen, he was a "religious renegade." There he came under the influence of his teacher, Barrett Wendell, and became a Zionist. He, thus, retained his Jewish identity, yet, at the same time, became a better American. He "absorbed concepts from the surrounding culture (the American

idea) but gave it an ethnic name (the Jewish idea)” (265). Thus in Kallen, “Americanization and ethnicization” went hand in hand. This assimilation and appropriation which resulted in a sort of “Cultural Pluralism” in Kallen had an ironical twist in his attitude towards a black man named Alain Locke who was his student at Oxford, when he went there on a Sheldon fellowship. Locke was a Philadelphia – born black intellectual who graduated from Harvard, and came to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in 1907. Sollors refers to Kallen’s feelings towards this black student, which were ventilated in a letter to Wendell: “... I have neither respect nor liking for his race – but individually they have to be taken, each on his own merits and value...” (270). Wendell’s reply is an echo of Kallen’s sentiments: “professionally, I do my best to treat Negroes with absolute courtesy. It would be disastrous to them, if they are gentlemen at heart, to expose them in private life to such sentiments of repugnance as mine, if we were brought into anything resembling personal relations.” (271)

One would expect a man like Kallen, whose race was subjected to persecution, who had aspired to freedom in his childhood, and who found a patron in his Brahmin teacher who belonged to the ‘master race’, to show some understanding and sympathy towards his own black student. But Kallen’s stand is one of ambivalence – accepting the blacks individually, but not collectively. Also, his desire to protect the black student from racism is

at war with his own feelings of repugnance.

#### **4.2 Positive Self Presentation and the Negative Effect**

Years after the abolition of slavery and segregation, the official norm is that racism or even racial prejudice is immoral and illegal. There is no doubt that the American support for racial equality has mounted greatly ever since abolition has come into effect. A study conducted on the same in the years from the 1940s to the 1970s shows the following finding:

In 1964 one American in four was opposed to open housing. A majority was in favor of it, to be sure, but it was neither solid – losing ground in 1966 – nor overwhelming. After 1966, however, support for open housing mounted steadily. By 1976, less than one in ten Americans supported segregated housing, while an overwhelming number (85 percent to be exact) believed that blacks had the right to live wherever they could afford to, just like anybody else (Sniderman 5).

In the years since 1976, the percentage of anti-segregationists in America has gone further up, yet certain psychological barriers to crossing over the colour line remain in the hearts of even the liberal-minded Americans. Van Dijk talks about the semantic strategies adopted by the Americans in the discourse about delicate topics such as ethnic and racial relations. He argues that "... one major strategy in many types of discourse about minorities

is positive self-presentation. In this strategy white people try to convey the opinion that they are not racist or prejudiced, and will typically make statements like “I have nothing about blacks, but ....” Or “Of course, there are also hardworking (peace-loving, law-abiding ....) blacks but ....” (Van Dijk 187). As Van Dijk observes, a large number of white people are only tolerant of the blacks, or try to make an impression of tolerance; but most of the time they convey a negative impression of the people they try to be tolerant of. They project a strategy of “positive self-presentation” by denying that they are racist. But this strategy only gives them an opportunity “to say something negative about others without running the risk of being categorized as racist”. (188)

#### **4.3 Crossing Over the Colour Line: the Double Consciousness and the Opposing Impulses**

William L. Andrews’ interesting autobiographical essay, “Junctions on the Color Line” (Veaser, *Confessions* 241 – 55) is a pointer to the more positive changes in the white consciousness in recent years about the matter of racial segregation and alienation. The author, a contemporary white southerner, comes through as genuine in his attempt to track the colour line and detect junctions and passages from where he could see over social and racial barriers. He pledges his abiding interest in black writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Maya Angelou, Phillis Wheatley and Charles N. Chesnutt, and

expresses the hope that intellectual encounters at literary junctions between white readers and black authors would help to break down racial barriers and pave the way for dialogue and mutual understanding. He exhorts the whites to feel a social mission in this regard and values his collaboration with black scholars whose interests coincided with his.

Andrews' essay is, indeed, intended to be a critique of racism and a defense of the minorities. However, like the colour line in Chestnut's fiction which is intended to separate, but which marked points of encounter between the races, here also, one can detect traces of the author's helplessness and inadequacy in the face of the prevailing system. It is there in his vague response to his mother's reaction, "Why the colored, Bill?" (241), when he expressed his decision to write a doctoral dissertation on the African-American writer, Charles W. Chesnut. He admits his shame of the fact that his education had not taught him anything about how to talk about race in his own family. "... I was raised to say the least about what I feel the most strongly about" (242), is his apology. It is there in his reaction – or non-reaction, for that matter – to the impassive black woman, Florence, who assisted his mother in domestic chores. He expresses his curiosity in the woman who was "quiet and unobtrusive", who "spoke only when spoken to", who "always ate by herself" and "partook of nothing else" (243). He admits that he had little confidence in his own moral vision to ask questions when his mother

corrected his reference to coloured “ladies” as coloured “women” (244). He is alarmed by the rise in Black Nationalism and fearful that “segregation would be accepted as both a social fact and a tactical political necessity” (251). He is troubled by Du Bois’ emphatic statement, “What was true in 1910 was still true in 1940 and will be true in 1970” (251), which makes him think ruefully of George Wallace’s cry of white defiance, “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” (251).

The scepticism of Andrews about successfully crossing over the colour line is further invalidated by his reference to a sub-text in the essay. This refers to the 1970s and the uprising on the campus in support of the anti-Vietnam War efforts. He recalls an anti-war demonstration which concluded in a meeting where the platform was occupied by many speakers against the American involvement in Vietnam. Among them were two men in uniform. The author remembers clearly how ill-at-ease and nervous they looked. “They glanced around over the heads of the crowd, unsure of what to do with their hands, clearly unused to this kind of rally, plainly uncomfortable in front of this audience. Yet here they were, two enlisted men from Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, on hand to take part in this demonstration against a war they were almost certainly being trained to fight” (246). The author identifies himself with the two soldiers and understands their discomfort in going against something which they were supposed to support. He calls it

“double consciousness” and “unreconciled twoness”, and discovers the same in his own tentative attempts to understand the blacks on the other side of the colour line.

There is uncertainty and discomfort not only in the attitude of the whites towards blacks, but even in that of the blacks towards themselves. The ambivalence in the impulses of the American Negro towards a successful implementation of absolute integration is evident in the following example:

We are Americans, having a birthright citizenship – natural claims upon the country – claims common to all others of our fellow citizens – natural rights, which may, by virtue of unjust laws, be obstructed, but never can be annulled. Upon these do we place ourselves, as immovably fixed as the decrees of the living God.

.... The advantages to the colored people of the United States, to be derived from emigration to Central, South America, and the West Indies, are incomparably greater than that of any other parts of the world at present .... There is nothing under heaven in our way – the people stand with open arms ready to receive us. ... [T]he voice of the people say come – and God our father bids us go. – Will we go? Go we must, and go we will, as there is no alternative. To remain here in North America,

and be crushed to the earth in vassalage and degradation, we never will ... Our race is to be redeemed; it is a great and glorious work, and we are the instrumentalities by which it is to be done. But we must go from among our oppressors; but can never be done by staying among them (Van Horne 301 – 02).

The opposing impulses are what Van Horne calls the “stay-but-rely-on-self-help” impulse and the “leave-out-of-necessity” impulse, both of which are aimed at establishing the dignity and worth of the blacks.

The ambiguity among the whites as well as the blacks about the race– relations can be traced to that in the very idea of slavery implied in the term itself. Racism, before it was brought to an end by law, had denigrated the blacks as slaves, and elevated the whites as slaveholders or masters. The black slaves were considered as an inferior lot and totally dependent on the white masters. It made the white feel undoubtedly superior and supposedly independent. The White man’s sense of being independent, as Van Horne’s book points out, “was grounded in his direct dependence on his domination of both the African’s labor and will” (296). This corrodes the white man’s sense of independence, if not his sense of superiority. And the fact that he depended on the black man to get things done raises questions about who is dependent on whom.

#### **4.4 Ambivalence in the Present Scenario**

This 'doubleness' is replicated even in the facts about the achievements gained by American blacks in the social and political scenario in recent times. On the one hand, they have availed themselves of the opportunities that arose after the abolition, to place themselves in positions of power. So much so that it makes one think that a fully integrated society is close at hand. Consider the following statistics provided by Van Horne's book:

In 1989, did not General Colin Powell, a black man, become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – third, behind the president and the secretary of defense, in the chain of command for the armed forces of the United States? In that same year, did not the Democratic majority in the house of representatives elect William Gray, a black man, to be the party's whip – the third highest ranking member of the party's leadership in that house of Congress? Did not Reginald F. Lewis, a black man, acquire Beatrice International Food Company in 1987 for nearly one billion dollars? Was Clifton Wharton, a black man, not serving in 1989 as the Chairman and Chief executive officer of the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association – College Retirement Equities Fund (TIAA / CREF), the country's largest private pension system, with some \$70 billion in assets – having

served previously as the President of Michigan State University, one of the largest universities in the country, and as Chancellor of the State University System of New York, the largest university system in the country? Were not five black individuals among the top ten entertainers in 1988 – 1989 earnings – Michael Jackson, \$ 125 million; Bill Cosby \$ 95 million; Mike Tyson, \$ 71 million; Eddie Murphy, \$ 57 million; and Oprah Winfrey, \$55 million? .... (297).

The book goes on to list examples of several more blacks who have overcome the economic, social and political barriers, not to speak of the barrier of the colour of their skin, to position themselves in posts of power from where they could influence and impress upon their fellow countrymen.

But if we look on the other side, a dismal sight glares at us, even as the United States has become, technically speaking an integrated society. There is a fast expanding black underclass. The problem of unemployment grips the blacks much more than the whites. The high number of teenage mothers among the blacks is alarming. The black women and men engaged in the flesh trade far outnumber their white counterparts. AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are on the rampage in black communities. It is not surprising that "... since the late 1960s a sort of social schizophrenia has really taken hold in the black community, as the social – psychological, not

to mention material and status, distance between the ones “taking off” due to the demise of undue barriers to the exercise of the autonomy of the will and those who have not done so widens ever more and more” (298).

#### **4.5 Shades of Colour Consciousness in Anne Tyler**

As concerning the issues discussed in the earlier chapters, here, also, one detects shades of ambiguity in Anne Tyler’s stand on the matter of race and ethnicity. The topic is a marginalized one in her novels, as it occupies very limited space. And even then, as always, she does not probe into the causes and consequences. Tyler does not appear to be biased for or against the blacks or the coloured. She seems to highlight their favourable qualities, and gloss over the unfavourable ones. But a careful study of the few novels that shed some light on the issue reveals her overall positive stance towards the Blacks and the Ethnic groups that filter into her humanistic vision.

##### **4.5.1 Tyler’s African – Americans**

###### **4.5.1.1 Peripheral Existence**

There are not many blacks in Anne Tyler’s fictional world; and even those there are, mainly function as menial employees. They make a living as housekeepers, like the black woman, Clotelia, in A Slipping Down Life, or as gardeners, like the Blackman, Richard and the black couple, Laflour and Sulie Boudrault in Searching for Caleb. “Most of the White Southerners among the new writers of the South have black characters in their fiction, as

one would expect them to, but in many cases these characters are shadow figures ...”, points out the critic Charles East (East xxiii); and this is true as far as Anne Tyler is concerned when one considers the scarcity of blacks in her novels, and also the relatively negligible roles the rare ones play.

In some of Tyler’s novels, the black man does not even assume the dimensions of a character. In Earthly Possessions, the thirty five – year- old Charlotte Emory is kidnapped and held as hostage, even as she is in the process of running away from her husband. As she is forcefully taken away, she notices that at the Baltimore bus terminal, the headlights of the bus “colored a wallful of black men in crocheted caps and satin coats, lounging around chewing tooth-picks” (19). The blacks here are just a part of the passing scenery that Charlotte’s eyes happen to fall on. In Saint Maybe, one comes across many Middle Eastern men, but, significantly, no African Americans other than the “two black men laughingly wrestling at an intersection” (271), whom the Bedloes see on their way to collect Thomas returning from New York. In Morgan’s Passing, the protagonist, Morgan Gower, frequents the ‘No Jive Café’ where all the customers were black, but “they wouldn’t talk to him” (42). During Morgan’s daughter’s wedding, Tyler presents a smiling brown maid bearing a tray of drinks through the wedding crowd. The reader also makes a casual observation of a very old black man in a uniform sitting on a stool as an elevator-man in the building

which housed Morgan's family physician's clinic (243). These black characters are with no specific identity, not even a name.

The novels of Southern writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and Truman Capote amply illustrate the fact that the literature of the South has been consistent in voicing its new-found concern with racial perspectives. In the Southern fiction, usually, the society is the hostile setting for the struggles and aspirations of the individuals. The man of letters in the South is never ashamed to express his sense of guilt which comes from having been a part of the enslavement and segregation of the Negro. The new generation Southern writers still share, to some extent, the South's collective guilt over slavery, and the memory of the Civil War has not altogether vanished, though it is fading considerably.

#### **4.5.1.2 Fading Memories of the Civil War**

Anne Tyler's memories of the Civil War seem to have been fading faster than those of the other contemporary writers. True, there is a vague reference to the war in her early novel, The Tin Can Tree. In this novel, the town 'Caraway' is named after Major John Caraway who had fought in the Civil War and the town boasts of the Major's three-foot-high statue still standing tall (244). In Searching for Caleb, old Justine Peck is believed to have avoided the Civil War, and since then, it is said that the Peck men had allegedly possessed a heart stutter which saved them from many combats

and much violence. On the whole, it can be said that Tyler is a representative of the postmodern era in which the seeds of liberal thought sowed in the Southern consciousness in the mid-twentieth century have taken root. She can be placed among the younger set of writers that Michael M. Cass refers to in his 'Foreword' to The Southern Writer in the Post Modern World:

The younger writers are not writing with the 'burden' of racial guilt; they are writing about 'unburdened' characters who are very different at first glance from Quentin Compson and Jack Burden and their brothers and sisters in classic Renaissance fiction (Hobson Foreword).

Anne Tyler, too, has been at the receiving end of a lot of criticism because of the lack of racial consciousness in her novels. Her treatment of this aspect that has invariably been a part and parcel of Southern existence has drawn a lot of adverse comments from the critical circles. Susan Gilbert criticizes Tyler for not broadening her focus in the course of a literary career that has spanned over four decades now:

Her books run deeper, but not wider. In the all-Southern settings of Tyler's novels, children trundle off to schools never touched by Brown V. Board of Education; her younger men never receive or burn their draft cards; their parents never keep vigil on courthouse steps in protest against a war; no

women parade with placards for, or against the ERA (Inge, *Southern* 252).

There is no overtly visible sign anywhere in Tyler's fiction that she shares the South's collective guilt over slavery, or contemplates on the fall of the South in the Civil War. Unlike Faulkner, whose *The Unvanquished* is devoted to the horrible after-effects of the Civil War, or Andrew Lytle, whose *The Long Night* is an interesting Civil War novel, Tyler does not so much as even seriously refer to the war in any of her novels. She seems to be oblivious of racial tensions, though they occur regularly in her Baltimore surroundings.

Speaking of the racial clashes that crop up in and around Baltimore frequently, one recalls Paul Binding's description of Baltimore as a Southern city, and the role the city had played in the height of the civil war. Documents Binding:

It has certainly partaken of Southern History. The largest city of a slave-holding state uncertain of its future direction in the troubled prelude to the Civil War, its people were chastised for their Secessionist sympathies. Union troops were jeered at and pelted with missiles by the citizens as they marched through Baltimore. Provoked, the soldiers fired on the crowd and a number of people, mostly civilians, were killed. As a result

Lincoln ordered the occupation of Baltimore by the army and the imprisonment of leading local pro-Confederates (Binding 198).

