THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS OF EUDORA WELTY

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With the passage of time American literature has got a very significant place in the annals of world literature. A number of literary luminaries contributed to this all round progress in the field of literature. Southern American literature started getting recognition in the beginning of the 20th century. Eudora Welty, Faulkner, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Robert Penn Warren and Andrew Lytle are the most notable names. They disapproved the dictum of H.L. Mencken that south was a “Sahara of the Bozart”. By their craftmanship and dexterity in the style and variant themes, they carved a unique niche in the literary arena.

The first chapter of the thesis introduces the author and southern fiction. As it is well known there was a big divide between the north and the south about the themes, but the Southern topics remained pertinent for the southern readers. The popular themes during that time of the literary works were ever changing family relationships, one’s own family and those of friends and neighbours, later on other writers described about the disparity existing between races. In such writing, the central
figure or the protagonist was a slave character - black character who got popularity but they had to face the challenges of the outside world. During 20th Century sentimental romanticism gave way to realism. Charles W. Chestnutt’s collection of realistic tales “The Conjure Women” (1899) describes the interesting development of the black women. He describes the pitiable predicament of the black slaves emulating the strategies of the white to preserve their dignity and to ensure their survival. Kate Chopin portrayed sympathetically the condition of 19th Century women quite at loggerheads with the trammels and shackles embossed on her by the society.

The second Southern Women, after Carson McCullers (1917-1967) who emerged as a major figure during 50s was Eudora Welty. She won a number of honours for her literary works. Among them are four O. Henry, first prizes the Gold Medal for the Novel from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and in 1973 a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She was really a southern novelist because she gave local colour to her novels by describing Mississippi and the Jackson area where she was born and lived for most of her life, the delta region, the hill country and new Orleans. She made this local colour a medium through which she
could explore the multi faceted aspects of the human comedy. In one of her essays writing in 1956 she called the use of local colour. In that way she is quite equal to the literary acumen of her contemporary in Oxford to the north and well above that of the rest of her peers. The body of that achievement consists of four volumes of stories (one of these a series of related stories that many have treated as a novel), five novels a book of children’s stories, a remarkable collection of photographs, of collection of essays on writers and writing and a book of autobiographical reminiscences.

She started her literary career with her short story, ‘The Death of a Traveling Salesman’ in 1936. Within a year she was able to get the attention of Brooks and Warren at the Southern review. Later on she wrote ‘A Curtain of Green’ in 1941, ‘the Wide Net and other stories’ in 1943 and ‘The Golden Apples’ in 1949 and three novels ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ in 1942, ‘Delta Wedding’ in 1946 and Ponder Heart in 1949. Afterwards one volume of short stories ‘The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories’ containing some of her best work appeared in 1955. The 60s was a lean period for her.

In all her works remarkable range is found in style, subject matter and theme. She gave the subtitle ‘Experiments in Fiction’ to her first book ‘A Curtain of Green’. It contains high and respectable quality as far as matter and method is concerned. In the words of Henry James, it can be said that “Welty was such a rare artist in whom nothing is lost”. Like Faulkner the most important quality in her works is the representation of the world
she knows best. She has rendered them available with a compassionate eye. Her characters include Mississippians of all classes and age groups, mainly white. She was criticized in her early career for not portraying adequately the black characters. Different firms of Mississippi life are described in her works like delta plantation in “Delta Wedding” the hill country in ‘Loosing Battles’ and small town in ‘Golden Apples’.

Welty’s main reason of success is her masterful method of presentation which is a mixture of humour and realistic details. Her works have identifiable marks of Mississippi- the geography, which she has observed at first hand, the language, which she has reproduced faultlessly and the people. But this local coloring gradually becomes the progressive revelation of the universal human condition. This aspect makes her significant among other women novelists like North Carolinas, Francas Gray Patton, Kentucky Borh Elizabeth Hardwick and West Virginia’s relatively prolific Mary Lee Settle.

The second chapter deals with Moral Consciousness in the novels written between 1941 and 1946. It is found that a distinct kind of moral consciousness is writ large in the writings of Eudora Welty. The fourth decade of the 20th Century was very
productive for her. Two of her best collections of short fiction came out during those years – ‘A Curtain of Green’ (1941) and ‘A Wide Net and Other Stories’ (1943) and two novels – ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ (1942) and ‘Delta Wedding’ (1946).

