Familial Relationships in 
Alcott and Oates's Literary Works 
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Abstract: This article makes an attempt to study the qualitative difference in modern American family with special reference to Alcott's Little Women and Oates' Expensive People which represent the Victorian and contemporary America respectively. The focus is mainly on the depiction of family and familial relationship in these novels which are set in different cultural contexts. After discussing the vision and voice of Louisa May Alcott and Joyce Carol Oates the paper proceeds to sketch in brief the changes that brought about the above-mentioned decline in American family. The rest of the paper discusses the difference in the portraits of family in Little Women and Expensive People. If the former exemplifies familial values like love, commitment and concern, the latter, published exactly a century later, portrays the pervasive value conflict in modern American family.

Key words: Literature, Family, Love, Commitment, Concern, Faithfulness.

INTRODUCTION

Family has always been considered a haven from the cares of outside world. But, unfortunately, the warmth and security associated with the "hearth and home" concept has been slowly vanishing over the years from the American social scene. One wonders whether the substitution of the traditional hearth by the central heating system in modern American houses is symbolic of this change. The current concern over the future of American family voiced by the social critics is shared by many creative writers as well. Modern critics of Alcott like Sarah Elbert and Judith Fetterley feel an undercurrent of feminist conviction in Alcott's fiction. Yet we can see that in spite of the tension between domesticity and individuality which is apparent in her fiction Alcott never denounces women's commitment to family. She accepts and at times, as Sarah Elbert says, even glorifies it. Her novels provide a unique perspective on nineteenth century American family life. As Charles Strickland points out, Alcott "served to perpetuate the values of Victorian domesticity to subsequent generations" (1985: 3). In fact a few changes in domestic sphere, though not as dramatic as that of the twentieth century, were taking place among the urban middle class even during Alcott's time. Her creation of Jo March , the independent, self-willed heroine of Little Women, itself proves the point. It was her confrontation with these changes that helped Alcott mould her vision of family life. In fact, Madeline B. Stern's Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott (1975) disclosed to the world the sensational stories that Alcott had written before the overwhelming success of Little Women. Judith Fetterley who also speaks of "Alcott's Civil War" (1979), her ambivalence, agrees with Sterns and shows how, after her feministic sensational stories, Alcott found her true style with Little Women. According to Fetterley, the book is designed to teach Jo the value of family. Yet, any reader can discern that while upholding familial values Alcott does not endorse servile subjugation to the all-controlling male master.

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Hers is a vision of cooperative family. Her own parents-Amos Bronson and Abigail May Alcott-had tried to live up to the sentimental ideal of family life. Even Jo March, who had denounced marriage, marries later and her exclamation at the end of Little Women, "I do think that families are the most beautiful things in all the world" (1955: 547) proclaims Alcott's view of family. If Alcott glorified the beauty of family life in the Victorian America Oates voices her concern over its diminished effectiveness in the postmodern American society through the comment of one of her characters, "Family is a vanishing animal in the United States, doomed to extinction" (1984: 22).

Though critical responses to Oates vary, an observant reader can discern her garb of a social realist which justifies her concern with familial displacement in America. Oates believes that "A writer's job, ideally, is to act as the conscience of his race. I wouldn't be honest as a writer if I ignore the actual conditions around me" (1978: 60). Of course, she takes a moderate feminist perspective in her later novels, but not at the cost of family. Marilyn Wesley (1993) speaks of the "dysfunctional families" in Oates' works. Set in the context of family relationship her works depict modern American family in the throes of change.

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According to Calvin Bedient, Oates' "turbulent pages make no apology for virtual annihilation of western moral culture; indeed most seem unaware of it" (ed. Bloom 1987: 21). A close look at the modem American social scenario reveals its marked qualitative difference from that of the Victorian period. There has always been a reciprocity between society and family. Naturally the radical changes that took place in the American social scene in the latter half of twentieth century had its repercussions on American family also. The crisis in American family has been traced primarily to industrialization and urbanization. According to Charles W. Hobart the changes which tend to weaken the solidarity of family are (1) loss of the family functions, (2) increased personal mobility within society, (3) the decline of status ascription and the increase in status achievement and (4) the ascendance of materialistic values (1967: 5).