In the Baltimore of Anne Tyler's novels – where most of her stories unfold - , there are no outbursts of racial violence, and there are no blacks – like Benedict Copeland in Carson McCullers' The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter – worried about the injustices perpetrated on the people of their race. Of all her novels, perhaps the only novel in which a character is presented as participating in an anti-racial demonstration is Searching for Caleb. But then, it is significant that the two such characters, the fortune-teller, Justine, and her maverick husband, Duncan, who are seen picketing a whites-only theatre, are white, and not black. Reflecting on the relative calm and quietness of Tyler's Baltimore, the reader can only conclude that it is because the city is not Tyler's native home, but a place the novelist has chosen to settle down. Also, her novels deal with the conflicts within the minds and homes of her characters, and not with the conflicts without.

#### **4.5.1.3 To Offend is to Defend: The Black Domestic as Confidants and Choral Characters**

A close examination of her novels shows that there is a lot that is offensive in Tyler's depiction of blacks. It is there in the choice of the words and phrases used to describe their appearances, their mannerisms, their

speech, and their general life-style. Lafleur Boudrault, the Creole gardener of the white Peck family in Searching for Caleb teaches Caleb Peck 'ragtime' which is described as "a disreputable, colored kind of music" (53). The novelist may not be expressing her personal opinion, but may be only stating a fact since that was the general attitude of the whites towards anything composed and practised by the blacks. In the same novel, Daniel Peck glares at "the inferior class of people" – which includes a black boy – travelling by bus (149). In The Clock Winder, Alvareen, the domestic in the Emerson household, is described as "a black hulk of a woman" (30). Mrs. Emerson in the novel is worried about seeking help from the State Employment. She is obviously in favour of black domestics, but anticipates problems, nevertheless: " ... it scares me, just to think of looking for another colored man. Nowadays you can't tell *what* to expect" (21). In Anne Tyler's first novel, If Morning Ever Comes, the hero Ben Joe Hawkes is returning home to Sandhill, North Carolina, from law school in New York. The crowded compartment of his train has several black families. Ben Joe observes that the black children's hands are like "four little black spiders" (23); the men sit in the back of the train, "tipping hip flasks" (24); the women eat openly and talk loudly.

Although there is plenty to offend the blacks in Tyler's fiction, it is to be noted that the African Americans are not used as mere comic props or good-for-nothing scums who indulge in sex and drugs and violence, living

on the other side of the law. In fact most of them are allotted sympathetic roles and are made to utter positive statements which often embody the very themes of her novels. Take, for instance, The Clock Winder, a novel about the troubles and turmoils in the white Emerson family. All the servants in this family have been blacks. The novel opens with Richard, the black handyman, being dismissed after twenty five years of service by Mrs.Emerson, the lady of the house. The crime he committed was urinating against a rose bush with his profile to the house. The novelist allows the black handyman to put up a spirited argument in his defense, though it is of no avail against the adamant stand taken by the lady of the house. As Richard leaves, he delivers the stinging reply to his employer, Mrs.Emerson, that she cannot function alone, and in so saying, he articulates the novel's theme of the fear of isolation. Alvareen, the woman servant, may be "a black hulk", but it is she who pulls the distraught Emersons together after the funeral of Mrs.Emerson's son, Timothy. She gets the dinner ready, and soothes the household with her tactful references to the recipe of her dishes when there is clash between Mrs.Emerson and her children, and the dinner threatens to go awry. She does all she could to enliven the funeral party. 'Ragtime', the coloured music taught by Lafleur, the coloured gardener to Caleb Peck in Searching for Caleb, may be 'disreputable', but Tyler narrates that Caleb developed a definite liking for the music and the musician. He is said to have

copied everything Lafleur did on the piano. He was inquisitive about stories of musicians in New Orleans from where Lafleur came. Caleb was so full of admiration for the Blackman and his music that he later becomes a fiddler for a black singer named 'White-Eye'. Tyler, thus, even allows a white man to play a subservient role to a black. Not only that, but she also entrusts blacks with secrets as important as matters of life and death.

The fact that the novelist takes the blacks into her confidence is evident in the vital role of the confidant she allots to the black woman servant Sulie in Searching for Caleb. In the novel, Caleb Peck, after leaving home, was quite contented to live in the company of blacks, but his family was determined to retrieve the 'black sheep'. However, they had no idea where he was until sixty years later when they engage a detective on his trail, who tracks him down. And all this while, Sulie, Lafleur's wife, had known where Caleb was. She complains later that she was ignored by the Pecks and kept at arm's length. She had resented their neglect of her, and taken revenge by refusing to reveal clues regarding the whereabouts of the missing Caleb for years and years. She discloses it eventually to the detective employed by Justine and her grandfather, Daniel, on the trail of the missing man. She vents her anger towards the Pecks by retorting: "Them folks don't think you know nothing" (242). The reader naturally feels that she is voicing her anger at the superiority complex of the whites. It can even be

interpreted as the voicing of rebellion by the blacks against the long-suffered racial oppression. But on second thoughts, one realizes that her statement is more of an assertion of the knowledge the black is capable of possessing and keeping, than an accusation of the all-knowing attitude of the whites.

Yet another black character in Tyler's fictional world who serves as a case study of the novelists' ambivalence towards the racial issue is Otis, the driver of the Chevy, upon whom Maggie, in Breathing Lessons, in her usual impulsiveness, plays a trick, on the way back from Deerlick where she and her husband Ira had gone to attend her friend Serena's husband's funeral. Otis is one of the few blacks in Tyler's fiction who assume the dimension of a character. Piqued by the assumption that Otis has deliberately attempted to drive them off the highway, Maggie shouts at him, while they overtake him, that his front wheel is falling off. It was intended as fun initially, but the moment Maggie realizes that the driver is an old Negro, she is stricken with remorse:

Maggie twisted around in her seat, gazing out the rear window. Then she turned to Ira. There was a stricken look on her face that he couldn't account for. "Oh Ira", she said. "Now What". "He was old, Ira". Ira said, "These goddamn senior-citizen drivers ...". "Not only was he old", she said. "He was black". "So?" "I didn't see him clearly till I'd said that about the wheel",

she said. "He didn't mean to run us off the road. I bet he doesn't even know it happened" (136).

The passage makes one wonder whether it is the Southern sense of white superiority that makes Maggie doubt that a black driver would dare to run them off the road. It also makes one wonder whether her pity for Otis is motivated by her human sympathy for an old man or her unconsciousness wrestling with the racial guilt. There seems to be some justification in the latter theory, because Maggie worries aloud in the next page that Otis might think that they are racists and that they belong to the anti-black, white-supremacy organization, 'ku klux klan'. Maggie's respectful reference to the black man as "Mr.Otis" also lends support to this theory. It is to be remembered that initially Maggie had treated the driver of the Chevy as an equal, but that changes the moment she realizes that he is a black man, and from then onwards, she gives him some preferential treatment. It can be argued that this sort of preference may damage the self-respect of the black and hence it may be psychologically injurious. Maggie's gesture may be read as expansive, and interpreted as an abdication of her racial guilt. The unrefined black speech of Otis, along with his almost deferential treatment of the Morans, places him in a 'service position' and reflects upon the general condition of the blacks in the South, even though the situation is said to have changed considerably in the course of the years since the Civil War.

Referring to the Otis-incident in the novel, Robert McPhillips argues:

Although Tyler's handling of this set piece is charming, it fails to confront directly to what extent both Maggie's aggregation and guilt are racially motivated, while at the same time Mr. Otis eventually becomes merely a likeable stereotype of the self-effacing black who defers to the greater wisdom of his white interlocutors (McPhillips 466).

This incident might have been blown out of proportion by some of Tyler's critics to make believe that she is racially inclined, but it should not be forgotten that Otis is yet another choral character in Tyler's fiction, who voices the novel's moral vision. When Maggie and Ira hint at the death of their family friend and express their pessimism at the shortness of life and the waste of time, it is Otis who conveys the novel's central theme that one need not feel devastated at the loss of something or someone. To lose is to gain, in a way. It helps one to reflect and reconsider, take stock and notice things and people hitherto unnoticed or ignored. In spite of his peripheral existence in the South, on the fringes of a society dominated by Whites for a long time, Otis shows the forbearance to weather the shock of unhappiness, and has earned the fortitude to take failures and setbacks in his stride. He reaches over them and looks positively for compensations. Yet, it is to be remembered that the Otis – incident is also one of the various comic diversions

for Tyler in her obsession with the more pressing problems of the family front. Otis may utter serious philosophies, but on the whole, he ends up looking rather silly. This is not surprising considering the fact that not just the black man, but even most of the other characters in the novel, including Ira and Maggie, end up looking silly.

#### **4.5.1.4 Blacks as Sensitive to the Sensibilities**

With the exception of the odd black character, most of the blacks in Tyler's novels, however, play positive, if not serious roles. They exhibit good sense and sensibility and have no hesitation to put in hard, untiring work. Take, for instance, Missouri, the tobacco-tier in The Tin Can Tree. She is described as a huge black woman, standing tall in her broad bare feet, yanking tobacco leaves and wrapping them together in swift movements, clicking her tongue and showing disgust at the first sign of delay in handing the leaves (92). She doles out sensible, practical advice to her fellow workers, irrespective of their colour. It is she who succeeds in prompting the stubborn mule to move with the heavy load of tobacco leaves. It is she, again, who utters a very pro-feminist line – “In the end, it's the women that work” (95). It is Missouri who also states the theme of the novel: “Bravest thing about people ... is how they go on loving mortal beings after finding out there's such a thing as dying”(106).

Another black woman character who is unsentimental, realistic and

wise as Missouri, is Clotelia in A Slipping Down Life. Her firmness and wisdom become all the more evident in the light of the vulnerability and fickle-mindedness of the members of the white family where she is employed. This black house-keeper in the motherless Decker family is blunt and matter-of-fact. She is also insightful and wise about the ways of the world. She guesses correctly that Drum Casey, young Evie Decker's Rock-musician lover, is sleeping on the porch. She reads through the projected image of Drum, Evie's lover, and assesses his real nature correctly before anyone else does. This is what makes her proclaim sarcastically when Evie carves her idol's name on her forehead: "Ha. Thought that Casey boy would come riding up and spirit her away, once he heard what she done.... I don't see him beating down no doors. Do you?" (63). Clotelia knows intuitively when Evie is pregnant, and although critical, is also tolerant of her. She is critical also about the exaggerated and romantic notions conveyed by the soap-serials and ads. Though she talks about the serial-characters "as if they were relatives" (60), she is not fooled by their "sweet-talk" (62).

The blacks in Tyler's novels are not just sensible, they are sensitive as well, as can be interpreted from their temperament and attitudes. In Tyler's first novel, If Morning Ever Comes, we come across Matilda Hayes, the black woman, a resident of Sandhill, North Carolina. The white protagonist of the novel, Ben Joe Hawkes, meets her, along with her husband and baby,

on the train, returning from New York. It is unbelievable to her that Ben Joe's mother Ellen did not go and take care of her daughter at the time of her delivery. Such a cold-hearted behaviour is naturally unthinkable in a black family. But at the same time, Matilda is magnanimous and noble enough to find excuses for Ben Joe's mother, stating that it was probably due to unavoidable family responsibilities that Ellen could not go and look after her daughter in her late period of pregnancy. The reader knows very well what a quarrelsome, nagging woman Ellen is, and remembers how she had created such a cold atmosphere at home that her husband, Ben's father, was forced to run away to another woman. Matilda's husband Brandon refers to Ben Joe's father's death as "a dignified passing" (33), and repeats comforting Ben Joe, "Oh, I'm sure it was very dignified." In fact there was nothing dignified about the death of Ben Joe's father; if anything, it was the opposite. He died of a heart attack at his lover's residence, just two weeks after he had come back to his wife and children. Ben's mother claimed that he had meant to die in the company of his legitimate wife and children, but in a drunken state, had forgotten which home he was going to. It is Brandon's sensitiveness and innate goodness that makes him describe the death of Ben's father as "dignified".

#### **4.5.1.5 Warm Family Ties**

In spite of the negligible roles they play in her novels, Tyler's black

characters appear as ambassadors of strong and warm family relationships. This is something that is so hopelessly lacking in the novelist's white families like the Hawkes in If Morning Ever Comes, the Emersons in The Clock Winder and the Gowers in Morgan's Passing, to mention just a few. These families are torn apart by quibbling arguments, haunting isolation, estrangement, distancing, divorce, death and solitude. Ben Joe Hawkes is a typical white in Tyler's fiction who is pathetic in his sense of solitude. Raised in a family full of women comprising a proud, cold mother, and incorrigible grand mother, taxing sisters and a deserter-father, Ben Joe, worries eternally and thinks he is an outsider in his own family. It is this sense of loneliness that makes him jealous of the black passengers on the train. He envies the "upright, energetic Negro house wives, sitting like wide shade trees over their clusters of children" (19). He is conscious of the homely chatter of the blacks, the pacifying tones used by the women to talk to children, their good-natured bickerings with their men, their dignified walk and their amicable behaviour. Their sense of unity is also hinted by the large number of kinsmen who come to receive the black family at Sandhill railway station. Matilda and Brandon Hayes are welcomed by "a dusty black Chevrolet... stuffed with laughing faces, piled three deep." The "whole wealth of brightly dressed Negroes" (38) convey the closeness of the black families where the members connect with one another. Ben Joe can very well visualize the flood of

affection in the black family and comprehend the dry atmosphere of his own family, in comparison. The old white man Jamie Dower, whom Ben befriends, and who has come to Sandhill to die, also, is aware of the closeness and connection within the black families:

You know them colored folks off the same train as us? know what they're doing now? Sitting down to the table with their relatives, partaking of buckwheat cakes and hot buttered syrups and them little link sausages. Makes me hungry just thinking of it. (40)

Jamie Dower's hunger is not of the body, but of the mind and the spirit. The whites may have better material means to satisfy their physical needs; but the blacks in Tyler's fiction have an edge over them, for they possess larger hearts and can drink to their heart's content from a well of affection.

The whites in Tyler's novels are, thus on the whole appreciative of the good qualities of the blacks, though their appreciation is shadowed by their occasional awareness of the chips in the black armour. This ambivalence of the white man's attitude towards the blacks can perhaps be best summed up by Ben Joe Hawkes' observation of the hot waiting room at the railway station in If Morning Ever Comes (1964) :

The waiting room was divided in two by a slender post, with half the room reserved for white people and the other half for

Negroes. Since times had changed, the wooden letters saying “White” and “Colored” had been removed, but the letters had left clearer places on the wall that spelled out the same words still (35).

The passage is an obvious reference to the prevailing attitude of the society towards the issue of race. With the passing of time, changes have taken place. Physical segregation does not exist any longer; however, remnants of it still linger in the white psyche just as the indelible imprint of the wooden letters “White” and “Colored” remaining on the wall of the railway waiting room. This is not to say that Tyler is herself racist. More than that, she seems to be aware of the hidden race consciousness of her fellow whites and wants to put it across to the reader. According to Jorie Lueloff, Tyler is a humanist who acknowledges her fondness for the white as well as the black people: “I love the poor white trash – they’re fascinating and everything about them is so distinct. And I love the average southern Negro – they speak a language all their own” (Petry, *Critical Essays* 23).

