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Absent Father in Anjana Appachana's *Listening Now*

- S. B. Biradar & Tripti Karekatti

Abstract: Father is treated as a pious figure in Indian family system. The importance and his role have not been questioned in the past. Hence father is given a status of God. Father is a term widely used in social, religious and cultural context. It reflects the origin of power and authority. His scope and impact has been noticed in the titles attached to a family. Patronymic identity is followed in many societies across the world. Father is treated as a paragon of manhood and authority. He is not a stark picture and outgrows into a huge gigantic personality in all the societies. Innumerable fathers have shown their power and authority while discharging their duty and responsibilities in the family. In the sense, father is treated as a towering figure. However, many fathers do not fulfill all aspects of familial duties. This has been pointed in Anjana Appachana's novel *Listening Now*. Anjana Appachana's first novel *Listening Now* (1997) explores several mysterious clandestine regarding the father's identity. Five women characters reveal interesting observations on the secret identity of father. It postulates various perspectives on absent father. The novel depicts the challenges and frustration faced by the protagonist in her domestic life. The entire plot surrounds the awful life-story of Padma, the protagonist.

Keywords: father, absent father and paternal functions.

'God the father', 'fatherland', 'forefathers' and 'founding fathers' all such terms invariably refer to the origin, authority and also to its importance. Patronymic identity is followed in many societies across the world. Father is treated as a paragon of manhood and authority. He is not a stark picture and outgrows into a huge gigantic personality in all the societies. The history has given innumerable images of fatherly personalities such as Arjun, Karna, Buddha, Shivaji, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Churchill, Lincoln and Nelson Mandela. More than eighty countries of the world have the father of the nation. For example, Mahatma Gandhi is father of India, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, father of Pakistan, Cyrus the Great, father of Persia, George Washington father of America, Giuseppe Garibaldi, father of Italy and so on. Many films have been screened on father or fathers as a central character. Innumerable short stories, plays, epics and novels are written on father and his victories and defeats in an interesting manner. Father is a towering figure in all these societies though many men do not fulfill all aspects of this most worshipped and idealized role of father when we consider paternal functions. Anjana Appachana's first novel *Listening Now* (1997) explores several mysterious clandestine regarding the father's identity. Five women characters reveal interesting observations on the secret identity of father. It postulates various perspectives on absent father. The whole plot moves swiftly like a mystery thriller. The novel

depicts the challenges and frustration faced by Padma, the protagonist in her domestic life. The awful life-story of Padma is the root of the entire plot. Further it revolves around the impact of absent father in society and home. In contrast to Mallika's absent father (Padma's Husband), Appachana portrays many fathers in the novel. These fathers are classified into the first generation fathers and the second generation fathers. The first generation fathers include father of Shanta, Padma and Madhav, father of Karan, father of Anuradha (Anu Aunt), and father of Madhu (Madhu aunt). The second generation fathers include Karan (absent father of Mallika), Prasad (father of Prabha and Anirudha), Mr. Nanda (father of Mahima, Akhil and Ranbir), and Narayan (father of Vikram and Varun). The novel opens unconventionally with a reference to the absent father. (unlike the strong authoritative father). The first perspective about the absent father emerges from the daughter (Mallika) of this absent father. Mallika is the daughter of Padma. She presents her childhood and adolescence perspective. One of the childhood perspectives is quoted in the following lines:

In that deep and distant time, there lived in my house my permanently stricken mother, my mother's vivacious, laughing sister, and my **absent father**, whose presence in our house was shaped by my grieving mother's awful silence. Our house was like a well, holding his absence and her silence, and within those waters, my story began. (3, emphasis mine)

The curiosity about the secret identity of the absent father is introduced in the very beginning of the novel. The quest for absent father is the major theme of this novel. The stories about Mallika's birth and her father bore with her mother when she bore Mallika in the womb. The stories are "swirling with their enchantment, suffused with their mysteries" (4). It exposed its unrelenting radiance of one revelation after the other leaving behind the tortured remains. The haunting and craving for the father is noticed in Mallika. Many incidents refer frequently to the identity of the absent father. While talking about the God and his capricious nature Mallika refers to the father. She says, "In a fit of generosity, or perhaps, simply guilt (for my father was dead), God had given me two mothers" (7). The silence of her mother is also associated with the absent father. Mallika notices her mother's silence since at the age of three. She says, "...this was the silence which crippled my mother, this was the silence that held my father, this was the silence which excluded me completely" (8). The positive aspects of mothers are compared with fathers. This comparison is connected to the absent father, Padma's husband. The strength of women is expressed in the following lines:

