

## ANALYSIS OF RACISM IN THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

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### Abstract

William Faulkner was a great American novelist who had published a prolific amount of short stories, novels and columns. The recurring theme in most of his novels was of the racial divide in the American society. Faulkner himself was a white man but he realised and understood the sufferings of black people, showing how empathetic he was. Slavery which was officially abolished in society continued to take place in the American society. And while most people brushed this topic under the carpet, Faulkner was brave to have come out and talk about it through the medium of his novels. His most famous pieces of literature like *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) talk about this racial segregation and discrimination. Through the characters, Faulkner makes the readers realise that racism was not just a societal oppression of an entire race but also a physical and emotional breakdown of their innocent minds. White people have been asserting their dominance over the black people by legal and social means. Through, fictional towns and characters, Faulkner makes the readers realize of this biasness and compels the readers to think about it. In the present study, few of his works were analysed to understand this racial discourse.

**Keywords:** Racism, Racial segregation, Black people, white supremacy, Negro

### Introduction

William Faulkner was an American novelist and writer of short stories and plays. Faulkner has published as many as 13 novels. The most popular ones include *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom* (1936). Faulkner's writings have talked about the culture of racism in the society. With the help of his novels, he has tried to make the white as well as black readers aware of the rampant race based discrimination and exploitation of black people in society. Faulkner himself was white but he understood the complexities in the lives of black people. It was quiet brave of Faulkner to talk about such a subject in those times. He was against white

supremacy. The novels of Faulkner are important from social point of view as they are from literary view-point.

The first novel, 'The Sound and the Fury' talks about how Africans were treated as second class citizens in society. Even though slavery had officially abolished in the 1800s, it continued to exist for many black people throughout the country. The novels protagonists' had live-in black servants. The protagonists ill-treat their servants. Dilsey, the protagonist Negro character of the novel is a believer of her destiny and accepts it. However, as the novel progresses, she becomes aware of the racial segregation. She questions all the wrong of the society. She talks about how white people are not just cruel to the black people of the society but also to the members of their own race.

In 'Light in August' tragic racism is seen in the novel. The novel is set in the time when racial segregation was extremely common in society. One of the characters of the novel, Joe Christmas identifies himself of mixed race and therefore, uses this dual identity at several phases of his life. He deliberately tells white people about his black lineage just to observe their strange reactions. He both despises and cherishes his dual identity. His relationship with Joanne, a white woman is seen with disgust in society. Many instances where rampant degradation of the black community happens are seen in the society.

The novel 'Absalom Absalom' is another master piece by Faulkner where white supremacy at its max is visible. Black people are socially ostracized. The novel protagonist Sutpen has immense hatred for the black race. He gives away his own son after knowing that the woman he married to was mixed race. Thomas Sutpen was of the belief that white people are supreme and that their economic status does not define their supremacy. Any white man, rich or poor is superior to the entire black community. He was adamant on establishing an all-white Southern dynasty. The idea of racial purity wipes the entire family of Thomas Sutpen and even himself leaving behind Jim Bond, the Negro boy who is also the sole descendant of Thomas Sutpen. His racist mentality prohibits him from accepting his own children because of them having Negro blood.

Another piece of literature, 'The Unvanquished' also portrays the racial prejudice in society. Injustice, racial segregation and prejudices against black people were so common and prevalent in the society. Slavery, and mis-treatment of slaves is also a recurring theme. Hence, in times where everybody feared about talking of the black people suffering, William Faulkner came out and he was vocal about the sufferings of black people even though he himself was white.

### **Racism and Racial Segregation**

Anbaran (2016), in their research titled William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun": Multiple Views of Oppression talks about oppression of people based in race, gender and

class. He talks about how the humanity has suffered. In 'That Evening Sun' he discusses the racism and oppression faced by a black family by their white counterparts. He shows how the ones who are oppressed become lonely and depressed after sometime. This isolation leads to a sense of 'otherness' in these people and they begin to think of themselves as objects in the hands of the oppressors. Very evident from the novel also, the author reiterates that due to racial segregation, the blacks were not allowed the same freedom and amenities as the white people. He talks about that black men serve their white masters all their lives but when black men need help, white people are nowhere to be seen. This is also against the basic code of humanity. He also talked about gender discrimination. While women were socially backward, the status of black women in society was probably the worst. Black women were denied education, that led to double or triple times of their oppression because of their color, race and gender.

