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Depiction of Women Characters with Special Context to Brian Moore's Novel "An
Answer from Limbo"

Abstract

An Answer from Limbo (1962) is one of the most distinguished North American Novels of Brian Moore in which he has beautifully portrayed the real image of all women through his female characters in 20th century. His protagonists are seen violating against established social orders and Catholicism. They migrate to follow their own faith as a result of exile from their home land to the foreign land. They are secular in thinking but they do not discard the people who have faith in religion. Though his characters face restrictions of Catholicism and patriarchal society but they deal with such problems efficiently as described by the author. The present research paper explores two distinct worlds of women figures in

this novel. There are two women Characters; mother of Brendan Tierney, Mrs. Tierney and his wife, Mrs. Jane who become the victims of man's selfishness and over-ambitiousness.

Key Words: Ambitiousness, Atheist, Catholicism, patriarchal.

Introduction

An Answer from Limbo (1962) is one of the finest North American novels of Brian Moore. The central figure in this novel is Mr. Brendan Tierney who is a writer by profession. He wants to be a well-known novelist. As Jo O'Donoghue states about Tierney's aim, in his book *Brian Moore: A Critical Study*, "His quest is not for approval but for glory" (O'Donoghue 105). He lives with his wife Mrs. Jane and two children Liam and Lisa in North America. He is non-religious instead of his upbringing in a Catholic family in Belfast, Ireland. He calls his mother to stay with him for looking after his children. It is found that Brendan's ambitiousness leads Mrs. Tierney and Mrs. Jane to live a disgraceful life.

The author uses the technique of first person narrative in this novel and it makes the reader more interested and inquisitive. The world of North American Novels is non-spiritual. It is also true in case of women protagonists here. As Jo O'Donoghue, in his book *Brian Moore: A Critical Study*, expresses, "It is also to this secular period that Moore's most famous novels with female protagonists belong. He broadens the scope of the term 'belief' to include sexual love, which for their women is all consuming, but which is shown to have its own pitfalls and terrors" (xvi-xvii). It reflects the personality of Mrs. Jane who wishes for true love and self-satisfaction in the proposed novel.

The main aim of the present research paper is to investigate the role of female protagonists; Mrs. Tierney and Mrs. Jane who enrich the appeal of the story. They play their role to evaluate Mr. Tierney as a son, as a husband or as a good father. It is found that this

novel has presented a changed outlook of Brian Moore. Seamus Deane sees a change of preoccupations in *An Answer from Limbo* as he states in *A Short History of Irish Literature*, “It is here, according to him, that Moore begins to free himself from the simplism of the battle between the aspiring individual and the stifling social form” (Deane 220). In this novel, Moore also delineates the ambience of North America where women become the victims of men’s over ambition.

Portrayal of Mrs. Jane

Brian Moore has explored the psyche of a modern woman through Mrs. Jane who struggles for her self-identity and for self-independence in New York. It is examined how the author has depicted two distinct worlds of two women who differ in religion, culture, social customs and philosophy of life. Mrs. Jane epitomizes the new modern world which is free from social dogmas and religion while Mrs. Tierney belongs to the old world which is based on social conventions and Catholic dogmas.

Mrs. Jane has two children Liam and Lisa from Brendan Tierney. She does not believe in religion and traditional social values. She is influenced by New York City life style. The fact of her Jewish origin creates disputes between her husband’s mother Mrs. Tierney and her. She knows that her mother-in-law despises her for her being one fourth Jewish as she speaks to Brendan, “I’m one-quarter Jewish. And your children are one-eighth Jewish, remember” (*An Answer from Limbo* 39). This creates doubt in Jane’s mind that Mrs. Tierney may teach her children dislike for Jewish people as she concerns for them, “If she fills them full of anti-semitism?” (39) She complains to her husband about this fact but he ignores her.

