Chapter Two

Broken Family Syndrome Initiating the Quest

Audrey Thomas, being a woman writer, understands the soul and spirit of women and tries to portray clearly the lives of women in totality. In her writing, she explores and explodes the limits and boundaries in a perpetual search for meaning. This quest is evident from her first published story, “If One Green Bottle . . .” where her major themes of loss, loneliness, death, and art emerge. They surface again and again in a variety of forms in all of her stories as the characters grope for meaning which would give them reassurance of their existence in a seemingly absurd world. Audrey Thomas writes of families replete with unhappy marriages and abandoned wives and daughters. Her female protagonists are mostly homemakers struggling to survive at subsistence level: lonely widows, students, single women living on the edge, bystanders without exception. They suffer in nearly all their experiences: hideous childhoods, awkward adolescences, failed marriages and traumatic abortions. Her stories preoccupy with issues, problems and disasters related to love and marriage. Presenting her stories from the perspective of female characters, she often describes modern human relationships, particularly the discouraging prospects for caring, nurturing bonds between men and women. According to Carole Gerson, Thomas creates “penetrating expositions of characters and their irresolvable muddles, which lead the reader along the delicate filaments of the tangled relationships we all spin ourselves as parents, children, spouses, lovers, and friends” (484). Her stories also focus on characters of different sexes and conditions that have some form of altered, heightened, or deranged consciousness. She also explores them in crisis, placing them in foreign countries – Africa, England, British Columbia, Mexico, Greece, Paris, and Scotland – where they will be pushed to their limits.
The scope of this chapter is confined to identifying the causes for the breakup of the two vital social institutions of marriage and family and the consequent issues and problems which mostly affect the women and drive them inevitably to undertake a quest. A detailed examination of the causes is provided in the chapters in the relevant contexts. The various forms of the quest are discussed one after another in the ensuing chapters, starting with the quest for identity in the next (third) chapter.

Incompatibility in familial relationship between man and woman due to various reasons seems to be a vital issue around which Audrey Thomas’ short stories are woven: the husband and wife are separated from each other in most of the families. As Ellen Quigley rightly states, more than one reviewer has commented that he is tired of all the negative male characters that populate Audrey Thomas’ work (43). Under the author’s frankly feminist scrutiny, men in her stories are not shown in good light. Most of the men seem misplaced; they are non-functional or downright disgusting in their human relationships, at least with women. Faithless ex-husbands are mentioned only in a passing reference. And several male characters are noteworthy mainly for their fatuous self-absorption.

Larry, in “A Hunter’s Moon,” is a typical misogynist, a self-centered fool and a man who remains stoned most of the weekend. He is perhaps one of the most repulsive misogynist males Audrey Thomas has ever sketched. Annette, his girl friend, says that he is “The kind of person you’d be sorry, later, that you’d told the story of your life . . .” (WBY 38). He hurts her by attempting to seduce her best friend, Zoe, under her nose. She is angry, depressed and disappointed of Larry as he is the cause for the possible end of her friendship with Joe. Still Thomas’ female characters have no illusions about the men in their lives. Comforting
Annette later, Zoe says simply: “Listen, Annette, do we really like them? I’m not talking about sex, I’m talking about like” (WBY 48).

Charlie, from “In the Groove”, is a self-absorbed macho man. Danny and Fred, in “Trash” are thugs who come and go, while Peter, in “The Happy Farmer,” is a presumptuous, superior, male chauvinist who mentally harasses the female protagonist. The crowd of male football fans in “The Survival of the Fittest” cause a sick, elderly woman great distress; perhaps threatening her life by undermining her ability to survive her fearful journey. “Compression” contains images of a mass murderer, a male stripper as the Grim Reaper, and threatening, invasive, male technology, while “Blue Spanish Eyes” is a first person account of how a woman, meets, courts, and is courted by her murderer. The young murderer charms her, presents himself as innocent and trustworthy. Images and references to trust appear throughout the story. But the trust becomes an illusion, a game which makes her wonder whether there are any trustworthy men at all.

Michael, in “Roots”, has no psychotic tendencies, but he does walk “around with his head in the clouds,” translating reality into the esoteric etymologies found in the dictionary, leaving Louise to deal with the shitload of daily life, and paying little attention to her feelings unless she explodes (WBY 3). Ase and Fred in “Breeders” are two male characters who appear to be normal, but they are homosexuals, implying social alienation. Corinne is uncertain whether she can trust them enough to tell them that she is pregnant. Even Jeff, the father of her unborn child, seems incognizant of her pregnancy. He and Corrine have been together since grade twelve. But now he is no longer interested in her. This makes her wonder whether he has ever thought of her as a woman.
Lionel in “Real Mothers,” is considered a creep for he is “always creeping around in his runners coming up behind you when you didn’t expect it” (RM 16). He smokes a lot of dope all through the day and has a silly laugh, like a whiny, when he is stoned. He has a superior manner about himself and carries a “stupid smile on his stupid face” (17). He threatens Marie-Anne with his sexual advances, treats Patty sadistically, and corrupts Clayton, teaching him how to use drugs. According to Marie Anne, he reminds her more of some creepy high school boy than a twenty-eight year old man. It is after his arrival that she feels “the world came to an end” (16). In “Natural History,” Clytie, as a child when asked what strangers are, she replies very seriously “Strangers are usually men” (RM 33) and this stranger-man who is drunk leaves Nurse Primrose brutally raped in “Salon des Refuses.”

