



**Marital Conflict Depicted in Simone de Beauvoir's Fiction with Special
Reference to *The Age of Discretion***



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ABSTRACT

Simone de Beauvoir has achieved a credible place in 21st century. She has also gained international renown as the exponent of woman's emancipation. Her fictional world is full of images of women playing the roles of daughter, wife, sister etc. The present paper is an attempt to focus on the problem of married woman depicted in the fiction of Simone de Beauvoir. The married woman of the fiction *The Age of Discretion* though educated, modern and financially independent creates problem in her life as well as in others due to wrong approach towards herself which affect adversely her married life.

KEYWORDS

Marriage, conflict, woman narrator, husband, family, married woman

RESEARCH PAPER

The term family has been employed in many different ways by different writers who study various branches of human science. In the simplest biological sense, the family consists of those individuals who are related by mating and descent. In the sociological sense the family is the social group of intimate person most of them are blood relatives and some of them are through marriage institution. Family is considered as distinctive social unit. Family has been the centre and care of many social processes and social sub-systems. It is the focal point of attraction for variety of social, economic, educational, cultural and other institutions.

The family carries many functions but it has three main functions, reproduction, care and nurture of children and mutual helpfulness for the peaceful human life in the society. The family as a social unit is built up and modified by the concerned society from time to time, depending upon the social changes and the changed structure of the society. The family and marriage institutions are closely related to each other.

Encyclopedia Britannica explains the term marriage as legally and socially accepted union usually between a man and a woman that is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the parents. Hence marriage is one of the deepest and the most complex involvements of human being.

After marriage a person gets various new roles to perform. In a traditional society, wife is expected to do some duties. Her prime duty is to satisfy her husband's physical need, respect him as well as his family members. She should be a helper to her husband. For a woman to be a successful wife she should win her husband's heart and be a source of comfort to him she should also provide adequate measures to maintain his health and well being. Then she is expected to do majority of the household duties. She has to play the role of home maker. The next responsibility she has to take is reproduction. She has to give birth to kids and take care of them. At this stage to nurture, to teach, to train the kids become her important duties. She has to shower love over the family. If a wife is unable to do all these things the family gets disturbed. In this regard researcher wants to focus some basic but crucial causes which create marital conflicts.

Causes of marital conflicts

1 Lack of Emotional Maturity

Marital disorder may stem from various causes and sources. Marriage requires a good deal of maturity as it involves human interaction of the great intimacy. It requires that individual should be possessed by physical, intellectual and emotional maturity so that they undertake

responsibilities one should have. Unhappy married people make marital partners physically and emotionally sick; drain their energies, their productivity.

2. Psycho- Social Maturity Scale

Psycho-social maturity scale of husband and wife and other family members play a vital role in family functioning and happy or unhappy married life. Emotional maturity found to be positively associated with marital adjustment. Mental illness, health problems, maladjustment, legal or moral problems, financial pressures, change in financial state, change in personal problems may create a problem in married status and harmonious function of the family.

3. Trust and Adjustment

Family life and marital life largely depend upon the mutual trust and respect for each other. Trust is the cardinal aspect of life. It can be defined as “belief by person in the integrity of the individual”.

Marital adjustment basically depends on the issues of economic matters, personal life and daily activities, psycho-sexual satisfaction, various decision making areas, roles and responsibilities, socio political issues, social relations etc. The confused and complex inter-relationship of social, economic, political, philosophical life of individuals give birth to new attitudes, values and standards which in turn have registered a vast change in the family.

4. Difference in Temperament

Men and women can never be equal because they are different in every cell of their bodies and therefore they differ in many ways psychologically, emotionally and physically. Both may have different strong points and weaknesses, different level of self confidence, different approaches to self defense. If the marital couple is unable to understand the differences of the partner, it may cause to conflict.

