Chapter-iv

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The Kept woman has been present in almost every society and in every country. Theodore Dreiser is among the novelists who advocate for sympathy and equal treatment for the Kept woman. As it is supposed to be a social taboo, it is difficult for the society to accept such relationship. Keeping in view their problems, Dreiser has discussed the theme of the kept woman in particularly two novels - 'Sister Carrie' and 'Jennie Gerhardt'. Like a true feminist, Dreiser’s tries to achieve equality for such women. Dreiser’s views about the Kept woman are very liberal. According to him, morality is not a static phenomenon. It changes from time to time because change is the law of nature. Of course, what we call immoral
today may be treated as a normal behavior after a lapse of time.

In the novel 'Sister Carrie', the heroine is Sister Carrie herself who is a kept woman. Her act of being a kept woman is not accepted by the conventional society of America. "In the light of the world's attitude towards woman and her duties, the nature of Carrie's mental state deserves consideration. Actions such as hers are measured by an arbitrary scale. Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous. Wherefore, villain, hast thou failed." (Sister Carrie 68)

Being influenced by the natural philosophers, Dreiser holds a different view.

The stigma of the 'Kept woman' continues in Sister Carrie as she first lives with the Drummer, Drouet and
then with Hurstwood. Her this act in the moral terminology is a social taboo and gentle folk never accept such an act as it might pollute the so called ‘cultured society.’ But if we consider the circumstances, she had no other option whatsoever but was forced to become a kept woman. Her poverty forces her to go to Chicago and to find shelter at her sister’s. It is unfortunate that Sister Carrie is "picked up on the train by the man who will become her lover, Charles Druet. She is led easily into a life of sin and under his protection, matures into a beautiful woman." (Karen Alkalay-Gut 36)

In the very first chapter of this novel, Carrie Meeber’s going to Chicago gives us an impression that she may be forced to become a kept woman and she may lose her virginity. "When a girl leaves home at eighteen, she does one of two things: either she falls into saving hands
and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse.” (An American Tragedy 11) And yes, she acquires the virtue of a big city and becomes a kept woman. Of course, it can be said that she does not do it for pleasure’s sake but she is compelled to do it. In her early life, Carrie had followed conventional morality. She is the product of her heredity and environment. Her living with Drouet sometimes forces her to think that she was committing a mistake. But later on she becomes used to the new moral code. She departs from the traditional path because her stay at her sister’s taught her that “the conventions sanction a dreary and monotonous lower class life.” (Hoffman 47) Carrie was fed up with the life of poverty. She wanted to enjoy the pleasures of money. It tempts her to err.
Carrie's going with Drouet made her feel that "things are within her grasp if she will take them and accept the marginal morality that taking them requires." (Hoffman 47) It is surprising that she forgets morality faster than anything else and does not care for even her sister who is very particular about morality. She can be compared with Undine Spragg of Edith Wharton's famous novel *The Custom of the Country* for whom marriage becomes a business and morality is of no meaning. Carrie's "breaking of ordinary percepts of personal ethics twice and becoming a man's mistress was in obedience to a higher law of her own personality. Dreiser recognized that she suffered no more penalization by so doing than did the elder Morgan, or Vanderbilt in their public careers." (Burgum; 295) But Carrie was right in her decision which leads her to success. As it is customary, a successful person is always strong and, such a person
overpowers the society. Carrie is strongly defended by Dreiser at every step as he wanted to establish the fact that a kept woman like her was not a burden on society, and she had full right to live the way she liked. He does not find any evil in her character “Throughout, Carrie is simple, pure soul touchingly concerned over moral irregularities and becomingly surprised when she discovers the tricks Hurstwood has played on her.” (Hoffman 47).

In the novel *Sister Carrie*, Carrie emerges as a girl of strong will power. As far as her going with Hurstwood is concerned, she did not do it of her own accord. She becomes a prey to Hurstwood’s tricks as he informed her in a deceitful manner that Drouet had met with an accident. As soon as Carrie comes to know of the accidents, she readily accompanies him, but later on she
discovers her mistake. She had no other way but to submit. Thus, opportunity does knock at her door and she grabs it quickly and becomes independent. Circumstances brought in her “a quite definitely qualitative change from earlier life.” (Hoffman 47)

Carrie becomes self-supporting. Though she seems to barter her sex for better life while residing with Drouet and Hurstwood, she cannot be called an opportunist. As a matter of fact, she is a victim of circumstances, and therefore she is called “Sister Carrie” throughout the novel. Here Dreiser “wishes to disabuse us of the customary notion of the kept woman by reminding us that Carrie is after all, a member of the family, even if she has cut herself from them.” (Simpson Jr. 81) Hence, she is equal to any other woman of the society in terms of being a good human being.
But from the traditional point of view, "Carrie Meeber is also a fallen woman, although she does not fall from such heights to such depths as Hester Prynne, the heroine of The Scarlet Novel." (Gut Autum 36) Actually she attains the heights only after her downfall in the traditional sense.