#### **4.5.1.6 Tyler, the Humanist, not the Social Crusader**

Many critics have harped on Anne Tyler’s reticence to enlarge on the black characters in her novels. They have expressed their displeasure at her refusal to dwell upon the racial issue and take up the role of a social crusader. Voelker admonishes Tyler in his review of *If Morning Ever Comes* for her

hesitation to draw upon the racist undertones in the waiting room incident. He notes that the novel “moves swiftly inward, toward domestic matters, and never addresses the intriguing questions it raises” (Voelker 24). Hoagland, in his review of Breathing Lessons comments that the novelist “is not unblinking. Her books contain scarcely a hint of the abscesses of racial friction that eat at the very neighbourhoods she is devoting her working life to picturing. Her people are easily virtuous, Quakerishly tolerant of all strangers, all races.” (Hoagland 44). But it must be mentioned to Tyler’s credit that she does raise the reader’s consciousness of the African-American people and their plight, irrespective of their limited number and scope in her fiction. In the early stages of her career she may have reportedly said that she loved the Negro for his unique language; but later on we realize that she loved him for more reasons than that. She makes fun of the Negroes, but she also highlights whatever virtues and strengths they possess in their marginalized world. This capacity of the writer is what Alice Hall Petry acknowledges in her article entitled ‘Bright Books of Life: The Black Norm in Anne Tyler’s Novels’. Petry does not fully agree with the detractors who accuse Tyler of being a writer who “skates handily around anything that smacks of racism” (Petry, *Bright Books* 12 ). On the other hand she applauds the novelist in the concluding part of her article:

As her career has progressed – and as she herself has matured

– Tyler has evinced increasingly less interest in such “picturesque” aspects of black life as colourful dialect, and increasingly more concern with the capacity of blacks to survive and thrive in a hostile world. Tyler once wrote to this author that “I would feel presumptuous writing about black life as if I really knew what it was like” (Interview), but that is not to deny that she sees blacks as possessing qualities that whites would do well to acquire. Thanks to the wisdom and dignity of her black characters, Anne Tyler’s novels – striated through they are with sudden death, dysfunctional families and disappointment – are indeed ultimately bright books of life (12).

This brightness which is a prominent aspect of the writer’s vision is also detected in her depiction of the ‘coloured’ people whom the reader meets in the pages of her novels.

#### **4.5.2 The Foreigners in Tyler’s Novels**

As a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth and service, the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction, very much like the servants in grand households and in novels, whose work is

taken for granted but scarcely ever more than named, rarely studied...or given density (Walder 255 – 56).

This observation is made by Edward Said in his essay “Culture and Imperialism” which became a trendsetter towards popularizing post-colonialist studies. Said speaks of the allusions to the empire in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century British and French Culture, particularly the British, with specific reference to the novels of Jane Austin and Charles Dickens. More than a century later, when one looks at the ethnic groups found along the fringes of Ann Tyler’s fiction, one is reminded of Said’s above quoted statement.

#### **4.5.2.1 On the Margins**

Like the African-Americans discussed in the previous pages, the other ethnic groups the reader comes across in Ann Tyler’s novels are also few and far in between. Comparatively speaking, with the exception of Saint Maybe, none of Tyler’s other novels devote much space to the latter, even though a few of them flit across some of the other novels. Many of them are no more than casual strangers whom the main characters happen to see and reflect on. They do not play any vital role in steering the novels to their denouement. And the novelist does not attempt to explore their cultural particularities and diversities. And again, as in her treatment of the blacks, here also, the novelist is neither downright critical of the ethnic groups nor

very vocal in her appreciation. She is, as ever, understanding and tolerant of them. In Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Ezra Tull, while visiting his employer-turned-partner, Mrs. Scarlatti, in the hospital is fascinated by another patient, “ a dark-skinned foreigner whose masses of visiting relatives gave the place the look of a gypsy circus” (116). If the novelist’s reference to the foreigners as a ‘gypsy circus’ may have an indirect implication of condescension, there is nothing condescending in Ezra’s attitude towards them. His slow attachment to the foreigners is uncompromising and genuine. When the Asian Indian with a heavy black moustache recites a poem, Ezra even feels that “their poetry touched matters” close to his heart. Tyler mentions the ethnic Indian group again in the Accidental Tourist. She refers to the Indian woman in “Singleton” who was “hosing down a glowing threadbare carpet that she’d spread across the sidewalk” (267); and “Singleton” seems to be a locality where many Indians reside. In her novel, Breathing Lessons, Maggie Moran’s husband Ira has some Red Indian blood in him, a fact which is pointed out to Maggie by her boyfriend, Boris Drumm, during the days before her marriage to Ira. Boris obviously regards it as a shortcoming, but Maggie’s growing attraction for Ira makes her think that it is perfect. Although Maggie afterwards admits to herself that she hadn’t expected his eyes to be so narrow that he could have been Asian rather than Indian, she is struck by their son Jesse’s handsomeness which she thinks is

inherited from Ira: “He had taken Ira’s one drop of Indian blood and transformed it into something rich and stunning: high polished cheekbones, straight black hair, long black lusterless eyes” (35). Ira’s Red Indian blood did not come anywhere in between him and Maggie during their courtship days. Maggie’s parents, too, did not object to her marriage with Ira on this issue. The only hindrance was posed by Ira’s father who had expected him to remain a bachelor and look after his family of an ageing eccentric father and disabled sisters. In Tyler’s latest novel, Back When We Were Grownups, Rebecca’s daughter Min Foo is married to Hakim, an Arab(8). Their baby boy is named Abdul Abdulazim (145). Min Foo’s ex-husband was a black man (30). Rebecca’s dead husband’s skin was the colour of burnished olive and his eyes were narrow and sleepy, almost ‘Asian’ (29). Rebecca likes to wear an Indian blouse embroidered with peacocks (28) and a mirror-studded tunic from Pakistan (126).

#### **4.5.2.2 Foreigners as the Eccentric ‘Other’**

Ann Tyler’s treatment of the foreigners in Saint Maybe is equally tolerant and sympathetic. We do not come across any blacks here, but that is amply compensated by the liberal presence of several “constantly shifting assortment of Middle Eastern Graduate students... attending classes at Johns Hopkins” (3). Tyler narrates: “The foreigners came and went in rotation, with their M.D.’s or their Ph.D.’s or their engineering degrees” (163).

In spite of their high academic qualifications, they show several eccentric traits in their behaviour and life-style which the novelist succeeds to bring to the notice of the reader. In their quirky ways, they seem to identify themselves with many of her eccentric white people. Like the insecure introvert Ben Joe in If Morning Ever Comes, the nomadic and free - spirited Caleb Peck in Searching for Caleb, the masquerader Morgan Gower in Morgan's Passing, and numerous other characters built along this line, the foreigners in Saint Maybe also exhibit many peculiarities in their character that make them stand out in their American neighbourhood.

The Arab students in the novel endear themselves to the readers, and often even exasperate them, with their careless lifestyles, hare-brained projects, reckless handling of vehicles and electrical tools, and their generally mechanical inclination. Their attempts to repair and invent mechanical gadgets frequently misfire, but they are nonchalant in their pursuits. On one occasion, Doug, Ian Bedloe's father in the novel, goes to the house of the foreigners to assist them fix the aerial for their short wave radio. He is initially apprehensive about the safety of the project, but changes his mind halfway through, and reflects on the cool and easy way these people handle crisis:

Doug wouldn't have worried, except these people seemed prone to disasters. Last summer, while hooking up an intercom, they had set their attic on fire. Doug wasn't sure how an intercom

could start a fire exactly. All he knew was smoke had begun billowing from the little eyebrow window on the roof and then six or seven foreigners had sauntered out of the house and stood in the yard gazing upward, looking interested. Finally Mrs. Jordan had called the fire department. What on earth use would they have for an intercom anyway? She had asked Bee later. But that was how they were, the foreigners: they just loved gadgets (163 – 64).

On yet another occasion, the foreigners set their car on fire, trying to install a radio. Doug went over to see if he could help, and looked at the scene of the accident:

John Two and Fred and Olive were standing around the car in graceful poses, languidly fanning their faces. The smoke appeared to be coming from the dashboard. Doug said, “Fellows: think we should call the fire department?” but Fred said, “Oh, we dislike to keep disturbing them” (169).

It took all of Doug’s ingenuity to put out the fire without any real damage. Doug “pictured them travelling through a flat green countryside like the landscape in a child’s primer. They would be the kind who set off without filling the gas tank first or checking the tire pressure, he was certain. Chances were, they wouldn’t even have a road map”(169). Though exasperated by

their eccentric tantrums and unpredictably careless ways, Doug, nevertheless, tolerates them and offers assistance. However, when they start playing their radio music and begin to explain the meaning of the words, he cannot stand it any longer and escapes soon on the pretext of looking for his dog (165). The foreigners also make one shake one's head in wonder at the hilariously ungrammatical English they speak. "Happy your Independence Day" (162), "This is proper gift", "In America every what you do is proper" (334) are just a few samples. As Judith Caesar observes, it "is difficult to believe that graduate students at Johns Hopkins would speak such broken English (How did they manage to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFEL]?) or that they would be so slow to catch on to the informality of American social manners" (Caesar 74). One of the foreigners, Mike, is also reportedly arrested (335). Tyler does not get to the bottom of the incident which leads to Mike's arrest. But the flippant way in which Mike's friend relays the news indicates that such an incident is either common place in their American lives, or the reasons for it are too trivial to be mentioned.

#### **4.5.2.3 Acceptance of the 'Other'**

Although slightly intimidating by their waywardness, these foreigners, nevertheless, are accepted by their white neighbours including the Bedloes. They are invited to family functions such as Ian Bedloe's brother Danny's wedding (13) and Bedloe's Christmas Dinners (111). They lighten up the

tense moments and add variety and colour to the occasions. They offer their condolence at the funeral of Lucy, Danny's wife (101), and reciprocate the hospitality received from their neighbours by throwing a neighbourhood party every Fourth of July to celebrate the American Independence Day (162). They wear their jeans "neat and proper with the waist at the actual waistline" (163), and take life as it comes. Nothing is carefully pre-planned or meticulously executed, and understandably, several of their ventures miserably backfire, yet they have no complaints. They are quite contented with their impoverished dwelling – "not a desk or chair or bureau, not a mirror or family photo" (164) – and with their deliberately distanced existence. Look at the way they respond when accidentally ruining their car radio:

"May be we just won't have radio", John Twp told Ollie.

"We never had radio before", Fred said.

"We were very contented", John Two said, "and while we traveled we could hear the birds sing" (169).

It is this attitude and approach of these people to life that make their white neighbourhood accept and include them in their midst.

The differences that we notice in the foreigners in Saint Maybe is defined as 'differentness' and 'otherness' by Judith Caesar and considered as a depiction of the novelist's humane view of life. It is applauded as a tribute to the American acceptance of foreigners as well as a recognition of

the foreigners enriching the ‘Americanness’. Hence it is apparently mutually supportive and beneficial. Considering Anne Tyler’s successful marriage to Teghi Modaressi, an ethnic Iranian physician who passed away lately, and her graduate work in Russian literature, it is not surprising that she presents a humorous and affectionate portrayal of the Middle Eastern foreigners in her novel. Caesar regards the foreigners and their foreignness as the novel’s only ‘constant’. She argues that while the Americans are subjected to all kinds of changes – physical, psychological, religious and marital – it is the foreigners who remain changeless. The point to be noted here is that the whites in the novel are the same people throughout, but the foreigners are always in the process of coming and going, as a result of which the young Middle Easterners we meet in the beginning of the novel are entirely different from those we see towards the end. But what is constant is their foreignness.

#### **4.5.2.4 Undertones of Post- Colonialism?**

The presence of the foreigners in Tyler’s novels and the depiction of their eccentric ways automatically raise questions as to whether there is any undertone of post-colonialism detected in her novelistic vision. As Frantz Fanon – who is acknowledged as the pioneer in shaping postcolonial aesthetics and theory – claims:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content.

By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it ... The effect consciously sought by Colonialism was to drive into the native's heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality (Fanon 169).

Keeping in mind Fanon's claim that Colonialism deals with the exploitation of the colonized subjects as well as their past culture, and reveals them as vulnerable and helpless, falling back to savagery in the absence of the colonizers, let us look at Anne Tyler's estimate of the foreigners in Saint Maybe as seen through Doug Bedloe's eyes:

The best thing about the foreigners, he decided, was how they thought living in America was a story they were reading, or a movie they were watching. It was happening to someone else; it was n't theirs. Good Lord, not even their names were theirs. Here they spoke lines invented by other people, not genuine language – not the language that simply is-, with no need for translation. Here they wore blue denim costumes and inhabited a Hollywood set complete with make-believe furniture. But when they went back home, they'd behave as seriously as anyone. They would fall in love and marry and have children

and they'd agonize over their children's problems, and struggle to get ahead, and practise their professions soberly and efficiently. What Dong was witnessing was only a brief holiday from their real lives (183).

The Arabs and the Asians in Anne Tyler's fiction are migrant students in a foreign land of their choice, from where they will go back to their native countries after their academic courses are completed. Unlike in Fanon's colonized land, the whites here do not hold them up in their grip, nor do they empty their brain of content. They try to temporarily adapt themselves to the American life style, wearing jeans, adopting anglicized names, hanging up pin-up calendars of belly dancers and drinking Pepsi; but they end up as different and meaningless. Tyler credits them with meaning only when they go back to their native cultures. Thus the native tradition of the foreigners is not presented as monstrous or barbaric, but is projected as meaningful, rich and full of value. The novelist, through the reflections of Doug, even expresses her fear of what might happen to them if they remain in America even after their studies, and try to make a life there:

..... consider, say, what happened to those foreigners who ended up not going home. The holiday couldn't last forever, could it? Was there a certain moment when the movie set turned solid? But for now, he did n't bother himself with all

that. He was happy just to sit there, letting some of their Time Out rub off on him (183).

#### **4.5.2.5 Tyler, an Ambassador of Goodwill**

Many critics have voiced their surprise at Tyler's sympathetic treatment of the Middle Eastern foreigners in Saint Maybe. The novel, published in 1991, was written at a time when the Arab American relations had floundered more than ever, and there was an anti-Arab mood in the U.S.A. as vehement as the anti-American mood in the West Asian countries. Judith Caesar comments on this aspect:

It is significant, certainly, that she has chosen now to do so, when she is going against a pervasive current of anti-Middle Eastern prejudice that both Jack Shaheen, in The TV Arab and Edward Said, in Covering Islam, have documented at length. Tyler's subtle incorporation of Arab characters into this novel of acceptance and redemption makes her fellow American realists seem limited and more than a little spiteful (Caesar 73).

The mutual hostility of the Arabs and the Americans has developed over the years ever since the latter began to extend their support to Israel in that country's offensives against the former. In 1973, matters were brought to such a head that the U.S.A. had even put its forces on nuclear alert. The

Arab-American relations had further deteriorated with the Arab militant attack on the U.S. marine headquarters in Beirut in 1983 which killed 234 marines. However, it is to be remembered that not all Arab countries are the enemies of the U.S. The open hostility between the U.S.A. and the Arab countries like Iraq, Libya, Jordan and Syria is somewhat balanced by the hand of friendship extended by America to Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait which are fortified by weaponry supplied by the arsenals of the superpower. The reader does not know the exact identity of the foreigners in Saint Maybe. They are simply referred to as 'Middle Eastern', and the novelist does not reveal their specific nationality. We also sense some political diplomacy in Tyler's gesture of presenting the Middle Easterners in a positive light. She emerges as an ambassador of goodwill, particularly in view of the tensions existing between the two sides.

Anne Tyler's sympathetic portrayal of the Middle Easterners is of greater significance because of yet another reason. According to Caesar, the Middle Easterners are "the most threatening of foreigners" because of their similarities and dissimilarities with the Westerners. "They share a Semitic religion and a Greco-Roman philosophical heritage with the West, and they frequently look just like southern Europeans. Because they are liminal people, people who call the borders and the concept of borders into question, they are among the groups most persistently and vigorously categorized as

Other—violent, irrational, primitive” (Caesar 73). That such a race of supposedly impulsive, mindless people are shown tolerance and sympathy by the novelist raises Tyler in the reader’s esteem, and also brings to our mind her affinity for the endearing eccentrics in her novels.

