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Dorothy West's Views On Social Stratification of African Americans in The United States Of America

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African Americans settled down in the United States of America are stratified according to their economical and social status. However, social stratification is not an isolated phenomenon; rather it is a result of series of events, incidents, protests and struggle. Research shows forth that stratification of African Americans rests on key pillars Race, class and gender. According to Dorothy West race, gender and class are prominent categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life and even are the basis for many social problems. In her second novel *The Wedding*, one of the main characters born white and one who has biological relationship with the black people named Gram prays to God like this:

My back is bent with the burden of living colored. Lift it from me in my last days. Make my great-granddaughter your instrument. She's marrying a man true white. Put it in her listening mind to live like white. Put it in her loving heart to carry me home to die. With all her life before her, she won't refuse her poor old Gram with all her life behind her. (p 30)

Gram's daughter Josephine married a black man named Hannibal, son of a woman who was formerly enslaved at Xanadu, the family's plantation. Gram, the born aristocrat, lived surrounded by descendants of slaves. She has no choice but has to die among them, no grave to claim her but the one they put her in. Though Josephine was born in rich family, incessant diseases in the family and failure in production due to lack of manpower pushed them to utter poverty. In these unavoidable circumstances Josephine decided to marry former slave of her family to escape from the terrible genteel poverty. There were no one to marry her in her own race because of poverty and her continued sickness. She thought the men with money were white trash that had robbed the aristocrats of their sovereignty, and would rather marry a colored man who knew he was dirt beneath her feet (p 32). There is racial discrimination in the United States of America, but one cannot separate the black from the white in building relationships among them due to the stay of the black for three centuries and interracial marriages and biological bond among them. Dorothy West projected these issues in her works. The black have had mixed experienced with the white in their long stay in the America and even there formed undivided social and biological bonds among them. However, the discrimination the black facing is not a deep rooted one, but the environment of propagating issues of color to the children of the white by their fathers causing to exist in the American society.

African Americans are striving to achieve equal social status with the white, but it seems, it is still a dream. However, there is a significant change in their social status that can be best illustrated with a brief overview of historical changes. Regarding their present status Dorothy West in her novel *The Wedding* states like this:

They formed a fortress, a bulwark of colored society. Their occupants could boast that they, or even better their ancestors, had owned a home away

from home since the days when a summer hegira was taken few colored people above the rank of servant.

Though newer comers owned cottages in other sections of the seaside town, some very splendid house in neighborhoods customarily called white, the Ovalites still outranked them. They had been the vanguard. They were now the old guard. It would sound like sour grapes, “so what?” (p 2)

There is a steady social and economic progress in the lives of African Americans. Most of the African Americans almost reached to equal status of the white in all aspects. They used education as a weapon to come out of the poverty and poor social living. Now, they have money, enough not only to spend but to save. They are college-bred, of good background and they are living graciously. Many of the blacks are doctors, great professors, politicians, businessmen and their titles made introductions so easy and self-explanatory. Dorothy West’s novel *The Wedding* portrays educational achievements of African Americans. In the novel the character named Hannibal son-in-law of Gram and husband of Josephine became the first Negro president of his college, and was the equal of his predecessors, because of his clock-round devotion to duty and his son-in-law Clark was a famous doctor. Clark Coles’ father, daughter and his son-in-law were doctors and his mother was a great teacher and a very well known socialist and one who supported and helped poor dying Negroes.

Prolonged slavery even after the United States freedom discouraged African Americans and they could not tolerate this unethical attitude of the white. Indeed slavery was an abominable practice which should have been abolished immediately after the formation of the United States of American constitution as it clashed with the ideals of freedom and liberty for all. Research shows forth that, though the white discouraged the African Americans, they could not stop their all-round progress in all fields and even in the field of science and technology and in sports.

