

Love, Marriage and Motherhood: A Critical Analysis of Jonathan Coe's *The Accidental Woman*

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Jonathan Coe has written on various subjects like Thatcherism, nationalism, terrorism, racism and familial disharmony in domestic life and at the same time he expects order in his society which is devoid of all the anti-social elements mentioned above. The research paper examines the issues of women at all stages of life with reference to the novel “*The Accidental Woman*”. The novelist argues that displacement and male dominance can in no way surpass modern women as they have transformed themselves into highly potential beings. Some of the elements that create adverse effects and threats to the woman folk are only from patriarchal dominance and woman of male dominated views. In addition, they encounter wrong choice in marriage, pre-marital and extra-marital relationship, economic dependence, possessiveness and self-pity. Surprisingly these negative elements that have been imposed on women make them emerge as empowered women who have got a new and vibrating energy and power.

Jonathan Coe is known for his political and satirical strategies attacking The Conservative Party of England for its policies and governance. Coe has very seriously discussed about the issues of women and their social transformation, in his maiden novel *The Accidental Woman*. There are very few male novelists who discuss about the trauma of women in the society and Coe is one among them. The inspiration he has received from virago novelists, Particularly Rosamond Lehmann has facilitated him to expose the social evils enforced on women in the British society. He being a male novelist is least bothered about the harsh criticism he may that have to encounter from the critics of both the gender and he is also not worried about the success of novel. His concern for women is markedly evident in his other novels like *A Touch of Love*, *What a Carve Up!*, *The Dwarves of Death*, *The House of Sleep* and *The Rain Before It Falls*. The noticeable

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factor is that the central character of *The Accidental Woman* and *The Rain before It Falls* are the women characters Maria and Rosamond respectively. The novelist has reflected the changing cultural and ideological reality of both writers and readers. Lidia Vianu in *The Accidental Theme: Jonathan Coe, The Accidental Woman* comments, "The Accidental Woman is a novel which changes absence (of family, of love, of sex, of a career, even of a life of the mind) into a sense of universal emptiness, an exacerbated general loneliness which springs out of displacement and defamiliarization" (154). Maria, the protagonist is compelled to move from place to place for the purpose of education, marriage, security, economic independence, survival and self-respect.

Maria is nicknamed by her schoolmates as, "Miserable Maria... Moody Mary, Shit-face. Snot-bag" (2), irrespective of gender in the school premises. The ridicule does not affect her determination to better them all at studies. She also does not take it to heart as she has no love and concern for them. Her love for education propels her to be studious and industrious in her studies neglecting the ridicule of her friends. This particular nature helps her in winning a place at Oxford, "the glorious start of a life rich in achievement and fulfilment" (3). Hence, the Headmistress of St. Jude's, Mrs. Lead better tells Maria, "Look forward to it with joy and anticipation. Be thrilled" (3). The education she has received helps her from not becoming a prey to infatuation as she rightly declines the love proposal of her class-mate Ronny suggests, "... why don't you find another girl, one who knows what you mean by those words" (4). She stands firm in her decision even after constant love proposals made by Ronny. She feels that sex is totally in no way important to her.

Coe presents Maria totally indifferent to his other characters in the novel and her weakness worth to be pointed out is her unfriendliness both at school and university. The novelist rightly says, "... she found friendship a difficult phenomenon to grasp, conceptually... friendship is frankly too strong a word for it" (19). Fear of a person mainly due to the bitter experiences at home and educational institutions may spoil relationships or prohibit a person from maintaining a friendly relationship. Fear is a destructive force that may replace love for the fellow beings. Maria's fear of being betrayed and neglected restricts her to be sociable and communicative with others.

Almost all the love relationship in *The Accidental Woman* ends up in failure. Charlotte, friend of Maria in London is in love with Philip which is in no way a platonic love. Both of them have craved for sex and so they indulge in pre-marital sexual relationship to satisfy themselves sexually. Such a physical love relationship has the least chance to transform into marriage, a sacred union of two minds, souls and bodies. Coe points out, "The course of Charlotte's love for

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Philip ran fairly smooth at first... after a few months they ran into difficulties” (26). Love with excess of lust will definitely ruin the love relationship. The novelist has never advocated pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relationship in his novels.