The twentieth century materialism has brought considerable changes in the function of family. With industrialization family ceased to be a work-unit and, consequently, the sense of collective enterprise which had been essential for the survival of the traditional family was replaced by individualism. This led to a value re-orientation in the American society. The consequent advent of feminism and consumerism also brought about revolutionary changes in American life. Communal values were replaced by personal ones such as self-fulfillment and egalitarianism. It is this loss of sense of community that Oates mourns in her works. In their onward journey towards material progress the Americans disclaimed the extended family in favor of the nuclear type. They have now discarded even the basic structure of family-two natural parents staying together for life. The failure of modern man to have enduring commitments to others is evidenced in the increasing divorce rates, revolution in sexual manners and morals and the emergence of step-parent and single-parent families in America. American family became, in Arlene Skolnick's terms, the "embattled paradise" (1991). The dire consequences of this transformation seem to go even beyond our immediate perception. Whether one joins hands with the doomsayers of American family or not, one has to acknowledge the fact that American family is as Skolnick says, "being battered by forces beyond control" (Prologue 1991: XXI). And this accounts for the difference in the depiction of family in the works of Alcott and Oates.

A close study of Little Women and Expensive People evinces the polarity of the two portraits of family in these two novels. If the March family in Little Women is the embodiment of an ordered past the Everett family in Expensive People represents the decline from the golden age of familial stability and harmony. From the outset Little Women gives us a notion of cohesiveness. All the members of the family, including little Amy, work together and make most of their limited means by sharing everything. Seeing them sitting at the hearth, after the day's labor, sharing their pleasures and pains one is reminded of Fletcher's comment that from the time of primitive men hearth has been "one common centre of momentary security, relaxation, lei sure and temporary happiness" (1993: 55). The Marches' refusal of their rich Aunt's offer of adoption of one of their daughters vouches for their sense of unity, "We can't give up our girls for a dozen fortunes. Rich or poor, we will keep together and be happy in one another" (L W: 45). It is this sense of togetherness that attracts the lonely Brooke and motherless Laurie to the Marches.

If the March family is governed by shared sentiments and practices, in Expensive People we miss such scenes of family solidarity and loyalty. Richard, the ten-year-old protagonist of the novel, admits that to an observant onlooker the Everett family had "the look of being three strangers who have met by accident on a walk and are waiting for the first chance to get away from one another" (EP. 19). It is a family that had been stripped of its traditional functions. Home never serves as a recuperative oasis for Richard.

In the Victorian America motherhood was considered one of the most sacred concepts of human culture. Marmee in Little Women is an embodiment of motherly virtues like tenderness, love and affection. She typifies the Victorian concept that women could be the provident antidote for the ills of the world. Marmee steers her children to the right direction against all odds in their voyage of life and brings them "safely into the port" (LW: SIS). She shapes the childish, yet independent spirits of her daughters in harmony with the interests of the family. Never forceful, but always suggestive, she remains a reassuring mother-figure throughout the novel. She is never a servile wife or a helpless mother. Her forceful personality adds charm to her domesticity. Laurie who feels homeless without a mother observes, "It's like looking at a picture to see the fire, and you all around the table with your mother; her face... looks so sweet behind the flowers, I can't help watching it" (LW: 59). This caring, supportive mother is a direct contrast to Natasha Everett of Expensive People who belongs to "the unrelenting gallery of hostile mother s populating Oates's fiction" (Mickelson 1979: 27).

Richard's friend, Gustave, says, "You should understand that it's always an awkward situation. Having a mother I mean" (EP. 59). Natasha, the beautiful and highly insensitive mother loves to be a pan of the affluent but pretentious and selfish suburban culture. In this "whitewashed society with a brainwashed morality" (Grant 1978: 48) this minor writer remains unconcerned about the emotional needs of her husband and son. Richard remembers her "always backing out of the driveway" (EP 183). He even wonders "if she was my mother" (45). Throughout the novel she remains a self-serving and self-centred mother. Natasha desecrates her maternal role when she insists Richard that she be called only "Nada" and not "Mother". She heartlessly reprimands him when he instinctively calls her mother, "What's this, now you are calling me Mother?... Don't give me that solemn weep look through your glasses, my friend, I don't particularly care to be called mother by anyone. I
don't respond to it..."No Mother, no Son" (188). Very often she leaves Richard with servants and seeks pleasure outside. One can feel Richard's sense of hurt behind his pathetic confession, "I never meant anything to her, never! I was perhaps some outlandish protoplasmic joke father had wished upon her one night after a cocktail party" (93). The very names -i-the assuring, warm 'Marmee' and the negative 'Nada'- are indicative of the contrast in their nature. Nada's attitude towards Richard reminds one of Elisabeth Badinter's argument, "Maternal love is a human feeling. And like any fee ling, it is uncertain, fragile and imperfect" (Introduction 1981: XXIII).