In “Out in the Midday Sun,” a woman hides a letter from a publisher who has accepted her manuscript, knowing that her husband will be jealous of her success. In “Aquarius,” a husband wallowing in self-pity blames his condition on his wife’s vitality. “Harry and Violet” is about a relationship that suffers because the man resents his lady love’s child. In “The Slow of Despond,” though Gordon never really appears, the way his male power rules is clearly portrayed. Thus, it is found that these problematic men are the reason for the breakup of the family. In fact, on more than one occasion, critics like Barbara Godard and Eleanor Wachtel have noted that male characters “do not come out very well” in Thomas’ hand, as they are often presented as selfish, egocentric, narrow minded, and guilty of great psychological cruelty (Wachtel, Fences 10). One of Thomas’ preoccupations as a writer has always been to probe relationships between the sexes, to explore what women see in those flawed men and how they recover from their abusive relationships with them through an understanding of their own motives and dependencies.
In “Trash,” the protagonist’s husband is portrayed as an irresponsible man who evades his duties by thrusting it on his wife. The protagonist, who already has several duties to perform as a graduate student, a teacher assistant and a mother, is burdened with the additional responsibility of placing their annual ads in the university rental sheet, interviewing prospective tenants and framing rules for them. Her husband eludes from his responsibilities, leaving her to deal with the actual people and problems that come with them. He merely plays the role of a “pleasant if somewhat distant husband” of the landlady (WBY 109). This makes her resent his attitude.

Most of the stories record the hatred that women have towards men. Her characters find men in their lives to be very disturbing. As the narrator of the “Elevation” admits, they are “charming, [and] interesting to sit next to but scary to spend your life with. . . . they made her [feel] uneasy” (GHGL 6, 7). In “Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989”, Pauline wakes up to the sound of the telephone in the middle of the night and feels very glad that she is sleeping alone. She says that the presence of a man in bed is awkward and embarrassing. Louise, in “Roots” during her delivery yells out “Why are there men!” (WBY 5), thereby registering her hatred for them. In “The Slow of Despond,” Sarah, for whom singing was a passion finds fault with her husband for not being able to hold a tune. She says, “The one fairy absent from your christening. When you sing you sound like a crow” (WBY 19).

Although Thomas’ women hate the men around them, they are also attracted towards them for various reasons. “A Hunter’s Moon” and “Blue Spanish Eyes” centre largely on women who are drawn toward destructive men by their need for sexual relationships. “A Hunter’s Moon” is thematically pivotal and the story is about Annette’s relationship with Larry and the other mother-hating men who surround her. At the same time, there is some
woman-centered refocusing of energy in the description of the strong and ritualistic relationship between Annette and Zoe. They bathe outdoors under a full moon, putting fragrant herbs and oils into the steamy bathwater. When Larry appears with wine, Annette calls him ‘Ganymede,’ indicating his position as servant to the women. Still, Annette’s feelings for Zoe are tinged with jealousy because of Larry’s attraction to Zoe, even though she fights against this. There are also other women who are attracted towards men for protection as in “The Survival of the Fittest”, for definition as in “The Slow of Despond”, and for family as in “Roots”, as well as women who are just trying to live their own lives only to have them rudely interrupted by male privilege as in “The Happy Farmer”. The lives of these women will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming chapters.

Almost all of Thomas’ characters are often/always in search of something. Nobody is presented as contented with his or her life. Atwood in her critical essay on Audrey Thomas points out that “Thomas writes to demonstrate the terrible gap that exists between men and women, and the phrasing is an indication of her even-handed approach. Though her women are usually bewildered, afraid of not being loved, unable to cope and dependant on men though resentful of them, her men are far from being the potent, capable figures these women suppose them to be” (2). When she writes from the point of view of a male character, one is likely to discover a man who feels smothered by such clinging vines, or who feels literally crushed – as in Aquarius – by a woman’s flaunted sexuality. Men, in their turn, visualize their women as all-powerful goddesses who mock and diminish them. Neither side is able to imagine its own power, only that of the other. It is typical of a Thomas’ heroine that she should long for a simple domestic life, with husband and children, something pastoral, with a wood stove and home-spun yard, only to find that she is hopeless at lighting fires and afraid
of everything outside the door, and that her husband is up to something with the next-door neighbour, while she herself is attracted by the young Indian fishermen down at the fishing dock.