Study shows that The Harlem Renaissance, which is also known as New Negro Movement focused on improved social and cultural standards of African Americans. This movement also helped to develop relation between black and white writers and to project their coinciding ideas and expressions. The black through intellect and production of art challenged the pervading racism and stereotype to promote progressive or socialist politics and lead to racial and social integration. The research revealed that the white appreciated the talent of the black and started to re-examine their false notion that black people are not improved one intellectually and mentally in various fields. Prominent white people encouraged the black to write in depth and to focus their views on various issues. In his literary article Robert C. Hart highlighted relation between the white and the black artists. He focused on the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and views of its founder Joel E. Spingarn who was a white man. Spingarn being a board member and author of *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* and *The New Criticism* has very close association with the black people. He encouraged W.E.B Du Bois author of *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* to write greatly and has given chance to advance in the literary field. Du Bois quickly became most powerful spokesman and editor of the NAACP Organization journal *Crisis*. Dorothy West met the great literary persons at Harlem at an early age and departed as a last leaf of Harlem Renaissance. She was aware of all the incidents happened from the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance and to the end of the Harlem Renaissance. She focused on these developments and social stratification of African Americans in her works. The magazine established by her ‘‘ The New Challenge’’ was the first publication to bring together black art and politics and other magazines would follow its example. Former American President John Kennedy’s wife Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis met Dorothy West to encourage her to finish the novel *The Wedding* which focused on improved social living conditions of African Americans. Dorothy helped influence the direction and form of African American writing during the Harlem Renaissance. She was considered a little sister by Zora Neale Hurston and other writers and poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Wallace Thurman. She wrote about unsatisfied people who always feel trapped by their environment, or by racism, or because they are black female. Dorothy

was a keen and sharp observer of things happening around her and she focused on real social and economical condition of African Americans and how they have been denied equal status with the dominating white race.

Dorothy West was sympathetic to the aims of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and supported the movement. We could see issues relating to civil rights movement in her works. Critical study shows that civil rights movement helped African Americans to attain self respect and to grow socially and economically. Research on the works of Dorothy West reveals that the ideals and aims of her coincide with the views of Martin Luther King Jr. who led the Civil Rights Movement using tactics of nonviolence and civil disobedience based on Christian beliefs. In the most of her works she projected Christian beliefs and the faith the black have on the eternal God and how he could redeem them from the bondage of racial discrimination which continues in the American society as an unsolved issue and it seems very difficult to come out this problem. The attitude of some white people about the black is that they entered into the United States as slaves and they ought to remain as slaves and they have to accept this very fact. However, there are some white people who wish that the black people should work hard and grow economically and socially. Dorothy West portrayed these limited white people in her works as their well wishers and need not to blame that the entire white race has aversion towards them. She projected the point of view of the white in her novel *The Wedding*. In this novel one of the main characters named Shelby Coles at the age of six went out to see if the berries were ripen or not within a stone's throw of her house and got lost following a lovely puppy into deep woods. Through this incident she focused on concept of color line.

“but you live near here, don't you?” the lady asked Shelby, with another stare that confirmed her first impression that Shelby was of the breed that belonged, and was probably a visiting cousin. Shelby answered that she did not live near, not wanting to confess that she had strayed farther than a stone's throw, and not knowing that the distance between two worlds and two concepts of color. (p 61)

Shelby was born light skinned and she almost looks like a white girl. Parents already registered a complaint to find the missed color girl. Many people saw her, but could not recognize her as a color girl. In the point of view of white society that the color plays prominent role and they never accept the black as their equals though the color line between them is insignificant. It's not the matter of rich or poor, rather American society has been divided on the color line and African Americans have been fighting for decades to get redemption from the clutches of color discrimination. The Negroes Civil Rights Movement is the major one and which is aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure legal recognition and federal protection of the citizenship rights enumerated in the constitution and federal law. African Americans succeeded in achieving equal rights with the white after the Civil Rights Movement to the maximum extent, but still it exists to some extent. Dorothy West tried to convince the white through her writings that the color line between them and the black is insignificant and that should be eradicated.

Dorothy West focused on the efforts of the black for generations to attain comfortable economical status in the United States of America. Lionel C. Bascom in his edited work on Dorothy West *The Last Leaf of Harlem*, collected short stories and in the short story named “The Typewriter” the main character J. Lucius Jones, a genitor by profession have had great dreams to become a great businessman in his life. His social and economical condition could not cope with him to attain desired position. He was frustrated and not satisfied with his low social living. He hoped that there might be born a son to fulfill his dreams, but a girl child was born named Millie. As life was flowing monotonously, the rented typewriter by his daughter to practice typing to get a job became a thing of joy for poor janitor as he dictated business letters to his daughter imagining himself a great business magnet. When he was living the life of fantasies dictating business letters to his daughter and as the fantasy reached to the pinnacle, unexpectedly the typewriter had been returned without his knowledge and he could not dictate the final letter and eventually died with broken heart. Dorothy West's critical view is that the life Negroes lived in the past