In spite of her heredity and environment, Carrie could not force herself from moral surplus. She does have a feeling that her ways were immoral and her opinion was based on the opinion of "the world, her past environment, habit, convention in a confused way. With it, the voice of the people was truly the voice of God." (Sister Carrie; 70) Her conscience followed the conventional way. Depiction of the character of Sister Carrie is Dreiser’s aspiration for equality for the kept woman because he finds that people hold a conventional view regarding the kept woman.
People had a belief that all men and women should be virtuous in the traditional sense. Dreiser wants to re-define the position of the kept woman. Our traditional and conservative standard of morality causes the whole problem. But it is not possible that every woman continues to be a pure woman. It is always probable that a woman may be under particular circumstances, and hence may go astray.

The theme of "Kept Woman" is prominent in Dreiser's yet another novel - *Jennie Gerhardt* which deals with the story of its protagonist, Jennie Gerhardt who appears to be a very interesting character. She is also a victim of circumstances and shows the spirit of service and that of sacrifice. For her, others' welfare stands first which is evident in the novel when she does not think of her own progress, and makes a sacrifice by permitting Brander to
gain his father’s property after leaving her. We find Dreiser defending a kept woman as, according to him, a kept woman is a sufferer, and she needs attention and sympathy. Dreiser opposed the traditional views about the kept woman. He feels that there are some traditions which need to be challenged, and the tradition of hating and disliking a kept woman is one of them. He is upset to witness that a woman is described as a kept woman if she does not undergo a formal marriage.

But things have changed a lot today and it is no longer a social taboo in America now a days, and even in traditional and conservative countries like India, it is not treated as a serious matter. “We see how the life of a lovely and sympathetic woman is be delighted because her conduct is "officially" immoral, and the effect of the story is to suggest that standard Christian morality is
inadequate either to guide or to judge conduct in a world that does not adhere as Dreiser sees it, to the assumptions underlying that code.” (Walent 256) In advanced countries and even in some developing countries, the concept of ‘live-in-relationship’ is growing speedily. Under live-in-relationship sexual relations cannot be ruled out. Hence, a woman living with a man without formal marriage ceases to be called a kept woman. In the long run, this objectionable title will automatically disappear.

Jennie’s living with Lester without her marriage with him is suspected by her father that she was after his money. But actually it is not so. As a matter of fact “Jennie is Lester’s wife in everything except name; there is no unfaithfulness in her.” (Wagenknecht, 287) In spite of it, “the orthodox reader may find in Jennie Gerhardt an impressive picture of the miseries incidental to irregular
unions, a powerful denunciation of the wrongs which women must suffer under such arrangement.” (Ibid 287)

It is categorically known to Jennie that society does not have a good opinion about her. Despite the fact that she has made sacrifice for someone, she has earned the name of ‘Kept Woman’. She feels that it was beyond her control to face the circumstances and that is why, she submitted easily to different men. She becomes conscious of the social position and feels guilty. Her virtue is no longer virtue but becomes a vice for her. “For the first time in her life, aside from the family attitude, which had afflicted her greatly, he realized what the world thought of her. She was bad she knew that. She had yielded on two occasions to the force of circumstances which might have been fought out differently, if only she had more courage.”

(Jennie Gerhardt 241):
If we consider facts carefully, it is evident that Jennie is a faithful woman. It is love and a sense of service for Laster Kane that forces her to live with him and not for his money as her father believes. She may not be literally his wife; she plays this role with dedication. But, her faithfulness towards Laster Kane has nothing to do with social norms, and she is labelled as a kept woman by society. Here Dreiser seems to be criticizing the American trends that speaks ill of Jennie Gerhardt. Virtues are neglected. According to him, we can’t brush aside the virtues of such women just because they are not formally married. Human emotions are more important than social sanctions. Jennie’s pain can be understood very well in this respect when people speak of her as an ordinary ‘Kept woman’.
In the characterization of Jennie, Dreiser does have a feeling of pity as a woman like her is looked down upon just because she fails to follow and abide by the customary moral code. Dreiser sincerely believes that if so called traditional morality is against the emotions of human beings, we must be ready to ignore it and should establish new social and moral values. Moral values can’t be made stationary as they reflect the need of a specific time period and if they are made or treated as rigid, the progress of a society will be totally hampered. Instead of advocating blindly for these social norms, we should look deeper as life is not always what it appears to be. In the above perspective, Jennie deserves our appreciation as she is in no way lacking any human qualities. Alfred Kazin aptly remarks that “A novel with a ‘kept woman’ for its central figure would be somewhat unusual, but when that kept woman is presented as good and admirable, as possessing
positive virtues which raise her quite above the general sum of socially minded people, we recognize a novel in which conventional values are challenged, in which an unusual approach is taken to the problem of man in society.” (Kazin 250)

Jennie’s virtues are very much understood by Lester Kane, and when his father rebukes her and passes some unpleasant remarks on her, Lester Kane protests against his father’s statement, and reminds him about Jennie’s virtues and even declares that he may even marry her. “She is not a woman of the streets. You know, as well as you know everything that I would not take up with a woman of that kind.” (Jennie Gerhardt 277) This statement clearly indicates that Dreiser takes Jennie as an ideal woman despite the fact that she suffers from the social stigma of
being an unmarried woman whom the society calls ‘kept woman’.