There is a perceptible lyricism in her short fiction. She has described intimate gestures that shape the individual and his behaviour. Her eyes go as far as her heart can feel. The reader is totally impressed with the beauty of the emotions described in her works. The wonder sound and cadence of her story can carry a reader through it with dream like intensity. In her stories the reader finds an unusual form and sometimes they are not able to look beyond the surface described in the form of human emotions.

‘A Curtain of Green’, Welty’s first book has a collection of four stories - Clytie, Petrified Man, Lily Daw and the three ladies and a Curtain of Green. This book is quite remarkable in range, style, matter and theme. That is why it has been given the title experiments in fiction. This collection of short stories brings forth Welty’s concept of individualism. In it, she gives a limited autonomy to the sheltered individual. They explore the difficulties
of the women leading their life in a troubled society. Society tries to subjugate them while showing to shield them from danger.

Welty's second book of stories 'The Wide Net and Other Stories' shows a slight opening out of the sheltered life. In 'A Curtain of Green' women are described in piquant situations but here they leave no stone unturned in loosening their tight bonds.

The novel 'Delta Wedding' is a celebration of life and is a beautiful presentation which resolve around a love marriage in a family.

The Third chapter of this work tries to analyses human consciousness and celebration of life in the novels written between 1974 and 1954. Eudora Welty was alive to the power of art to impart the lesson of human consciousness among the people. She describes about different experiences of life which leave indelible impressions on the mind of the readers for making their life more aware of the selfishness of others. She wrote 'Golden Apples' and The Ponder Heart in this period. 'Golden Apple' is a collection of seven stories. They are all related with life at Morgana.

The second book of this period The Ponder Heart presents the worthy characteristics of character which can be imitated by
the readers for ushering in a better future for the mankind. Daniel is a role model for this strife torn humanity. He is a man bent on helping others without any kind of ill will against anyone. He appears as a personification of love and benevolence. Despite having opulence in materiel terms, he is not having an iota of pride or snobbishness. He is as free as wind rain which does not discriminate on the basis of race, caste or creed. This novel appears to be a scintillating star in the firmament enveloped with darkness by unfurling the flag of gentleness, selflessness and love towards all.

In the novel ‘The Ponder of Heart’ the author narrates the life style of a person who is always jovial, generous and full of love and affection towards all creatures without discrimination. He is the embodiment of good human values. His life just like full of water and, therefore, it was not possible to tie him to any person or profession.

The fourth chapter of this thesis analyses the essential humanity in the novels written between 1955 and 1965. Eudora Welty looked at life and its multifaceted functions from various angles and describes in her novels its possible pitfalls for making people conscious of its dangers so that they may be able to ward
it off for turning their life towards better future. Each and every novel of this period is replete with feelings of essential humanity – the very backbone of the living beings. Those characters who express the feelings of love, affection and sympathy get unqualified admiration from the novelist and on the other hand, those characters who are governed by the power of senses and body are described to caution others not to tread on these dangerous paths for getting love and confidence within the family and goodwill among the community.

In all the stories of this period, the novelist tries to broaden the mental horizon of the readers by imparting them the lesson of kind heartedness and generosity. They should rise above sectarian and parochial considerations for bringing about a complete transformation to establish an egalitarian society where everybody might live with pride and peace of mind.

The fifth chapter of this work describes the emotional penetration in the novels written between 1966 and 1980. As every artist looks at life from either of two angles – roseate or dark, the contemporaries of Eudora Welty described their characters in the back-drop of the violence engulfing the region during those days. Welty took the same raw material and
provided a picture where life has not been shunned but to be enjoyed despite its vicissitudes. The novels written in this period like ‘Losing Battles’ and the ‘The Optimist’s Daughter’ confirm to this pattern. There is miscarriage of justice and multifarious problems, but the characters don’t lose hope and fight up to the end. In the Losing Battles, the protagonist Jack despite being sent to jail remains optimistic about the joys of life and family values. He gets more pleasure in joint family rather than in nuclear family as was suggested by his wife Gloria. The celebration of 90th birth day of Granny, the grandmother, gives the idea to all family members numbering about 100 to ponder over the benefits of cohesiveness for facing the tribulation of life. As hope and despair are the part and parcel of life so the same are described in the novel but the painful incidents are pointed out for learning the harsh facts of life which always result in pleasures of life. The system of justice has come in criticism as was done by John Galsworthy. Judge Moody does not give significance to the cause of conflict between Curly and Jack and punished the latter without applying the complete Canons of Justice.
The sixth chapter deals with the comic element, mystery of life and love in the novels of Eudora Welty. Eudora Welty’s novels written in the 1930s, 40’s and 50’s are the unique contribution to the American story writing. They are having elements different from the black humour found in the Faulkner’s novels and old order romanticism present in Katherine Anne Porter’s Miranda stories.