The rampant, self-seeking spirit of the modern American capitalistic society is another point of contrast between Nada and Marmee. Listening to Marmee's account of her attempts in the past to tame her quick temper for the sake of her children Jo feels, "In that sad, yet happy hour, she had learned not only the bitterness of remorse and despair, but the sweetness of self-denial and self-control" (L. W: 97). But Nada is always in pursuit of unregulated freedom. She cannot bear to be bound by any ties. Unlike Marmee she is never bothered about her duties towards her husband. She sees Everett only as a stepping-stone to success and luxury, and has no qualms about being unfaithful to him. She seeks sexual pleasure outside, and even deserts her family as and when she feels like.

Nada's romantic quest for freedom collides with Richard's yearning for mother love. She seeks personal fulfillment at the cost of her son's stability and sanity. Richard feels that there are "Two Nadas... the one who was free and who abandoned me often and the other who has become fixed irremovably in my brain..." (EP. 100). Nada fails miserably to strike a consonance with her maternal responsibilities and romantic aspirations. There is a gratifying reciprocity between the Marches and their children: "The girls gave their hearts into their mother's keeping, their souls into father's, and to both parents who lived and labored so faithfully for them, they gave a love that grew with their growth, and bound them tenderly together by the sweetest tie which blesses life and outlives death" (L. W: 272). Mr. March is never dominant, but is always an understanding and encouraging father whom the, children consult on all matters. We see how his Christmas letter to his daughters expressing his confidence in them inspires them to work harder. As he says, he thinks of them by day, and prays for them by night. When he comes back from war he never supersedes, his wife's authority but only augments it. Mr. March plays a primary role in sustaining their domestic harmony. On the contrary, Elwood, Everett, though a successful executive, is a pathetic failure as a 'husband and father. He not only puts up with Nada's infidelity and insensitivity but also fails in providing Richard with necessary emotional backing in the absence of maternal love. Richard does not feel any emotional closeness with his father who takes everything in his stride. His longing for a firm, authoritative father who would in some way regulate Nada's romantic spirit is evident when he says how he kept waiting for the "brutal voice of my true father" (E? 25 - 26). Ironically this strong father emerges only after the death of Nada, and it is this father who shuts the door on Richard after his remarriage.

Little Women and Expensive People illustrate the difference in the attitude towards marriage in these two different periods. A successful marriage is based on mutuality of interests. All the marriages in Little Women are born of love. Marmee's advice to her daughters, "Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives" (L. W: 115) is very significant. But it is her social aspirations that motivates the nineteen year-old Nada to marry the thirty-two year old Elwood. Richard observes, "Seeing the two of them together, you knew that they could never have met, by accident or by any other way, they could never have exchanged two words, never have married. Anyone could see that" (EP: 121). Richard's childhood memories are marred by images of his mother's infidelity.

It is Nada's quest for extraneous experience that leads her to infidelity. If Little Women evinces the strength of conjugal and parental sentiments, marriage in Expensive People is a relationship just endured and not relished. As Marmee reveals to Meg, the secret of their home happiness is nothing but mutual understanding and co-operation.

This kind of a reciprocal relationship lays a healthy foundation for the mental development of the March children. In the case of Richard lack of parental love makes him feel "as transparent as glass" (EP. 86). When he comes to Fernwood this ten year-old child is "an old man, already," "a doomed, damned child" (11). Their constant shifting, which is a characteristic feature of modern American life, leaves Richard no scope for establishing close friendship with others. His longing to love and be loved is not even acknowledged. With father mostly on tour, and Nada rarely at home, devoid of close friends, left alone with unconcerned servants Richard, naturally, begins to disintegrate and this turns fatal to Nada. The drunken father's revelation one night that she had wanted to abort him is too much of a blow to him and he crumbles totally with the result that he becomes a child murderer. He kills his own beloved mother, for he finds that the only way to keep her with him forever. At the end of Little Women, all her children settled in life, a contented Marmee voices her happiness, "my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this!" (L. W. 555).

This sort of a positive note cannot be expected in Oates' other-directed and dehumanized world. Richard's words, while planning to commit suicide by overeating, "All I ask is the strength to fill the emptiness inside me, to stuff it once and for all" (EP. 255) echo his sense of emptiness. Thus we note that instead of being a haven
from cares his family becomes a torture house for him. A study of these two novels, thus, shows the difference in the portrayal of family and familial relationships in these two culturally different periods. When Alcott upholds the familial bond and its strength in Little Women in 1868, Oates exactly a hundred years later, proclaims the dire need of it in the American family through the conspicuous absence of the same in Expensive People (1968).

REFERENCES