Mrs. Jane is happy with Mrs. Tierney who takes care of her children nicely. But she becomes jealous of her because Mrs. Tierney encroaches the world of a mother and that of a

wife. As she speaks to her husband, “She makes me feel guilty, for god sakes” (52). She thinks that she is a stranger in other’s apartment instead of living in her own house as she explains to her husband, “I mean, this is our apartment, not hers” (53). Another thing that pinches her is that her husband often takes his mother’s side.

Mrs. Jane is a selfish woman who dislikes the presence of her mother-in-law. She considers her a burden. But she has to tolerate her unless her husband finishes his novel. Brian Moore has also expressed the exploitation of a woman through Mrs. Jane in the male dominance society even in North American scenario. It is examined in the novel that the decision of Mr. Brendan is final over his wife. His rude behaviour hurts her. He considers her as a caretaker of his children and a means of sexual pleasure as she grudges against the conservative mentality of Brendan, “If he thinks I’m going to stand for it, he’s out of his mind. I won’t, I won’t” (*An Answer from Limbo* 81). She shares it with her mother-in-law who also concludes about American’s attitude towards women as she expresses, “They have no dignity, Americans” (81). She says that there is no law for marriage in America unlike Ireland.

Mrs. Jane is possessive for her husband. She does not want her husband to flirt with other women. She loves him too much and does not want to lose him as she says to him, “I love you, Brendan” (80). She has caught him flirting with a woman named Guinevere in a party in their house. She finds that he has broken the bond of marriage they have. She thinks that Brendan considers her as a mother of his children and a financial support only.

Mrs. Jane bore physical harassment in her office by her boss, Vito Italiano. She was scared of facing him. He tried to be physical with her whenever she came to his cabin. She did not want to stray from right way. But her husband did not give her enough time and did not appreciate her. She found herself lonely. She felt excitement and lust suddenly unwillingly when her boss kissed her in his cabin, “He pulled her to him and kissed her”

(113). She felt guilty for what had happened in the office with her boss. But the circumstances obliged her to continue her job against her will.

Jane thought that it was not the fault of her and her boss but it was her husband who was responsible for her predicament as she became nostalgic, "If he had not asked her to take this job, if he had not wanted to bring his mother over, none of this would have happened. None of it. All his fault" (137). Further she told her husband about the office incident and tried to convince him that she must quit the job to save their marriage. But he did not understand her because he loved his novel writing only. His ambitiousness exploited Jane economically and mentally.

Mrs. Jane is cooperative and helpful. She always pardons her husband's fault like forgiving parent. She wants to see her husband a successful novelist. Therefore, she motivates him, and gives him a moral support. Brian Moore in this novel has beautifully portrayed exploitation of Mrs. Jane who represents all women who are exploited at their work place not only in American ambience but everywhere in the world. Mrs. Jane enjoys the company of her lover Frank Finnerty (Vito) who has used her as the narrator said, "He did not love her: he used her" (*An Answer from Limbo* 178). She is in search for true love that she has not got from her husband.

Mrs. Jane has a dual personality. She wants to carry her relationships with both her husband and her lover. She tells lie to her husband to hide her illicit affair with her lover. Her husband got her lie. But she rejected his charges against her. At the same time she also felt proud of her husband for his dedication to his writing work as she said, "I'm here and I'm proud of you. I always knew you would do it" (186). She congratulated her husband for the success of his novel.

Mrs. Jane becomes indecisive in case of choosing either her husband or her lover. She appreciates her lover and says to him that he is sexier than her husband. She wants to

continue her affair with him at any cost. It reveals the weakness of her character just for sexual satisfaction. She has complaint to both her husband and her lover because they do not understand her. She complains to her lover Vito, "How little you know about women" (194). She is insulted by him on many occasions. She thinks that there is no man who can understand her. As the story progresses, Mrs. Jane realizes her blunder of having an affair with another man. She also accepts that she has done injustice with her children. She thinks that she should forget her lover. She believes that her children may save her marriage life as she hopes, "The children will save me" (198). She does not give up in adverse circumstances.

