



PARADOXICAL SHADES OF SIBLING BOND IN ANNE TYLER'S DINNER AT THE HOMESICK RESTAURANT

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Abstract

The paper aims to shed light on the bond of siblings in the work of Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. It brings onto surface the dichotomy of relationship that burgeons between the Tull brothers and the liaison they share with their sister. The bond of each of the pair of siblings is remarkably different from that of the other. This paper is an attempt to depict the same and the factors that determine such bonds.

Keywords: sibling bond, dichotomy, factors

"A relationship with a sibling may well be the longest in an individual's life"
(Cicirelli 1995).

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is the most admired work of Anne Tyler. It strikingly manifests different shades of sibling bond. The galaxy of siblings in this novel is formed by Cody, Ezra and Jenny. The former is the oldest of Tull children; he is insulated with great vehemence of contempt for and resentment towards his younger brother, Ezra Tull, who is "so sweet and clumsy [that] it could break your heart" (Tyler Dinner 04). Hardly any tinge is harboured by Cody for the youngest of three children, Jenny Tull. Cody, "a difficult baby", carries immense hatred for his brother. This stems from his mother's favouritism for Ezra (Tyler Dinner 03). Certainly, "when favouritism is obvious or is interpreted as such, siblings are more likely to become estranged" (Eckel). Unknowingly, Pearl Tull has instilled a deep sense of competition in Cody's mind by means of pampering Ezra over her other children. In order to wear the crown of his

mother's love, he locks horns with him and competes with him over petty issues. "Teaching the Cat to Yawn" underscores the first stroke of sibling rivalry, which Cody carries towards Ezra, who is oblivious of his brother's antagonism. The archery incident lets the reader comprehend the depth of indignation that makes him seethe. Before deserting the family, Beck Tull arranged an outing, wherein he encouraged the Tulls to shoot an arrow at the core of the target, hung on the trunk of a tree. He first demonstrated them and then counted on his elder son to nail the target. Without any interest in the activity, Cody released the string and, apparently, missed the spot. Pearl Tull hardly enjoyed or seemed to take interest in Cody's performance. Rather, she urged Ezra to go for it, "Let Ezra try", "Ezra? See if you can hit it, honey", she said (Tyler Dinner 37). Her gestures manifest her fondness for the child. Obediently abiding by her mother's requests, he took part in the act. He knocked the arrow at the heart of the target, despite his wandering attention, he had "his mind on something else" (Tyler Dinner 38). Everyone applauded him, except his elder brother, who felt "a springy twanging inside as if he himself were the bowstring" (Tyler Dinner 38). There are numerous illustrations that divulge Cody's conspiracies, meant to tarnish Ezra's image in the eyes of Pearl Tull. This takes into diameter – his act of slipping a fishing line through a hole in the kitchen, which he drills, so that when Ezra tutors Jenny to strike a soft ball, it should break the windowpane. He succeeds in his plans, for things materialise as he desired.

Yet another instance in the novel that puts a stamp on Cody's malicious thinking is revealed through the scene where he opens all the hot water faucets of the house, when Ezra takes bath. Through this move, he wants his mother to gain an impression that it is Ezra who is responsible for water crisis in the house and the family has to struggle to make up for it.



Ironically, Cody's plans turn out as schemed, but he fails to hurt Ezra as he hoped for. This very thing infuriates and pesters him.

Cody enters the phase of adulthood, without shedding the coverlet of enmity towards his brother. He developed romantic liaisons with a series of girlfriends and then, deliberately, arranged their meeting with Ezra, even if it required them to travel from New York, where he worked, to Baltimore. Strangely, "if they are friendly and polite to Ezra", he gets green-eyed when his brother catches their eye and if "they are cool to Ezra, he loses interest in them" (Madden 66). At the surface, Cody appears more successful compared to Ezra, who works in a restaurant and then owns it. But journeying deep into his inner recess lets the reader see him competing for contentment that his brother possesses. He is so set on with his wickedness that the only girl he resolves to tie a knot with, is no other than the one girl Ezra loved, whole heartedly. In spite of the fact that he wins her in his one-sided sweep-stakes, he is unable to wheedle out an ounce of delight in his marriage with Ruth Spivey. He stays away from his family at Baltimore, fretting over the single thought that Ezra and Ruth would get along well. When he does visit the Tulls' place of living, he is conscious of every move and conversation that his brother and his wife make. Even an exchange of word is not tolerable to him. He would pass snide comments, the moment he finds them interacting with one another. Clearly, he makes an awful joke on his life and spoils the life of his brother as well.