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was unfulfilled and there was frustration and uncontrolled anger in them being aliens and under slavery for decades without newness in life and even lack of encouragement to show forth their inner potential to the world. The stress of that time along with the fact of being Negro sheds a new light upon the present day negroes to show forth their inner talent being freed from slavery and having multiple opportunities before them. West's point of view is that one could accomplish desired dreams when we work hard and set goals to become something great in the real life. One of the prominent African American writers Zora Neale Hurston states that it is necessary to show Negro talent to the world to come out of all kinds of prejudice. In her book *Dust Tracks on a Road* she states like this:

I do not share the gloomy thought that Negroes in America are doomed to be stomped out bodaciously, nor even shocked to the bottom of things. Of course some of them will be tromped out, and some will always be at the bottom, keeping company with other bottom folks .It would be against all nature for all the Negroes to be either at the bottom, top, or in between. It has never happened with anybody else, so why with us? No, we will go where the internal drive carries us like everybody else. It is up to the individual. If you haven't got it, you cannot show it. If you have got it, you cannot hide it. That is one of the strongest laws God ever made. (p 192)

Hurston believes that eternal God created all the human beings equal. It is up to the individual to prove his or her talent to the world and come out of state of low social living. If anyone won't strive he or she will be in the same social state forever. Careful study of history shows that relentless efforts of human beings and aspiration to achieve something that made them great in the real life. One has to aspire for upliftment of his or her social status. After getting redemption from the slavery some Negroes started the business and became great entrepreneurs. Sharon L Jones in her work *Reading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* projects plight of many black families from South to North early to mid twentieth century, including Dorothy West's father to become successful entrepreneurs and in the real life they became great businessmen and West's father was a successful entrepreneur and fruit wholesaler dubbed as the black banana king of Boston (p 139). Dorothy West in her novel *The Living Is Easy* portrays a character named Bart Judson who aspires to become a good businessman and his wife Cleo Judson desires to attain at least middle class status in the real life and achieved it. Dorothy West's short story "The Richer, The Poorer" which is extracted from her work *The Richer, The Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences* focuses on how a woman named Lottie could work hard and earned money and attained a middle class status. She was conscious of the money troubles her family suffered and that made her determined to have enough money to be able to afford whatever she wanted. She worked hard up to the age of sixty and retired from the work and enjoyed rest of her life giving sustenance and moral support to her sister named Bess who was married and lost husband and was in need of financial support.

Research reveals that American abolitionists played a major role for immediate emancipation of slaves and they wished that African Americans should grow financially and they had given moral support for their advancement and better living. William Lloyd Garrison agitated tirelessly for total and immediate emancipation of all the Negro slaves. Henry Highland Garnet insisted that the slaves should take up arms for their redemption from the clutches of white slave masters (*Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*, P 330,331). Douglas an African American socialist and writer began to tell his story at abolitionists meetings. His expressed views are like this:

Through his writings and oratory, Frederick Douglas became one of the nation's most persistent agitators against "the grand aggregation of human horrors". He openly declared war on the corrupt institution that still held away over most of his brethren. And he chronicled his experiences as a slave, joining other ex-captives whose narratives offered public testimony that damned the southern propaganda that slaves were content in bondage and well-treated. (*Africans in America*, p 371)

He also played a key role in focusing the cause of African Americans to the human society and resisted the cunning attitude of southern white slave masters. One could find only slavery related topics in all his writings.

Research reveals that the church gives moral support to the African Americans. African Americans in America have always supported their religious institutions even though they would not support their schools or business enterprises. They donate a portion of their income to the church, and the church is still a major social center in all Negro communities. Though they are basically brought from African continent, they never give that much priority to the worship objects which they used to worship in their ancient days. All the prominent authors of Negro background, particularly Dorothy West also mention the church and church related activities and beliefs in their works. We could perceive that the church played a major role for their redemption from the slavery. The white encouraged them to have progress in all fields and to acquire secure financial status and respected by them, because of their faith in the lord Jesus Christ. Regarding their Christian faith William H. Banks, Jr. in his edited book *Beloved Harlem* states like this:

Harlem is not an exception to this rule, and its finest buildings are the churches. Their attendance is large, their prosperity amazing. Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist, Spiritualist, Holly Roller, and Abyssinian Jew – every sect and every creed with all their innumerable subdivisions can be found in Harlem (p 104).

The church helped to construct biological relationship between the black and the white and there are inter racial marriages among them. Martin Luther King Jr. who participated in the civil rights movement was a great preacher and some white folk also had given him moral support to continue the movement for the African American rights. On the whole, in the process of time African Americans achieved significant milestones to acquire equal social status with the white.

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