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**Lessons for Indian Women:
Empowerment of Women Seen Through
Some Selected Women Characters of American Fiction**

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Empowerment of Women in India

Indian history and Indian literature abound in women characters, who are known for their knowledge, understanding, patience, valor, and for every noble virtue. Jhansi Ki Rani, Velu Nachchiyaar, Kittoor Chennamma, Rani Mangamma, Indira Gandhi and many others from every region in India can be cited. There are many great women poets in Indian literature such as Avvaiyar, Akka Mahadevi, Aandaal, Meera Bhai, Sarojini Devi and so on. Within Hindu theology, Sakti worship is much sought after. Lakshmi and Saraswati control money and education. Kali and Durga become symbols of righteous anger to defeat, kill and eliminate evil powers. Current Hindu movements have a number of women leading spiritual resurgence within Hinduism. In every department of life in India, thus, we have women who have demonstrated their skills and understanding in a very admirable manner.

And yet millions of women are in great darkness, and suffer from deprivation of language, culture, and minimum necessities of life. Poverty affects women more painfully than men in poor families. Their burden is not recognized as adequately as it should be.

To Learn from and to Share with Other Women

This paper is an attempt to show how women in some other nations were able to overcome their hardships and deprivations using the portrayal of women characters in selected novels, especially American novels.

Serabji's Speech in the First Parliament of Religions in 1893

Let me begin with a speech by an earnest Indian woman in the First Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Jeanne Serabji's name may not be found in our textbooks, but she was one of the several Indians who spoke in the First Parliament of Religions in 1893. While Vivekananda and others are rightly mentioned in relation to this Parliament, it is very unfortunate that the only Indian women who spoke in this Parliament is almost forgotten. But Serabjee did not forget her fellow Indian women in a Parliament dominated by men. She spoke valiantly about the aspirations and cry of India women.

According to the original records of the proceedings of this Parliament, Serbjee spoke, "When I was leaving the shores of Bombay the women of my country wanted to know where I was going, and I told them I was going to America on a visit. They asked me whether I would be at this congress. I thought then I would only come in as one of the audience, but I have the great privilege and honor given to me to stand here and speak to you, and I give you the message as it was given to me. ... Tell the women of America that we are fast being educated. We shall one day be able to stand by them and converse with them and be able to delight in all they delight in.'

"And so I have a message from each one of my countrywomen, and once more I will just say that I haven't words enough in which to thank you for the welcome you have given all those who have come from the East. When I came here this morning and saw my countrymen my heart was warmed, and I thought I would never feel homesick again, and I feel today as if I were at home. Seeing your kindly faces has turned away the heartache."

As Thirumalai (2005) points out, "In Miss Serabji's speech, we see anguish for the welfare and equality of Indian women, a project that would not find a focused place or attention in other speeches. This was an earthly speech in a conference of spiritual leaders, and it drew the attention of the audience subtly to the condition of Indian women, and their hopes and aspirations. The aspiration of Indian women is well portrayed when Serabji quotes Indian women as declaring that 'we are fast being educated. We shall one day be able to stand by them and converse with them and be able to delight in all they delight in.' Unfortunately, this is still a dream for the vast majority of Indian women, and yet there has been tremendous achievement in this area since Indian independence."

The Scope of This Paper

This paper deals with Celie of *Color Purple*, Meridian of *Meridian*, Alexandra of *O Pioneers!* and Hannah of *White Banners* and how these women triumph over life's tragic circumstances, building for themselves a positive self-image and confidence, gaining freedom and economic independence. Their empowerment is multidimensional. It enables them to realize their full potential. Their political empowerment, economic independence and social upliftment, also include a transformation of self, society and community. They assert that empowerment of any society is possible only when women are empowered.

Celie in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker's Celie is the principal character in *The Color Purple*. She is the best portrait of an estranged individual. She is seduced and socially ruined. In her inexpressibly complicated situation, she does her best to keep herself above reproach. She is portrayed as a poor, illiterate, submissive and helpless girl who is sexually and physically harassed by men and suffers from physical and mental exploitations through the major part of the work asserts freedom at the end. She is a southern black woman

who struggles to escape the brutalities. Her traumatic experiences ultimately lead her to triumph.