Mrs. Jane understands the feelings of other women. Though she dislikes her mother-in-law Mrs. Tierney but she finds that Mr. Brendan does not have any concern for his old mother. She has pains for her, "That poor woman has been all alone ever since she left our place. My god, Brendan, I've never heard of anything so heartless" (224). This reveals the deep concern of Mrs. Jane for her old mother-in-law. She expresses to her, "I'm sorry,' Jane said" (*An Answer from Limbo* 228). Here Mrs. Jane becomes emotional and sensitive after seeing deplorable conditions of Mrs. Tierney. It shows that she is a good human being.

Mrs. Jane always expects Mr. Brendan to be a loving husband who may understand her feelings. But she ensures that she has married a man who wants to be famous only. She has found no adult man who cares about her and vice-versa, "Who do I love, she wondered? . . . Isn't there one adult person I care about now? (272) Thus she finds no one whom she cares about, except her two children. She feels herself alienated in her own house among her family members.

Portrayal of Mrs. Tierney

Another woman character in this novel is Mrs. Tierney, mother of Brendan Tierney. She is a widow. She is Catholic, and believes in ethics and principles of Irish society. Though

she has lived most part of her life in Ireland but in her old age she has to stay in abroad. She is a traditional lady who takes care of her son's family. She becomes the victim of her son's over ambitiousness. She is very brave and handles all the adverse situations with patience and judiciousness.

Mrs. Tierney loves her son and she does not want to be a burden for him. When Brendan Tierney goes to airport to receive her, she speaks to him, "I hope I'm not going to be a bother to you" (*An Answer from Limbo* 33). But he is selfish, and he wishes her mother to help him as he asserts, "You'll be a great help to us" (33). He does not have any concern for her mother's sentiments. He is devoted to his writing and does not want any disturbance due to his wife and his children. He is of the opinion that his mother is the best option to look after his children. He says to his mother, "Besides, now that Jane's going back to work, she wouldn't want to trust the kids to a stranger" (34). It means that Mrs. Tierney is merely treated like a caretaker, but not as a mother. She gets hurt of his notions for her.

Mrs. Tierney has spent her entire life in Ireland, therefore, she feels homesickness. She expresses her will of going back to Ireland to her son, "So, Brendy, if I ever wanted to go to Ireland, you wouldn't be angry, would you?" (*An Answer from Limbo* 34) This reveals her drive for liberty. She is also worried about her daughter-in-law Mrs. Jane. There is a generation gap as well as a distinction of culture and religious thinking between them. But she tries her best to adjust with her.

She finds herself uneasy to adopt New York life style as Liam Gearon states in *Landscapes of Encounter*, "Brendan's Irish Catholic mother represents the symbolic death of a traditional Catholicism on secular American soil" (Gearon 75). She is generous and always ready to help her daughter-in-law in house works so that she could focus on her job. Though she is very traditional but believes in cooperation and liberty of her daughter-in-law because she has faith in the saying 'live and let live'.

Mrs. Tierney seems to be a good grandmother as she loves her grandchildren Liam and Lisa. She takes care of them and brings them to a nearby Central Park everyday where she meets Mrs. MacAnaspey whom she makes a good friend. She faces a crisis when Liam meets an accident while playing in the garden. She and her granddaughter Lisa get him admitted in the hospital. It is the first time in her life when she gets scared of some unknown fear. She is indecisive whether to inform Jane and her son about the accident. She also prays to God to save him, "He must not die, O Lord, he must not die, I will do anything You ask of me, give me any penance but do not let him die" (*An Answer from Limbo* 98-99). These lines show her kind heartedness.

She has sympathy for the mother and father of a son, who do not know that their son's life is in danger. At the same time she has a fear in her mind that if Liam dies, he will go to Limbo but not to the Heaven because he is not baptized. Limbo is the world of such children who have never been baptized and they have to stay there for eternity after their death. For this she considers her son, Brendon Tierney responsible because he is an atheist.

Mrs. Tierney has a strong faith in religion. She prays to God for saving her grandson and she promises Him to right the wrong that Brendan has made. God has accepted her prayer, and Liam has come out of danger. The ill-mannered behaviour of Jane has shaken her deeply. She is always engaged with children. She does not have any time to pray and attend the Church. She feels herself lonely in the new world. When Brendan is at home she asks him to look after children so that she can attend the Church in the evening. But he forces her to adjust her evening prayer. First time she notices that she is considered a porter of his children.