In “Aquarius,” a husband feels smothered by a wife who seems “the very essence of female with her full Northern figure and her incredible self-assurance and practicality” – the prototype of the castrating female (L&E 10). The man is a failed poet and teacher, and he is trapped, like the fish he sees in the aquarium, yet envious of their ordered environment. This wimpy, whining husband of the terrible, voracious Erica is dominated by her. His beseeching “O Ile leape up to my God . . . who pulls me downe?” (6) is the perfect poignant moment in the story, as the former poet and lover watches the whale show at the aquarium. This husband of Erica’s is in mid-life crisis. Depressed, frustrated, angry, he mentally vents his rage and disappointment against Erica, whom he blames for his present predicament, making his way from exhibit to exhibit with increasing bitterness. His wife, he concludes, “had raped him – truly – as the Vikings raped their conquered women. And she had desecrated him and everything he dreamed of” (17). Similarly, in “A Monday Dream at Alameda park”, the young wife is vibrant and flouncing (“she was color and life and delight”), the middle-aged man stricken with cramps and frequent diarrhea. They have chosen to be “liberated” from dependence on each other so they can fulfill their separate desires (L&E 121). But in the end it’s obvious he is unequal to the task.

In other stories, the roles are reversed and the narrator’s voice is that of the female who is hurt, bewildered, afraid of not being loved, and resentful of her dependence. In “Kill Day on the Government Wharf,” the city-bred wife thinks she prefers the uncluttered life of a fishing village and is obsessed with the myth of escape to a summer cabin by the sea. Yet she
can’t cope with such simple things as lighting fires or knitting and she’s afraid of imaginary footsteps on stairs and faces outside window panes.

Audrey Thomas skillfully records the problems and dynamics of modern adult and family relationships. She says that men and women physically and emotionally abuse each other. Peter’s father, in “Three Men and Two Women” is always drunk and half-crazy. Locking himself in the back room along with Peter (aged around nine), he hands over a rifle to him and asks him to shoot if he tries to leave. As a drunken man, he is out of his mind and is frightened that he might hurt his wife. This is further reinforced by the narrator of “The Survival of the Fittest,” when she records, “When men were angry they attacked whatever was weakest and nearest. . . . It was hard for a boy to grow up gentle, however much his parents might wish it so” (WBY 157).

When Annette in “A Hunter’s Moon” says something accusatory to her husband, he hauls off and smashes her in the eye. She also admits that her new boyfriend Larry has an enormous capacity for hurting her. After making love to her, he says that, that was the first time he had ever slept with a woman and had “not been intimately involved in the process . . . My penis was having a wonderful time . . . But I wasn’t involved, somehow, not on a personal level” (WBY 41). Just as the drive through the mountains that Annette goes with Larry is physically dangerous, their relationship is psychologically dangerous. The only way for Annette to maintain equal ground is to become equally abusive.

In “In the Bleak Mid-Winter,” Johanna, one of two women in a ménage a trios, rebels against the self-centered male corner of the triangle. In taking up with a workman in the Greek hotel where the three are staying, she undermines her lover’s pretensions. Then she silences his impotent anger with the reassurance: “It’s all right, Patrick. I told them that you
were my brother” (RM 87). When Margaret’s husband in “The Albatross,” points out that the house smelt like a fifty-cent brothel because of Mrs. Pilkinson’s deodorant, she questions him as to how he knows what it would smell like. He leaves her hurt with her reply: “Never marry an intellectual. Or not one who’s an aural nymphomaniac” (TGB 78).

Pointing out his romantic shortcomings, the husband in “Roots” ruefully asks his dissatisfied wife, “Whoever heard of a prince with a bald spot on the top of his head?” She replies, bitterly, “Whoever heard of a princess with stretch marks?” (WBY 5) For all of the characters in Audrey Thomas’ short stories, life is distinctly unlike a fairy tale. Flesh turns to flab, romance burns to ashes, and husbands move on, usually to younger, more attractive women. At mid-life, Thomas’ heroines find themselves chalking up more losses than gains, and the past will not leave them in peace. The short stories of Audrey Thomas, thus voice the complaint that the traditional relationship between men and women, adults and children are unhealthy. Treating one another as possessions, both spouses create in each other a ‘whorelike dependence’.

As Eleanor Wachtel justly remarks, Audrey Thomas’ stories take up the subject of the failure of modern relationships, which has even supplanted love and romance as a preoccupation of our time (Contemporary Triangles 51). Connections between man and woman fail because ties between individuals are unequal and they eventually break up. In her stories, men are not only more vulnerable, but also more callous: they live in self-delusion and so they are spared the pain of self-knowledge and it is only the women who bleed.

Thomas presents life as a lonely path, in which kindness and fellowship, however welcomed, are of limited use. In focusing on the enormous strength and spirit needed to get through life with dignity, Thomas has created a compassionate tribute to her women who
soldier on in a world in which there are no happy endings. These women experience a sense of estrangement, dislocation and displacement. Living in an unfamiliar environment compels them to face their own sense of unfulfillment, to find a meaning to their lives, to dare challenge their fear of life and death.

