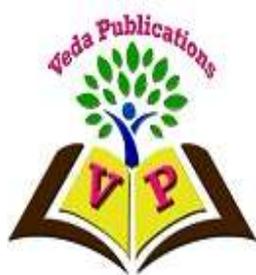




CRITICS VIEWS ON SOCIAL, GENDER, CLASS, RACIAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES WHICH ARE FOCUSED IN DOROTHY WEST'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Dorothy West was a prolific writer. She has written novels, short stories and started journals *Challenge* and *New challenge*. She worked for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writer's Project during the Great Depression. She has published more than sixty short stories in the New York Daily News and she was the first black writer published. Her first novel, *The Living Is Easy* was published in 1948 and it was well received critically. Dorothy West's second novel *The Wedding* was published by Doubleday Publishers in 1995 and in the same year a volume of her collected stories, *The Richer, The Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences* was also published. In her works she has focused on social, gender, class, racial and economic issues. Critic's views on social, gender, class, racial, and economic issues are explored in this article. Critics consider her as the last leaf on the artistic tree of the Harlem Renaissance Movement.

Keywords: *Social, Gender, Class, Racial, Economic.*

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Dorothy West has a unique vision on social, gender, class, racial and economic issues and she has highlighted these issues in her works. She has written the novels *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding* and more than sixty short stories. In her novel, *The Living Is Easy* she has focused on status of folk, proletarian, and bourgeois classes in the United States of America and gender roles through the main character Cleo Judson. West's novel, *The Wedding* highlights interracial and intra-racial issues, social class and economic issues. Several of her short stories are appeared in The New York times from 1940 to 1960. Dorothy West's unique vision of various issues brings a distinctive voice to black women's literature. But, West is almost completely excluded from discussions of African American women's literature (Tamara Janelle Williamson, IV). Her literature can be compared favorably to that of other modernist authors.

Dorothy West's writing career has begun during the Harlem Renaissance, which encouraged black Americans to express themselves creatively. Research reveals that even before the United States was a nation, black women found ways to express themselves through the written word. Writing efforts of black women have begun with Lucy Terry's work *Bars Fight*, and continued with Phyllis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* which was published in 1733 (Nellie McKay, 152-153). Dorothy West is one of the greatest African American writers and being a prolific writer has written passionately on various themes and subjects. Lawrence Rodgers in his review on African American literature has expressed his views on Dorothy West's novel, *The Living Is Easy*. In his point of view West's first novel is easily identified as a satiric picture of Boston's counterfeit bourgeois, its black middle class and as a novel that indicts black society arterially modeled on false white values (162). In the novel, *The Living Is Easy*, the character Cleo is represented as West's mother Rachel Pease Benson who came from South Carolina to work in the houses of white women. She marries Isaac Christopher West who is older than her, just to attain bourgeois status. She loves money, and behaves like a rich white woman. She imitates white rich people and wants to achieve high social status, like white bourgeois class. H Katz in

his article "Cleo and the Black Boston Elite in The Living Is Easy by Dorothy West" states that Cleo is originally from the South, but after making her way north learns the social refinements of northern cities and marries a down-to-earth businessman, Bart Judson, whose money helps her maintain her social airs. She doesn't see herself as black so much as Bostonian, and wants to raise her daughter, Judy, to also be a little Bostonian lady (2015). In the novel *The Living Is Easy*, West, focuses the real story of her parents and how they attained bourgeois social status. Research reveals that in a place like Boston, a black person with some money and education could enjoy a certain refined lifestyle, and black men could work as doctors or businessmen with considerably more freedom than in the south. Bourgeois social status could help to have white friends or at least openly friendly or collegial relationships with them. West shows forth the subtle but powerful social barriers keeping the black elite apart and socially inferior to the prominent white families. Mary Helen Washington states:

West writes about the black middle class from the viewpoint of the marginalized insider, both a fierce critic of the bourgeois life and a loyal daughter upholding the values of family and class. In *The Living Is Easy*, the story of privilege is stanchly disrupted-by tales of slavery and slave suicide, by stories of blacks fighting de facto segregation in the North and Ku Klux Klan terror in the South, and especially by the figure of the child Judy, who, much like West herself, resents and rejects her mother's desires for status, money, and white acceptance (The Richer, The Poorer, Preface-xiii).