Dwivedi and Prabhu (2015) in their study talked about the writer William Faulkner and his excellence in writing. According to them, the writer uses the consciousness technique in his novels. He has recorded the American South history in his novels and therefore brought the discourse of racial discrimination to the forefront. Civil wars, class conflicts and oppression based on race are the recurring themes in his novels. He also earned a Nobel prize in literature for his efforts. The authors call Faulkner the most formidable writer of the century because of his amazing work. He talked about Slavery in the American south, a topic which most people refused to talk about. His coverage of the issue was explicit. He copied the exact condition of the society in his novels with the help of fictional characters and settings and is regarded as one of the most prolific writer of the century.

### **White Supremacy**

Oza, in her research of the racial conscience in the novels of William Faulkner talks about the biography of Faulkner. She also talks about how he was inspired to pursue writing as a career. She talks about his earlier works like *Soldier's Ply*, *Mosquitoes*, and also his famous works like 'The Sound and the Fury', 'As I Lay Dying' etc. She analysed their style of writing and their themes. She also emphasises upon the theme of racism, and interracial relationship. Racial prejudice leads to black people suffering in the hands of the white and their mistreatment. In Faulkner's novels, slavery, ill-treatment, torture, wrongful conviction etc. of the black people. The actual role of Negro in Faulkner's fiction is consistently one of the Pathos of heroism. Faulkner's description of the Negro problems is important because even though the law had provided Negroes with legal representation and rights, however, they were denied the recognition and protection in reality. Faulkner wanted to assimilate the black people in the mainstream white American society.

Kumar (2016) in their research talked about the real image of South. He talks about Negro-white tension which was existent in the American society. Every reader of the novel

is struck by its curiously heightened pitch, its brooding intensity, its poetic language, and the endless recapitulations which have the effect almost of incantation. The societal structure and the oppression of the black could be seen clearly in the novel 'Absalom Absalom'. They also analyse Faulkner's 'Light in August' to represent the racial subjugation.

Barnwell (2020) in their study talked about the racial segregation in the America. He talked about racial differences in the American society. His characters were both a victim of racism but some of them chose to call out the indifference. He also told that Faulkner's narratives are inspired by real events of history. He also shows the relation between race and war. Black Americans were treated as outsiders even when they had spent all their lives on the same land as white Americans. White people threaten and dominated over black people. Many such instances are mentioned in the novel.

Jerng (2008) talks about the mixed race people in the novels of William Faulkner. He talks about how people with mixed heritage try to hide their black origins and present themselves as white in the society. Words like 'nigger' are repetitively used to indicate black people. Blackness is seen as some sort of contamination or disease. The authors repetitively focus upon racial consciousness.

### **Class, Gender and Racial Discrimination**

Ford (2016) highlighted slavery, violence and struggle with poverty of the black people in society. He talks about how Faulkner has been able to vividly capture the racial, class and gender imbalance in society. He also discusses various works of Faulkner and examines each character and situation and discusses the racial segregation of society. According to him, works of Faulkner are not just pieces of fiction but they provide a real background of American South society.

Folk (2020) in their paper titled "The Meaning of Peace: William Faulkner, Modernism, and Perpetual Civil War" has discussed in detail about the theme of world war and other civil wars in the American society. He talks about the impact of war on different sections of society. The violence and the bloodshed and the marginalization of black communities is also discussed in detail.

Oza (2021) in their work 'The Sound and the Fury: An Epic on Racism Signifying Nothing and Everything' talked about various novels of William Faulkner like 'The Sound and The Fury', 'Light in August', 'Absalom, Absalom!', 'Go down Moses', 'The Unvanquished', 'Intruder in the Dust' and 'Sartoris'. The talk about the modern evils of the American society like loneliness, self-centeredness, greed, racial discrimination and other forms of violence and discrimination. She talks about the culture of calling black people 'Negroes' or 'niggers'. All sections of the novels are vividly discussed in detail in the novel.

She has talked about racial segregation of society and how it affected the life of black people. She has also talked about Faulkner's representation of white people.

### Conclusion

Hence, through the works of William Faulkner the readers come to realise the system of slavery and marginalisation of the black community in the America. Most of his works are based on the civil wars that the American society faced during the early 1900s. He discussed about people dealing with racial crises, people of mixed heritage hiding their racial identity, and white people dominating over their black counter parts. There are multiple instances in his novels where black people face oppressed. Slavery is also a recurring theme in his works. The black characters in his novels have accepted their fate in life. They spend their entire lives serving their white owners. White supremacy at its worst is also experienced. Through fictitious characters, Faulkner has painted a true picture of the American society. A picture where class, caste and gender discrimination are also very severe, the result of which is borne by the women of colour. The racial prejudices, wanting racial purity, torturing the African Americans were extremely common in the American society. He uses the consciousness technique to make the readers understand racial disparity. Faulkner underlines the fact in this novel that without racial integration American society can never hope to complete with the Progressive society in the industrial world.

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