Frantz Fanon, in The Wretched of the Earth, comes to the conclusion that the colonized African natives were branded by the European white settlers as a “hysterical type” (Fanon 44). He argues how the natives were subjected to denial and subjugation and became dispossessed and marginalized within their own land: “The emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of his skin like an open sore which flinches from the caustic agent; and the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself and finds outlet in muscular demonstrations which have caused certain wise men to say that the native is a hysterical type” (44). If we look at Anne Tyler’s Middle Eastern students in the context of the above conclusion, we must observe that though they come out as an eccentric and peculiar lot, they can, in no way, be termed hysterical. They are certainly not hysterical in the sense in which Fanon refers to the African natives. They do not engage in “muscular demonstration” or violent atrocities to ventilate any feelings of repression. Nor are they oversensitive about the colour of their skin. True, they often come out as ‘Other’ and their tantrums and tastes (particularly in food) are ‘exotic’. The editors of Postcolonial Literatures refer to these terms as “the strategic

vocabulary of patronage” (Parker and Starkey 6). But we notice that it is not just these foreigners who are characterized by ‘Otherness’ in their waywardness, but many of Tyler’s white men and women also are eccentrics and most of them are worse than these foreign students in their eccentricity. Also to be noted is the fact that in spite of their peculiarities, these foreigners are applauded by the novelist for their moralistic vision and upheld for their traditional cultural values. Thus a balance is struck by Tyler between repression and liberation; and “a structure in which two constructed oppositions could meet, thus liberating both the repressed and the privileged” (Parker and Starkey 6) is maintained. Tyler thus establishes what Fanon calls a “reciprocal relativism”.

#### **4.5.2.6 Between the Melting Pot and the Mosaic**

The foreigners in Tyler’s novels co-opt the western culture in many ways, but do not exactly fit in their adopted culture. They manage to appropriate, and this appropriation only produces a discrepancy of styles. This discrepancy allows them to keep a suitable distance between themselves and the Americans. In this process, they allow themselves to rub off some of their positive qualities on the latter. The Ethnic minorities and Blacks dotting the margins of Tyler’s fictional world also provide a fine illustration of the multiculturalism in the American society. The idea of multiculturalism has been associated with a subtle shift in meaning in recent years. The

concept has changed from the earlier 'melting pot' image to that of a 'mosaic'. The American melting pot envisages a land where people from all over the world – people of different races, colours, religions, languages and cultures – come together, lose their differences and identities, merge, interact, and become someone new, and assume a new identity which befits the image of the new land. The mosaic, on the other hand, provides a colourful and exotic canvas for the different people and cultures that co-inhabit the new land. It gives off the image of something diverse yet static, but which adds to the general beauty of the canvas. The foreigners in Anne Tyler's fiction may be perching on the margins numerically, materially and socially, but morally, spiritually and culturally, they are shown as superior, and therefore, they move from the margins to the center in Tyler's humanistic vision. They are as Doug observes in Saint Maybe, like their music, "blurred and wandery", but at the same time, "mysteriously exciting" (165).

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

*By*

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## **Chapter 5**

### **‘Sinner Saints’ and ‘Saint Sinners’ :**

#### **Anne Tyler’s Religious Sense**

##### **5.1 Phases of Religious Surge**

In the physical universe, energy does not perish but is transformed. In like manner, religious values are lifted into a higher case or degenerate into a lower one. When the nuns gave up their long habits, the girls put on maxi coats; when the rosary as a devotion was dropped, the hippies put beads around their necks; when mysticism evaporated into an irrelevant ideal, youths sought the ecstasy not through the long haul of asceticism, but the short trip through pharmaceuticals; when seminaries, schools and convents dropped discipline, which is an inner violence against our vices, the street mobs picked up violence but directed it this time against neighbor, race and state. When the pulpits no longer resounded with the Name “above every name”, the young began calling themselves “Jesus people” (Sheen 11: 3).

America has witnessed two distinct phases of religious surge since World War II. The first, which spanned the 1940s and 50s, was directed toward the traditional church. The second, from the 1970s onwards, resulted

in the sprouting of a confusing variety of religions, which competed for the occupation of the restless minds of the youth. In between these two phases, there existed a time of religious decline, when the religious impulse had found an outlet in social activism and revolutionary movements. These were moored in the social gospel of secularism as opposed to the Christian gospel of salvation, and the tendency of the youth to look up to Jesus as a social and political rebel and not as a means of salvation. There has also been the extreme case of 'Satanism' where God's adversary is invoked to effect the opposite of the accepted moral, ethical and spiritual standards. What is considered as blasphemous is treated as virtuous. The Holy Bible is replaced by 'The Satanic Bible' and the Holy Mass by 'The Black Mass', with "the cross hung upside down, the Lord's Prayer recited backward, obscene phrases chanted in Latin, urine used for communion wine, and a naked female for altar" (Yinger 231).

The restless youth who found an anchor in religion in the 1970s are the "Jesus people" to whom the late Rev. Fulton J. Sheen, the then titular Archbishop of Newport, refers to in his New York Times article entitled "Jesus People and the Churches", the opening paragraph of which is cited earlier. These youth rediscover Jesus outside the church and turn to him for salvation and not for a role model of rebellion. They pick on Jesus whose preachings, they feel, the church hesitates to practice. In Rev. Sheen's words,

the youth believe that liturgy has smothered the person and abstract virtues have killed a loving personal relationship. Hence they seek Jesus in their own ways, which are ethical, but not necessarily spiritual and liturgical. The American evangelist Sir Billy Graham also acknowledges the revival of the spiritual greatness of America, a nation said to be afflicted with sickness for a long time. Rev. Graham points out the ambivalence of the situation when he alludes to the oscillating nature of the revival between a mere fad and a real commitment: "Some say it is too superficial – and in some cases it is. Some say it is too emotional – and in some cases it is. Some say it is outside the established church – and in some cases it is" (Graham 16). The ambivalence of the American religious consciousness is also indicated in Rev. Graham's following statement: "The polls all indicate that while in essence the Jesus generation is becoming more and more religion conscious, the churches are getting emptier and emptier" (174). This apparently is also the opinion of the sociologist Wolfgang Schluchter who draws attention to the contradictions in the American religious sense. He points to the paradox of increasing "this – worldliness in the secular spheres" which goes together with "a strengthening of institutionalized religion". He recalls the ambivalence in the religious situation where the churches are threatened with the prospect of turning from "mass churches into churches without masses" (Douglas and Tipton 64 – 65).

The critic Marty writes about the changes in the religious belief of Americans since mid twentieth century:

For a great many years until mid-twentieth century, religion in the United States gave every indication of becoming increasingly secular, institutionalized, and less influential in American life. Yet the years since then have brought unanticipated changes in the relationship between religion and culture, and as a result, academic theorists have sought – and developed – fresh theories to account for these surprising cultural shifts.

First, contrary to expectations, religion is very much in evidence, which means that the secular paradigm and prophecy that had dominated Western academic thought has come to be questioned. Second, rather than being contained within formal institutions religion has unmistakably and increasingly diffused throughout the culture, and has assumed highly particular forms in the private lives of citizens. Third, traditional religion has not fallen away, as expected, but has survived and staged an impressive come back, establishing itself firmly and enduringly in large subcultures (Douglas and Tipton 273).

A gallop report of the growth of religious belief in America during the fifty years between 1935 and 1985 reaches the following conclusion, which is in

line with Marty's observation. According to the report, in spite of the influence of civil humanism on cultural elites and the promotion of egoism by the advertising and entertainment media, Americans have remained "a religious people". The report goes on:

By all the indices of public opinion surveys, most Americans regard religion as either "very important" (56 per cent in 1984 according to Gallup) or "fairly important" (30 percent) in their personal lives. More than 90 percent of Americans indicate some kind of religious attachment, all but about 2 per cent within the Judeo – Christian tradition. How much deep religious experience these figures represent is open to question – probably more than many academic commentators assume. After several decades of decline, the share of youth expressing some form of religious faith in the 1980s has begun to rise. A new religious awakening seems well within the realm of possibility (Reichley 360).

## **5.2 'Americanity' or the 'Culture –Religion'**

This religious awakening has coincided with a continuing dilemma concerning religion. This has eventually given rise to a religious pluralism, which is a mutually accommodative relationship among Judaism, Christianity, and what is called 'Americanity'. This 'Americanity', which is a new

expression of an old faith, or a new product of the interaction of different faiths, is defined as “the religion of the American culture” by the critic Eric Lincoln, who explains that “Americanity is the semi-secular, unofficial, but characteristic religion to which most Americans appeal when an appeal to religion is indicated. It is the religion most Americans feel when they feel any religion at all” (Lincoln 131). This national and ‘culture – religion’ gives meaning and moral value to individual Americans and produces humane goals for the nation. This has led to a sort of social gospel, which advised individuals to be completely human and to participate in the life of their fellow-beings. This has reminded the Americans of the need for an enthusiasm for humanity, which is the only way for a profound personal experience of God in the modern world. It has advocated that “religious self-realization manifests itself as a religious enthusiasm for humanity”, as William McGuire King says (Lacey 53). At the heart of the social gospel’s understanding of Christianity is a religious experience that is, according to Eugene Lyman, “recuperating, healing, reconciling, unifying, liberating in its effect upon the person who has it; and it means also that such experience is kindling and elevating, bringing enthusiasm in the pursuit of the good, heightening and sustaining moral energy” (Macintosh 260). This is what the protestant Martin Marty also speaks of in his reference to a new faith which he calls “secular humanist” or “secular and humanistic” or “religion of democracy”. Most

Americans, he says, hold to two faiths, or an amalgam of the two, one traditional and the other secular (Marsden 229). George M. Marsden who quotes Marty goes on to explain that those who are religious subordinated theology to ethical concerns such as love, justice, tolerance of minorities and sexuality and varieties of life styles (238 – 39). To them personal consequences are more important than rules – religious or of the state. They advocate a ‘situation ethics’ which combines Christian teachings of loving one’s neighbour with utilitarian ethics (244).

### **5.3 The Many Faces of Jesus**

The ongoing dilemma concerning religion leading to the birth of religious pluralism and what has come to be called a humane, social religion has perhaps a parallel with the various permutations that are attributed to Jesus Christ, the human-divine figure from whom Christianity derives its name. There has always been an awareness and fascination with Jesus at all times, even during those times when there was a devaluation of God and church. Rev. John Shea calls Jesus “a cultural constant” in the middle of dissonant voices, who is always there, sometimes worshipped and sometimes conventional, “one of those inelectable societal facts which everybody at one time or another must confront”. (Shea 116). But even this constant Jesus abounds in multiple images, according to Shea, in our time. He ranges from “a heavenly visitor” and “a flower-child” to “a revolutionary comrade”

through manifestations like “Jesus Christ Superstar”, “Jesus the Romantic” and “Jesus who wants to succumb to his last temptation.” These portrayals of Jesus are not intended to be malicious. The purpose is not to devalue Christian faith but to reveal it in terms of contemporary accents. And as recently as on 12 March 2001, the Cahners’ Publishers Weekly, the international News magazine of book publishing and book selling, has a forecast on the book, The Changing Faces of Jesus by Geza Vermes. According to the editors of the weekly, this book tackles the question of Jesus’ identity by attempting to strip away theological and historical interpretations in order to reach the original Jewish, human Jesus. Here Jesus is revealed as a prophet-like holyman, mighty in deed and word, a charismatic healer and exorcist, and not one who possesses any divine status.

#### **5.4 Religion and Anne Tyler**

Thus religious values have always fluctuated from a higher to a lower case. Religious surge has shifted from an emphasis on the traditional church to that of a more liberal one which attracted the youth. This, again, has varied from a religious impulse anchored in social activism and revolution, to one that catered to the social gospel and spiritual salvation. In the middle of all this there has also been that extreme case of invoking the satanic power and resorting to blasphemous practices. Thus there has always been a degree of ambivalence and ambiguity in the religious beliefs and practices

of the average American. This trait is also evident in the pluralistic approaches Anne Tyler appears to adopt in the religious sense manifest in her novelistic art. There are occasional references to religious men and congregations in her fiction, and her treatment of religion seems to range from one of conviction to condemnation, from charismatic gatherings and religious supplications to that of downright denial and atheism. In between these two extremes, the novelist uses religion as a tool for community gatherings and as a vehicle of humour, irony and satire. The ambivalent stand which she strikes is visible in her use of religion more for moral satisfaction than for spiritual sustenance. She advocates a religion that stresses abstinence as well as enjoyment of worldly pleasures, a religion that is not weighed down by too many rules, a religion that encourages forgiveness in order to enhance human goodness.

#### **5.4.1 Anne Tyler's Awareness of Religion**

Awareness of religion is manifest in many of Tyler's novels where the novelist mentions religious men and congregations. Some of Tyler's characters have religious connections, though not of any intimacy with the movement of the plot. In The Tin Can Tree, Miss Lucy Potter's nephew is a missionary in Japan and James' sister Madge is a missionary in China. James' parents regularly attend Bible Classes. Caraway, where the Green family lives, is described as a small town with "tight little church of God parents" (210). Janie Rose's tin can tree is created during her "religious

period” and is “dedicated ...to God”. If Morning Ever Comes has the old man whom Ben Joe meets in the train, whose daughter-in-law belongs to the religious group, ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’. Jamie Dower recalls how his grand father came under the influence of a revivalist called Hezekiah Jacob Lee who preached about the unreality of material things and the reality of the things of the spirit (157). In A Slipping Down Life, Evie Decker’s father attends church on Sundays, and Evie opts for a church wedding – blessed by a Methodist minister – even though she was admittedly never religious. Elsewhere in the novel, a Revivalist named Brother Hope comes to preach at the Pulqua Tabernacle of God. Notices with his face and numerals showing the number of souls he had saved appear everywhere, along with sermon titles like “One Way Street”, “Do You have a moment?” and “For Heaven’s Sake” (172). Grandfather Daniel, in Searching for Caleb, reminisces about his attending church and Sunday School classes. He is dragged by his grand daughter Justine to a Quaker meeting, though he had never before attended meetings or services by that congregation. Justine’s daughter, Meg, runs away from home to marry Arthur, a minister by profession. Arthur’s mother is proud of the fact that there has always been a clergy in her family. She herself is a healer who claims to be gifted with the power of faith to cure ailments. In The Clock Winder, the heroine Elizabeth’s father is a minister in the Baptist church. Saul Emory in Earthly Possessions is a minister who

is “called to preach” (83). His vocation is chosen for him. He has had an experience of a religious nature, and after Rev. Davitt’s death due to lung cancer, Saul becomes the pastor of the church, Holy Basis. In Morgan’s Passing, Leon and Emily are invited by the gospel–singing Bible group and the Holy Word Entertainment Troupe to stage puppet shows on evangelisation. In Tyler’s recent novel, A Patchwork Planet, Barnaby Gaitlin’s maternal grandmother hopes that Barnaby’s girlfriend, Sophia, is a catholic, and is slightly disappointed that she is Presbyterian. She, nevertheless, consoles herself that her own daughter has married an Episcopal, “and the sky hadn’t fallen in” (134). Barnaby himself had at a point of time worn his hair long, a habit which had made his in-laws refer to him as ‘Jesus’ (152).

#### **5.4.2 Tyler’s Positive Treatment of Religion**

Unlike other Southern novelists like Flannery O’Connor, Anne Tyler, in spite of her Quaker heritage does not deliberately set out to project her religious beliefs in her novels. Elizabeth Evans is correct in her following observation: “Only with the publication of Saint Maybe (1991) does Tyler present the topic of religion in a serious view. This novel marks a distinct departure as far as religion is concerned” (Evans 69). The tendency to make ‘saints’ of ordinary mortals and ‘sinners’ of the religious is manifest in Tyler’s fiction. Caren J. Town quotes Tyler as having said, “... I’m particularly concerned with how much right anyone has to change someone, and ministers

are people who feel they have that right” (Giles and Giles 247). Perhaps the only exception so far is Saint Maybe where she is more sympathetic towards preachers and the religiously inclined people. The Bible looms large in the novel which is all about sin and atonement. It is the story of Ian Bedloe who is haunted by guilt over the suicide of his brother and sister-in-law, for which he feels responsible. Seeking forgiveness, Ian turns to the Church of the Second Chance from where he learns about practical reparation. He sacrifices his personal ambitions and decides to take his brother’s orphaned children under his wing. Initially Ian is urged by his own conscience to be the caretaker of his brother’s children, but whenever he hesitates, it is Rev. Emmett, the founder of the Church of the Second Chance, who fortifies him in his resolve, by strong advice.