After the emancipation most of the African Americans worked hard to attain a respectable social status in the society and achieved it. But some of the white folk could not digest their advancement and live like them. Though black people earn money and build houses like the white people, still they have to suffer discrimination. There are bourgeois, proletarian and folk classes within the African community, but the white never mind it; they consider all the black community is inferior to them. Dorothy West, in her conversation with Deborah E.



Mc Dowell states that she could not write the stories that are about black people because magazines don't buy the stories that are written about black people (Kramer 276). In the 1930s and 1940s, the white people consider, black people don't have that much knowledge to write novels, short stories or any other literary genre; that is why they don't like to read books or articles written by the black people. Due to this reason Dorothy West, in her early age, has written literary genre with pseudonym as a Mary Christopher. Some white patrons appreciated literary talent of Dorothy and encouraged her to write stories to the News Papers, particularly to the New York Daily News, without revealing herself as a black writer. Research reveals that in 1932, Dorothy West, Langston Hughes, and twenty other African Americans went to Russia to film a story of American racism to be called Black and White. The project was dropped, following accusations of association with Communism. West stayed in Russia for one year and returned to United States of America, hearing news of her father's death. Though she was in Russia, she is reluctant to suggest Russian statues to be implemented to solve social problems in the United States of America. Sherrard-Johnson states that, West is not persuaded to advocate for the communist experiment at home, but she does develop a sophisticated critique of capitalism, a comparative understanding of the rigidity of class stratification and how performing or attaining exceptional status might create an approximate, if not actual, paradise (103). Dorothy West perceives that there are interracial and social conflicts within the African American community. Some black people, belongs to bourgeois class, never give reverence and respect to the poor black folk that makes the difference. In her point of view, one could not blame only the white people for existence of social inequality and prejudice black people suffer due to the poor social status, but some high middle class black people are also responsible for that kind of discrimination.

Dorothy West has focused on gender roles in her works. Ann Ducille in her work *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, has conveyed her views on Dorothy West's created character Cleo Judson of the novel

The Living Is Easy. She has highlighted gender role played by Cleo in the novel. She opines that the sins of oppression for which many critics believe the text condemns Cleo are the same virtues of aggression for which men are praised and promoted. Pride, strength, willfulness, subterfuge, authoritativeness, manipulation, craftiness, even deceit are the stuff of which tycoons are made--the tactics by which corporations prosper. Such men society calls successful, savvy; such women it labels grotesques, bitches, Sapphires, jezebels (114). Pamela Peden Sanders accentuates gender bias and gender roles in her works. In her article "The Feminism of Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy*: A Critique of the Limitations of the Female Sphere through Performative Gender Roles" states that through the character of Cleo, West offers a critique of the American patriarchal society with its long-established dichotomy: an unlimited public and business sphere for men and a limited private and domestic sphere for women (2002). In West's novel the main female character Cleo Judson behaves like a male. She could not tolerate men's domination in her personal life. She controls her husband Bart Judson and even insists him to give more money to her so that she could rent a big house and send money to her sisters. She wants to attain bourgeois status. Bart Judson works hard and excels in his business, but Cleo spends money extravagantly and creates problem to him. Cleo rules her family and brings calamity to her family pushing her husband into financial crisis. In Pamela's point of view, West subversively pursues this feminist critique by allowing her female protagonist deliberately to cast off limiting feminine traits such as passivity, domestic interests, and cooperation to instead perform masculine gender traits such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and economic interests. As we closely analyze the text with regard to per-formative gender roles, one discovers that, Dorothy West does employ and explore several familiar themes and plot devices, marriage, the domestic sphere, and the community of women. It is her distinctive representation of Cleo that significantly changes positive configurations into negative ones.

West's short story "An Unimportant Man" focuses on race line. The protagonist of the story,



Zebediah Jenkins was deeply upset over the series of incidents happened in his real life and he was the victim of racial discrimination. There was nothing to feel proud of his black race. An incident deeply regretted him on the race issue.

And then one day he was caught in a cheering crowd that was watching a Negro regiment march by. In the first few moments he was stifled by the embarrassment he always felt at the sight of a concourse of colored people. And he felt a swift indignation that they should be grouped in a separate regiment. Even the war could not reveal them brothers under the skin. They were going, poor fools, ironically enough, to fight for justice (The Richer, the Poorer 144).