Her stories present realities of women’s lives as they struggle for a sense of selfhood (“Timbuktu”), wrestle with conflicting demands of children and husband/lovers (“Harry and Violet”), or deal with the complex web of miscomprehensions which are the conventions governing relationships between members of the opposite sex (“In the Bleak Mid-Winter”). In all these situations, conflicting emotional demands or role expectations are threatening to split women apart.

Audrey Thomas’ stories echo with anguish and torment. As Ken Adachi rightly points out the “terrible gap” that Audrey Thomas is interested in exists not only between men and women but also between different cultures, island and mainland, country and city, parents and children, even between different continents (Stories 9). These all collide, with the fiercely inward-looking characters inescapably locked in their own private torments and isolated on the edge of the world. The stories are scorching exercises in anguish, humiliation and hopelessness, deceptively simple but always powerful.

In settings that range from Africa to New York City and from Great Britain to Canada’s West Coast, where she has lived since 1959, her stories artfully demonstrate that human misery is universal. Lives shatter into pieces and cannot be fixed; a sense of isolation and rootlessness prevails. In her West Coast stories, she amusingly conjures up an exotic countercultural atmosphere where superannuated hippies drink home-made wine, smoke cannabis and never lack sex partners. But even those free spirits are anything but content. In
“A Hunter’s Moon,” a divorced Vancouver playwright named Annette reflects on her inability to find peace of mind: “She felt like putting a message in a bottle and throwing it out to sea. ‘Help me’. Help me do what?” (WBY 54).

Some of Thomas’ characters find marriage to be inevitably boring. Since boredom cannot be endured, marriage necessarily becomes intolerable. In “Timbuktu” Rona claims that her boredom is unbearable. She feels that she has to get away as she finds marriage insufferably dull. She is unable to stand the certainty and security that comes from being loved, and instead longs for excitement and change.

Some of the women in her stories explicate that it is impossible to commit themselves to marriage without losing their sense of identity. Her characters see themselves as “vegetables” during their married life, and believe that they could not come into being, until they escaped the relation. “The real meaning of Easter,” the professor in “A Monday Dream at Alameda Park” realizes, once he is out of a marriage that “had nearly killed him,” “is that resurrection is a possibility for us all” (L&E 206, 207). He had not been able to discover his whole identity in a conventional marriage because the relationship left him sexually unfulfilled: in spite of the marriage he had been able to realize his intellectual self, but he had never been able to know himself as a sexual being. Thinking back on his first marriage he asks “where had this body been during all that time?” (207).

In “Roots”, the ears of Michael that stood out from his head appeared charming to Louise before marriage. But after nine years the very same ears, she says, “drove her nuts” (WBY 3). In “The Slow of Despond,” Sarah complains that her husband, Gordon, cannot hold a tune and that he sounds more like an “old crow in a kilt” when he sings, to which he replies “Why did you run after me then?” (WBY 20).
In “Real Mothers,” Marie Anne’s father had not “been in love” with his wife, Helen (RM 13). He was not attracted to her and he had never wanted to hug or kiss her. According to him, marriage has turned his life into a mere vegetable. Similarly in “Three Women and Two Men,” Margaret, abandoned by her husband, thinks of herself as a cripple. In “Salon des Refuses,” Nurse Primrose compares getting married to working in an insane asylum. She says that both require “work[ing] your fingers to the bone” and that the only difference is one doesn’t get paid in marriage (TGB 174). The protagonist’s husband in “Blue Spanish Eyes” compares marriage to motor cars and says that just like motorcars even marriages get worn out over passage of time.

In “The Slow of Despond,” Sarah MacLeod puts on her wedding ring only once a year, on a certain day in November. She has been doing this for more than twenty-five years and each time, she says, that her hands felt strange with the ring upon it. The life that she shared with her husband has been so frustrating that she finds her wedding ring very “hot and heavy under the sheepskin glove” (WBY 17). Likewise Francine in “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck,” reckons that the wedding ring is false, atleat to the wearer. To her, it no longer has any meaning. “. . . it was not the symbol it was to the rest of the world.” She feels that it is just “a small gold tourniquet tied too tight, cutting of her circulation” (GHGL 205), not only to that one finger but all over her body. She senses as if something mysterious is strangling her and cutting off her air. She sees her wedding ring as a poisonous snake. This woman, who has trouble breathing, considers leaving her husband as a kind of escape.

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WHY CAN’T THEY SEND THEM ALL? (218)
She also thinks about “other wives of other men” (207). She wonders whether any of them walked around in a similar state of choking despair. She listens to music that deals with the sad realities of people cheating on one another, hurting each other, and about lonely people in bars, just like her. She also adds that she is not able to discuss things freely with her husband. She compares talking to her husband to walking through a glass door without knowing that it is in front of you. She feels that it would only leave her in an awful shock and with a bump on the head.

