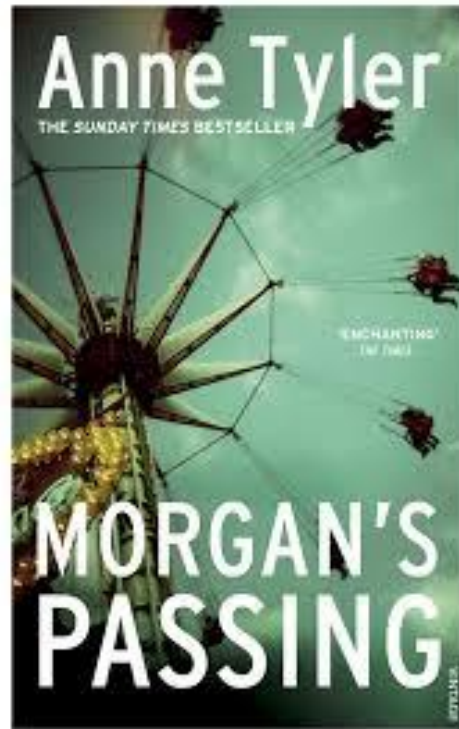


Identity Crisis in Anne Tyler's *Morgan's Passing*

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Courtesy: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1031807/morgan-s-passing/>

Abstract

Anne Tyler's novels deal with the issues of families wherein individuals have their essential roles to maintain unity. It is impossible to deny that family is an indispensable part of humanity. When individuals fail to understand one another, the family disintegrates. This loss of stability and pain of insecurity lead to a search for self-identity in one or more members of the family. *Morgan's Passing*, one of the novels of Tyler, is about a fragmented family man named Morgan. Throughout the novel, Morgan is found changing his roles quite often. He is always accompanied with orderlessness and uncertainty; almost a marginalized state which drives him into a search for self-identity. He craves for an orderly life which he tries to attain by assuming the roles of various personae. This paper attempts to explore how Morgan in his life journey tries to achieve the orderliness and thereby a stable identity.

Global Village

The world has become a global village thanks to the advancement in science and technology. People living in distant parts of the world are connected easily. Moving around the world and meeting people has become a cake walk now. Often there occurs a talk of cultural carnival too – a tendency to accept, respect and celebrate the practices that are foreign to a native culture. This paves way for the masses to multiply their acquaintances through the remarkable social networks, but there is an irony that they feel insecure. They have a struggle within themselves unable to find a trustworthy person. Trusting others seems a far off quality for them which eventually lead them to the following questions: Who am I? What is the purpose of my living? Is there anyone who really does care for me? Thus people begin to search for their identity. Fromm, a German psychoanalyst stresses the significance of identity by writing that, “the problem of the sense of identity is not...merely a philosophical problem...the need to feel a sense of identity stems from the very condition of human existence, and it is the sense of the most intense strivings” (Bickford 191).

Identity Crisis

Identity becomes a crisis when one feels a lack of clear identity. This state experienced by people is concretized in literature. According to Blanche H. Gelfant, “the search for identity in modern literature takes on the form of a pursuit – a curious pursuit, because the object is often undefined and unvisualised” (133). Many writers have taken up this issue that persistently revolves around the humankind. Anne Tyler is one among them and she is a Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist. Since childhood she has been interested in imagining what people’s lives are like. She is interested in portraying a detailed picture of eccentric characters in fragmented families who “negotiate disorganized, isolated lives.” Some of her popular novels are *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*(1982), *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) and *Breathing Lessons* (1988).

Morgan’s Passing

The novel *Morgan’s Passing* is about Morgan Gower, a man who does not have a clear identity of his own. The story is spun around 1967 to 1979, the years in which changes happen in the life of Morgan, and therefore the people related to him. Morgan is in his forty two when Tyler begins this novel. He is introduced as a doctor who delivers the baby girl of Emily and Leon, the puppeteers. But one may wonder at the way Morgan delivered the baby with no medical equipments. Because the role played by him as a doctor is one of the many identities which he assumes. So there grows a sense of suspect in the personality of him. And this is brought to the light in the course of the novel, even though there is a hint given by the author in the opening chapter. Morgan is a father to his seven daughters, the youngest of them being almost eleven. But he has not been portrayed as a responsible father though he has nurtured them with love when they were young because he is as "unpredictable" as the climate of Baltimore, a man who has "always been in pieces", an "unassembled" character. There is also "something fragmented about Morgan's house". It is full of "the particles of related people's unrelated worlds" (19).

Morgan's wife Bonny, his mother Louisa and sister Brindle are also in the house. Though there are lots of people around him he feels that nothing is in its place. He is managing the Cullen Hardwares, an inheritance from Bonny's side. But he is not at all fully involved with the

profession. He does not want anyone to restrict him and that is why he tries out many different jobs. As noted earlier he has the habit of assuming different personalities through which he searches for his identity. He is identified as a priest one day, the other day as a doctor, and then as a mailman. He has many outfits, say, a sailor's, a soldier's, river-boat gambler's, which he puts on to perform the respective roles. To add to these, he is a chain smoker too. He can be understood more comfortably that he is more or less like a collage. In all the roles he assumes each new day he tries to find out who he really is.