The research discloses that the military history of African Americans spans from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans during the colonial history of the United States to the present day. They participated almost in every war, including the Revolutionary War. Although black soldiers proved themselves as reputable soldiers, discrimination in pay and other areas remained widespread. Tanya Lee Stone, in his work, *Courage Has No Color, the True Story of the Triple Nickels: America's First Black Paratroopers* (2013) has focused on race discrimination in the American army. He stated that enlisted black men are segregated from white soldiers and regularly downgraded to service duties. Dorothy West didn't witness the slavery, but she was aware of slavery. That is why she explored the issue racial discrimination in her works. Though African Americans have been living in the United States of America for decades, legally or socially sanctioned privileges and rights are given to white Americans but denied to them. Whereas migrated white Europeans are granted exclusive privileges in matters of education, voting rights, citizenship, and land acquisition. There formed a gulf between the white and the black and recognized as two different races and stick on to their own race in the matters of marriage and social living. In her first novel *The Living Is Easy*, Dorothy West expressed female societal limitations through the character Cleo Judson. Race played a major role to resist the advancement of African Americans, particularly at the time of great

depression. A prominent writer Carl Milton Hughes states that "the Negro world in isolation with separateness of races a matter of course" (The Negro Novelist 1940-1950 115). Like Dorothy West, he too highlighted racial issues in his works.

Dorothy West has focused on blood relationship among the white and the black. The critical study reveals that even blood relationship among them could not redeem them from the clutches of racial discrimination. Dorothy West's short story 'Mummy' explored these issues.

The investigator nodded indulgently, and picked up a framed photograph that was lying face down in the drawer. She turned it over and involuntarily smiled at the smiling child in old fashioned dress. "This little girl," she said, "its Mrs. Coleman, isn't it? The old woman did not look up. Her voice was still listless. "That was my daughter." (The Richer, the Poorer 52)

The black investigator met Mrs. Coleman to get information about a black woman named Mrs. Mason who left the house and sought financial assistance. Though Mrs. Mason was mother of Mrs. Coleman, a white woman, she did not say anything about their relationship, simply mentioned that she had been a domestic worker. Susan Kenney states that as rhetorically distinct as these accounts are, all weave a pattern of the same common thread -- racial intermingling, first forced and then voluntary, many combinations driven less often by love than by convenience and ambition, one admixture after another tumbling forward to the present, until we come to see that this is not just the story of one wedding involving one choice between two men, one light and one dark, but of many weddings and many choices. Thus "The Wedding" is an account not simply of a journey forward toward "true" white, or backward toward "real" black, but down many roads, along which the seeds planted so many generations ago have engendered a family tree of many colors -- copper, ebony, butternut, golden, bronze, brown, tan, rose-pink and more (Shades of Difference 1995). Though, there are many inter-racial marriages in the United States of America, still racial discrimination prevails and show aversion one against another. Dorothy West's point of view is that even biological



relationship among the black and the white could not help them to come out of clutches of racial discrimination. Their division as the black and the white races remained as it is irrespective of their achievements, improved social living and religious faith. The gap between them increased to an extent that the rich black family shows aversion to poor white family to build any social relationship. Most of the people in America would like to build strong social relationship on the basis of race line. It seems to be very difficult to build the ideal of the equality between two races. The white supremacist ideas prevail and suppress the black race. Carl Zimmer in his article to The New York Times " Genes for Skin Color Rebut Dated Notions of Race, Researchers Say" states that for centuries, skin color has held powerful – a defining characteristic of race, and a starting point of racism. In the same article Dr. Tishkoff, a geneticist at the University of Pennsylvania, taking point of view of scientists, affirms that the widespread distribution of these genes and their persistence over millenniums show that the old color lines are essentially meaningless and the research dispels a biological concept of race. In her point of view human beings, particularly in the United States of America say that the main differences between races is the skin color, but that is a wrong notion and gives wrong signals to the entire humanity to behave indifferently. Then the hatred and aversion towards a particular race is basically is not a deep rooted one but the creation of human beings on the basis of wrong life motives, attitudes and ideals. United States of America is a country divided over race line. The research shows that the most of black people face a lot of discrimination in the United States on the race line and groups of nonwhites who face discrimination on the same line include Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Native American and Pacific Islander and other races. However, racism and discrimination, racial disparities in normal life changes everyday life for blacks in the United States.

