

DEPICTING VOLCANIC VIOLENCE IN JOYCE CAROL OATES' SELECT SHORT FICTION

DR. C. GOVINDARAJ

ASISSTANT PROFESSOR

SRI VIDYA MANDIR ARTS &

SCIENCE COLLEGE, UTHANGARAI,

KRISHNAGIRI. (T.N.), INDIA

DR. V. KUNDHAVI

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,

GOVERNMENT ARTS COLLEGE

(A), SALEM, (T.N) INDIA

R. LISSY

ASISSTANT PROFESSOR

SRI VIDYA MANDIR ARTS &

SCIENCE COLLEGE, UTHANGARAI,

KRISHNAGIRI. (T.N.), INDIA

Abstract

The present study has attempted to investigate the unique and energetic factors of an American versatile writer, Joyce Carol Oates' exploration on grotesque with reference to her short fiction Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars, from the anthology of Last days (1984). She has proved the obsessed minds through her prolific creativity and has rendered transcendence for the obsessions in humanity. Joyce Carol Oates as a messiah has dedicated her life to document the lived experience of the members of the Southern American society. It can be safely said that this social scenario is applicable to many decadent societies, and hence through her literary achievement, Oates has clinched the theme of the female grotesque to universality, thereby rendering a conscious awakening to the entire womanhood.

Key Words: *Violence, Grotesque, Obsessions, Transcendence, Violence.*

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One of the United States' most prolific and versatile contemporary writers, Joyce Carol Oates focuses upon the spiritual, sexual, and intellectual decline of modern American society. She gains the experience for writing through her long and deep association with her society. Joyce Carol Oates was born a year before the breaking out of the World War II. The American life was changing during the first half of the century and most importantly after the World War II which was witnessed by Oates's America in many sectors like social, economical and cultural. Along with the social character, the physic of the Americans also underwent a change.

Oates's writings reveal the tragic disappearance of a stable society and a common set of values prevailing in the American society during these years. The changes in the social attitudes towards race, sex, wealth and poverty and the complex variety of the American people can also be found in many of works of Joyce Carol Oates. Oates's writings reflect this dramatic change in the cultural and intellectual climate of the country. Among them the theme of violence against women is placed as a highly prominent one. Though violence has been dealt in most of her short fiction, the story titled *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars* has been chosen for exploration on this domain.

There is a link between early exposure to violence and victimization and the resultant antisocial behaviour, which is the cycle of violence. The cycle of violence theory suggested that children who are raised in violent circumstances will turn violent as they

grow older. Communities that exhibited high levels of child abuse also showed higher recurrence of adult violence.

The cycle of violence theory has been used to explain a variety of such scenarios, starting from the contribution of parent- child abuse in producing violent future generations, especially in domestic violence. The term 'cycle of violence' has been used in two models of domestic violence and abusive behaviour.

Seifart states that the cycle of violence is among women in the wake of heightened female violence and aggression. Teen females are most likely to exhibit violence if they come from violent families. A study on the subject showed that adult females with histories of violence had moderate to severe behaviour problems that started before the age of 13. In addition, women with severe assault backgrounds that had caused harm or death to another had a history that included escape from a facility, running away from home and bullying. The family is identified as a unit of social stability. The changing family structure creates family disorganization and is moving towards a chaotic society.

According to Peppler and Rubin advocate that behaviour is a result of various interactions between personal, environmental and structural factors resulting in various outcomes that will often differ with every individual. It seems reasonable to conclude that children learn violence by being exposed to it either through abuse or as they watch violence being perpetrated by others around them.

Violence against women was defined in 1993 by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women as, 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.' It is said and criticized for this emphasis on violence, a seemingly inappropriate subject for a female writer to dwell, to the surprise, Oates has depicted the present reality of human nature.

The present paper aims in focusing the volcanic violence employed by Joyce Carol Oates with reference to one of her renowned short stories, *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars*, from the anthology of *Last days (1984)*. Joyce Carol Oates has not failed to exhibit the

multidimensional violence in many of her stories like, *Ich Bin Ein Berliner*, *Our Wall*, *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars* and so on. In the short story entitled, '*Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars*', Joyce Carol Oates has exposed the story of a woman, Elizabeta who marries Jonathan and becomes the step mother to his three daughters. She justifies her love for her step daughters, 'Because I am Jonathan's wife now, and the girls' true mother and no force on earth can change that fact' (81).

Elizabeta starts narrating the story from the day before Easter. They were eagerly waiting for Easter, but the snow was falling heavily, 'And tomorrow is Easter Sunday. And the girls will be angry' (77). Snow is falling everywhere and it is dissolving in the forbidden pond. Jonathan's family is living here for hundred years but sailing in pond is forbidden to them.

The girls mostly long for her mother and asks, "when is our real Mommy coming back?" (78). Sometimes Jonathan would scold them for asking such question, but she will take care of them, Vicky, Niall and Gillian. 'My inherited daughters, whom I love more than my own life, whom I will protect with my own life' (79). She will console them by telling, 'You know I am your real mommy now' (79). Niall and Gillian would feel sorry and hug her, but Vicky stares at her, 'You are not our Mommy' (79).