5. Double Standards of Morality

The family pattern has sanctioned the sexual license in men but insisted chastity in unmarried women and fidelity in married women but now a deep rooted revolt against this double standard of morality has set in. Family structure is based upon the acceptance of the conventional morality. Any widespread and permanent change in the sex moves affects the marital relationship.

6. Quarrelling in Marriage

In marriage when two persons of different temperaments, likes and dislikes, habits and breeding live together, there is bound to be some differences or personality clashes. Further

the difference in physiology, economics and intellect may also be the source of some quarrels between couple.

7. Lack of Understanding

There are inherent differences among the sexes. There is no wonder that if there is proper understanding, man and woman are able to understand each other sufficiently, intimately and achieve reasonable harmony in their personal married life.

8. Conservative Thinking of the Partner

This is the basic conflict which the family or the society cannot resolve but the partners themselves have to solve. The conservative thinking provides the source for much instability in married life out become of this is disturbed and disorganized marital life.

Beside all these causes, to accept female partner as a separate identity is crucial one. If a male partner denies the other partner as a separate identity, separate entity, the conflict starts. The problem of identity crisis, self-identity, loss of sense of self occurs which shakes the basic foundation of marriage institution. The woman protagonist Monique of the fiction *The Woman Destroyed* faces the same problem in her marital status. The same problem is the root to undertake the journey from normal to abnormal.

After having much discussion on the institutions such as family, marriage, causes of marital conflicts, researcher feels it is very important to take into consideration Simone de Beauvoir's approach to the role of wife as well as marriage.

Simone de Beauvoir begins her comments on the role of a Woman as housewife with the statement,

Queen in her hive, tranquilly at rest within her domain, but borne by man out into limitless space and time, wife, mother, mistress of the home, woman finds in marriage at once energy for living and meaning for her life. We must now see how this ideal works out in reality. (T.S.S. 467)

Instead of calling wife, Simone uses the word 'The married woman'. She says that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. Most of the women of the society are married, or have been or plan to be married. Many women who do not wish to get marry become the victim of society's criticism and they suffer a lot. For some women, marriage is a career. Marriage is considered as an unavoidable ceremony in woman's life. After marriage, she has to accomplish her sexual destiny. At this stage, a married woman is more frightened because she has to undergo the strange operation, i.e. the first intercourse, which is considered a very sacred act. Family member, close relatives, friends, society are interested in to handover a married woman to her husband as if to a master. The 'act' plays very important

role in her life. Her future, her married life is depended upon this 'act'. Then confined to the conjugal sphere, the married woman pursues a mindless pursuit of so-called beautiful objects. With its endless repetition, housework becomes her only aim. After so many years, the house chore becomes torture for her. It is not astonishing that conjugal duties may often seem boring to the wife.

Simone de Beauvoir has not given any specific name to the female protagonist of the short story *The Age of Discretion*. So researcher uses the term 'the woman narrator' while addressing to the female protagonist. *The Age of Discretion* is the first short story of the novel *The Woman Destroyed*. The story moves around the woman narrator. She plays the roles of mother and wife.

The woman narrator is in her sixties but still highly active woman. She has taught literature at the Sorbonne and is about to publish a book on literary methodology. Andre is her husband. He has flourished his career as a scientist. He is absorbed in the world's sufferings, supporting freedom fighters and political prisoners all over the world. They have only son, Philippe, who is brought up in the intellectual atmosphere. At the very beginning of the story, readers easily enter into the woman narrator's life where they find the woman narrator's life as full of joy, and happiness. Researcher finds the woman narrator's life as a harmonious life in which she feels total freedom to take her own decisions. Furthermore the woman narrator says that her relation with her husband is entirely open. She describes:

...my eyes attribute no age to him. A long life filled with laughter, tears, quarrels, embraces, confessions, silences, and sudden impulses of the heart: and yet sometimes it seems that time has not moved by at all. The future still stretches out to infinity.
(TAD 8)

From the above quotation one can easily assumes that she is happy with her husband. Time has done nothing to change her feelings for him. The same satisfactory approach the woman narrator has towards he son Philippe. She feels satisfaction as her son follows her advice of pursuing Ph.D. As per the woman narrator's wish Philippe works on his thesis at the Sorbonne.