In Thomas’ short stories the relationship between husband and wife is pictured as a mutual dependence which is debilitating to both. They find that their marriage locks them into a very unhealthy, unnatural relation with the partner. In “Aquarius”, for example, Erica stays married to a man she detests because she needs to feed off his pain vampirically. Her husband hates her, but he is her “captive” and cannot leave (L&E 12). Thomas’ characters find that this debilitating relationship between the husband and wife has made them consider the possibility of open marriage. Her characters claim the right to live independently, and to have a life separate from their marriage partner. In “Timbuktu,” although Philip objects, he agrees that it is Rona’s prerogative to leave him to go on a journey she insists on making alone.

Many of Thomas’ characters confess that they have grown tired of their marriage partners and are sexually attracted to others. An unnamed white woman in “Omo” shacks up with an African while her husband is on leave. Later, discovering her pregnancy, she tries to get rid of it on her own and ends up dying in a hospital. Tom’s wife, in “Kill Day on the Government Wharf” is disconcerted when she realizes she is sexually attracted to the young Indian who uses her telephone. She and her husband are both becoming uncomfortably aware
of the “sad and immeasurable gulf between them” (L&E 43) and their efforts to bridge it are futile: although she refuses to eat the fish the Indian has sent her and tries to compensate for her disloyal feelings with the violence of her lovemaking; husband and wife are as distanced from each other as ever when they fall asleep.

While the professor in “A Monday Dream at Alameda Park” lies sick in the hospital, his wife investigates Mexico without him. Even when he is well again, they agree to spend their days apart. When he returns to the States, Laura will not be accompanying him: “. . . they were very liberated, very liberal, in their attitude to one another. What was the point of their always being together?” (L&E 121). In addition to this, Laura accepts her husband’s decision to establish a sexual relation with Rosario and Inez. But even this unconventional sexual arrangement proves to be no remedy either. Laura and her husband are hurt by their sexual encounter with Inez and Rosario; crying in each other’s arms after the painful experience, Laura advises the professor to “let go of it” but he is not able to, for the next day he feels “tired and convalescent” and Mexico seems “unfriendly, cold” (127).

In stories “Real Mothers” and “Harry and Violet,” Thomas delineates how open marriage affects the dynamics between children and their parents. In “Three Women and Two Men” family arrangements even more radical than these are explored: Margaret and Richard bring their friend into their marital life and ask her to bear a child for them. In “Ted’s Wife,” middle-aged Phyllis Keeping is shattered to learn that the recent widower, Ted, whom she wants to romantically befriend is passionately involved with a much younger woman whom he eventually marries.

The women in “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” and “Crossing the Rubicon” are injured psychologically trying to live in a ménage a trois. Realizing that her role in the relation with
Maggie and Patrick is masochistic, Johanna is able to leave them before she has been seriously hurt, but she has suffered, nevertheless. When Patrick tells her that Maggie has been crying, she informs him that she knows why Maggie is in pain because she herself cries too. The narrator of “Crossing the Rubicon” seems to have fared worse than Johanna participating in a ménage a trois. She is bitterly cynical about the experience, and her cynicism betrays her pain. When asked if she really lived with Sheila and her husband, she lashes out with, “Oh, yes, but I think we did it more for the sound of the thing than anything else . . . [m]énage a trios. It sounds so nice, so civilized and sophisticated. Quite different from ‘bigamy’ or ‘screwing two women’ . . . although, after a while, it sounded more like ménage a twat to me” (RM 162). As therapy, she tries to write about the experience, but she has been too hurt to confront her past directly, and instead of writing about what actually happened, she invents a story about a woman immune to pain, who walks away from the ménage unscathed.

In most of the stories it is observed that there is a lot of difference in age between the man and the woman. In “Real Mothers,” Marie-Anne looks at her father’s new girlfriend, Ardelle, sitting in a car, wearing a sundress and realizes the new stepmother is nearer her brother’s age than her father’s. In “Ted’s Wife” when Ted brings a young woman back from his tour and announces that he has decided to make it legal, Phyllis Keeping questions him, “What are you going to do . . . adopt her?” (RM 59). In “A Monday Dream at Alameda Park” the older man has been liberated by his pupil from a marriage of stultification and repression. It is as if the mother’s daughter has grown up and taken away the father.

Getting people’s age and status wrong is a common image of emotional disturbance in Thomas’ stories. Edward in “Local Customs” is shown to the same hotel room as his
overly young stepmother by the proprietor, who thinks both are Anna’s husband’s children.
In “Relics” the fate of Nicky, the married RAF officer, a young student is having an affair with, is sealed when his photograph is mistaken for one of the students’ father. In “Blue Spanish Eyes,” the protagonist romantically befriends a young boy who is a fellow passenger and who is more of her son’s age.

Audrey Thomas has once said in an interview that she is interested in portraying “the terrible gap between men and women” and “to show how we all delude one another” (Coupey 98). She writes of families replete with unhappy marriages and abandoned wives and daughters. As one of her characters, Rona in “Timbuktu” opines none seems to be married for ever; husband and wife go separate ways sooner or later and the marriage does not last forever.