Elizabeta finds many secrets about their real mother, Meredith like snapshots, where Jonathan and a girl are smiling. After Meredith's departure, Jonathan marries Elizabeta, 'She has not died but has done worse – she has run off' (80). Before her marriage with Jonathan, Elizabeta was working in a Windmill Diner. Who was just twenty – three years old then. She lived in a nice clean room without any troubles and she liked her work, 'I praised God each and every heartbeat for my freedom' (82). After her marriage, they are,

with me telling about the hospital, and how I sinned so terrible trying to take my own life, and how they took my baby away from me, and pretended it was dead, and Jonathan framed my face in his hands and said, I love you, only you, and all that is past, and nothing of the past is going to happen again, because I decree it (82).

Once Jonathan was out, the girls wanted 'to do forbidden things. They wanted to play in the barn, chicken coop and the pond which was forbidden by Jonathan because as they are dangerous. The girls torture her but would not disturb their father. Jonathan would not allow them to go to the pond, as they were dangerous and the most dangerous is the pond.

The shallow end of the pond is filthy and it sucks our feet. The deeper end is deceptive 'because there are things beneath the surface to pull you down' (84). The girls hate the step mother and wish she dies. To the contrary, unlike their mother who had absconded, Elizabeta wished to sacrifice her life for the daughters, for her loyalty to her husband which was misinterpreted. She as a typical mother wanted to, 'protect them from harm and to rejoice in their warmth' (86).

Once when Jonathan goes on a business for five days, the daughters force her to take a ride in the lake which they were forbidden. The girls start to torture her by asking, 'where is Daddy, when is he coming home, why did he go away' (93). Gillian starts to cry. She too is waiting for him, "I am waiting at this moment for him to telephone and all will be well' (93).

Again they are sailing in 'the shining white boat' (93). All feel excited, 'sailing away and never coming back!' (94). To satisfy them, she accompanies them and sacrifices her life along with the daughters. Joyce Carol Oates has given the life of a step mother and her love for her step-daughters, even she sacrifices her own baby for the sake of her love for them, because for her, they are her real daughters and she has proved to be a typical mother with the trait of sacrifice.

The impact of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), gets exhibited in Oates story. It is the story of the dissolution of the last generation of the Compson family. The story with four portraits is focused on the Compson children – Jason, Quentin, Candace and Benji, Disney, the old Negro woman servant as Elizabeta, the step mother in Oates's '*Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars*' who functions as the binding force of the members of the family. All the Compson children are grotesques either physically or mentally as Jonathan's children in Oates's *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars*.

The sacrifice of the surrogate mother contrasts the biological mother, Sethe in Toni Morrison's, *Beloved*. The mother to get rid of the black female oppressions yields to female infanticide whereas this surrogate mother of Oates sacrifices along with the other children, though not her own, yet her husband's, remains to be abnormal and grotesque yet a fictitious reality. As Prof. Shantaram states, 'Oates is an artist of incomparable power of expression. She is concerned about America and its problems. She intelligently interprets the American loneliness in the multiple planes of their living, decisively touching, the American dream and its passion' (24).

Joyce Carol Oates is frequently asked, 'Why is your writing so violent?' as if, she was depicting fictitious violence, and she was transgressing an invisible boundary claiming territory that rightfully belongs to men. Weary of this question, Oates finally answered it in *'Why Is Your Writing So Violent?'* (1981), she says, is always 'insulting,' always 'ignorant,' always 'sexist' (35). Violence is not the character's only response. Retreats into somnolence, into gluttony designed as fortresses against fatality are almost equally common. Branda Daly claims, 'Oates continues to bear witness on a global scale – to social injustice that often leads to violence' (88).

CONCLUSION

The present human society is found to be a society in which men and women are incomplete and fragmented. Family, the foundation of a society, is a place where every individual usually look for love and fulfillment. The American south is a community, which possesses a cultural heritage of its own. Racial guilt, defeat in the civil war, lynching of the blacks and segregation are the major themes of their demolition of the cultural heritage of white Southerners.

With her exhaustive psychic experience, Oates has depicted the idiocies of the contemporary American scenes through her haunting tales of ordinary people whose lives have been filled with horrifying, obsessed and violent overtones. She has exerted her exemplary literary art to explain the, 'troubled experience and bitter sense of American life

to her and to others'. The versatility and series of literary contribution have earned her the reputation as one of most prolific and gifted "serious" writer.

Of the few American writers, who have experienced the regressive patterns of human relationships like Flannery O' Conner, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Joyce Carol Oates reigns supreme in experimenting the intricate workings of the human mind, especially in her unique portrayal of the female psyche.

Oates stresses the fact that the world into which they are born must be accepted and respected. The reason for the tragic destruction of her characters is their own lack of self-identity and self-fulfillment. The isolated self is connected with violence, retreat, defensiveness and brittleness. Apart from the artistic value, Joyce Carol Oates's works has received universal acknowledgement and has been significantly noted for the insistence that man's life will lose its meaning and significance if it is does not focus on the foundations of faith and religion. Her far reaching success lies in her exhibition of reality and in the blending of the religious faith with literary aesthetics.

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