

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH



**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 9, September 2018

www.ijellh.com

*V. Gopinathanikandan

Ph.D Research scholar, Department Of English,
Annamalai University,
Tamilnadu India
gopinathaec@gmail.com

**Dr. M.Madhavan

Assistant Professor, Department Of English,
Annamalai University,
Tamilnadu,India
mvmadhuwins@yahoo.co.in

William Styron's: "Sophie's Choice" – A Study of Racial Discrimination

Abstract

Racism means a condition in society in which a dominant racial group benefits from the oppression of others whether they want such benefits or not. Racism is an outcome of the complex interaction in a given society of a race- based worldview with prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. Racism is present in social practices, actions and political systems that support the expression of prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices. The theory underlying racist practices includes the idea that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and inherent capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior. Racial discrimination and racism are often used to describe discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis. William Styron's *Sophie's choice* is an example of literature that deals with the theme of racism and social oppression during that period. After the Second World War, the concentration camps (Auschwitz), the sadistic treatment of the Jews, great depression and American dream have become the theme of many literary works. William Styron's novels mostly deal with race, ethnicity, oppression, guilt, sin and salvation. This paper deals with the racial discrimination faced by the characters in William Styron's *Sophie's choice*.

Key Words: Discrimination, Ethnicity, Racism, Social Oppression.

1. Introduction

Racism means a condition in society in which a dominant racial group benefits from the oppression of others whether they want such benefits or not. Racism is an outcome of the complex interaction in a given society of a race-based worldview with prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. Racism is present in social practices, actions and political systems that support the expression of prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices. The theory underlying racist practices includes the idea that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and inherent capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior. Racial discrimination and racism are often used to describe discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis. William Styron's *Sophie's choice* is an example of literature that deals with the theme of racism and social oppression during that period. After the Second World War, the concentration camps (Auschwitz), the sadistic treatment of the Jews, great depression and American dream have become the theme of many literary works. William Styron's novels mostly deal with race, ethnicity, oppression, guilt, sin and salvation. This paper deals with the racial discrimination faced by the characters in William Styron's *Sophie's choice*.

2. The Background

Racial discrimination plays a major role in the work *Sophie's choice*. Sophie, Nathan and Stingo in *Sophie's choice* are affected racial discrimination in one way or other. Styron was born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1925 and died in 2006 in Massachusetts due to pneumonia at the age of 81. He was trained as a candidate for officer in the Marine Corps while attending Duke University in North Carolina. At Duke, he became interested in literature and was encouraged to become a writer by Professor William Blackburn. Upon graduating in 1947, he worked briefly and unhappily as an associate editor for McGraw-Hill publishers in New York City. *Lie down in darkness*, *The confession of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's choice* are Styron's famous works. *The confession of Nat Turner* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

His important works are *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), *The Long March* (1952), *Set This House on Fire* (1960), *The Confessions of Nat Turner*(1967), *Sophie's Choice* (1979), *This Quiet Dust*, and *Other Writings* (1982), *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), *A Tidewater*

Morning: Three Tales from Youth (1993) and *Havanas in Camelot* (2008). The book *Havanas in Camelot* was published two years after the death of Styron and is a compilation of personal essays. In his stories and novels, one can find the struggle of the individual against the corruption rooted in the society and institutional conventions.

3. Sophie as the victim of social discrimination

In *Sophie's choice*, Styron narrates the story of the three young friends Sophie Zawistowska, Nathan Landau, Stingo who lived in Brooklyn in 1947. This novel refers to a secret held by Sophie. Stingo begins the story. He loses his job and moves to Brooklyn, wants to become a writer. He meets Nathan and Sophie then he becomes friend of them. Sophie is a non-Jewish who survived the concentration camp. Nathan is a Biologist and Jewish-American who suffers mental disorder. In the end of the story Nathan and Sophie ends their life.

Racism which prevailed during this period has played a major role in *Sophie's choice*. Stingo, the narrator, is a Southern boy, born and bred, who moved to New York with the aim of becoming a writer and works in Mc Graw – Hill, a publishing company from nine to five. He is not happy with his job, resigns and moves to Brooklyn. There he finds a room. He meets his fellow tenants, Nathan Landau and Sophie Zawistowski, a volatile but fascinating young couple. Stingo is delighted to be in the company of people of his age. Stingo enjoys life again and finds new inspiration for his writing.