The character of Celie emphasizes the point that economic independence is of paramount importance. Her character reiterates that women should dispel their wrong perception that they are inferior and should play second fiddle to men. In the course of searching for her identity, she makes sure people around her accept her as a human being. She substantiates the view that empowerment begins at home and that family is an instrument which empowers women. This further makes her understand herself and improve her skills and creative abilities.

Meridian

The novel ***Meridian*** is an “impassioned account of the spiritual progress” of Meridian (Towers 450). She is a victim of unfortunate experience such as a loveless family life, teenage pregnancy, a loveless marriage, lack of something to hold on to, alienation and a struggle to establish an identity. Her struggle to emerge out of the barrenness of her life is portrayed. She finds peace in becoming an active Civil rights worker.

Marriage and motherhood also do not satisfy Meridian. Her struggle to find an identity, to survive and live is portrayed in the novel. Finally, in her role as a civil rights worker, she is able to find a purpose in life. She commits her life to aid southern blacks in their struggle for political and social equality. She joins an organization of black revolutionaries but is forced to leave the group when she refuses to condone its violent actions. However, she continues her activist work and later becomes a legendary heroine.

O Pioneers!

The basic theme of Willa Cather’s ***O Pioneers!*** is of taming and making the wild prairie fruitful. It is set against the background of stories of love, birth, and death, and the basic realities of man’s existence. The story opens at the deathbed of a middle-aged Swede, prematurely worn out with his vain struggle against the inclement weather, the failure of crops and the burden of mortgages. John Bergsons leaves behind him incompetent sons and one splendid, dauntless amazon of a daughter, Alexandra, who dedicates her youth, strength and beauty to the hopeless drudgery of carrying on the task, had slain her father. Alexandra Bergsom in ***O Pioneers!*** is Cather’s first great pioneer heroine.

White Banners

Lloyd C. Douglas presents A Hanna Parmalee in the novel, ***White Banners***, as a valid representative of a healthy well-balanced living. She is a powerful example of emotional maturity and mental health. Her ability to love and care for others is directly related to her undying faith in God. She is a healthy personality who faces life openly, and is free of grudges and bitterness. She is able to love, to forgive, to hope and to rejoice with the help of God.

The courageous, longsuffering, steadfast nature of Hannah is revealed at the time of crisis when her husband Thomas Bradford deserts her. Her ability to cope with any new situation is remarkable. Though separated from her son, alone and deprived of everything familiar and homelike, she has a strong self-will and the ability to face life, even disappointment, and not allow circumstances to destroy her. Initially, she is thoroughly depressed and disappointed, grief stricken and desperate with no meaning in life. But later she enters upon an entirely new phase of life, when she comes into realization of the oneness of the Infinite life and power.

“Only by replacing the inhuman old order with life-affirming values, can a new world be built” remarks Karen Stein (130). The hope for a better society lies not only in the change in the political scenario, but also in the personal transformation.

Celie and Other Black Women – Ethnic Disadvantage

Celie as a helpless, poor, black, ugly and sexually abused girl, moves from her helplessness towards the state of complete independence and establishes her own world. She who suffers from selfscorn learns to love herself and other black men and women and becomes concerned about the black community as a whole. Alice Walker proves that salvation depends on the way one looks at God. She also shows how looking up to God brings a transformation in one’s life. The powerless Celie moves to a state of empowerment.

Education Comes to the Rescue

As it is proved in the case of Meridian, education helps women to gain knowledge and provide the necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges of life. It helps to bring about a smooth and orderly social change and integrate women to the main stream of society. Her experiences focus on the view that education is the process of bringing change in the behaviour of human beings. If women are to be acceptable socially, culturally and economically, their education should result in a change in knowledge, skill, attitude and understanding. This will enable them to reclaim their rights and raise their level of aspirations and achievements.

The Agonizing Path from Revelation to Resolution

Willa recollects the triumphant experiences of Alexandra and her struggle against odds. In *O Pioneers!* from revelation to resolution, from resolution to realization, the road of Alexandra’s career stretches into the future. Her life of responsibility and hardship is big enough demand and she faces willingly and gladly. She goes through a psychological crisis and the demand is therefore for the willing acceptance of effort, hardship, suffering and denial. The character of Alexandra proves that a proper understanding and appreciation of the relation ship between man and woman would help to reduce the imbalance between the sexes.