With all his eccentric behavior - those hats, his cigarettes, his humming – he is given no importance these days by his daughters. Even on their vacation to the Delaware Beach, he is unable to make himself attached to the family. He believes that his life has come to a naught. He is like the “classified ads” in the newspaper which is “full of private lives”. He has an interest to take a glance at it. A reviewer’s remark on Morgan as an imposter is found in Robert W. Croft’s *Anne Tyler: A Bio-bibliography*, “Like [Tyler], [Morgan] is a small-scale imposter who laments having one identity” (60). So Morgan’s desire is to make the classified life of him unified.

Since his first accidental meeting with the Merediths—the puppeteers, Morgan has awe for them, Emily in particular. He manages to find their whereabouts from the telephone directory. He begins to trail behind them because he does not want to show himself up as Dr. Morgan. He does not want to hide himself into the identity of a doctor once again. Eventually the Merediths suspect his following. When they find no harm of him, they consider him “something to be adjusted to, as a matter of course...part of the furniture of their lives” (51). He thinks always about becoming a solid person with a definite self identity. Even when he returns from a movie with Bonny, he ponders over the lives of the characters in the movie.

Everyone had been so sure of what everyone else was going to do. The hero, who was some kind of double agent, had laid all these elaborate plans that depended on some other, unknowing person appearing in a certain place or making a certain decision, and the other person always obliged. Sentries looked away at crucial moments. High officials went to dinner just when they usually went to dinner. Didn’t B ever happen instead of A, in these people’s lives? (45)

Bonny

Morgan’s wife, Bonny, on the other hand, hails from a rich family. She unlike Morgan is quite aware of her being. She knows who she is. The Cullen Hardware is an inheritance from her grandfather and their house too is a gift from her father. Morgan seems to have married her for her money and the “definiteness” that gives. Now the house experiences a slipping down with Morgan drifting apart from it. Morgan thinks that Bonny is not serious about things. She goes along with them just as she is with Morgan.

Confronting Merediths

At last Morgan decides to confront the Merediths. He no more wants to procrastinate. He arrives at this decision when he feels standing aloof during the wedding party of her first daughter. He senses that he has not been given the due place in his family—the identity as a father and a husband. He comes to know of the wedding arrangement all of a sudden. It seems that the

ongoings of the house are not conveyed to him properly. He is in his quest for an identity. So he goes in search of the apartment of the Merediths with a sign board Crafts Unlimited to get along with them. The Merediths are taken aback by his visit. They do not like the way he has been trailing behind them for they are such sort of people who do not “veil anything”. Emily tells, “You could have come straight up and said hello, like ordinary people” (105). Now Morgan confesses that he is not a doctor but a hardware store manager. Emily who has been seething now makes a twist. She almost has given a green signal by saying, “he just has to get out of his life, sometimes” (108). Mary F Robertson writes, “Finally he is let into their lives as a valued friend. After a few years he reciprocates by allowing them into the life of his family” (CLC 217).

The Gowers and the Merediths meet often at dinners. In fact, Bonny too likes Emily, unaware that Morgan desires for a life with Emily. Morgan has started to incline more towards Emily. To him, “she was the most perfect person he had ever met” (205). The reason behind is the orderliness. Mary F. Robertson writes, “Tyler also has a suitable wry sense that the most disorderly characters themselves have a fascination with or craving for order” (CLC 222). Morgan shakes Emily’s purse and says,

“Look at that!” he said. “You’re so orderly.” Emily retrieved her belongings and put them back in her purse. Morgan watched, with his head cocked. “I too am orderly,” he told her. “You are?” “Well, at least I have an interest in order. I mean, order has always intrigued me. When I was a child, I thought order might come when my voice changed. Then I thought, no, maybe when I’m educated. At one point I thought I would be orderly if I could just once sleep with a woman,” ... Emily said, “Well?” “Well, what?” “Did sleeping with a woman make you orderly?” “How can you ask?” he said. He sighed. (117)

Emily

Meanwhile the love bond between Leon and Emily begins to disintegrate as Emily finds herself more comfortable with Morgan. They both confess their love for each other. Morgan who is in his fifty-one and Emily who is in her twenty-nine decides to elope when they confirm Emily is pregnant with Morgan’s child. Bonny sends away Morgan from their house with all his belongings whereas Leon offers to leave the house.

Morgan and Emily, with their son Joshua and Gina, Emily’s daughter through Leon, involve themselves in giving puppet shows. Morgan plays the role of Leon both as a husband and a partner in the puppet show. He has taken up the identity of Leon. He has reached the zenith of his determination. He has joined hands with Emily to cast off all the clutter that has made him feel lost, but he realizes that “clutter is life’s inescapable condition.” Even at the end a lady has mistaken him for a mailman and the words “rich with possibilities” make the readers understand that Morgan may change his identity in the future. The unasserted personality of Morgan can be understood as the result of the “separation anxiety” a phrase which Tyler uses to describe the use of fairy tales in her works.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

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