Further Mrs. Tierney herself discloses the reality to her friend Frank Finnerty that there is no use of her help to her son and daughter-in-law because they consider her merely as an unpaid domestic assistant. She reveals that Brendan has committed a mortal sin by not baptizing himself and his children. She believes that this act of mortal sin will lead them to

the world of Limbo but not to the world of heaven. She is very religious and believes in Catholicism.

Mrs. Tierney gets hurt of the fact that Liam and Lisa consider her a bitch after the process of baptism she has performed upon them. She has a complaint against Brendan why he has brought her here from Ireland. Over this Brendan explains that he cares for her. She reacts, "Aye, you wanted a maid" (*An Answer from Limbo* 156). In fact she clears it to him that he needs an assistance to look after his children. But he rejects these charges. She thinks that she is a burden to him and she dislikes being a burden as she says, "I hate being a burden" (157). Thus in New York she feels isolated and upset instead of living with his own son and his family.

Mrs. Tierney concludes that the feelings of Brendan towards her are like his father, Grattan who also had the same behaviour for her in old days. As she spoke, "It reminded me of the times I used to ask Grattan if I was getting old-looking" (*An Answer from Limbo* 166). This showed the reality of patriarchy society in which all men had the same attitude towards a woman. She found that women were not treated in equality of men in Ireland and in North America. The world of women has been the same everywhere.

Mrs. Tierney advises her daughter-in-law to hide her affair with Tito from her husband as she said, "She helped her son's wife tell-lies to deceive him" (*An Answer from Limbo* 188). This showed that she advocated wrong things but her intention behind this was to save their marriage life. Jane insulted Mrs. Tierney because she has baptized her children without letting her know about it as Jane complained, "She did this thing behind my back. She hid it from me. Later, she kept my secret" (189). She offended Mrs. Tierney and this made her realize her guilt in the sight of God.

The conflict between Mrs. Tierney and Jane causes Brendan to shift her mother in the apartment of his cousin Franklin (i.e., Vito). She complains to Brendan that he has never

taken care of her like a good son. But a stranger cares about her health as she ponders in seclusion, “A stranger, a foreigner that she’d not known four months ago, had asked her to tea but her own flesh and blood wouldn’t even” (238). This disturbs her mentally. One day she falls down in the kitchen, and finds nobody to help her out. She feels that her hip is paralyzed. As she speaks to herself in her fantasy, “My broken side is my good side. Unless Brendan comes, I will die” (253). She confesses her sin of hiding the act of baptizing children from their parents.

It can be concluded that Mrs. Tierney’s life is governed by Catholicism. Unfortunately she meets with an accident due to irresponsible behaviour of her son. She dies in seclusion as Jo O’Donoghue describes about her in *Brian Moore: A Critical Study*, “Powerless, despite the competence of her nursing and grandmotherly personality, is the characteristic of Mrs. Tierney most strongly and lastingly conveyed; she dies, powerless, unnecessarily isolated” (O’Donoghue 113). Therefore, she has to suffer mental trouble and physical crisis at the end of her life instead of being a good human being.

Conclusion

Thus the present research paper, in *An Answer from Limbo*, has analyzed how women protagonists become the victims of a man’s selfishness and over ambitiousness in the North American scenario. As Jo O’Donoghue concludes exact image of Mrs. Tierney and Mrs. Jane who have been exploited by Mr. Brendan, “Conversely, the two female characters, though frequently depicted in a critical manner, either implicitly or explicitly, are ultimately the victims of Brendan’s immorality, his terrible blindness and restriction of vision” (O’Donoghue 116). It is found that their endless pains make us feel pathetic and sympathetic. Mrs. Tierney and Mrs. Jane become the representative expression of all women

who suffer due to the irresponsible behavior of others. Thus it can be claimed that Brian Moore has presented his feministic views through these women characters in this novel.

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