Studies insinuate that, "completely cutting off a sibling, regardless of how much it may be deserved, has serious ramifications" (Eckel). Moreover, "those who initiate estrangement often feel deep regret later" (Eckel). This spells out Cody's ambivalent ties with Ezra. No doubt, he feels repulsed by him, but still is perpetuated by a certain degree of affliction, when he happens to inflict pain on his brother, as planned by him. This is brought into play in an instance, when he and Ruth let Ezra know

about their romantic affair, the betrayal that is caused by his brother and the love of his life crushes him to the core. Travelling to New York City in order to tie their wedding knot, Cody reminisces his childhood days with his brother. He memorializes Ezra's sweetness, his amicability, his stance "to get through life as a liquid" (Tyler Dinner 166). His conscious pricks him over his sinful deed. He calls to mind "a tune piped, a burble of notes, a little scrap of melody [that Ezra usually played] floating by on the wind and breaking his heart" (Tyler Dinner 166). Rightly posits critic Paul Bail that:

His [Cody's] seduction of Ezra's fiancée, Ruth, is both a hateful attempt to deal a deadly blow to Ezra and a twisted expression of his love for Ezra – as if to absorb Ezra's envied qualities by sympathetic magic. Cody is trying to redress the lack he experienced in his youth, to win from Ruth the love that he felt Pearl bestowed exclusively on Ezra. But he ends up recreating the same old fear, namely, that like his mother, Ruth has always "loved Ezra better than me" (Bail 110).

It has been gleaned from scrupulous research accomplished by Buhrmester and Furman that structural factors play a key role in the texture of sibling relationship, during childhood and the phase of puberty. These circumscribe 'gender composition' and 'birth spacing' of the siblings. It brings to spotlight that, "sibling pairs in which children were less than four years apart in age, for example, were more competitive" (Pike at el 494). It also posits that, "the interactions of same-sex sibling pairs in childhood often involve more aggression and dominance than interactions of opposite-sex sibling pairs" (Pike at el 494). These factors that hatch up behind-the-scenes club together so as to damage the liaisons of Tull brothers. Anne Tyler herself stamped the influence of 'birth order' on her characters in one of her conversations with Quindlen. She said that, "Oh, birth order is crucial! I don't know how I would flesh out a character without knowing his or her birth order" ("A Conversation"). This is to note that



Ezra does not carry an iota of malice towards his elder brother, even when he is shattered by the wrongs he does to him. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is the most acute manifestation of the impairment that owes to sibling rivalry.

The above premises by Pike at el also aid so as to understand the bond between Cody and Jenny as well as Jenny and Ezra. Jenny holds barely any grudges towards her two brothers. A perusal of the novel, however, makes the reader stamp that she holds more warmth and love for Ezra than she has for Cody. This is due to their temperamental differences. Cody hardly allows anyone to get close to him. It seems that his worn out relation with his mother lets him shun the doorway of anyone's entry into his heart. No doubt, he makes it a point to visit Jenny in the college, during her freshman and sophomore years. But the bond they share is not hunky-dory. "She could not straight his tie, or compliment his suit, or inquire about his present life without setting up that guarded look in his face" (Tyler Dinner 84). In antithesis to the circumspect relationship, which she and Cody share, Jenny and Ezra erect a very warm and friendly liaison. In fact, the kind of understanding they have is incredible. The wavelength she shares with him, she feels with no one else, not even her mother. Going through the rough patch of life, due to the marital discord with Harley Baines, Jenny returned back to her maiden house. She does not reveal the secret of the marital disharmony to anyone else, but Ezra. Though, later on, everyone gets to know about it.

The letters Cody and Ezra sent to Jenny bear symbolical connotation. These imply the sort of relationship the siblings have with one another. She gets Cody's letter when he is enrolled in the college. "Cody wrote almost never, and what letters he did write were curt and factual" (Tyler Dinner 70). Alternatively, "Ezra sent a postcard the moment he arrived in camp, and followed that three days later with a letter . . . longer than several of Cody's put

together" (Tyler Dinner 70). Jenny loves his simplicity and innocence. He fits in the role of good and caring brother. More to the point, she decides to get hitched to Harley Baines, for he reflected "his [Ezra's] slowness and his thoroughness" (Tyler Dinner 86). Somewhere, at the core of her heart, she wished to marry someone like Ezra, who would never cross the fence of violence. Ezra is the one who could never harm anyone in the world but himself due to his placidness. She feels safe and comfortable with him. Jenny is in her own skin with him, for Ezra does not prompt her to mask her feelings from him. She is always overwhelmed by "a flash of pity" for him, because of the way he treads through his life (Tyler Dinner 102). She could see that, "he was turning into the family custodian tending their mother and guarding their past and faithfully phoning his sister for lunch" (Tyler Dinner 199). His goodness makes her worry for her brother. The novel is an odyssey into the bond of siblings, featuring rivalry, conflict as well as warmth and care.

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