

## **Struggle in Translating the Emotional Turmoil of the Characters in Anne Enright's *What Are You Like?***

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Literature can be considered as an outcome of translation of the societal occurrences, using language as a medium. Not all experience is effectively translated into the verbal form. Emotion of one person is never completely decoded by the other. The mindset of a mother can be well understood and explained by a woman. Anne Teresa Enright the winner of the 2007 Man Booker Prize is one of the leading literary figures of Irish literature. She focuses on the changes that occur in the lives of the individuals and its impact on the culture which they adapt. She exposes the internal and the external conflicts of individuals that work as the chisel that shapes their characters. Maria in *What Are You Like?* oscillates between her past and the present and uses compensatory technique to suppress her confused past. This paper analyses the struggles she undergoes at the various phases of life that obstructs her from moving to and fro.

Enright's concern for the family background and its relationships are evidenced in almost all her novels. There always occurs difficulty in defining the concept of family. The characters within the families of Enright's novels are influenced by various factors like social and economical changes over times. The changes reflect in the characters affecting the family relationships in various phases. Enright employs themes like death, grief due to loss of a family member, complicated family relationships and parenthood. She discloses the hidden secrets of the family that had been buried deep in the conscience of the characters for several years.

Berts is a married man who encounters the death of his pregnant wife. He describes his new born daughter who is too small for a monster yet made women's breasts ache and rattled the keys of men. As a baby, she was all skin holding the soft little parcel of her insides. He recalls how he made her as one of the map on the sheet. She was like another country for him. For him she was just a bad joke. He looked after the baby on his own. He wonders why men have nipples. He starts loving her by choice.

He tried to think, but his eyes got stuck in the net curtains like a film of tears in front of the glass. The curtains were white. He loved her by choice. He made the choice to love her. That was important. That was all. She turned her face to his chest and sucked his heart until it bruised. (WYL 4)

Berts travels back to the past, remembering his wife who behaved out of senses. She behaved so due to the brain tumour that has occupied her brain instead of the senses. Berts neglected such behavior by convincing himself that women have their own rules. Every now and then he gets a chance of knowing the other side of women. He feels that women are strange. Berts is portrayed as a representation of the patriarchal figure taking care of his wife as a mother does. He finds it difficult to wipe away the memories of his wife.

She was quiet. She cooked the wrong things. . . . She put the cup into the milk, you could say, and not the other way around, she put the bag into the clothes and not the clothes into the bag, she poured water on the floor and squeezed it back into the bucket. . . . Women have their own rules. Why not turn the world inside out - . . . (5)

Berts names his daughter, Maria. He sees her growing like an object that feeds earnestly and sleeps like the dead. Maria and Berts never had a permanent abode as they had to move from one house to the other for food. Berts is unable to translate his emotions into words and express the necessity of a mother for his daughter. He, at times takes small trips around the Dublin Bay as a therapy for his wounded soul. The waves of the Dublin Bay boost his courage in translating his mind thus, expressing his preference to re-marry. He decides to fill up the hollow generated by the death of his wife with another woman for his daughter. He dreams of going back to the beginning where he could see all other things except his dead wife. His wife's death has emptied a part in his map.

Enright has portrayed the lives of her characters in the form of maps where every character becomes a landmark or a region in the map of other characters. The disappearance of one character creates a void in the map of the others. The attrition of the family network leads to the absence of social protection which ultimately becomes the cause of susceptibility. Social structures such as family and home are both challenged. Separation from the roots and the impact of that separation is evidenced in the life of the characters of Enright.

The bondage between the characters is well knit in Enright's *What Are You Like?*. He chooses to marry Evelyn. He misinterprets her mind thinking that she hates him but instead she surprises him with her love. Berts is touched by the tenderness of Evelyn. Women's psyche is always a mysterious one. It may be asserted that no individual has ever evolved to decipher the emotions or ideas of a woman.

Time comes when Evelyn becomes pregnant and Berts is once again happy for his victory. It is at this time that Evelyn exposes her selfishness, "I want my own carpet" (14). Berts still appears

affectionate towards his dead wife. He recalls, “My wife chose this carpet. You know that. My dead wife” (14). At this moment Berts reveals the untold story about his dead wife. This moves Evelyn and this time she happily accepts to own Maria into her life. It takes time for Berts to elucidate the dark traces to his past to Evelyn.