In many of the stories, it is found that men are not committed to their marriage. They grow tired of their partners and eventually leave them, for younger and beautiful women. When men leave, the very act of leaving seems to have been already over and the partners are presented only as separated men and women. This act of leaving on the other hand affects the lives of women and leaves them shattered.

In “Real Mothers,” Helen’s husband leaves her and moves on to Ardelle, one of his students (obviously young) because to him the relationship that he had with his wife for nearly seventeen years was more like vegetables. Unable to overcome the desertion of her husband, Helen remains sad for months together and even keeps weeping in the middle of the night. So he takes their daughter, Marie Anne on a long walk to Third Beach and explains to her that he and her mother no longer ‘related’ to one another and that in the end her mother would probably thank him for leaving her.
In “A Monday Dream at Alameda Park,” the professor leaves his wife and marries a young and beautiful woman, Laura. When his wife cries at the moment of leaving, the professor tells her that they have been living as vegetables for fourteen years and why should she cry about. He adds that his relationship with his wife nearly killed him and that he had never loved her. Even after separation she writes him letters, proclaiming her love, her unhappiness and her desire to try again. But to him, it is more like “presenting him with past hurts like unpaid bills” (L&E 117). In “Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989,” Richard, after ten years of marriage life, falls in love with a young woman who sold them coffee every Saturday and so deserts his wife, Pauline. Even after several years, she feels devastated and finds it very difficult to overcome the pangs of his separation.

In “Galatea,” Peter tells his wife that he could not give up “this girl” and therefore he has to leave. His wife asks him to give her his photograph, the one that he had used on the back cover of his first book. He hands over the photograph to her, writing across it “To my dear, dear friend. I will always be there when you need me” (RM 42). She reads it through her tears, thanks him for it and asks him to get out of the room right then. The desertion on the part of the husband is too much for her to bear for she really loves him. The next day, before leaving him, she wants to bake bread and prepare him a meal for he has never once cooked in his life. She wants to show him how much she cared and how much he needs her. But all that she could do is to leave back the photograph on the kitchen table.

A grotesque imagery is used to define the relation between Peter and his wife. Even though Peter returns to her after a year, their relationship is seen only as a mutilation: the narrator has “crippled” her husband “as surely as if she had cut off his toes with one of those wicked-looking knives that she saw here on market-day” (45). She actually imagines herself
behind him, pushing his chair around forever and his legs covered in a soft plaid robe. She no longer worries even when he flirts with his students or other young girls because she knows that he would never leave her again, even if he did, he would soon return.

In “Blue Spanish Eyes,” the narrator-woman lives alone after her husband leaves her for a younger woman. But she prefers to wear her wedding ring whenever she travels. If a talk about her husband comes up, she only admits that he had passed on without adding the fact that he had passed on to a younger woman. She prefers to be looked upon as a widower than a divorcée. In “Local customs,” Edward’s father divorces his wife and moves on to a younger woman, Anna. She is very much younger than him that Dmitri, the owner of the hotel where they stay mistakes her to be the elder sister of Edward and even shows them to the same room.

Clytie’s father in “Natural History,” deserts her mother who finds it very difficult to ‘recover’ from it. From the discussion that she has with the woman she meets on the island, she comes to know that her husband has also left her and her children, preferring to live with a younger woman. She is so upset with this act of leaving of her husband that she spends a month thinking up ways to kill him and his ‘younger woman.’ The pity is that this woman is also very beautiful with “curly dark hair and long dancer’s legs” (RM 29). The protagonist also has a similar kind of feeling when her husband deserts her. She starts chopping kindling everyday. To her, it is not just kindling that she is chopping, it is “hands and fingers and lips; ears, eyes, private parts.” She chops up everything small and throws into the stove. She says that this makes her feel “warm as toast” (29). While discussing with her friend on the beach, she wonders “Is it a husband that I want or a hired hand?” (31).
In “Ascension,” it has been a year since Michael, has left his wife, Christine. Before leaving he tells her, “Listen, there’s no nice way of saying this. I’m sorry” (WBY 63). This act of leaving seems easier to men but not to women as seen in the case of Christine. Even after nearly a year, Christine could not sleep, however tired she might be, and she continues to be disturbed by strange erotic dreams. She is so much disturbed that she takes out the wedding ring which she had placed very carefully in a velvet lined box, walks to the end of the government wharf and throws the ring into it. Further, she hopes that no fish would swallow it, and that no fisherman would appear at her door as their initials were inside the ring. She wants to get over the pain and suffering that had been caused by her husband’s desertion. In another story, “The Man with Clam Eyes” a similar expression is used by the husband while leaving his wife: “There is no nice way of saying this . . . Let’s not go over it again” (GHGL18).