The woman narrator and her husband Andre have different opinions regarding Philippe's brought up, about Philippe's career. The woman narrator feels that she knows better about Philippe and about his future plans. Having more understanding attitude, Andre reconciles the matter. That's why they live very happy marital life. Up to this stage the woman narrator lives very normal life. This smooth life is disturbed by Philippe's decision of leaving the university, discontinuing his research and the joining of government job. Philippe's

declaration about his career gives a great shock to the female protagonist. It affects her role of mother. She cannot tolerate that Philippe goes against her wish. She loses her mental balance and suffers from restlessness, violent mood, and extreme sensitivity. Her negatively affected motherhood disturbs her role of wife. Thus disturbed motherhood creates the problem in the woman narrator's marital life. Though the two roles are different, they affect each other.

The first problem the woman narrator face as a wife is inferiority complex. She thinks that she is failed in her motherly love that's why Philippe follows his wife's advice and neglects her own wish. This thought affects her psychology so highly that she starts to think about her role of wife. She feels that she is unsuccessful in giving her husband a real happiness. She recollects some past years of the marital life and wrongly concludes that Andre, her husband does not love her with the same intensity as in the past but it is not true. With the same mood, she enters into Andre's room. Simone de Beauvoir describes the woman narrator's condition as Tender awakening. Andre was curled up in bed sleeping, with the bandage over his eyes, one band pressed against the wall like a child's (TAD 7)

The woman narrator is moved by Andre's image. She becomes more affectionate towards Andre. She wants to shower real love on Andre. At this time, the woman narrator has stopped to communicate with Philippe. Next time, while discussing with Andre the woman narrator comes to know that Andre has met Philippe. She gets another news form Andre that Philippe wants to join ministry of culture. This information makes her angry. She cannot bear that Andre meets Philippe without informing and taking her permission. The woman narrator loses her temper as well as mental balance. She warns Andre not to have any relationship with Philippe. Andre tries to convince her that Philippe is matured man. He has his own ideas and following one's own ideas is not a rebellious act. The woman narrator is not in a mood to listen anything. She becomes very angry. She, instead of mutual understanding, suspects that Andre and Philippe both are plotting against her. She declares that she does not want to see Andre again. She stops to talk with André:

But we could not talk of anything else, either. We had diner almost in silence very quickly, and then each of us took up a book. I felt bitter ill-will against Irene, against Andre, against the world in general (TAD 31)

Researcher finds that the woman who wants to shower love on her husband, the woman who wants to be more affectionate towards he husband, stops to communicate with her husband. This extremity of nature proves the woman narrator as a woman of injured psyche.

Irene comes to the woman narrator to convince and to request her to re-establish her relation with Philippe. Irene tells that Philippe is disturbed by the situation. The only good thing with

Philippe is that Andre keeps healthy relationship with him. Having this news, the woman narrator becomes violent and quarrels with Andre. To go ahead she blames Andre to instigate Philippe to write a rebellious letter.

Instead of trying to understand the situation, the woman narrator makes the situation more intricate and more problematic to herself and to others also. Researcher has treated this phase of emotionality as the symptom of wounded psyche. In this particular case the woman narrator creates conflict in her married life.