Maria flirts with Anton, an English man who seems to be a guy from another life, a representative of an entirely different culture. She strives hard to mix-up with the other culture and learns gradually that she cannot completely dissolve in it. She likes his physical appearance and loves the way he appears. She feels that he has something that is missing in her. She thinks of ignoring him but fails in the attempt on hearing his voice at once. She falls for him again and again. She desires to have a thorough knowledge of his physique and hence examines even the pattern of the follicles: “Maria pulled back the sheet and searched every inch of him, trying to memorise the way the hair grew, the swirls and shifts, the pattern of the follicles” (25).

Maria is surprised when she comes across a photograph that she gets from Anton’s bag. The twelve years girl seen in the photograph is she herself. She tries to compare the smile of the girl in the picture with her present smile. She discovers that the smile which she wore in the photograph had been robbed completely with the passage of time. The subdued past of Maria is slowly brought back to the present. Enright’s characters are totally consumed by their past and their memories haunt them as ghosts. The past and the present are interlinked and affect one another.

Maria desires to find out the secrets of her past in order to understand the family history and also to design her destiny. Maria is a prototype of many of Enright’s characters who sway between the past and the present through recalling and ignoring. She roams out of Ireland and inhabits several parts of the world in order to unravel her family history. At a later stage, Maria realises that she has a twin sister.

Maria and Rose are identical twins, who are separated at birth on the demise of their mother, Anna. The loss of the mother and the separation of the twins develop a sense of vacuum throughout the novel. The complex structure of family relationships is exposed by Enright in *What Are You Like?* through the space created either by a loss or an absence. Through Maria, Enright depicts the desire of the characters to sustain healthy relationships with others and also with themselves. The characters of Enright’s novel are closely attached with their family background and their surroundings. Cahill asserts that the characters of Enright represent “a general sentiment of dislocation and disorientation . . . Enright aims to acknowledge the traumatic effects of the missing mother on her daughters” (87).

Anna’s death becomes the noteworthy event in the lives of the twins. The complexities imbibed in the conscience of an individual avert the feat of interpreting the real psyche. Though the twins are never informed about their birth, they learn on their own that each of them is a half twin sister. Both the

sisters appear persistently perplexed about their lives and identities. Enright states: “She (Rose) was born with a hole in her head, a hole in her life” (WYL 140).

Maria is raised in Ireland by her father and Evelyn, her step mother; whereas, Rose is adopted by a couple in England. The twins are moved by the experiences of split identities. They aspire to uncover the reasons of their unhappiness that occurs throughout the novel. The concept of split identity is confirmed through Maria. She quite often feels the presence of someone else residing in her. Enright puts it thus: “Maria laughs, but when they get home, something unfair starts to happen to her. She has a feeling like there is someone always coming around the corner, who never arrives (WYL 54).

Further, Cahill states: “In *What Are You Like?*, the unconscious experience of separation, the perceived lack of interconnection between self and other, underpins the psychic trauma of Maria and Rose” (119). Maria understands the mystery hidden behind her existence. She experiences a sense of detachment from the society and hence tries to embrace death by committing suicide.

The thoughts of Maria’s missing mother haunt while she journeys in the car. Certain aspects of the past frequently appear in the present and the future. The absence of her dead mother teaches her that life has its own negativity. Maria’s memories of her dead mother remain unarticulated as she has no memories of her mother that she could share with. The undisclosed family secrets induces pain in her. Bracken puts it thus:

Maria’s memories of her mother cannot be fixed or curtailed, as they are opened up to possibility itself through the word ‘nothing’. . . For this reason, the act of remembering becomes a generative process in the present, leaving space for different memories in the future, ‘a kind of repetition’ that is a repetition of difference” (193).

Memory plays a vital role in the characters of Enright’s novels. Though the process of reminiscence is at times much painful, there always lies a necessity to look back into it to comprehend the present and affirm one’s identity. For both Maria and Rose, it becomes essential to identify their roots in order to understand their lives.

Enright’s novels expose the dark reality of life like, depression, disappointment and despair. Towards the end she remembers to include a flash of light and hope for a better future. The readers encounter at least a piece of similarity between their own life story and the story of the characters of Enright’s novels to some extent.

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### Works Cited

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**Abbreviation**

WYL

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*What Are You Like?*