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HOPE FROM HOPELESSNESS – A STUDY OF JOYCE CAROL OATES'S *WONDERLAND*

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ABSTRACT

Tragedy emanates both pain and gain. Is this statement an optimistic one? Joyce Carol Oates with her unique way of thinking raises this question. Tragedy leads to both physical and mental pain. Man dreads tragedy despite its recurrent existence. But to Oates tragedy is a stepping stone. It gives man strength. She opines, "I consider tragedy is the highest form of art". She thinks tragedy strikes the minds of men the hardest, from which they build themselves to be exemplary. As Isabel Allende's words, "We don't even know how strong we are until we are forced to bring that hidden strength forward. In times of tragedy, of war, of necessity, people do amazing things. The human capacity for survival and renewal is awesome". The paper is a discussion on Oates's views on tragedy and how it affects a twelve year old boy when his father murdered the entire family. Jesse endures the pain, the tragedy exquisitely to a tremendous growth.

Keywords: Tragedy, Emanate, Optimism, Exemplary

Discussion

Strange are the words of Oates: "The blood smells so sweet, it rises to him in a cloud blotching his sight", in *Wonderland*. Is the smell of blood so sweet? Does the spilling of blood give happiness? What does Oates trying to convey through these words? Tragedy exists from the origin of the earth. The world has to undergo many a catastrophe, and man suffers for his survival right from the beginning of the earth. These sufferings are but inevitable for the growth of an individual and for the community at large. Though man dreads tragedy, he draws lessons from them. Relating to the tragic note in Oates, Phil McComb quotes, "A major literary figure, candidate for the Nobel prize in literature, she (Joyce Carol Oates) is an obsessive Dickensian, Dostevskian writer of American culture psycho-sagas. Whose work is marked by violent, gruesome and bizarre episodes" Her major characters are introduced and accompanied with suffocating tragedy. In the novel *Wonderland* frustrated Jesse sees his pregnant mother, two brothers and his sister lying dead in a pool of blood at different places in his house. To highlight the tragic situation, Oates writes that, the father shoots himself and dies, but even before killing himself he wants to shoot his son too. What more can a writer weave to bring out the tragic situation of an individual. Later Jesse wakes up and is conscious only to learn that his father shot himself and fell dead making him an orphan.

As an orphan, Jesse has to work hard for his sustenance. The pain he undergoes, because of his heavy physical work proves to be manna, for he is able to sleep peacefully without any mental disturbance. It turns

out to be favorable for him as his physical pain makes him stronger. May be that in life man must draw his strength from anything that is negative. Oates asserts: "Boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting, just as it is about feeling pain, if not devastating, psychological paralysis is more than it is about winning", Oates emphasizes that life is not all about winning. it is something beyond – living in full. Like the above quote, man must become empowered through tragedy and other ghastly situations. To assert this she speaks of death, through Dr. Pedersen, the protagonist in the novel *Wonderland*,

"It's easy to die, Jesse. I see it every day. The most expensive bodies surrender and die. They claim they want to live, but really they want to die, because the mystery of their bodies is too exhausting for them. They die, they surrender. It's easy to die, not to live. That is not easy, that is the challenge, the strain. To displace God is not easy. To be higher, a higher man, that is not an easy fate. Once you become the man you are, Jesse, you cannot ever rest, but must prove yourself continually. Again and again it's the fate of the higher man." (WL 101, 102)

It is easy to die rather to live. Man must muster up courage through crisis, just like phoenix which rises from its own ashes.

To Oates tragedy should be the major theme of art and literature. As an answer to the frequent questions of the critics regarding the excessive use of violence and tragedy and addressing herself as a tragic heroine or a pessimist, she says, "My belief is that art should not be comforting; for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish". To her hope comes from hopelessness, and hope and hopelessness are just the illusions of spirit and a right approach to the situation is reality.

Oates idea on tragedy and war is different. Any war is foreseen commonly as the destroyer but she feels it to be mandatory for the progress of a nation. The protagonist, Dr Pedersen identifies the negatives of war as a catalyst for progress. He says, "When this war is over, Jesse, there will be a marvelous growth,. Everything will grow, expand, come alive again.... Is it death? Never! It is the very heartbeat of life-the last resources of life's energies!" (WL101) She opines war is a marvelous adventure for the future. After war there will always be a tremendous growth. War helps identifying new policies, destructing the old ones. She underscores that the conflict in one's mind transforms him to a healthy state. True to the words of Morris West, "One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to the total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying". Jesse's life itself is a conflict, where his father, mother, brothers and sister die, to transform him from a frustrated child worker to a great neurologist. Jesse is portrayed as, "Jesse is sad but he is excited happy in other side. In front of him the other locks, the other levels of water, vibrated with energy- the noise of water splashing angrily from one level to the next, a continual racket. Life is a powerful journey which goes from one level to another." (WL73)

Jesse marches towards perfection climbing the highest wrung of the ladder through his painful tragic experiences. He is ready to fight with odds and work hard in the agonized real life. Jesse's approach is positive which makes him possible to reach the pinnacle.

Conclusion

To Joyce Carol Oates, title 'wonderland' is America; one finds many suffering like Jesse, who despite tribulations, forges to climb the ladder of success and survive as it is the land birth for autonomy. Here Oates plays a vital role in teaching them to mould themselves against the malicious world. It is the law of nature that everything has to be set right. For the world has to go on. It is destiny for man to undergo tragedy in life and keep moving with hope. Man undergoes many upheavals but eventually settles to normalcy. Thus Jesse is designed to experience the worst, but to scale great heights.

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