Zoe, in “A Hunter’s Moon,” adores her boyfriend who was younger than her, although her friends thought him to be “pushy and immature” (WBY 51). She has been with him for nearly six months and is even ready to get married to him. But, he calls her over phone and tells her that they have to break up as he wanted to meet a younger woman and have children. Zoe, unable to come out of it, cries whenever she talks about it even years later he left her. In “Breeders,” some of Corinne’s friends’ parents are divorced and the men are married again to much younger women who wanted to have babies.

In some stories, the man leaves his wife for other reasons also. In “Dejeuner sur l’herbe” (Lunching in the open air), the (nameless) female protagonist’s husband and Robert were friends. Robert forces his wife to leave though he keeps telling that it was his wife who left him. Then, he moves to a different part of the city and lives with a series of live-in
girlfriends, all much younger than him. Five years later, the protagonist’s husband also leaves her for reasons not made clear. However, it is understood that she depended on her husband too much and that the act of leaving was to her a painful experience. Unable to bear the pangs of loneliness, she always wanted to love and to be loved.

In “Three Women and Two Men,” the protagonist’s husband has left her and she feels herself completely lost and unwanted that she compares herself to a cut off finger that can never be united to its hand. She feels that her husband has chopped her off and has thrown her in the garbage just as someone would chop off a superfluous part. “Now she was a lost finger looking for a hand to be sewn into with neat, tiny, final stitches. So no-one would ever notice” (L&E 157). Veronica who is undergoing unpleasant X-rays for a possible malignant breast tumor in the story “Compression” tries to deal with her anxieties and fears and the possible results. The results of the test have not yet been received. However, she contemplates on the possibility of her husband leaving her when she tells him the truth.

In “Harry and Violet,” Tom leaves his wife for a reason not even suggested anywhere in the story. The new lover of Tom’s wife ‘Harry’ has also left his wife, for reasons not clear to her because Harry “never spoke against his wife” and he “loved her still and often saw her” (RM 67). In “Salon des Refuses” (Exhibition of Rejects), Nurse Primrose’s husband walks out on her because she had an abortion and did not tell him.

Audrey Thomas’ stories establish that it is naive to think a permanent commitment is possible in marriage and she shows us how harmful this naivety can be. Women in expecting this commitment from their marriage partners are only left emotionally scarred and hurt. They are devastated when they discover that there is no such certitude in marriage. While the
husbands move on getting satisfaction through younger and beautiful women, their wives move more towards alienation and are left embittered.

Thomas’ women break down when their husbands desert them, because they cannot live without guarantees: when they realize they have been living in a void, and not a world of certainties, they are overwhelmed by horror. “Nobody married forever anymore,” (RM 129) Rona announces as a matter of fact, in “Timbuktu”. Her husband Philip has already been abandoned by one wife, and it is presented to us as only natural that Rona would leave him too. This same assumption, that marriage cannot last forever, is voiced in “Out in the Midday Sun”: Frank has already had two wives, and between him and his third wife is “the tacit understanding that the line did not necessarily stop there” (RM 96).

The narrator woman in “Blue Spanish Eyes” seems to voice the predicament of such women aptly in the following words:

When someone you love tells you that it’s over, when you’ve been married to that someone for twenty years, something terrible happens to you . . . You never get over it; all you can do is get around it. (WBY 182)

She further adds that it is like being in a bad car crash or an airplane crash. Even if one manages to survive without any physical scar, the desertion would definitely leave their souls wounded. In “Crossing the Rubicon,” when Sheila learns that her husband has a lover, she feels as though she has been walking around in a bubble for the last six years which has got burst just then. This broken family drives Thomas’ women to move away from their predicament in search for fulfillment elsewhere.

While most of the men choose to leave their wives for another woman, women prefer to leave in search of their identities for which their marriage poses to be a great hindrance.
These women try to escape from their present condition by moving out of it either physically or they undergo a psychological journey which will eventually make them come out of that situation.

In “Degrees”, Ruth, an East Indian woman, living in Africa with her British husband, tries to be more British than the British. She desires to belong and “fit in” (GHGL 96). So she takes several efforts to socialize with other women. In one such effort, she throws a party on the birthday of their adopted son Trevor. But the party turns out to be disastrous, ending in Trevor’s death a week later. Unable to bear this situation in an alien country, she breaks up with her husband and leaves him.

Frances’ mother in “The Wild Blue Yonder” finds her life shattered when her husband who has been presumed to be dead in the war comes back. She is unable to accept her husband when he returns from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp broken and disillusioned. She feels that she would have preferred to have him dead than to have him as a kind of misplaced person, unable to function in the world to which he returns. So she finally decides to divorce her husband.

In some cases as in the story “Relics” and “Joseph and his Brother” it is found that the women desert their husbands for other men. Ursula in “Relics” leaves her husband Nicky and runs away with a student to London. Joseph’s wife in “Joseph and his Brother” has a secret relation with someone in her village. When Joseph goes to challenge and accuse her, she goes to the extent of putting something in the soup that poisons him. His stomach gets burned and his mouth is covered with blisters leaving him sick for a long time.