So potent the women, so powerful! What an absence of fathers, what a profusion of good and evil mothers! Where were all the fathers while the mothers battled, protected, rescued, nurtured? ...where, indeed *were* they? Sita gave birth to Luva and Kusha in the absence of Rama (no unwitting absence, this), brought them up fatherless. Kunti's son Karan, also fatherless, ...Shakuntala left with a child, forgotten by Dushyanta.

Ma, telling me these stories her voice unsteady, the women bearing Ma's face, Ma, my black braided Rapunzel, my father, the elusive Indian Prince. (9)

The fatherless state invariably haunts Mallika. She discovers her father's photograph at the bottom of saree trunk of her mother and describes him. He has a noble face with aristocratic looks. Her father and mother stood next to each other. She finds charm in her mother's eyes. She feels the charm in her mother's eyes due to companionship of her father. She finds this radiance has been extinguished in the life after. Mallika knows her mother weeps for him all night silently and bitterly. She says, "Secrets withheld during the day poured out at night into the darkness of Ma's room, creeping out like smoke from under her door" (13). She also knows that her father's absence has created a sense of presence in their life. His presence is felt frequently and in this context she says, "The nature of his absence shaped his presence in our house, a shape that had inhabited our lives from the very beginning, one that enveloped and consumed Ma" (14). Frequently, she imagines her father's arrival. When the door bell rings she thinks of his arrival. It is expressed in the following lines:

Ma opening the door. Dada standing there, eyes bruised, face gaunt with sorrow, voice hoarse with suffering. "Padma, I have come back to you." Swiftly catching her before she falls in a faint, looking down at the beloved, unforgotten face. A sound-looking up, there before him, his child, his free arm opening wide, I within it, his face wet against my cheek. (14)

The sound of door bell ringing has been used frequently as a metaphor. It implies the expected arrival of Mallika's absent father. Her father's arrival before the door of their house, his words of affection over his child and wife has been quoted many times by Mallika. Gradually, the expectance of her father's arrival diminishes and also the response of absent father towards his daughter in her imagination also diminishes. She says:

Ma opening the door. Dada's face, distraught. "I have come back to you, Padma. It was my memory that went. For years I wandered, a prisoner in my own mind. Then my memory returned. I have come back to you, my sweet." (His eyes wide in disbelief. His arms open.) "And this, this beauty is my child? (16).

The gradual change of diminishing expectancy of her imagination is noticed in the following lines. "She opens the door. He stands there, his heart in his eyes. ...he says, 'it has been death without you'. He sees me. 'My child, oh, my child!'" (28). In the next recalling of her imagination, she has noticed that the absent father does not speak. "Ma opens the door. Dada stands there, unmoving" (32). The hope of meeting absent father is dominant in the mind of Mallika. She tries to fill the space of absent father through this kind of imagination. She expresses her longing for him as her mother longs for him. She knows that her father has given many books to read to her mother. This reference of books also leads to recalling her absent father. She knows that her absent father and mother are intellectually compatible to each other. Old memories of her

father play and replay in her mind. All the neighbours namely, Anu Aunty, Madhu Aunty, and Anu Aunty's Mother-in-law are sympathetic to Padma and her daughter. Madhu gives a different version of absent father's identity. It is based on the cooked story told by Shanta, sister of Padma. In that story, it is revealed that Padma's husband died in a car accident. Thus, from Madhu's perspective, absent father is no longer survived. Due to his absence Padma and her daughter face lot of problems in their life. Anuradha, neighbour of Padma gives her perspective on the absent father. During her conversation with Padma, she comes to know that Mallika has taken after her father in temperament. On her journey to Lucknow, she meets Sita accidentally. Sita is the youngest sister of Karan (absent father of Mallika). During her conversation, she narrates her bareness, how it linked to a curse on her family. Two women and a man have come to her house with a proposal of marriage for her brother. When her mother has used nauseating words, they have cursed to her entire family. Their curse is quoted in the following lines:

I curse you all. You and you, and you. May your' son's wife be forever barren. May your two daughters be forever barren. May your house be forever empty of the laughter of grandchildren. May the marriages of your son and your two daughters be as barren as their wombs. May all my sister's suffering come back to you through your children. (144)

Incidentally, Sita's entire family fails to have children in their life. When Shanta and her mother have visited Karan's house with Padma's proposal, Karan is under civil service training in Delhi. Sita does not share this event with her brother as she has lot of respect for her brother. She believes that her brother must not have committed this mistake. Justifying this she says, "My brother is a man of integrity. Whatever his faults. He used to be moody, completely spoilt by our mother- he is her moon and her sun- all that I Know. But he was, is, honest" (151). Intestinally, Anuradha does not link Sita's version of story with that of Padma. The writer underscores the importance of father and absent father in one of the instances of the novel. Anuradha recalls mythological characters through which the children without father excel in their talents. It is expressed in the following lines:

Look at Kunti. She bore Karan out of wedlock, and what a great man he was, greater than the Pandavas. And Shakuntala. Even Hanuman- he was born of Anjani and the Wind god- they were not married, and don't we all worship Hanuman? And look at Sita, they say she was born of the earth, and the earth took her back. Our Shastras do not condemn. (152)

Shanta, the sister of Padma narrates her version of absent father. Shanta's version about the absent father is the same as narrated by Sita in the railway compartment to Anuradha. She comes to know that Karan has got married a month ago. By the time, Padma is pregnant and she is not ready to abort. All the family members of Padma decide to play a trick about the absent father in order to avoid the disgrace of Padma's pregnancy. They have cooked a make belief story of Padma's husband's death in an accident and narrated it to everyone. Shanta knows that

Mallika murmurs in her sleep about her father. Padma gives her version of the story of her husband. Padma loves Karan and has an affair with him. Karan is a friend of her brother. They know each other for more than four years. In their passion for love, both consummated. The result is the pregnancy of Padma. She gives birth to a female child. Due to the role of fate, they did not get married though both love each other. Karan stands as an absent father. Padma also imagines the sound of door bell ringing and Karan begging for Padma's forgiveness, "Forgive me, Padma. Padma. Forgive me" (242). She expects that one day Karan comes back and asks for her forgiveness. Rukmini, mother of Padma narrates the episode of Karan, the absent father visiting their house in Bangalore after thirteen years. Karan visits Padma's parent's house with his wife Prema and narrates his past in the following words, "My mother and sisters did not tell me you had come with a proposal, because when you came I was already married" (372). He narrates how his marriage was fixed and how he got married. He has read all the letters of Padma recently when Sita has given them. All the letters of Padma have been first read by his mother and hid them in the trunk. Karan reveals another secret that during his first visit to their house, Padma's father tells him she is married. His first visit falls during the same day when Shanta and Rukmani have gone to Lucknow with Padma's proposal. Many secrets about miscarriages in their family are revealed by Prema. Rukmini raises pertinent questions on his fatherhood when Karan visits her house. She asks, "You ask about *your daughter*? She is not your daughter. You think your seed, it makes you her father? ...every right you forsook when you forsook Padma. Even now, even now you think you are more sinned against than sinning, do you not?" (394). Rukmini's support is not consistent towards her daughter Padma. Karan now wishes to reunite with Padma as a husband and Mallika as a father. Padma allows her daughter to decide whether to accept him as a father. When Mallika knows all the secrets and mysteries about him such as Karan's marriage with another woman, the identity of the father in the photograph, [The person in the photograph is Sumi's brother Sumit. He is not her biological father], and about the hidden letters. The shocking news about identity of her father is uncomprehensible. She observes terror on her mother's face and grief in the mind of Shantamma. But Mallika has already accepted the person in the photograph as her father, though he is not her biological father. It is expressed in the following lines:

She could have no father other than the one she had known for seven years, the one in the photograph, who was still alive, who had given her the polite smile. ...And the man who had fathered her, whose face she did not know, whatever they wanted to tell her about him she did not want to hear. (414)

Later, when the mystery of absent father is revealed, Mallika draws crucial and critical remarks on her father at the end of the novel. She meets her absent father and retaliates the same nauseating words which