Dorothy West has highlighted the economic status of African Americans in her works. In her novel *The Wedding*, she has projected the economic status of African Americans in the United States of America like this:

The Clark Colesees came closest to being as real as their counterparts. They had money, enough not only to spend but to save. They were college-bred, of good background. They lived graciously. Two respectable maids had served them for years, living proof that they were used to servants. If Clark and Corine had not slept with each other for years, even their daughters could not have demanded more discretion in their outward behavior. (West 3)

Economic progress of Africans is slow and steady. Though there is no capitalist class of African American origin, relying on public sector they earned enough money and achieved respectable economic class status. African Americans used education as a weapon to tackle financial crisis in their real life. They became successful in earning money and they have beautiful houses and even maids to serve them. Once most of the African Americans were servants, financially poor and were under poverty line, but now they procured honorable bourgeois and working class status. According to edited work, *African American in the U.S. Economy* by Cecilia A. Conrad, John Whitehead, Patrick Mason and James Stewart, the First World War was a boon to African Americans to raise their financial status (Conrad 38). At the time of war a great demand for labor arose in such industries as steel, meat packing, automobile manufacture, shipyards, mines, transportation, and enterprises. This labor shortage, directly or indirectly played a major role for economic progress of African Americans in the United States of America. In the half century between the emancipation and the outbreak of World War I, blacks, with few exceptions, had been unable to get work in the North except in domestic and personal occupations. But, as the nation's usual labor force enormously depleted due to war, Northern Industrialists eagerly turned to the Southern Negroes, women as well as men, the only untapped source of common labor remaining in the country. An intensive campaign was launched to recruit southern blacks. This way the black are benefitted to improve their depriving poor financial status. However, at the time of great depression African Americans miserably suffered with financial problems. During the depression period Dorothy West has worked with Works Progress



Administration- Federal Writers Project to overcome financial crisis. Beginning in 1938, Dorothy West, worked as a welfare investigator in Harlem for a year and half and in the early 1940s became a regular contributor for New York Daily News. Dorothy West witnessed difficulties of poor black folk while working as a welfare investigator. That is why William H. Banks Jr. states that the great Depression's impact had forced many artists to leave Harlem. Yet West stayed, and founded a journal called *Challenge*. Then, in 1937, she and Richard Wright founded *New Challenge*. Like the earlier journal, it was short-lived, but became the launching platform for many writers. Her later work as a social worker brought her close to much of the pain in Harlem life (157).

In her short story 'The Type Writer', Dorothy West has manifested struggles of a man who migrated from southern region to northern in search of economic opportunity. The protagonist's current socio-economic level as a janitor stands in opposition to his former dreams and ambition of achieving black middle-class status. His race and lack of formal education prevent him from rising socially or economically strong. The typewriter he rents for his daughter Millie, who wants to be a secretary or administrative assistant, functions as a vehicle by which the protagonist and his family can move from working class to bourgeois status. On another level, the father's practice of dictating letters to his daughter in the guise of an affluent, upwardly mobile man enables the protagonist to fulfill his bourgeois desires in his imagination. He spins tales in which he transforms himself from a janitor into a successful businessman. His imagination allows him to attain his bourgeois dreams and goals. Ultimately he dies in anguish as the rented typewriter has been returned and deprived of his dream and to live out of fantasies. Research reveals that many African Americans have great desire to grow economically and socially, but lack of educational opportunities and slavery resisted them to grow in all aspects. In the edited work, *Social Issues in Literature: Civil Rights in Richard Wright's Native Son* by Candice L. Mancini, financial status of African Americans in the 1930s is highlighted like this: "Bigger Thomas wanted control over his life. He wanted the right to go where he desired, live where he desired. He wanted to fly a

plane. Bigger did not decide himself: he was aware that his status as a black man living in the 1930s United States prevented him from attaining these things (Introduction 9)." African Americans tried to utilize every opportunity to grow socially and economically, but they could not achieve desired position. After the Civil Rights Movement, there is a significant growth in their social living and economical status.

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