Dreiser’s sympathy with the kept woman is not restricted up to these two novels: *Sister_Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. Cowperwood in *The_Titan* maintains a number of kept women. Referring to them, Gerber speaks of “the most amazing chorus line of mistresses in American Literature.” (Gerber, 24) In this novel some of these women are wives and daughters of person who are well-placed in society. Cecily was the daughter of Mr. Haguenin, an editor. Mrs. Hosmer Hand was the wife of Mr. Hand, an eminent investor and financier. Rita Sholberg was the wife of an artist. She is given a thorough beating by Aileen when she comes to know of her affair with her husband. When Rita visits her, she asks Rita to come to her room and after closing the door she expresses
her anger: “You’ll steal my husband, will you? You will live in a secret apartment, will you?... You prostitute! I will show you for what you are! I will teach you once for all! Take that, and that, and that.” (The Titan 152) Thus, the kept woman has to undergo even physical torture.

In *The Titan*, we witness the truth that a kept woman finds no peace in her life which is full of sufferings. In this novel Cowperwood married Aileen who had been initially his mistress. She constantly lives in fear and wants that her neighbors should never know that she had been his mistress even before his marriage. It vindicates the fact that Dreiser knew it quite well that even after a marriage a kept woman has to hide her past life because even marriage fails to wash out the stigma of the kept woman. Aileen always “feared that if this sort of
thing continued, it would soon be all over town that she had been a mistress...." *(The Titan 64)*

Her this statement shows her fear which continues to be after becoming Cowperwood's wife. She comes to know about Cowperwood's interest in another woman, Mrs. Rita Sohlberg. She is a very beautiful woman whom Aileen had met once. After this disclosure that Cowperwood likes her, Aileen is afraid of her. Here we find how well Dreiser has depicted the psychology of a woman who does not tolerate another woman particularly if she happens to be active and attractive. This fear is multiplied particularly if she happens to be a competitor.

".........Women dread women most of all, and of all women the clever and beautiful. Rita Sohlberg had been growing on Aileen as a personage for she had obviously
been prospering during this past year, and her beauty had been amazingly thereby.” (The Titan 134)

In An American Tragedy, Roberta Alden remains Clyde’s mistress for a long time. Roberta shifts to the Gulpins’ for the facility of having a separate, private entrance. Clyde visits her and he appears loving and sincere, but later on abandon’s her to her own fate when she gets pregnant. Dreiser draws our sympathy towards Roberta. She yields to him physically in the belief that he will marry her. “Yet nights and nights -- all scruples for the time being abandoned, and however, much by day Roberta might brood and condemn herself when each yielded to the other completely.” (An American Tragedy 290) They wished each day that the concealing, rewarding feverish nights were at hand. But in the long run, she suffers and meets her watery grave.
In *The Bulwark*, Dreiser's another novel; he depicts the predicament of the kept woman. Etta, Solon's daughter, lives as Willard Kane's mistress. She has to face disappointment when the artist leaves her. Her act of becoming a kept woman is the result of the unnatural repression in his home. Dreiser's description highlights the fact that he was aware of the severe control of his own father on his brothers and sisters, particularly in respect of sex, and this he wanted to bring before the world with a view to condemning this act of his father. "Of sex he (Dreiser's father) was even on guard to preserve his daughter's virtues, a care aggravated severely by the girl's own disregard for it as they bloomed into young womanhood." (Gerber 24) The same thing is applied to Solon's daughters. Solon was also very much particular about their chastity, but they found it a severe control. The result is that Etta becomes a mistress, and has to face the
normal problems which a kept woman is bound to face. Later on, Etta realizes her mistake and comes back to live with her family.

To sum up, we can say that Dreiser picked up a totally new theme, and he should be given credit for establishing the position of the kept woman in the society. Hardly ever before, any writer touched such a burning issue. It was he (Dreiser) who drew attention towards the pathetic condition of the kept woman, and for this purpose his mother became the source of inspiration for him. When we read his novels, we develop a soft corner for the kept woman. That is why, he has been considered as the pioneer of the novelists who advocated so vehemently for the kept woman. We can say that as long on the kept woman lives in our society in one form or the other, Dreiser's name will always be remembered.
Dreiser has surely done a Yeoman's task by trying to uplift the kept woman from the social point of view. The feminist in him inspired him to fight for the equal status of the kept woman. So much so that Carrie continues to be Sister Carrie to imply the fact that any of our sisters can go astray but she continues to be respectable.

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