Chapter-iii
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Theodore Dreiser had experienced the bitter truths of life and most of his experiences were entirely personal. He draws upon this material for his novels. His sympathetic approach towards the unmarried mother was nothing but a reflection of the catastrophic situation of his own three sisters who became mothers before they could become wives. He witnessed some tragic scenes in his life and they made him understand the problems that such a woman faces. In his novels he pleads that a society should be humble with these women, and advocates for the equal treatment of the children born out of the marital tie, in the same way as those born through formal marriage.
In the novels of Theodore Dreiser, we have deep analysis of the predicament of the unmarried mother. His sympathetic approach towards the unmarried mothers was just because of his mother, Sarah Dreiser, who, whenever faced a conflict between Nature and the social code, stood in favour of Nature. It was his sheer love for the ideals of his mother which accounts for his sympathetic approach towards the unmarried mother in his novels.

In one of the best novels of Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*, the protagonist Jennie herself is an unmarried mother whose lover Senator Brander unfortunately passes away even before fulfilling the promise of marriage. To add to her trouble, Jennie was pregnant at the time of his death. Later on, she is bound to face the music as during her time it was a social taboo for a girl to be pregnant before marriage. Society was hardly able to digest such cases easily. "She had no definite realization of
what social and physical changes this new relationship to the Senator might entail. She was not conscious as yet of that shock which the possibility of maternity must bring to the average woman." (Jennie Gerhardt 78)

Jennie starts facing problems from her very home when her mother herself was shocked after Jennie made the confession of her motherhood. She “stood there too dumb with misery to give vent to a word”. (Jennie Gerhardt 85). Not only this, even her father Gerhardt, exclaims with sorrow after he comes to know about this fact; “Ruined! He exclaimed Ruined! Ha! So he has ruined her, has he?” (Jennie Gerhardt 88) His reflection presents the consideration of the then society which was predominated by traditional ideas and thoughts, and to them Jennie’s act was immoral and unacceptable. “The incidents of the days that followed, relating as they did peculiarly to Jennie, were of an order which the morality of our day has agreed to
"taboo." (Jennie Gerhardt 98). According to Jennie, "She had committed a great sin; it was impossible to get away from that." (Jennie Gerhardt 116). Despite all the guilty feelings of Jennie, Dreiser does not approve of her opinion. He has a firm faith that "the accidental variation from a given social practice does not necessarily entail sin". (Jennie Gerhardt 98). Thus, Jennie's sufferings apparently seem to be caused due to lack of social sanction, but, at the same time we must consider the fact that the same relationship (of Jennie's with Senator) would have been accepted by the society without question, had senator been alive. Dreiser intervenes here saying that Jennie was being blamed for that which "but for Brander's death might have been consecrated and hallowed as one of the ideal functions of life." (Jennie Gerhardt 99).

The birth of a child is a necessary product of two person's love, and society welcomes this act with open hands. No doubt,
it is a time of merrymaking and rejoicing. But actually what happens is just the opposite: the birth of Jennie’s daughter, Vesta, becomes a curse for her. But for Dreiser, it was just a part of the natural process. Under dead leaves and snow-banks, the delicate arbutus unfolds its simple blossom, answering some heavenly call for colour. So, too, this other flower of womanhood. We can find that the predicament of Jennie is similar to that of Hardy’s Tess who is seduced by Alec, a slave of his passions who later violates her virginity, making her the mother of a baby.

Even after her marriage with Angle Clare, Tess is no longer able to carry on this marriage as her husband abandons her after knowing her past. She fails to prove her innocence because the society puts conventions above all beliefs. Tess no longer possesses chastity once her virginity is lost. But the sub-title of the novel is “a pure woman” which reflects Hardy’s attitude
towards such a woman. But she faces a number of difficulties just because she has a social stigma of being an unmarried mother, and suffers for no fault of her own.

A mother loves her child more than anything else in the world, and her love is believed to be a very pious. But, as Jennie was unmarried at the time of the birth of her child, the child was treated as evil. Moreover, her love for her own child was looked upon as a bad practice. This act was never tolerated by the society, and many a time she had to face the scornful gaze of men. Despite all these odds of life after her motherhood, Jennie's love for her child is pure and she is quite pleased to be a mother.