Sometimes the woman narrator recognizes that she is doing things problematic and wants to calm herself but next time she cannot control her behavior. She wants to overcome the dilemma but she is unable to do it. Due to which she experiences next problem of psyche i.e. total negative emotions. She becomes negative thinker and draws the meaning which is incorrect. In Andre's case she concludes that Andre is a totally changed man and so she has lost her married life. The woman narrator starts to recollect her past married life where she considers Andre and she as 'Siamese twins' always united, linked to one another. Now she thinks that Andre has cast himself off from her. She wrongly thinks that he wants to separate from her so she decides to forget everything which is connected with Andre. Instead of forgetting him her memory moves around his voice, his face. She feels that she is being tortured by Andre's mental images. In addition to it, she finds Andre's note telling that he has gone to cinema. She becomes emotional and tears come into her eyes continuously. She cannot tolerate the situation. So she takes sleeping pills and goes to bed. For so many days she remains in the same mood. Researcher feels that by the means to discussion, open-mindedness, the woman narrator can solve the problem but the protagonist due to her disturbed, wounded psyche makes the situation difficult. Due to this injured psyche things go for the worst. She starts to compare Andre to whom she has lived within the past and Andre in present.

In a confused state of mind she is unable to decide which one of Andre's personalities is correct. For one moment she sees Andre as good, lovable husband and in another time she finds him full of hatred. In this puzzled situation, she takes help of drinks. She takes such an extra quantity of drinks that proves injurious to her health.

I filled a glass and emptied it in one gulp. Andre's face, Andre's voice: the same man another; beloved, hated: this anomaly went down inside my body. My sinews, my muscles contracted in a titanic convulsion (TAD 37)

With the physical pains, the note of Andre's going to cinema without her tortures her. She thinks and rethinks about the same note. She becomes suspicious regarding Andre's

character. This thought suggests the abnormality of the woman narrator. She is surrounded by various questions which are unnecessary. She feels that she has done nothing fruitful for Andre. That's why another woman enters in his life. The woman narrator, being disturbed and over whelmed by self doubt and being dominated by questions, shuts herself away in her flat for three days. Meanwhile she thinks:

But could he fill this emptiness within me? Where did our relationship stand? And in the first place what had we been for one another (...)? (...). Had he loved me as I loved him? (...) Did he come to the conclusion that our love was not enough for him? Did it disappoint him? (...) would another woman have succeeded in giving him more? Who had set up the barrier between us? Had I? Both of us? I was tired of asking myself questions. The words came to pieces in my mind: love, understanding, disagreement they were noises, devoid of meaning. Had they ever had any? (TAD 55)

The woman narrator is unable to find out the true meaning of life. She becomes suspicious about everything. Even when the woman narrator, after some days, joins Andre she is still engrossed with doubt, "*was he really pleased to see me again?*" (TAD 56) Find herself trapped in dilemma, she thinks about death. She feels that death is the only solution to the problem. In this abnormal state of mind, Andre helps and encourages her. He suggests going for driving to find freshness. She becomes ready and does the same. For some time she feels good but thinks wrongly that they have still some distance. She reminds the old days. When they have quarrels, they solve it and unite themselves in bed. Now being old, she confesses "Now we are deprived of that resource". She experiences the problem of communication gap in their trip. She feels that they are very remote from each other. They feel that they no longer capable of talking to one another. The questions "were we, as I had glimpsed in my anger, condemned to silence and loneliness? disturbs in the whole journey. Researcher observes that the woman narrator suffers a lot due to her abnormal thinking of what would happen in future and this abnormal thinking is baseless. Instead of thinking the solution, she thinks for the worst and behaves accordingly. At this juncture, researcher wants to give another example of the woman narrator's unnatural and abnormal thinking. Andre suggests the woman narrator to go for his mother's village Villeneuve for some days. When the woman narrator shows her negation, Andre leaves the home. It is the normal incident in anyone's life but the woman narrator takes negative meaning from it.

Thus it is found that the negative approach of the protagonist is the main obstacle of her disturbed psyche. Due to which, the female protagonist suffers from inferiority complex, instable mentality, addiction to alcohol and sleeping pills, thoughts about death useless

suspicion etc. This married couple feels marital conflicts in their life due to communication gap, misunderstanding, lack of adjustment, the lack of mutual understanding, differences in temperament.

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