There is a fair amount of Charismatic prayer meetings, spontaneous prayers, public confessions, Biblical quotes and insinuations of spiritual salvation through service and charity, in the novel. The believers of the Church of the Second Chance are persistent in their religious practices and faithful services to the needy. Their prayer sessions range from ‘Devotion hours’ to ‘Sharing hours’ and ‘Bible Verse hours’. They offer spontaneous prayers for those who have asked for their help, and also render practical help whenever necessary. Rev. Emmett exerts a gentle, yet firm influence on Ian who chooses to become a carpenter. This reminds the reader of

Jesus Christ, who was himself the son of Joseph, a carpenter. While Jesus attained salvation through the Cross, Ian attains it through his care-taking of his brother's children. Ian is at times comparable even to Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus. Joseph is the epitome of abstinence in the Bible, though married to Mary and believed to be father to Jesus. Ian who learns to become a carpenter derives great satisfaction in building a cradle (315). After he decides to become a foster-father to his brother's children, he denounces worldly pleasures such as 'Playboy' magazines and sexy Christmas cards from his former girl friend, which he had relished in the past (128 – 29 ).

The novel abounds in religious supplications like "... Let thy mercy pour like a healing balm ..." (101), "Lord with me abide!" (102), "Blessed Jesus! Blessed Jesus!" (116) and " Dear God.... Look down upon us and understand us, we humbly beg in Jesus' name" (137). Even during his sister-in-law, Lucy's funeral service, Ian feels the comforting touch of religion as he sits in the church pew and listens to the prayers and hymns. And this is long before he comes into contact with Rev. Emmett and the Church of the Second Chance:

The voices ceased to be separate. They plaited themselves into a multistranded chord, and now it seemed the congregation was a single person-someone of great kindness and compassion, someone gentle and wise and forgiving. "In life, in death,

O Lord”, they finished, “abide with me”. And then came the long sighed “Amen”. They sat down. Ian sat too. His knees were trembling. He felt that everything had been drained away from him, all the grief and self-blame. He was limp and pure and pliant as an infant. He was, in fact, born again (102).

At his first encounter with the Church of the Second Chance, Ian is touched by the “strong and joyful” (115) voices of the singers in the church, though he missed most of the words. He is drawn by the Congregation’s “tender, affectionate cry” (116) to Jesus, and he finds comfort in the priest’s affirmation, “No prayer is unworthy in the eyes of our creator” (119). He gets over his inhibitions, and summons enough courage to plead, “ Pray for me to be good again, ... Pray for me to be forgiven” (119). Finally, he decides to practice the preaching of Rev. Emmett, “Go ye now into the world and bear witness to His teachings” (120). In moments of crisis, Ian does not hesitate to kneel in front of the statue of “Jesus in a white robe, barefoot, holding His hands palm forward at His sides and gazing down at Ian kindly” (252).

Religion is used in the novels of Anne Tyler not just as a means of spiritual salvation, but also as a tool for social gatherings. Morgan’s Passing boasts of an Easter Fair at the Presbyterian church every year. Tents, booths and machine rides are set up by amusement companies with carts selling

popcorn and jelly beans, organized games stalls and a general atmosphere of merry making and music.

#### **5.4.3 Religion Depicted in a Negative Vein**

Religion does not play any decisive role in the lives of Anne Tyler's characters who generally go about resolving their domestic crises and upheavals without the helping hand of God. The only Christian element discernible is the "Southern Christian reverence for the moral virtue of domestic stability" (Voelker 113). Except in Saint Maybe, nowhere in any of her other novels does Tyler exhibit a constant and staunch religious sense. Tyler first refers to organized religion in The Clock Winder where Elizabeth's father is a Baptist preacher. But even here, she appears to make some scathing remarks about them to project a distrust of clergymen, by making Elizabeth come into conflict with her father often. Saul Emory of Earthly Possessions is a preacher in the local Holy Basis Church. He even brings home and adopts an abandoned child; but critics like Voelker are sceptical about his Christianity. Voelker calls it "a compulsive system, a closing down of the psyche". He comments further: "Saul's ministry is ineffectual; it is ultimately circumscribed to the act of bringing people home, where it is Charlotte who takes care of them" (Voelker 119). But Charlotte, herself, is a "non-believer". Voelker has drawn attention to the Biblical connotation in the title of the novel which alludes to the scriptural context where Christ

talks to the young rich man who seeks ways of an easy access to heaven (Matthew 19: 20 – 22):

There is a conceptual chasm here: Saul the preacher accumulates earthly things, and it is the non-believer Charlotte who goes about to the bank to sell all she has and follow Jake .... ‘Possessions make me anxious ‘ (41). Charlotte instinctively acts in ways that parody Christian imperatives. (118).

The list of ‘non believers’ outnumbered far that of ‘believers’ in Tyler’s novels. They belong to various religious denominations, but lack the spiritual sense. Pearl Tull in Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant remembers that she had met Beck Tull at the Charity Baptist Church which she visited only because of her friend Emmaline, who was a member. “Pearl was Episcopalian, but truthfully not even that; she thought of herself as a non believer” (7). While listening to the priest delivering a eulogy for his mother, Cody Tull reflects:

That she was not at all religious, hadn’t set foot in this church for decades; and though in certain wistful moods she might have mentioned the possibility of paradise, Cody didn’t take much comfort in the notion of her residing there, fidgeting and finding fault and stirring up dissatisfaction. (285 – 86).

Like Pearl Tull, Maggie Moran of Breathing Lessons too is rather indifferent

to religion. She was brought up as a Methodist, but lost touch with her religion somewhere along the way. During Max's funeral service, while the priest was reading the psalms, all that she could think of it was that it was "something about a lovely dwelling place with Grace Kelly and Bing Crosby" (68). When the old man in the nursing home expressed his belief that once he reached heaven, he would regain all that he had lost in his lifetime, Maggie did reflect upon it, but was concerned not with retrieving the soul, not even with intangibles like youthful energy or capacity to be impassioned; she was worried only about recapturing material things like the green dress which her brother's wife Natalie had taken from her. Maggie did voice her irritation over Ira's lack of moral compunction when he played cards in "a house of worship", but she was bothered only about what people would think.

There are occasions when Tyler treats religion in an absolutely negative fashion. We do not chance upon many anti-religious sentiments or statements in Tyler's fiction though a close reading shows that they do occur occasionally. In The Clock Winder, Rev. Abbott is upset because his daughter Elizabeth does not fall in line with the expected calling of a preacher's daughter. She refuses to "stand up for Jesus", and dares to jilt her fiancé, Dommie Whitehill, at the altar (222) – an act unthinkable and blasphemous to her preacher-father. The Emersons of Baltimore, where Elizabeth lands as a housekeeper

initially, and becomes a daughter-in-law eventually, are not very religious, either. After the funeral service of Timothy Carter Emerson, a young and promising medical student who dies in suspicious circumstances, his mother and Elizabeth's employer, Mrs. Emerson, is unbelievably candid when she says: "I don't want to disappoint you children in any way, ... but the fact is that I have never felt all that religious. I just didn't have the knack, I suppose." (129). Agatha, Ian Bedloe's niece, in Saint Maybe "always got grumpy and embarrassed when talk of religion came up .... She was not a true Christian .... She hated going to Camp Second Chance" (134). Her hesitation and embarrassment may be typical of her adolescent reaction to religion, but even Ian Bedloe, before he became a subscriber to faith in the Church of the Second Chance had felt embarrassed by religious phrases like "Blood of the Lamb" and "Died for Your Sins". He used to be "ordinarily indifferent to prayers (or to anything else even vaguely religious)" (102). Earlier, he had even considered the word 'Jesus' as an "itchy word" (123). In Searching for Caleb, when her daughter, Meg, runs away to marry Arthur, a minister, Justine sighs that she would prefer her daughter to marry a motordrome driver, or a Congo Chieftain, any day. Later on in the novel, when Justine and her husband go to visit their newly married daughter, taking Justine's grandfather Peck with them, the grandfather peers at the pictures of Christ in Meg and Arthur Milsom's house and ridicules it as "Religious art". Duncan,

Justine's husband runs down on Christianity and calls it "a dying religion" (109). The ironically named Revivalist, Brother Hope, in A Slipping Down Life, makes an intolerant attack on rock-music which he considers as 'a false God', and denounces Evie Decker for ruining her face in an orgy over the rock singer, Drum Casey. Brother Hope and his followers even make Drum lose his job as a singer in a local club. The enraged Evie Decker is prompted to accuse Brother Hope of slander and libel, and the whole incident raises questions about the validity of Christian love preached by ministers, when it only serves to make a young man lose whatever livelihood he has.

The novelist makes many negative statements about religion in the rest of her novels, too. In Earthly Possessions, the Holy Basis Church where Saul and Charlotte Emory get married, is described as a "total-dunking", hellfire place" with "fake-brick tarpaper and smoky, wooden ceiling". Both Charlotte and her mother are non-believers. Says she, "... I had no church, wasn't religious in any way at all; and Mama'd quit Clarion Methodist some twenty years back over an insult she'd overheard" (81). Charlotte feels that the church is more closed-in than her house, and the only person older than her mother was a "hellfire preacher" (84). After her marriage to Saul who becomes the pastor of Holy Basis, Charlotte dutifully attends service, but sits in her own "dreamy docility" and her "private, untouchable deafness", looking at her husband's hands and chiseled lips and plotting how to get him

into bed with her (110). She has her own reasons for not being religious:

“Is it my fault I’m not religious? I never have been, not since I was seven and they gave me this book of children’s Bible stories, this jealous God throwing tantrums, people having to sacrifice their children, everybody always in the wrong. I didn’t like it” (164).

Anne Tyler’s obviously negative remarks about religion often overlap with her humorous, ironic and satiric remarks about God and God’s people; and sometimes it is very difficult to draw a line of demarcation between the two.

#### **5.4.4 Religion for Humour, Irony and Satire**

“When Tyler sets a scene in a church or brings a minister on stage, a sacred atmosphere is not the point”, comments Elizabeth Evans while at the same time conceding the seriousness with which the novelist presents the topic of religion in her fourteenth novel, Saint Maybe, published in 1991 (Evans 69). This point is reiterated by Brad Leithauser who agrees in his review of Saint Maybe that while religion is at the core of her novel, “...her handling of spiritual matters has a wry, temperate feel.” He adds that “... she engages the other worldly with almost satirical detachment”(Leithauser 53). Although Tyler seems to be conscious of religion as evident in many of her novels, and although she depicts religion in a negative vein in some of

her novels, it is mostly for the effect of humour, irony and satire, that she makes use of religion. This is clear even in Saint Maybe, the novel where, for the first time, Tyler talks about the serious impact of religion on man. According to Ann Janine Morey, "Tyler displays an acuity about everyday holiness that is all the more effective for being understated" (Salwak 189). However, it is also true that her novels "lack something central to Christianity" (188). In Saint maybe, the divine words are, more often than not, twisted to suit an ironic purpose. There are sarcastic comments about the Biblical fig-tree, Noah's Ark and Abraham and Isaac:

"Jesus decides he wants figs", Agatha said.

"Of course, it's not fig *season*, but Jesus wants figs anyhow. So up he walks to this fig tree, but naturally all he finds is leaves. And what does he do? Puts a curse on the poor little tree".

.....

"Or Noah's Ark: how about that? God kills off, al the sinners in a mammoth rainstorm. 'Gotcha! He says, and he's enjoying it, you know he is, or otherwise he'd have sent a few sample rains ahead of time so they could mend their ways."

.....

"...That one *really* ticks me off. God asks Abraham to kill his

own son. And Abraham says, 'Okay'. Can you believe it? And then at the very last minute God says, 'Only testing. Ha ha'. Boy, I'd like to know what Isaac thought. All the rest of his life, any time his father so much as looked in his direction Isaac would think ...." (197 – 98).

Agatha blatantly criticises her uncle's religious stand and makes the reader sit up and notice when she says further: "That's what religion does to you. It narrows you and confines you" (284). Ian is accused of committing the sin of squandering his only life. The Church of the Second Chance is described as "the Church of the Second Rate" (177). Daphne's vociferous defense of religion (285) is more in defense of her uncle Ian than of the church. When Ian Bedloe goes to the Church of the Second Chance for the first time, he listens to the preacher's request to step forward and ask for the prayers of the congregation: "No request is too great, no request is trivial in the eyes of God our father" (116). Ian is immediately reminded of the plasterer who had repaired his parent's bathroom ceiling. The repairer's panel truck had read "NO JOB TOO LARGE OR TOO SMALL", words which echoed the minister's urging. At camp Second Chance, organized for the youth of the church, when Sister Myra reads aloud from the Bible Story Book the story of "The Boy Jesus in the Temple", Ian's nephew Thomas' cynical reaction is, "How rude He was to his parents!" (141). When Reverend

Emmett, the leader of the church, reads from Exodus, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God", Ian's niece, Agatha, comments ironically, "Any time *we* act jealous, people have a fit"(199). Even Ian, the convert, does not hesitate to take God to task for not forgiving his sin sooner:

I've been atoning and atoning, and sometimes lately I've hated God for taking so long to forgive me. Some days I feel I'm speaking into a dead telephone. My words are knocking against a blank wall. Nothing comes back to show I've been heard (201).

Although the novel is all about sin and retribution and reparation, and although his new-found religious faith urges Ian to sacrifice his life for the sake of his brother's children, the novelist also makes Ian's friend Jeanne advise him not to commit the sin of squandering his only life, as according to her, he would never get another chance in all eternity (210). When Reverend Emmett wants Ian to take over the church while he was hospitalized due to a heart attack, Ian almost makes a blasphemous comment, "But you ARE the church" (246).

There are touches of irony even in allusions to religion in Tyler's other novels. In Searching for Caleb, Justine forces her grandfather, Daniel, to a Quaker assembly. Daniel who is not a Quaker by religion and who is almost completely deaf, is content to sit through and let the Minister's words

fly past. But he becomes curious when a member of the assembly rises to speak. He whispers loudly to Justine, "What?" to which Justine writes down her reply: "He says that God must have made even Nixon", and "peace is not possible as long as neighbors can still argue over a lawn mower". And Daniel exclaims a trite irritably, "*That* took him five minutes?" (190 – 91). In The Clock Winder, Elizabeth remarks sceptically about heaven to Timothy, "I never did think much of those streets of gold and pearly gates". She prefers life on earth with "something always about to happen" (75). She even prefers reincarnation which offers more chances of surprise. And perhaps her comeback to the Emerson household as 'Gillespie' is in a way her reincarnation. The narrator of the same novel describes the travelling revivalist who puts up a tent in the fields near Elizabeth's house in North Carolina every August, who flails arms and shouts messages about death and hell, standing behind a portable pulpit. The novelist makes Elizabeth remark ironically: "The revivalist picked sinners like plums, and her father stood by with a bushel basket and smiled as they fell in with a thud" (149). There is a touch of irony in Tyler's allusion to the ever-increasing denominations of religious congregations and their ultimate purpose in the tolerant observation of Elizabeth's father: "As long as they arrive at the right destination, does it matter what road they come by?" In If Morning Ever Comes, Ben Joe's grandmother expresses outrage at the news of her old

boy friend Dower's grand daughter going to Europe and having an audience with the Pope as part of the itinerary. There is irony in Dower's advice to his daughter-in-law to go and visit the Pope, and then right after that on the very same day, meet with a Protestant minister too (155). There is irony also in Muriel's religious bent in The Accidental Tourist, which is in dramatic contrast to her progressive appearance. "She was religious in a blurry, nondenominational way and had no doubt whatsoever that God was looking after her personally – ironic, it seemed to Macon, in view of how she'd had to fight for every little thing she wanted" (236).