Unchanging Character of Heroic Women

Always in the foreground remains the figure of Alexandra whose valour and foresight embody the essence of the heroic spirit. Her character never changes. Her strength of purpose, her dependability and kindness, are constant throughout. She is a woman who feels deeply. She is not without tears in her eyes at moments of crisis, but not one who can show or express her feelings very freely. Moreover, she is always able to control her emotions and proceed with the business of everyday life.

The World of Love

Douglas in the character of Hannah creates the world of love, concern and compassion in his novels where the execution of God's will in the lives of individuals results in restoration of peace, joy and hope. Hannah of *White Banners* displays amazing excellence in the discharge of her duties. Besides she stands for the very sunshine itself, dispelling the darkness of gloom and despair in the dingy atmosphere pervading in the house in the house of the Wards. Though she loses part of her sunshine in the midst of such enveloping despair and desolation, she breathes a spirit of cheer into the despondent hearts of people. She exhibits her great confidence and remarkable strength and ability to deal with extraordinary matters. Her life becomes a challenge.

The Growing Sense of Social Responsibility

The growing sense of social responsibility in Celie, Meridian, Alexandra and Hannah with the consequent widening of their sympathies endear them to all the people. The novelists have endeavored to show what marvelous effects of service to society could bring about. Celie, Meridian, Alexandra and Hannah find fulfillment in service to mankind. By courageous endurance of hardships imposed on them and ministrations of love to the sick in body and soul, they become symbol of sacrifice and suffering.

Faith as the Redemptive Factor

Faith is the best of the redemptive factors, as it nurtures the soul and strengthens the moral fibres of Hannah, endowing her with confidence in herself and faith in God. The lofty and ennobling influence of domestic love and conjugal affection are best illustrated in *O Pioneers!* the harmony of love between Alexandra and Carl Listurm without a discordant note ultimately proves to be a saving grace.

These women characters find fulfillment in service to mankind. By courageous endurance of hardships imposed on them and ministrations of love to the sick in body of soul, they become symbols of sacrifice and suffering. Society another powerful redemptive factor acts as catalyst in the exploitation of human potential at its best, by exposing them to the widening sympathies in the wide circles of humanity.

A Powerful Combination

The redeeming power of love, the therapeutic value of society, and the restorative value of faith comprise the redemptive factors which ensures woman her rightful place in the chain of humanity. Their lives are transformed from a state of misery, unhappiness and hopelessness and raised to a state of service others. The blow on the outward person proves to be greatest blessing to the inner person. They understand that trials are permitted in their lives to construct and not to destroy.

Their transformed lives give them courage and strength to face the challenges in life. Their sorrowful lives are filled with contentment and cheer. It is this gift of cheerfulness that helps them to reach great heights of perfection. The characters from a state of sorrow and frustration are gradually guided to a life of faith and service.

Discovering Solutions to Their Problems

The characters discover solutions for their problems, which revolutionize their thinking of life. These characters who go through the disputed passage of life discover that the tests of life are to make and not to break them. Troubles seem to ruin their homes, business and job but ultimately build their characters. These women characters exchange impotence for strength, sorrows for joy, which enable them to come into fullness of peace, power and plenty. The universality of the characters as exemplified in the novels earn a significant place in the mainstream of American literary tradition.

Women's Empowerment – An Essential Component of Development

Alice Walker, Willa Cather, and Lloyd C. Douglas assert that women's empowerment is an essential component in every dimension of development. They have effectively portrayed the possible redemptive factors such as economic independence, social service. The novelists have endeavored to show what marvelous effects of service to society could bring about. These women characters find fulfillment in service to mankind. By courageous endurance of hardships imposed on them and ministrations of love to the sick in body and soul, they become symbol of sacrifice and suffering.

Empowered, as they are, these women characters enjoy a freedom to take decisions with fearlessness and dignity. They validate the view that their empowerment is a process for helping the right people at right levels to make the right decision for right reasons. Education, employment, effort and hard work broaden the outlook of Celie, Meridian, Alexandra and the spiritual insight of Hannah makes them aware of their rights, responsibilities and duties in society. Indeed they empower themselves.

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M. D. V. Kalyani Annie, Ph.D.
Sri Bhathavatchalam Memorial College for Women
Korattur
Chennai
Tamilnadu, India
anniekalyani@yahoo.com