After her motherhood, when Jennie meets her father Cleaveland, he no longer displays the old nature of a loving father. Rather, he shows his harsh and unsympathetic nature: "At the sight of his daughter he weakened internally; ...All the
forces of his conventional understanding of morality and his naturally sympathetic and fatherly disposition were battling within him, but .......convention was temporarily the victor.” (Jennie Gerhardt, 117). But the doctor who looks after Jennie’s pregnancy and her safe motherhood i.e., Dr Ellvanger shows sympathetic nature and advises Jennie’s mother not to worry for the comments which people pass on this entire issue. He was, in addition, very much pleased to know when he learns that Brander was the child’s father and comments cheerfully: “Indeed, that ought to be bright baby.” (Jennie Gerhardt, 100)

Despite all these consolations offered by Dr Ellvanger, the Gerhardt family wants to wash out this social stigma and finally decides to shift to Cleaveland so as to have a new beginning of life. Jennie, with a heavy heart, leaves the child to avoid any further scandal. Jennie feels very sorry at that moment: “But when it came to bending over her baby for the last time her
courage went out like a blown lamp. Stooping over the cradle

...She looked into its face with passionate motherly yearning

....Mrs. Gerhardt saw that she was trembling.” (Jennie Gerhardt 106). Thus, this entire episode of Jennie’s motherhood makes her “cut off from society because she has borne a child out of wedlock....” (McAleer 94). She faces problems because she does not follow the conventional code. The birth of her daughter Vesta lifts her above a world of convention that follows a dead letter and the goals of greed.

Despite the fact that Jennie has no American dream in her mind, she faces a series of problems in her life. As per the tradition of the American society, it was necessary for a mother to disclose the name of the father of the child who was to be baptized. Also, the marriage of the mother should be a legal one. For Jennie, the problems were multifold. The child was not a legitimate one as she had not married Brander at the time
of Vesta’s birth. Jennie has to confront this bitter reality at the moment when the priest wants to know the name of the father of the child before her daughter gets christened. “Mrs. Gerhardt reminded him (Old Gerhardt) that someone would have to stand godfather to the child, and there was no way to have the ceremony performed without confessing the fact that it was without a legitimate father. (Jennie Gerhardt 118). But Dreiser continues to show sympathy with her considering it the creation of life and the beneficent processes of Nature. Truly speaking, “to both Jennie and Dreiser, the birth is a confirmation of the beauty and goodness of the generative principle in life and Jennie is not only unsullied but uplifted and strengthened by the experience.” (Donald Pizer 107).

Marriage, which is a dream of every girl, becomes a problem for an unmarried mother. She becomes unacceptable to the society. Jennie does not dare to accept Kane’s offer of
love after Brander’s death because she fears that Kane may refuse to love her the moment he comes to know about her daughter. Later, she accepts his proposal of love but constantly lives in fear because her love can come to an end at any moment. She is therefore, afraid of disclosing the fact of being a mother. Though Kane does know about her (Jennie’s) daughter, Vesta, and therefore, despite the fact that he loves her, he drops the idea of marrying her.

The predicament of an unmarried mother is yet again the central theme of Dreiser’s another very famous novel — *An American Tragedy*. Like Jennie Gerhardt, Clyde’s sister, Esta, is left penniless and pregnant by her lover and suffers a lot. Her confession before her brother that “It’s all my fault, of course. If I haven’t run away, I wouldn’t have caused her (Esta’s mother) all this trouble ....” (*An American Tragedy* 97) Esta’s entire family — his brother Clyde, her mother are all very much
disturbed and ashamed of her deed because people considered it a taboo. Her mother is so upset and ashamed that she does not permit her to come home lest other children should come to know of it.

Despite being ashamed of her such a hateful work, however, Esta’s mother stands by her during the time of her distress. But her brother Clyde is in a what-to-do situation and fails to provide any help to her. We witness facing the same catastrophic condition of another girl in *An American Tragedy*, i.e. Roberta Alden, who gets pregnant before her marriage and becomes a mother. Her situation is similar to that of Jennie as she is scared of the world. "For the opinion of society in general and what other people might say, Roberta stood in extreme terror. The stigma of unsanctioned concupiscence! The shame of illegitimacy for a child." (*An American Tragedy* 369) As usual, she was afraid of her relatives and parents. Her lover
Clyde initially shows his love for her but later on his sympathy is transferred to a rich girl named Sondra, and Roberta seems to be a burden for him. Therefore, he wants to get rid of her. His attempt to terminate her pregnancy with the help of some pills results in her deathly illness. Ultimately, she is by chance drowned in Big Bittern and it is shocking that her lover Clyde does not make any attempt to save her. Once again, we find the sad end of a girl who becomes a mother without getting married.