Anne Tyler's attitude towards religious men is, generally, one of respect. However, she is careful to point out the occasions when they serve God and their fellowmen not out of love, but out of their sense of self-importance. Reverend Abbott in The Clock Winder is one such priest who enjoys the power of the clergy. His wife complains about the trivial activities he engages himself in persuaded by the women of the church. She prefers her husband to confine himself to sermons and funerals and deathbeds instead of squandering his time on lectures and tea-parties and slide-showings (37). Saul Emory, Charlotte's husband, in Earthly Possessions, who is "called to preach" after undergoing an experience of a religious nature (83) is described as assuming a new identity after he becomes a preacher. His wife thinks about him thus: "Certain parts of him suddenly began to seem preacherly –

even his bone structure, the echo in his voice, the tranquil gaze that could also be viewed as complacent, I saw now.” (84). Charlotte, who did not believe in God, says ironically that she could almost change her mind and believe in one, for who else could play such a joke on her – the joke of being married to a preacher. She feels that she has lost Saul to the Church:

He wasn't the old Saul Emory. He'd adopted a whole new set of rules, attitudes, platitudes, judgments; he didn't even need to think. In any situation, all he had to do was rest back on his easy answers. He could reach for his religion and pull it around him like his preacher's robe (108 - 09).

Elizabeth Evans quotes Anne Tyler as having said that “she has nothing against ministers per se but simply against ministers (and anyone else) who think they have the right to change other people's lives” (Evans 72). Evans cites the preacher, Brother Hope, in Tyler's third novel, A Slipping Down Life as an example of such a priest who has no spirituality, not even humanity, in him, but only an all-consuming sense of self-importance. The angry-looking preacher is ironically named ‘Brother Hope’. He seems to have no fellow-feeling, and never bothers to instill any hope in anyone. On the other hand, the self-righteous preacher succeeds in finding fault with the others as we have already seen in his treatment of Evie and her singer husband Drum Casey. Similarly, when the preacher recounts a fatal accident involving a

young man whose car hit a truck, he is quick to jump to the conclusion that the young man was a drug addict because marijuana was found in the glove compartment of his car (180).

#### **5.4.5 Tyler's Religious Ambivalence**

George M. Marsden refers to the emergence of TV ministries in the 1970s and 1980s which has given rise to the commercialization of religious faith in the technological civilization:

Although there were exceptions and often good intentions, the commercial pressures were high to do whatever worked and to give people what they wanted. Fund raising appeals, not regulated like commercial advertising, sometimes stretched the truth, used high-pressure scare techniques, or implied extravagant benefits to donors. Some of the ministries constantly celebrated self and success. So, although these ministries offered affirmations of many aspects of traditional Christianity and were valued for that by wide audiences, these commercial ministries also vividly illustrated some of the paradoxes found through American culture and religion (Marsden 273).

Marsden concedes that all the churches uphold spiritual and moral values, but in order to survive and become more popular in the fast-changing modern world, they resort to many tactics that question the ethical content of these

churches. The practice also points to the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in the functioning of the churches.

Anne Tyler also cannot but be conscious of these facts. That may be one reason why she hints at the drain in the value-content of the church as an institution, in many of her references to religion in her novels. The fact remains that religion occupies very little space in Tyler's novels, and is most of the time pushed to the periphery of her fictional universe, except in Saint Maybe where it bounces back towards the center. But even here, it is the familial and the moral obligation that prompts Ian Bedloe to become the caretaker of his brother's orphaned children. He is concerned more with their material and physical well-being rather than his own spiritual salvation. It is almost as though he looks upon religion as a convenient excuse for giving up his personal ambitions in order to look after the children. When the children are grown up and well settled in life, Ian decides to get married and set up a life of his own with the 'Clutter Counselor', Rita diCarlo. He does so after turning down an offer from the founder of the Church of the Second Chance, Rev. Emmett, to become the new leader of the church. This does not mean that Ian will henceforth sever all links with the church; in all probability, he will continue to be involved in the liturgical and social activities of the church, although spiritual salvation will not be his primary agenda. And as Leithauser concludes, "*Saint Maybe*" winds up being

something of a curious creation; a secular tale of holy redemption” (Leithauser 53).

As already described, there are occasional references to religious men and matters, and the subject is treated sometimes in a positive and sometimes in a negative vien. Most of the time, however, it is coated with irony and satire. On many occasions, Tyler strikes a visibly ambivalent stand which makes the reader wonder whether it is the spiritual or the moral consciousness that gains the upper hand in her fiction. Careful reading shows that Tyler uses religion more for mental and moral satisfaction than for spiritual salvation. This is detected even in Tyler’s treatment of the imagery of ‘heaven’ in Searching for Caleb:

I used to think that heaven was – palatable? Palatial, I was told it had pearly gates and was paved with gold. But now I hope they are wrong about that. I would prefer to find that heaven was a small town with a bandstand in the park and a great many trees, and I would know everybody in it and none of them would ever die or move away or age or alter (190).

The passage shows that Tyler visualizes the divine dwelling not as a place, aloof and expensive, distant and difficult-to-reach; but in her vision, heaven is friendly and affordable, closer to reach and easier to dwell in, a place where you are at home and comfortably happy, not awe-struck or perplexed

because of its grandeur and magnificence.

Schluchter talks about the disappearance of a world view in religious beliefs. According to him, secularization has made religious beliefs “become subjective as a result of the rise of alternative interpretations of life, which in principle can no longer be integrated into a religious world view” (Douglas and Tipton 67). Incidentally New Historicism also advocates the absence of any homogeneous world view. Anne Tyler’s fiction is also devoid of this. Tyler is, obviously, religious enough, but is not deceived by the establishment that religion has become. She apparently does not agree with all the set ways, rituals and conventional practices of the church. The novelist seems to demand a religion that would be a *via medium* from man to God; not a religion that ties man down to spiritual exercises and makes him identify himself with the divine and shun the worldly pleasures, but a religion that talks about Jesus as well as modern ways, as in the case with Reverend Emmett of Saint Maybe (142). Leithauser, too, finds fault with the church for inflicting too many rules and preventing Ian Bedloe from enjoying average worldly pleasures:

The reader recognizes ... that his religion safeguards him too well from life’s uneasy but enlivening give-and-take. With its numerous prohibitions.... the church may unwittingly foster an existence that becomes its own form of solitaire. It certainly

has rendered him solitary in the most work a day sense – he has no social life outside church and family (Leithauser 54).

The religion that Tyler seems to envision is one which is more humane than divine, one more like Reverend Emmett's Church of the Second Chance, founded by him as a result of his disillusionment with the Episcopal church to which his family belonged, where he himself had been a seminarian and his father, a minister.

.... how Reverend Emmett, an Episcopal seminarian and the son of an Episcopal minister, had gradually come to question the sham and the idolatry – for what was kneeling before a crucifix but idolatry? – and determined to found a church without symbols, a church without baptism or communion where only the real things mattered and where the atonement must be as real as the sin itself, where for instance if you broke a playmate's toy in anger you must go home immediately and fetch a toy of your own, of as good or better quality, and give it to that playmate for keeps and then announce your error at Public Amending on Sunday (142).

This new church of Reverend Emmett's demands that scarifies be made, but it also commands its followers to relish the worldly fruits of their labour. The bountiful meal comprising choicest dishes like “platters of fried

chicken, tubs of coleslaw, and loaves of home-baked bread” (175), served at the commune by the church is symbolic of the church’s ideology. Reverend Emmett advocates a rightful mix of spiritual as well as physical nourishment: “You don’t get just apple juice, you get the juice of heavenly knowledge besides”. He says further, “How lucky you are, to have both at once! Most children have to choose one at a time – either nourishment for the soul or nourishment for the body” (143).

The ambiguities inherent in this new-found church is even implied in the conflicting attitudes to the Sugar Rule implemented by Reverend Emmett. He had exhorted his followers to shun sugar along with coffee, alcohol and unmarried sex, though, sugar was, according to him, only “a distraction, not a sin” (200). He had felt that it was important to keep the rule because it reminded one of the need for eternal watchfulness. But the preacher does a volte face when he is hospitalized due to a heart attack. Then he comes to realize that most of his rules are silly, but the silliest is the Sugar Rule. He admits, “I knew almost from the start I’d made a mistake on that one. I just didn’t know how to get out of it. And truthfully, I never felt sure that I wasn’t merely rationalizing, once I’d seen how hard the rule was to follow” (26)). He comes to the new realization that sugar is not a stimulant, only a tranquilizer; it lulls your mind, though it gives you physical energy. Tyler also points to the inconsistencies of the doctrines of the churches, and to the

compromises the churches have to make in order to get a following, as one can see from the following confession Reverend Emmett makes to Ian:

“I figured I was setting up the ideal doctrine. But now I see how inconsistent it is, how riddled with holes and contradictions. What do I care if someone drinks a cup of coffee? Wouldn't I have done better to ban TV? And here's the worst, Ian: the thought of doing that did cross my mind, back in the beginning. But then I said, no, no. And never admitted the reason, which was: how would I get any members, if I didn't let them watch TV? ..... I see everyone has made Second Chance his own, adapted it to suit his own purposes, changed the rules to whatever is more convenient, and I pretend not to notice. I know Brother Kenneth smokes! I can smell it on his clothes, although I never say so. I know Daphne smokes too, and also drinks beer, and Sister Jessie has never given up her evening cocktail, not even the day she joined the church, which rumor has it she celebrated with a split of champagne after services. But I've never so much as mentioned it, because the awful truth is I find I don't mind” (259).

Reverend Emmett had hoped to found a religion of perfect ideology. But soon he realizes that even this new ministry is one of trial and error.

Tyler conveys the idea that no religion is meaningful unless it guides man towards self-realization; that it is meaningless to enforce rules on man from the outside and inflict morality on him. Reverend Emmett, during one of his sermons, hopes that Jesus “didn’t just stand around discussing theology with his friends while Joseph built the furniture” (257). The preacher would like to think that even He had “really put a few bits of wood together”. It is in such a practising church that Tyler obviously believes; where the practising should begin right from the higher rungs in the church. Tyler seems to anticipate the impossibility of such an institution when she makes Ian Bedloe imagine the incongruity of Rev.Emmett attempting to hold an infant in his arms (334).

In his New Historicist reading of “Snowed Up”, John Brannigan reaches the conclusion that a central feature of New Historicist reading is “that power incites its own subversion in order to contain subversion and to preserve its authority.” He observes further:

In New Historicist thought, the ‘individual’ is not inherently unique or complete, but is produced as an effect of the social order. Therefore, heroism exists not as an effect which is produced by the action of social forces around the individual. The ‘hero’ is then invented by the ruling order to promote an ideal image or stereotype, and this image or stereotype is

constructed entirely along the times of what the dominant order requires for its own perpetuation at this time (Wolfreys and Baker 166).

If one tries to apply this argument to Tyler's hero, Ian Bedloe, one finds that Ian is an individual, faulty, and thus incomplete, before his redemption by the Church of the Second Chance. He considers himself responsible for the deaths of his brother and sister-in-law, the desolation of his nephew and nieces, and the sorrow of his parents. This faulty individual becomes a 'hero' when he steps out of the church, having decided to atone for his sins, perform penance and reparation, and devote the rest of his life for the upbringing of his brother's orphaned children. But this decision is virtually taken for him by Reverend Emmett of the church. It is the indirect persuasion of the priest, along with his own overbearing sense of guilt, that prompts Ian towards becoming a 'perfect' individual. Also, the act gains him entry into the social order of the family and the church. Hence he manages to overcome his own fear of mental and social isolation. The dominant order thus makes a 'hero' out of this 'coward', and in the process also manages to perpetuate itself. The church gains a soul and the family begets a nourisher.

Thus socially and ideologically, Ian attains salvation; for, as Samuel S. Hill observes, "salvation is both a social and ideological pivot. Socially it means that before salvation a person is merely on the fringes of society, but

after being saved he is wholly within society and is fully accountable. .... Ideologically, it means that a person after salvation has full access to the belief – system” (Hill Jr. 135 – 36).

Speaking of salvation, one is automatically led to the question of forgiveness. Forgiveness is what Ian desperately seeks from God, from man and from himself. There appears to be an ambivalence even in this concept of forgiveness. According to Reverend Shea, there is a difference between forgiveness in the context of sinfulness and forgiveness in the context of goodness (Shea 116). Reverend Shea cites the Biblical parable of the Young Wastrel who squanders his inheritance, gets stranded in a foreign land, tends swine, and out of poverty, eventually starts his homeward journey, hoping to get employment in his rich father’s family as a mere hired hand. The son expects forgiveness which will exploit his sinfulness and shame, but gains forgiveness which reaffirms his inherent goodness. This is evident in the tearful, but joyous welcome he was accorded, and the sumptuous dinner he was treated to. Ian Bedloe, in Saint Maybe , is not only conscious of his own sin but also made all the more aware of it by the church from where he seeks solace. And as long as Ian is thus labelled a ‘sinner’ by the church, he does not earn reparation. He feels that his prayers for forgiveness fall on God’s deaf ears (201). His sense of guilt is only more deeply entrenched within him when the church goads him to stand up and make a confession

to the entire congregation. It is only much later, when his initial obligation to his brother's children changes to love and affection, that the 'saintliness' in Ian gains the upper hand, and he feels forgiven enough to embark on a new life of his own.

The ambiguous standpoint adopted by Anne Tyler in her approach to religion is also seen in her tolerant attitude towards God and His creatures. Tyler is subtly critical of both; yet, at the same time, is willing to find excuses for their lapses, as evident in the following monologue from A Patchwork Planet by the protagonist – narrator Barnaby Gaitlin as he remembers his conversation with his co-worker Maud May:

“In the after life” Maud May told me, “God’s got a lot of explaining to do”.

“What about?” I asked. I was unpacking groceries, and she was smoking a cigarette at her kitchen table.

“Oh”, she said, “children suffering, cancer, tidal waves, tornadoes ...”

“You think those need explaining? Tornadoes just happen, man. You think God sits around aiming tornadoes at people on purpose?”

“... Old ladies breaking their hips and becoming a burden ...”

“The most He might explain is how to deal with a tornado”, I

said; “How to accept it or endure it or whatever; how to do things right. That’s what I’m going to ask about when I get to heaven myself: how to do things right” (285 – 86).

Tyler’s fiction is sprinkled with many non-believers who do not mind putting up with God and His ways, either to humour Him or to harbour selfish interests of their own. There is no clear reason as to why Charlotte Emory’s mother in Earthly Possessions wanted a real church wedding although she admittedly never belonged to a church or believed in a God. Charlotte, herself a non-believer, consents to go to the Holy basis Church for a month, so that the preacher would agree to conduct her marriage to Saul (78). Bobbeen, Ian Bedloe’s mother-in-law, in Saint Maybe, is not, much of a believer, either. Still, she is exceptionally devout and solely attentive when she meets with reverend Emmett in Ian and Rita’s house. Ian suspects that she harbours a romantic interest in the priest who looks visibly uncomfortable in her presence (335). That the novelist is ambivalent and often chooses to defer action is also clearly evident in Searching for Caleb. Here Meg, Justine and Duncan’s daughter, leaves her parents and marries the spineless preacher, Arthur Milsom. The parents realize the mistake their daughter had made, and upon their visit to her house, are saddened by her servile existence in the Milsom household. Duncan, albeit casually, advises his daughter to free herself from the relationship. However, Justine does not

offer her daughter any concrete way of escape. She leaves Meg with the advice to endure, and adapt to her life with the 'faith healers':

“Meggie darling, may be you could just – or look at it this way. Imagine you were handed a stack of instructions. Things that you should undertake. Blind errands, peculiar invitations .... Things you’re supposed to go through, and come out different on the other side. Living with a faith healer. I never got to live with a faith healer.”

“That’s what you’re going to tell your daughter”, Duncan said.

“Just accept whatever comes along? Endure? Adapt?” (229).