Racism refers to groups which share a common identity such as ancestry, language or culture. It is mostly relied on religion, customs, beliefs and also memories of colonization and migration. Race has played a major role in social category. It was forged through oppression, slavery and conquest. Sophie, Nathan and other Jews become a victim of racism in this novel. Stingo is affected by racial discrimination of the fact being a southerner. Nathan meets Stingo first time and learns that he is from south. Nathan suddenly recalls what had happened to Bobby Weed some years. Stingo was not connected with the events which happened to Bobby Weed. Nathan accuses him as responsible for Bobby Weed's death because Stingo is from South.

“I will tell you something about Bobby Weed, Stingo my friend. And that is *this!* You southern white people have a lot to answer for when it comes to such bestiality” (p.77)

Nathan is a Jew and Sophie is a Non-Jew who comes from Poland. Nathan gets upset and he accuses Stingo and Sophie by mentioning their race or the place they originate. Sophie belongs to Poland. More than Nathan, Sophie faces a lot of problems due to racial discrimination. She faces discrimination at her home town Poland, Auschwitz camp and in Brooklyn. When Sophie was living in Cracow she spoke German before Polish language. German invaded Poland; in Poland Jews were targeted and insulted. Jews were taken to concentration camp for assassination. Racial discrimination was involved even in the process of selecting people put into death in the concentration camp. Sophie states that

“I was at Auschwitz for twenty months. When I arrived everyone who was selected to be killed was sent to Birkenau, but very soon latter Birkenau became the place where only Jews were killed”. (p. 153)

Racial discrimination was its highest peak when German invaded Poland. When German invaded Poland, concentration camp was set up for killing the people who belonged to Jewish race. The people who were chosen for put into gas chamber were given priority based on their race. During this time most of the people even tried to hide their race by speaking German language and behave like German. Jews were taken and killed mercilessly. They were put in gas chambers. People were afraid of their race, language. Everyone was put into death. Death was so cruel there. The skilled people were allowed to work for few months later they were also put into gas chambers.

We could see racial discrimination from the conversation between SS commandant Hoss and Sophie at Auschwitz camp. Sophie pleads Hoss to release her from the camp saying that she is not a Jew. Commandant asks her why she was in the camp. Sophie replies him that she was caught while taking meat for her sick mother which was against the rule.

I do hope you will believe me when I say that my imprisonment here is a terrible miscarriage of justice. As you see, I am Polish and indeed I was guilty of the crime I was charged with in Warsaw-smuggling food. But it was a small crime, don't you see, I was trying only to feed my mother, who was very sick. I urge you to try to understand that this was *nothing* when measured against the nature of my background, my upbringing. (p.284)

But Commandant replies that

“It’s hard to believe you’re Polish, with your superb German and the way you look- the fair complexion of your skin and the lines of your face, so typically Aryan. It’s a finer face than that of most Slavic women. And yet you are what you say you are – a Pole” (p.293)

Hoss refuses that he did not have the authority to release her. The only way she could escape from the place is the chimney smoke. Hoss talks about the various races and their traits. Sophie has a child named Jan. when her plea of release has been rejected, she pleads for the release of her son. She learns that there is a secret programme called Lebensborn. The children who were in the camp are selected to send to Germany and would be brought up like a Nazi. The racism is at its full swing when the kids were selected as saying

“Theoretically the children were to be of pure German stock. But that many of these young victims were Polish is another measure of the Nazi’s frequent cynical expediency in racial matters, since although poles were regarded as subhuman, and along with other Slavic peoples, worthy successors to the Jews of the policy of extermination, they did in many cases satisfy certain crude physical requirements – familiar enough in facial feature to resembles those of Nordic blood and often of a luminiferous blondness that pleased the Nazi aesthetic sense almost more than anything else” (P 315)

4. Conclusion

Sophie’s choice is an example of literary work blended with racial discrimination. The characters in the novel suffer in one way or another way by these elements. The conversations at the publishing house, the comments by Nathan about Stingo for being a southerner and the happenings at the Auschwitz camp are clear evidence of racial discrimination in this novel.

Works cited

Styron, William. *Sophie's choice*. Rosetta Books LLC, New York. 2000. Print.

Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice*. London: Picador, 1992. Print.

Fiedler, Leslie A. "Styron's Choice: A Novel About Auschwitz." *Psychology Today*, XIII (July, 1979), 102-107.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie's_Choice_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie's_Choice_(novel))

<https://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/terms/race.html>

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/sociology/social-and-global-stratification/types-of-social-classes-of-people>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racism>