Chastity is a powerful tool for the human beings that may strengthen the character of a person and improve personal reputation. Charlotte laments, “I feel so cheap... My love isn't my own anymore. Everybody talks about it. It's has become a spectator sport” (29). A true love may not encounter disharmony at any circumstances. Maria feels sorry for Philip rather than for Charlotte who is lustful and callous in her attitude. Coe is very particular that a failure in love relationship should not spoil the life of a person as love failure is prone to addiction to alcohol, loneliness, depression and dejection. When Philip painfully says, “Love destroys” (30), Maria advises him to “Cheer up” (30). Humans have to learn from their mistakes and stand steadily converting their loss into gain. Philip determines, “A new life. A new... attitude towards life. Yes, that's it” (30). Coe advises people not to get disheartened by their failures, instead he counsels them to rise from their downfall like the phoenix that raises from its ashes.

People of same character may stay in association with each other. They have the highest chance of understanding each other, as there invoke a curiosity to make friendship. Maria is able to cope up only with Sarah as she identifies her character with her. Coe narrates, “And even then, she was not always alone, for Maria in those days a friend, a new friend. Of her five neighbors, four were the usual harmless lunatics, but one was a little girl called Sarah, and in her Maria found something very like a sympathetic spirit, for her she felt something bloody close to friendship, if the truth be told”(33). It is for Maria, “a happy time” (33) as her reserved nature has stood a hindrance to make friends all these years.

Coe firmly believes, “... from love, to happiness, then to marriage” (39) and this is the transformation every individual anticipates or wishes in life and he also makes it clear, “Surely, When so many marriages end in ugliness or unhappiness, it would be cynical to believe that they were ever founded on love... when a marriage ends, it is simply an economic contract that has been broken” (40). The novelist warns the world that if materialism replaces love then it is beyond doubt hypocritical and disloyal that the relationship may get disintegrated at any point of time in life.

The entire function of the world is male- female relationship, yet a moral code is needed to make life meaningful. Hence, marriage is the only union that may inculcate true love between the life- partners and as a result a family comes into existence which becomes a part of human society.

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The sixth chapter of *The Accidental Woman* is entitled *Her First Mistake* as Maria makes her first great mistake in life by abruptly opting a wrong choice in marriage without analyzing the characteristics and attitude of Martin. Almost six years after their marriage and four years after the birth of their son Edward, Martin inhumanely informs, “Angela and I will marry, of course. I spoke to the vicar about it last night. The honeymoon is all arranged” (101). The physically and economically weak Maria is callously and ungratefully betrayed by Martin and his decision to marry Angela, the typist in his office is authoritatively charged on Maria. He charges, “Your failure to satisfy me sexually is evidence enough of that” (101). Maria becomes a victim of wife battering, humiliation, betrayal and ill-treatment. The motherhood of Maria makes her to endure all her suffering, but when she understands that her son Edward prefers to stay with Martin, she is shattered and shocked. The extra-marital relationship of her husband has fragmented her from her husband and son, but in another way, “It freed her to move to London, and to live with Sarah, to enter, in fact upon one of her better phases” (103). She learns from her mistake, “that choice too quickly and too carelessly” (105) made has affected her life and prospects. The bitterness she has experienced in life instigates her to free herself economically and as a result, she wins an employment, “in the office of a Women’s Magazine. Her job was to look after the photograph library” (107) and her “working relationship with her colleagues was healthy” (108) though most of the employees were men. Maria is no more afraid of men as she begins to understand the society and her potential. Lawson comments, “Maria is a successful figure, but it is not a success that appeals to us greatly” (The Complete Review. 1987), but she has proved her potential and mental ability as woman to surpass all her sufferings and miseries.

The feeling of insecurity in the society makes her accept the view, “Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures” and this suggestion makes her propose, “Ronny, will you marry me?” (137), but on the appointed date of marriage in the Register Office, “... Ronny was more than late, and after half an hour the truth of the matter was obvious. The bastard had stood her up” (139). Coe abuses men who try to handle women like puppets with abusive words. Most of the novelists at such circumstances would have pictured Maria as a gullible and pitiable character. He instead builds her as a revolutionary character who resolves, as the novelist states, “You see, in her simplicity, Maria had resolved to start a new life” (143). The invincible spirit of Maria assists her to find an employment in a Women’s Refuge Centre. The novelist rightly points out, “Maria had suddenly developed a social consciousness” (144). Coe wishes women to be economically independent and possess social consciousness. He also advises women to choose right life- partner as he advocates matrimony to be the best union to construct a moral world.

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