Tyler may be criticized for effecting a defeatist attitude of this kind where she makes Meg’s parents leave their daughter to endure her fate, rather than persuade her to break the marital knot and seek a better and happier life. But that is not the point of debate here. The point is that Tyler is not afraid of criticizing religion and religious men. She exposes the double edged personality of John Abbot, Elizabeth’s father in The Clock Winder who cherishes his rule as a preacher more preciously than that as a parent. He flinches when his daughter calls him “pop” and is upset because his family fails to “see him the way his congregation did.” (169). Tyler wants to expose the sham of certain religions and religious men; but proposing a remedy does not seem to be in her terrain. In Earthly Possessions, Tyler

ridicules religious congregations that encourage people to shirk their responsibilities towards self and others. Dr. Sisk, for example, is happy to take the advice of a preacher and hand over his life to God: “Recommended I give my life to Christ, instead [of contemplating suicide]. Well, I liked the way he put it. I mean, just to hand my life *over*” ..... “Well”, I [Charlotte] said, “but you still have income tax and license renewals” (144). This is also evident in the compromises made by Mrs. Abbott in order to play an effective role as a preacher’s wife in The Clock Winder. She is angered by the superficial life led by her husband; but she does not rebel. She endeavours to endure and adapt, and make her husband’s life comfortable by playing the perfect wife, attending church activities, cooking up “chicken and rice in a pale cream sauce, a dozen portions at once, laid away in the freezer until some church member should sicken or die” (146). But “underneath she was all bustle and practicality, and if she could have deep-frozen her sympathy ahead of time too she probably would have” (146).

Anne Tyler’s ambiguous viewpoint regarding religion is also seen in her juxtaposing Biblical quotes with lines from celebrated pop songs in her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, Breathing Lessons. She has enough respect for the sacred book, but does not consider it as blasphemous to interlace the Biblical text with pop culture. The occasion is the funeral service Serena arranges for her husband, Max Gill, and the venue is the Fenway Memorial

Church of Deerlick, Pennsylvania. Serena has invited her old high school friends for the funeral and she instructs them to sing the same songs and read the same lines they had sung and read during their wedding in the 1950s. They render verses from “True Love” , “Love Is a Many Splendored Thing” and Kahil Gibran’s The Prophet, with a bald-headed and properly-robed priest calmly seated in the foreground, as attentively listening to the popular songs as if to the pious verses from the scripture, and coolly resuming, “Turning now to the Holy Word...” (67), once the singing and reading stop.

Many a Southern writer has been the torch-bearer of a religious belief that focuses on redeeming the lost souls and recapturing the lost innocence. Flannery O’Connor, a devout Catholic, deliberately set out to project her religious beliefs in her fiction, with some of her characters like Tarwater in “You Can’t Be Any Poorer Than Dead” even deliberating over the choice of a religious vocation. Many of her novels are brimming over with a spirituality that is blatant enough to draw attention to it. William Faulkner’s Christ-image is invariably connected with guilt, suffering and expiation, traces of which are found in Quentin Compson of The Sound and the Fury and Joe Christmas of Light in August.

As earlier mentioned, Tyler herself has a Quaker heritage that includes years of childhood in Celo, a North Carolina Commune. This community life provided Tyler with an environment that helped her to inculcate qualities

such as simplicity, integrity and consideration for others. Rather than pursuing the American dream of material success, she could live a life centered on ethical and moral values – a trait inherited by Tyler, the novelist. But surprisingly, in most of her novels, there is not much of any religious fundamentalism. There is hardly any warning of hellish damnation; no repeated calls for repentance, and no consolatory promise that “Jesus Saves”. The rare samples of religious billboards the reader comes across in her novels are the ones like in Breathing Lessons, inscribed with the words “TRY JESUS, YOU WON’T REGRET IT” (23). But Tyler makes Maggie and Ira read it with the same emotional detachment that they show while looking at blazing signs like “Hi-Q PLUMBING SUPPLIES and CECIL’S GRILL and EAT EAT EAT” (293) on the highway. True, religion is mentioned; but it is mentioned as if in passing, or as a diversion in most of her novels. And what John Uplike speaks of Morgan’s Passing is true of all the novels in general. They are “without the pinpoint tunnel to Jesus at the end of all perspectives” (Voelker 113). Tyler’s religious ambivalence is revealed even in many other ways depicted in the course of this chapter, which is in keeping with the plurality seen in the religious culture of America. The novelist is aware of the importance of religion, and gives a positive treatment of it at times; but at other times she presents religion in a negative vein. She is impatient of organized religion and makes scathing comments

about the institution of religion and ministers. She is satirical yet tolerant of such people in her novels. However, she is more sympathetic towards characters who are agents of goodness and morality and whose acts have not much to do with winning the grace of God, but stem from a better understanding of the self and others.

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

*By*

**RANI PAUL UKKAN**

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## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

#### **6.1 The Precarious Position of the Novel**

Michel Foucault establishes an affinity between literature and madness and accounts for the marginal position of the former in the essay “Madness and Society”. Foucault’s argument runs thus:

.... Up to the nineteenth century literature was highly institutionalised for buttressing the social ethic and for entertaining people. Now in our day, literature has completely rid itself of all that and has become totally anarchic. This suggests a curious affinity between literature and madness. Literary language is not constrained by the rules of everyday language. For example, it is not subject to the severe rule of constant truth-telling, any more than the teller is under the obligation to always remain sincere in what he thinks and feels. In short, unlike the words of politics or the sciences, those of literature occupy a marginal position with respect to everyday language (Faubion 339).

The marginalization of literary words is parodied even in the exclusion of fiction from serious literature. In his enlightening essay called “Popular

Fiction and Critical Values: The Novel as a Challenge to Literary History”, the critic Morris Dickstein observes that the novel has been long excluded from serious literature and viewed with suspicion because of its transparency and popularity and because of its violation of classical decorum in style and subject. Dickstein calls the novel “the wild child of literature, the natural son that could never be fully legitimated” (Bercovitch 44). He considers the novel as artless, and as occupying an intermediate status between fact and fiction. According to him, the novel caters to the middleclass audience and like them it lacks pedigree, decorum and elevated style. The novel is referred to as “the child of the marketplace” born after the collapse of the old patronage system and the spread of literacy and leisure among the new middle class. He quotes Leslie Fiedler to substantiate his argument:

In the jargon of our own day, the novel represents the beginning of the popular culture, of that machine-made, mass-produced, mass-distributed *ersatz*, which, unlike either traditional high art or folk art, *does not know its place*; since, while pretending to meet the formal standards of literature, it is actually engaged in smuggling into the republic of letters extra-literary satisfactions (37).

In the course of the essay, Dickstein cites the apologists and detractors of the novel to prove his point regarding the precarious position of the

novel. He refers to Henry James' statement that though "many people speak of the novel as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, ..... catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet" (44); and the reader detects a catch in the statement when it is closely read. Dickstein also points out that James and Flaubert had tried to elevate fiction from popular culture into art, but the novels of both include generous helpings of romance and melodrama, the indispensable yardsticks of popular fiction (41). Dickstein also refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel, which he considers as the only modern theory that does full justice to the novel as a mixed and indeterminate genre, an incomplete genre constantly in process of formation.

He further observes:

Bakhtin's view helps account for the fierce resistance to fiction by the upholders of culture, for he sees the novel not as a genre like epic and tragedy but as a periodic, destabilizing force which renovates older genres but also "infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness"(44).

Though fiction occupies the status of the most popular genre today, some element of looseness and ambiguity has distinguished all fiction from the beginnings of the eighteenth century to the present. The above reasons have perhaps caused the novel to be rather suspiciously viewed. Consequently

many critics have been eager to place it between fact and fiction, and on the periphery of the classical literary canon. If fiction in general is ambiguously poised among the various literary genres, then, even within fiction, publishers have conveniently distinguished between popular and literary fiction based on the size of the readership of the novel. And most fiction occupies, as Dickstein concludes, the middle ground between “self-conscious experimentation and the predictable formulas of the best-seller list” (38). The point is that the novel as a genre, and within the genre most of the novels, occupy a controversial position. Anne Tyler, the novelist whose fictional works were under scrutiny in this thesis, maintains a similarly ambiguous position as it is difficult to rate her novels as ‘literary’ or ‘popular’. Also, as discussed in the earlier chapters, Tyler strikes an ambivalent stand in her treatment of people and issues in her novels.

## **6.2 Anne Tyler’s Growing Popularity**

Although Anne Tyler has been writing consistently for the last four and a half decades, she has won accolades for her literary art only since the latter half of the eighties. True, Tyler is a reader’s novelist. Her popularity has escalated with the publication of each new novel, and with several novels behind her now, she has carved out a comfortable niche for herself in the field of fiction-writing. There is even a growing international respect “evidenced by recent translations into foreign languages like Swedish, German

and French”, as Mary Ellen Brooks observes (Kibler Jr. 344). Tyler’s novels have some limitations, but there is something constantly charming about her art of writing, an ease which is quite enviable, a stamp that is typically ‘Tyleresque’ which has captured the attention of the readers and enhanced her fan following, as underlined by Doris Betts:

Though Tyler’s range does not aspire to *War and Peace*, though her work with time and family does not become Faulkner’s historical South, though there are subjects she passes over with minimal treatment - sex and philosophy; and though some complain that she never experiments much with her very competent style, her persistent tinkering with story methods has produced a distinctive, dense, Tyler-type novel, dependent on character, made resonant by memory. About 60 percent of the time she continues to do variations on the unfashionable and rather Southern theme that those who can live generously in close quarters at home are facing the world as it is, not as it should be. 40% of the time Anne Tyler runs off, with her vagabonds and rebels in their capes and costumes (Prenshaw 36 – 37).

Anne Tyler is as much a critic’s novelist as she is a reader’s one. Yet surprisingly not much academic interest had been bestowed upon her works

until recently. Critics like Sarah English have noted the absence of scholarly attention this gifted writer has received. Ralph C. Stephens in his introduction to The Fiction of Anne Tyler quotes English:

In spite of her now impressive body of work, [Tyler's] fiction has received little academic analysis. That absence of attention is puzzling, since Tyler is a serious, gifted, prolific writer whose fiction has been consistently admired by important critics and fellow novelists... It is time for critics to stop worrying about the direction her work is taking and to look seriously at what she has accomplished (Stephens ix).

Tyler's belated arrival on the literary scene – which accounts for the relatively less scholarly interest in her works – could be attributed to several reasons. Unlike many writers, Tyler does not encourage popularity shows undertaken by literary men. She does not comply with tactics and gimmicks adopted by publishers to boost sales. Betts refers to this aspect of Tyler's personality in her essay, "Tyler's Marriage of Opposites":

Yet, despite her popularity, she has never become lively copy for *People Magazine* because her own life has included one long marriage and motherhood, nor does she get interviewed about the pleasures of domesticity for housewives' magazines. The reclusive Ms. Tyler would never let Barbara Walters inside

her front door. Though she did attend the premiere showing of *The Accidental Tourist* where she was seated in a theatre section roped off from others, she has since her first novel appeared in 1964 secluded herself to write, and maintained equal unconcern about being popular, fashionable, or avant garde (Stephens 3).

Tyler refuses the lecture circuit and protects her personal life. Oblivious of statistics, Tyler is interested simply in writing, but she does not wish to be taken lightly. She declares, "but it does matter to me that I be considered a serious writer. Not necessarily important, but serious" (Michaels 43). And it is her desire to be considered as a serious writer that has even prompted her to either abandon some of her novels half way through their creation or leave them unpublished. Alice Hall Petry talks about Tyler's "series of aborted novels" which were as a result of her inability to strike a balance between a professional writer and a full time homemaker; and it is obvious that Tyler has always tried to juggle successfully her responsibilities on the homefront and in the workshop:

One such effort, still unpublished, was written before *If Morning Ever Comes*. Another entitled *Winter Birds Winter Apples*, was written after her second published book, *The Tin Can Tree*. Its manuscript is now with Tyler's papers at the Duke

University Library. She also began work on a novel that proved to be so poor that she “threw [it] away after two or three chapters”. Yet another book, *Pantales* was completed but never published. It was the product of the difficult years between *Earthly Possessions* and *Morgan’s Passing* (Petry, *Understanding* 4).

And her serious intent has been taken note of by her readers as well as critics. It has been observed that Tyler’s belated critical recognition is also due to the fact that the quality of her writing has improved with each new novel, and her best works are her recent ones.

### 6.3 A Summary of the Discussion

The publisher’s note at the end of the novel Saint Maybe states thus:

The text of this book was set in Electra, a type face designed by W.A. Dwiggins (1880 – 1956). This face cannot be classified as either modern or old style. It is not based on any historical model; nor does it echo any particular period or style. It avoids the extreme contrasts between thick and thin elements that mark most modern faces and attempts to give a feeling of fluidity, power, and speed.

The note is a yardstick to measure the nature of Anne Tyler’s fictional art, and it effectively calls attention to her pluralistic themes, ambivalent and

intermediary standpoints, ambiguous characters and non-specific literary tradition, unfolded during the course of the discussions in the various chapters of this dissertation.

In this work an attempt has been made to discuss the problematics of Anne Tyler's literary contexts, focussing on connections between the texts and recurrent human concerns such as history, religion, politics, gender, race and culture. A particular moment or incident in history was chosen to place the discussion of the relation between the text and the context/cotext. The work illustrates that context is crucial to literature, and far from interfering with reading, it adds to the meaning of the text. The historical treatment of the texts clarify how literature articulates the socially situated and contingent truths.

Chapter one is an attempt to make an approach to New Historicism as a new critical practice and to trace its possibilities in Anne Tyler's fiction. Focussing on the textuality of history and the historicity of the text, it illustrates some means of foregrounding certain contexts in Tyler's texts in the cotexts of society and culture. The chapter researches the origin and spread of the critical practice of New Historicism from a diverse set of practices and from various literary figures. The chapter outlines the standard paradigms of New Historicism and makes a distinction between the Old Historical approach and its recent counterpart. Both the significance and the disadvantages of

New Historicism are listed next, and this is followed by the narration of a few illustrations in the application of this new critical practice. This is done in order to posit this method as a viable medium of literary and critical interpretation, and to prove that this method provides ample scope for cultural studies. This, in turn, brings us to the question of the choice of Anne Tyler as the topic of this research. Tyler's life, work and achievements are described in detail, and it is also shown why she occupies a controversial place among her contemporaries. The chapter concludes by stating the consolidated aim, procedure and methodology of the project.

Chapter two focuses on the ambiguous and ambivalent stand adopted by Tyler on Gender and Public issues. In keeping with the cursory strictures on historicist criticism, it starts with a citation from history. The chapter attempts to enter the ongoing discussion about the relations between literary texts and the historical context by focussing upon the incident of a pro-abortion move and that of an anti-abortion rally lifted from one of Tyler's novels. It begins with news reports of demonstrations by anti and pro-abortion activists in the U.S.A. It goes on to show how the issue of abortion has assumed ambiguous and ambivalent proportions in its ideology, practice, its psychological and moral implications and even its terminology. It cites books and authors who have tried to defend the practice of abortion, but have only managed to offend it. The chapter shows, next, how the divided attitude of

the public regarding controversial public issues like abortion finds an echo in Anne Tyler's fiction. Tyler touches upon some of the raging issues related to sex, politics, war, drugs, pollution and rock cult; but on the whole, she gives the readers the impression that most of the time she is sitting on the fence. Being a fence-sitter is not anything to be ashamed of, according to Barbara Johnson whose essay "Apostrophe, Animation, And Abortion" underscores the power of those who are undecided about any political issue. Referring to the non-representative quality of either the pro-abortion or the anti-abortion groups and the political force exerted by those who are undecided and who emerge powerful, she states:

It is often said in literary-theoretical circles that to focus on undecidability is to be apolitical. Everything I have read about the abortion controversy in its present form in the United States leads me to suspect that, on the contrary, the undecidable *is* the political. There is politics precisely because there is undecidability (Warhol and Herndl 638).