Poverty strikes hard to such girls who find them in such catastrophic situations. Roberta’s tragedy is one such an example as she fails to obtain an abortion because of her poverty. Had she been a rich girl, she would have managed to go for abortion. As Dreiser comments, "An intimation that money could have procured the desired end with the doctor consulted, emphasizes that the plight is less one of the morally
wayward than those lacking money and station.” (McAleer 136)

The doctor’s refusal to perform an operation breaks Roberta badly and she feels disgraced and ultimately passes away. On the contrary, the same doctor did not mind operating upon a girl for the termination of pregnancy if she happened to be rich and also belonged to a good family. “And so, although in several cases in the past ten years where family and other neighborhood and religious considerations had made it seem quite advisable, he had assisted in extricating from the consequences of their folly several young girls of good family who had fallen from grace and could not otherwise be rescued....” (An American Tragedy 400)

Roberta was shocked when the doctor refused to provide her any kind of relief. “For apparently now here was illegitimacy and disgrace for Roberta, Exposure and
destruction for Clyde. And this had been their one solution seemingly.” (An American Tragedy, 407). Roberta understands it quite clearly that Clyde was pulled towards Sondra just because of her wealth, which results in his carelessness towards Roberta. Moreover, Clyde Griffiths takes every care that his name is not involved in Roberta’s pregnancy, and as a precaution, when he takes Roberta for abortion, he requests her not to disclose her name or the place from where she comes. For him, the prestige of his family stands first and therefore, he impresses upon Roberta that after all he belongs to the Griffiths’ family, and people in the vicinity must be knowing his name. Also he is scared that the disclosure of his name in this case may jeopardize his relationship with Sondra Finchley.

Clyde does not want that people should know that he had been maintaining deep relations with such an ordinary woman as Roberta. That’s why he seems to be avoiding Roberta’s
company while going with Roberta to consult a doctor. Roberta, on the other hand, feels shy of going by herself to the doctor. Thus, Roberta faces a great problem and Theodore Dreiser wants to impress upon the readers that an unmarried mother becomes a victim of the society of her time.

We are aware that a pregnant lady undergoes physical and psychological changes. Roberta, after being disappointed by the doctor, feels greatly nervous. Dreiser highlights the weakness of her body because she hardly walks by herself. The pathetic picture of a pregnant woman touches the chords of our heart, and we come to the conclusion that legal or illegal, pregnancy is pregnancy. Its illegal nature, in no case, reduces the sufferings of an unmarried woman.

Psychological and sociological impact of pregnancy has also been a prominent theme in Theodore Dreiser’s novels. Psychologically, it is very difficult for an unmarried mother to
live normal life. She constantly feels disturbed and upset and cuts herself off from society. In such cases, we find that even the members of society discard an unmarried mother as she is unfit for a healthy society. This type of treatment of a pregnant woman is not found in any other novelist. "An American Tragedy provides Dreiser's best known treatment of pregnancy, but The Genius and Gennie Gerhardt establish its critical position in his work." (Clare 149)

In the novel An American Tragedy, Roberta's suffering has no end, and she faces great misfortune even after her death. Her lover, Clyde Griffiths, belongs to the renowned family of Griffiths who do not want that any member of their family should earn a bad name. While the case of Roberta's murder was put to trial, their lawyer makes a false story according to which Roberta had been having some illicit relations with someone, and she requested Clyde Griffiths to accept her as his
wife, but this is not the fact. Thus, we see that even her soul suffers because her relations have been misinterpreted. "......... (Roberta) was compelled to come to this defendant Clyde Griffiths, and told him that she was about to become a mother. We shall prove to you that then and later, she begged him to go away with her and make her his wife." (An American Tragedy, 643)

Thus, it is evident that Dreiser has dealt with the problem of the unmarried mother in an excellent manner. His treatment of this theme shows his sympathy towards such women very clearly. It is not for the first time that the problem of the unmarried mother has been taken as a prominent theme by Theodore Dreiser. This problem of the unmarried mother has also been discussed by some of the well known English novelists. Mrs. Gaskell, for example, in Ruth, presents the general attitude of the society towards an unmarried mother.
Her plea for sympathy for such a woman is evident in her novels. She advocates uniform standards of morality for men and women both. She sincerely believes that society should come forward to give social respect to an unmarried mother. The illegitimate child should not continue to be a matter of shame for her.

We find the traces of discrimination against a girl who was betrayed by her lover. In such a situation, she had only three choices—emigration, death or prostitution. The famous characters like Little Emily in *David Copperfield* and Lady Dedlock in *Black House*, and Tess in *The Tess of the D’Urbervilles* are three best examples of the girls who suffer because they are placed in the above catastrophic situation. While Emily is transported to Austria after her seduction, Lady Dedlock is found dead when she becomes a mother after Captain Howdon, her lover, dies. Despite the above examples,
the theme of seduction and that of the unmarried mother was not a proper subject for open discussion in fiction during the Victorian Era. It was supposed to have bad influence on the readers who were basically used to traditional themes. Even in America, when it was trying to establish its identity in the arena of literature, such a theme was not accepted among the common folk. But Dreiser tries to advocate and establish a better social status for the unmarried mother, and was also successful to a large extent as the same theme was picked up by a good number of novelists, and general discussion started in America over the sanctity of the unmarried mother. Dreiser’s sympathy towards an unmarried mother is quite evident in his novels. Dreiser was bold enough to incorporate this theme in his works. Dreiser’s personal experience tilted the balance in favour of the unmarried mother.

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