“Breaking the Ice” is an account of a new relationship beginning for a divorced woman and man, and their daughters who willy-nilly are plunged into relationship: “Please
like him, said the mother’s heart to the child’s, I like him. I like him a lot” (GHGL 129). But the happy lovemaking towards the end of the story is overlaid by the worry “Who would leave first?” (141). The very title of the story is suggestive of the problems that the couple will have to face in that relationship. For, to break ice is potentially to drown in icy water and it is ineluctable that either the man or the woman has to leave the other.

An analysis and interpretation of the stories demonstrate the fact that there is no permanence in marriage, for it does not last forever. Men leave their wives on finding them becoming ‘vegetables’. They prefer to live with younger and beautiful women. Love for freedom and empowerment, desire for establishing a new identity, necessity to live with one’s self, infidelity of the husband, social snobbery are some of the reasons for the women leaving the home as illustrated in the next chapter. Men and women thus find their own culture and tradition inadequate and choose to seek freedom in a world outside their homes and themselves.

Audrey Thomas often introduces into the mix of these relationships the significant but frequently acknowledged presence of a child. “Separated children” (RM 11) are the by-products of broken marriages; they form the apex of contemporary triangles – a woman, her lover, and her child. Motherhood is an aspect of the feminine which preoccupies Thomas, particularly in its negotiations with the different demands of the man and the child on the mother. Hence, adult sexuality and maternity are often represented as incompatible.

Most of her stories deal with states of mind that are tragically bleak. They reflect the protagonists’ tortured and confused lives. The protagonists are themselves like anxious readers, watching out for the usual happy ending yet not always wanting it. These women both need independence yet want attachment. Rona in “Timbuktu,” leaves her husband but
she is no better off on her own. Travelling to Bamako she finds not a solution but a dilemma. She thinks, “She wanted Philip and her freedom: how could she have both?” (RM 136). She cannot detach herself emotionally from others, she comes to realize in Bamako that she depends on P.J. and in turn, the Weavers rely on her. She tries to understand the contradictory nature of love: “The amber beads, like love, hung beautiful and heavy around her neck” (137). In “Harry and Violet,” the mother/lover sees the apparent impossibility of enjoying both daughter and, as she calls him, “new old man”, in the house at once. She thinks, “It’s easier without a man;” but she hastens to ask herself “is it better?” (RM 69).

From the point of view of the reader, rather than the characters, these two stories set up expectations which are deliberately not fulfilled. “Harry and Violet” is not the ‘when-Harry-met-Sally’ romance it sounds like. The couple is, in fact, caterpillars, kept in a jar and named after her mother and mother’s lover by the daughter, who brings the jar to the bedroom for the human couple to see exactly at the wrong moment.

Audrey Thomas also presents women trying to forge new lives for themselves after the collapse of a conventional love-story, or resisting a pull towards a false romantic ending in a new relationship. In “Natural History,” the protagonist understands that there is a need for change, first in her own life for she and her daughter cannot stay in the house on the island forever. It may be Paradise but even Paradise is a “walled garden, an enclosure” (RM 33). She also understands the need to revise the ideology of gender based on an opposition between masculine (powerful) and feminine (dependent).

“Where are all the strong men”, the woman on the beach said, “now that there are all these strong women?” (32)
Audrey Thomas’ women search for an ideal hero who will not only be a passionate and heterosexual lover, but also a tender and compassionate man, reminiscent of early maternal attention. In “Survival of the Fittest,” Mrs. Hutchinson had loved her husband Sandy Hutchinson in a quiet, contended sort of way but she says that he was not a very affectionate man. Watching her daughter’s husband Joe, touching the back of her daughter’s hand when talking to others, and the way he called out her name, it is obvious that he loves her daughter very much. This love that she sees between her daughter and Joe was something that she missed in her own life – the little everyday gestures of affection. She admits that although she loves her husband, he was not a very affectionate man. He had been a passionate man – passionate about politics, about labour unions and about her body even but he had never been affectionate.

Broken families and the emerging problems, the pangs of suffering, separation and loneliness have been discussed in detail in this chapter. From this broken family syndrome that is so commonly found in most of her stories emerges the feminine quest for fulfillment. All of Audrey Thomas’ women are in search of something or the other. Most of the women are in search of their identity. These women acquire fulfillment only by establishing it, even at the cost of losing their marital bonding. There are also women who are left alone and they struggle to overcome their sense of loss and loneliness, thus succeeding in organizing a new life. Some of the female protagonists have a quest for familial relationships. They want to belong to somebody to overcome their loneliness. These women seem to get fulfillment only through their physical and emotional bonding with their male partners. While some others, losing their conjugal happiness, try to find fulfillment with their motherly bonding towards their children. Still few who are neurotic and frightened get fulfilled by overcoming their fear
syndrome that stems out of old age, loneliness and a sense of loss. All these kinds and forms of the quest are discussed in detail in the following chapters.