Welty’s most clear-cut departure from the American tradition of the short story has been in the shape of her story. In her reading of the nineteenth century Russian writer Anton Chekhov and of the British writers Jane Austen, who wrote in the late Eighteenth century and Virginia Woolf, who wrote in the early part of the Twentieth century, Welty explain the way that she sees subject and point of view shaping a certain kind of story. Welty has understood that Chekhov takes away the action-based plot and replaces it with a design based on his character’s mental associations and insights. Like Chekhov Welty does not narrate a story in the conventional sense of the phrase. She rather conveys through the story a feeling for the interior life of the people she despites. It can be affirmed that the lyrical, passionate feeling sense of daily life is articulated by her in her novels. As for as
Jane Austen is concerned, Eudora feels that her narrator is very close to the community that she represents and this closeness shapes the readers view of community.

Eudora Welty has found this world fraught with contradictions and paradoxes. So the same world is shown by her in her novels. She feels that a life lead apart from society leaves an individual in the dark unprepared to go out in the world. In The Robber Bridegroom Rosamond faces the same predicament. She could not read the inner machination of Jamie Lockhart. She started loving him despite his being a bandit- a man who robes things from the people. In an other way, Eudora Welty stresses the blurring of these two categories: out of the sheltered life comes its just opposite, the daring life. Warren finds both love and separateness in her works. Vande Kieft places stress on the love in her work. In her discussions of the Bride of the Innis fallen, she sees the women in the stories as lonely yet believes that they all find resolutions to their unhappiness. Thus Vande Kieft’s theory sees only one facet of that life the ‘loving’ sheltered Welty not the separate ‘daring’ Welty. Louise Westling describes Welty as an photographer whose world is ‘largely’ sheltered from poverty and violence.
The themes of Eudora Welty are different in different novels. But the progressive ideas are found in each of them. In the Shower of Gold (Golden Apples) the scholar finds Snowdie McLain, a woman devoted to her house and its welfare. She looks after the interests of family sincerely even in the absence of her husband King McLain. In that way the novelist pinpoints the all important role of the women in sustaining the family. The second story in this collection ‘June Recital’ revolves round ‘Miss Echart’ all embracing obsession with music. She has a student named Virgie who shows the novelist’s vision of a free woman. She is not subservient to any body and does work in her own way.

Welty’s works consist of both light and comic elements on the one side and dark and grotesque on the other. The reason behind it is that she enquires into the nature of the protected and isolated individual through her words. The brightness in her vision comes out in her comic stories of women who find unexpected solutions to the claustrophobia of their lives. In ‘Why I live at P.O’ sister devotes her entire narrative explaining the reasons of her residing at the post office, away from her family. It is sister’s first person narration that provides much of the story is comedy. Besides, this story is an expression of highly comic
events surrounding the return of Stella Rondo to the family with this child of two after she has run off with Mr. Whitaker, the traveling photographer.

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With the stories of the Golden Apples, Welty is able not only to suggest bright light at the end of Virgie Rainey’s insular life but also to intensify her scrutiny of sheltered individuals.

The ‘Bride of the Innisfallen’ shares explorations into the sheltered life with Welty’s other collections. The stories range
from an account of a woman who decides after taking the ferry from England to Ireland to leave her husband to the narrative of two sisters fleeing then plantation in the wake of union troops destroying of the estate. ‘The Burning’ is Welty’s most balanced consideration of the secluded life and sums up the balance of the ‘Bride of the Innisfallen’ as a whole.

Welty shows her awareness of her position as the observing narrator, first at a great distance, then drawing closer and closer. She links this narrative position with her “real subject: human relationship” she is troubled by the idea of love and how it works in a relationship. At the same time, she must not experience this love but only observe it, creeping toward its center but not actually touching it or entering into it. In other words for Welty, Love is blended with spatial distance: ‘Love and separateness’ love with the attributes of focus: ‘awareness discernment, order, clarity, insight’.

Ultimately, it has been found that Welty has made a significant contribution in the sphere of novel writing by mentioning diverse theme for inculcating noble ideas in the generation of the period. She took back the thinking of the people into the idyllic situation and then brought it into the present
bizarreness of adverse position to pinpoint the root cause of the problem, engulfing the society. She has blazed a new trail in this field to be imitated by others.