Tyler does not take up any strong feminist position. Elizabeth Evans quotes Dorothy Faye Sala Brock that Tyler's "works are largely free from feminist grievances against society" (Evans 138). But as discussed in this chapter, the novelist is not totally indifferent to women's issues. She makes some of her characters like Maggie Moran of Breathing Lessons react to

them. When the anti-abortion protestant admonishes Fiona, Maggie's daughter-in-law, "All the angels in heaven are crying over you", Maggie retorts, "Just because you've got too many children is no reason to wish the same trouble on other people." Immediately after this brave statement, Tyler makes Maggie utter soberly, "Fiona! Just think it over! That's all I ask of you" (240). Maggie does not force her decision on her daughter-in-law. Instead she lets Fiona make up her own mind. Tyler is antagonistic in her response to the novels by liberated women, "I hate'em all" (Evans 138), which shows that she is not a militant feminist. However, instead of lying down meekly and succumbing passively to all adverse conditions, she exhorts women to "recognize and draw on an inner self 'that goes beyond any question of anatomy'" (141). Perhaps it is this intuitive feeling that makes Tyler prompt Evie Decker in A Slipping Down Life to yearn for motherhood. She looks forward to wearing "a blue smock" (162), and pictures pregnancy in her mind as "a shaft of yellow light through her mind, like a door opening" (170). Similarly Mary Tell in Celestial Navigation, believed that "motherhood is what I was made for" (69). And it is the same novelist who makes Maggie Moran accompany her daughter-in-law to the abortion clinic for a termination of pregnancy. It is her role as a mother-figure that makes Jeremy Pauling propose marriage to Mary Tell(111). In fact, Tyler's own life vouchsafes that it is possible to combine family and career with each

enhancing the other. Tyler herself acknowledges the rich possibilities of being a mother in "Still Just Writing" thus:

"It seems to me that since I've had children, I've grown richer and deeper. They may have slowed down my writing for a while, but when I did write, I had more of a self to speak from" (Sternburg 9).

Tyler's preoccupation with day-to-day family affairs, and the absence of a 'world view' in her fiction are pointed out in the course of the second chapter which also concedes that the author's later works are more socially conscious. This is a point noted by Susan Gilbert in her essay on the private lives and public issues in Tyler's prize-winning novels:

That Tyler's characters persist in ignorance of or indifference to social debates around them is not the same thing at all as imagining that their creator never reads the papers or watches the evening news. Nor does one imagine that the social level of Tyler's heroines who are working class or poorly educated has any resemblance to the educated professional class of Ms. Tyler. But her last two prize-winning novels bring her subjects closer to immediate issues of American political debate than her work has been before without the characters or, if the reviews are apt, her readers seeming to notice (Stephens 137).

The fact that Tyler has had a Quaker heritage, a commune-life, an activist-father, a social-worker-mother and a cross-cultural marriage should be read along with Gilbert's observation; and then one can hardly believe that the novelist is indifferent to social concern and public affairs.

The second chapter also takes into account the political hide and seek and the polarized public opinion regarding the multiple murders which are on the rise in the U.S.A. This is connected with the depiction of death and violence in Tyler's novels. The novelist is aware of the evil lurking in the world which pounces on and catches the innocent people unawares. It is this awareness that makes her voice her concern and fear about this kind of a world through Sarah, Macon Leary's wife, in The Accidental Tourist:

"Macon", she said, "ever since Ethan died I've had to admit that people are basically bad. Evil, Macon. So evil they would take a twelve-year-old boy and shoot him through the skull for no reason. I read a paper now and I despair; I've given up watching the news on TV. There's so much wickedness, children setting other children on fire and grown men throwing babies out second-story windows, rape and torture and terrorism, old people beaten and robbed, men in our very own government willing to blow up the world, indifference and greed and instant anger on every street corner" (139 – 40).

It is acknowledged that Tyler makes frequent references to the violence that tears modern societies apart. But the incidents of violence are passed over quickly. The degree of restraint and the sense of detachment which Tyler exercises in the use of violence in her fictional world is highlighted which is in keeping with the ambiguity and ambivalence shown towards public issues in general. The chapter proceeds by drawing attention also to the mental and physical violence within the fictional families, which bring about alienation and detachment of the members.

Also woven into the structure of the second chapter are the changes in gender issues envisioned by Anne Tyler as reflective of the reconfiguration of the attitudes by the sexes towards each other in recent times. The chapter points out the various phases through which feminism has transgressed, and tries to locate Tyler on the periphery of the feminist movement. After underlining the novelist's priority on disintegrating love and tradition and deteriorating family structures, the chapter, in its course, provides illustrations on the visible gender shift in Tyler's novels. Her women characters are depicted as more dominant than her men characters, though the chapter admits that some of her women are stereotypical, submissive females. This duality on the part of the novelist is referred to by Dasgupta in her article on the cross-cultural analysis of American and Indian women writers' novels: "Anne Tyler exhibits supreme control and objectivity by steering clear of

either valorizing or demonizing her middleclass white American women” (Azam 157). In general, Tyler’s women are domineering, unpredictable, resourceful, plucky, original, enterprising and stubborn, although, at times, some of them are meek and submissive and keep a low profile. The comparatively docile nature of her men characters are touched upon in the concluding part of the chapter; but Tyler handles them with sympathy and gives them credit for being care-takers and surrogate mothers. The chapter traces the changes in the gender roles back to the Renaissance, and attributes the gender shifts to several sociocultural and technological reasons. This part of the chapter closes by underlining the path of conciliation, and not confrontation, trodden by the sexes in recent years.

The sixth chapter of Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant opens with a flashback where Pearl and Ezra Tull go on a cleaning expedition to Cody Tyll’s farm. This ritualistic journey is made by Pearl twice “or may be three times a year” in the company of her son Ezra, and she goes taking with her “a broom, a dustpan, rags, a grocery bag for trash and a bucket, and a box of cleanser” (167). The rural touches in the passage do not detract the essentially urban milieu from which Pearl makes this journey twice or thrice a year. It is in this context that the effects of urbanization play a significant role in Tyler’s novels, and project the same ambivalence as seen in her treatment of other public issues. The significance of the fact that Tyler

operates from Baltimore, a frontier city of South and North, is referred to in this connection, to show her tendency to depart from the rural characteristics while at the same time retaining some shades of the agrarian tradition. She seems to be comfortable with the urban milieu but makes sporadic deviations to the rural backlib. Documentation of this cultural doubleness is also provided in the course of the chapter to give enough justification for Tyler's standpoint. The urban milieu detected in her fiction can be explained further in the light of Hobson's observations on the altering scenario of the Postmodern South. He examines "the impact of mass or commercial popular culture on contemporary southern fiction" and alleges that it accounts for "one of the great departures from the work of the past" (Hobson 11). The influence of this culture is sooner felt in cities and towns than in villages; and that could be why Tyler's people, who are mainly city-bred, bear the brunt of this impact far more than those in several other novels from the contemporary south. Also shown in the chapter is the impact of urbanization on family and society, with special reference to the significance of the decline in moral virtues and familial and social ties. It has to be admitted in this connection that Tyler's families are better off than many postmodern ones, and perhaps her own strong pre and post marital family life is instrumental in this.

"The people Tyler writes about are often peculiar, eccentric, almost

grotesque”, observes Frank W. Shelton (Shelton 860). The eccentricity of Tyler’s people which borders on the grotesque is the topic discussed in the third chapter of this thesis. Instances of such fictional and factual characters are illustrated and changes in the attitude towards them in recent times documented. The presence of such borderline characters between sanity and insanity is analysed in the light of theories by critics like Michel Foucault and Louis Montrose. This celebration of deviance is further explained in connection with the New Historicist focus on the disturbance of borders and margins. Opinions of thinkers and anthropologists like Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Douglas are relied upon to substantiate the argument. Richard Eder says, “Her people are arrayed in comic eccentricity. But Tyler waives the preservative chill customary to such a thing. They perform as close as possible to life temperature” (Stine 200). The ample illustration of idiosyncratic characters is meant to project the view that while there is a stamp of the gothic and the grotesque in Tyler’s novels, there is also a controlled restraint and a hesitation to elaborate upon the awesome details, and a contagious sympathy for her ‘odd’ people. “She has retained a kind of innocence in her view of life, a sense of wonder at all the crazy things in the world and an abiding affection for her own flaky characters” (120). This affection for the eccentrics in Tyler’s novels stems chiefly from the fact that their deformities are more behavioural than physical or even mental. The chapter has also

attempted to trace the idiosyncracies of the characters as something inherited within the families. It is also viewed that the wayward behaviour of these people is a blessing in a way, a necessary evil, for, it not only makes them attain sharper focus and greater individuality, but also provides the novelist with a chance to paint them in an unusual way so that they stand out as unpredictable and less stereotyped. Also incorporated into the matrix of the chapter are the dress code of Tyler's eccentric people and instances of the carnivalesque tradition glimpsed in Tyler's fiction. These are analysed in the light of philosophical and critical theories and substantiated by the other aberrations detected in the novels.

The fourth chapter has explored the possibilities of the presence of the vexing issues of racism and ethnic conflict in Tyler's novels. Tyler has addressed the issue of cross cultural adjustment less in her novels than in her other forms of writing. Elizabeth Evans refers to Tyler's 1979 review-essay, "Please Don't Call It Persia", where the author recalls with nostalgia her first visit to her husband's family in Iran. Evans detects cross cultural experience also in two of Tyler's short stories – "Your Place Is Empty" and "Uncle Ahmad". These stories are rich in "exploring an Iranian – American family's life when relatives come to visit" (Evans 40). The chapter has traced incidents and characters endowed with the potential for ethnic and racial conflicts. It has concluded that although there is definite demarcation

of black and white in Tyler's novels, most of the time she indulges in the ambivalence of shades of colour. The chapter begins with historical incidents of cultural and racial pluralism and explores the politics of the irony implied in positive self presentation of the Whites and the projected achievements made by the Blacks. The opposing pulls involved in the crossing over of the colour line are also studied in the chapter prior to analysing the politics of colour in Tyler's fiction. The absence of black and coloured characters who play any prominent role in Tyler's novels is discussed. Certain critical viewpoints are projected to draw the conclusion that there are only vestiges of a collective guilt over slavery in her novels. She allots positive, if not serious, roles to her coloured people as ambassadors of goodwill in the familial and social set up. The chapter attempts to prove that something like a cosmopolitan levelling of nationalization is visible in the author's depiction of characters with Asian and Red Indian blood; and she does this without visibly harping on issues of cross cultural conflict. Tyler strikes an ambivalent posture when she makes her black and ethnic people appear as eccentric, as different, as the 'other'; yet she makes her white folks accept them in spite of their 'otherness'.

The fifth chapter has chosen religion as the fulcrum for an approach to literature and historicism. Tyler's non-definitiveness regarding religion forms the subject of the chapter. Even while illustrating the prominent role

religion plays in her recent novel, Saint Maybe, it is argued that most of her fictional people lack acute religious sense. It is pointed out that the number of the non-believers in her fiction is as much as, if not greater than, that of the believers. The scornful references to, and the ironic and ambivalent treatment of representatives of organized religion in her fiction are highlighted, and the chapter altogether contends that the novels in general do away with fundamentalist religion, although she almost makes a strong return to it in Saint Maybe with its religious groups and private religion. In keeping with the typical New Historical practice of starting off with an anecdote, this chapter also begins with the report by a respected religious person about the irony involved in matters which are religious. The opening of the chapter has acknowledged the substantial religious influences in the era preceding the World Wars. It has documented how religion faded away from the portrait of the modern era only to re-emerge later. However, this religious resurrection is marked by the ambiguity of a more secular, private and moralistic religion than the earlier spiritualistic and fundamentalist one – a trait that tallies with the ambivalence of the novelist's religious sense.

As is obvious from the study, the keynote that is struck is the ambivalent and ambiguous world depicted in Anne Tyler's fiction – something comparable to the collage created by the artist, Jeremy, in her novel, Celestial Navigation. It may appear to be torn to pieces and fragmented, but just as

there is a method in the madness of the collage, there is meaning and purpose which can be perceived even in the ambivalences and ambiguities and contrasting pulls visible in Tyler's novels.

#### **6.4 Beyond the Limits**

The title of the dissertation implies that all the long and short fiction written by Anne Tyler have been studied in the light of New Historicism. However, it must be noted that only her novels have been taken up for detailed study. All attempts have been made to make available the entire range of her novels, including the latest, Back When We Were Grownups(2001), for study and research before the submission of the final work. The absence of a published volume of Tyler's short stories has rendered it difficult to include her short fiction into the scope of this study. However, occasional references have been made to some of her short stories in the course of this work. New Historicism is a critical practice which emerged in the literary scene in the 1980s and captured attention in the 1990s. The advocates of this movement are careful to observe that, this is not a theory, but a practice. Hence it has not been easy to pinpoint the basic paradigms of New Historicism. Also, coming to the practical application of New Historicism, it must be noted that almost all the New Historicist studies done so far have been done either on Renaissance drama or on early fiction. The difficulties involved in the application of New Historicism – some of which are mentioned

in the first chapter – in the study and interpretation of a literary work may be reasons valid enough to assume why scholars hesitate to employ this critical practice, although it is understood that a few scholars are working on and making significant progress in research in this area. That it is high time scholars devoted more time and attention to this Pulitzer-Prize-winner's creative and critical themes and art, has already been referred to in the beginning of this chapter. This work is an attempt to focus attention on the application of the challenging contemporary critical practice of New Historicism on a genuinely perceptive contemporary novelist. It is hoped that the application of New Historicism has succeeded in highlighting both Anne Tyler's craft of writing and her observation of the complexities of life. If Tyler's fiction has provided the necessary foreground to establish the viability of applying New Historicism to present-day novelists, this thesis has served its purpose.

**A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF  
ANNE TYLER'S FICTION**

*By*

**RANI PAUL UKKAN**

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in English Literature  
to the University of Calicut*

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT  
SEPTEMBER 2002**

## Appendix \*

\* The matter appended is Anne Tyler's reply to the letter sent to her by the scholar on 15 January 2002. The answers provided by the novelist are in response to the following questions asked by the scholar:

1. Why are issues like 'abortion', 'violence', 'mass murder' etc. only touched upon and not incorporated into the matrix of your novels?
2. Your novels have many men who are 'deserters' of families. There are also men like Ian Bedloe who act as surrogate mothers. Is there any reason why you are critical as well as sympathetic towards men?
3. Blacks and Ethnic groups seem to be allotted only peripheral roles in your novels. Racial problems are apparently sidelined. Why is it so?

4. Your fiction depicts a certain amount of religious consciousness, but religion is used sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, and often as a means of irony and satire. Why is there such a tendency to make sinners of saints and saints of sinners?
5. Are the lovable eccentrics modelled on people whom you really know? Do you feel that eccentricity is a desirable trait? Why do you refuse to sketch a thoroughly villainous or frightening character?

222 Tunbridge Road  
Baltimore, MD 21212  
February 11, 2002

Rani Paul Ukkan  
"Poothokaran"  
W. Kombara,  
Irinjalakuda,  
Pin - 680 121  
Kerala, S. India

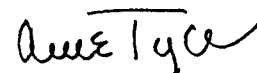
Dear Rani Paul Ukkan:

I'll be happy to answer your questions.

1. Although of course these and other issues concern me, I have never felt comfortable using my fiction as a platform to discuss my political beliefs.
2. You could also say that I am sometimes critical of women and sometimes sympathetic. I don't think of my characters as exemplars of their respective sexes; they're just individual people with some bad traits, some good ones.
3. Again, I wouldn't feel comfortable utilizing a political issue in my fiction. And although I would love to have people of different ethnic backgrounds take a more central role in my books, I think it would be presumptuous of me to imagine I could speak about the black (or Asian, etc.) experience with any authority.
4. I have nothing against religion, but I do feel people shouldn't proclaim that their way is the best way—and some religious believers do just that.
5. All of the characters in my novels are completely invented. I don't intend to make them eccentric; it's just that when you look closely at almost anyone, I believe, you're bound to find some eccentricity. And I've never sketched a thoroughly villainous character because I have to live with my characters for the two or three years it takes me to write a book; so I want them to be people I like.

I hope this is helpful.

Sincerely,



Anne Tyler

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