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RACE AND ETHNICITY IN SHAWN WONG'S AMERICAN KNEE

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Abstract: Migration from one place to another is an unavoidable part of human life in current world of globalization. Groups of people of one nation migrate to another nation for the purpose of business, education and in some cases to survive. Political upheavals of a particular country also suppress the people of the nation to dislocate from their ancestral homeland and to settle in the foreign land. Such migrated people establish their social group in the host country along with their culture, tradition and customs that give birth to cultural creolization in the host society. Variations in immigrants' race, ethnicity and their sense of being other in the host country and the problems they face in such a multi-cultural society is a matter of interest. This paper focuses race and ethnicity explored in Shawn Wong's novel American Knees diaspora literature.

Key words: Race, ethnicity, creolization, multiculturalism, displacement, etc.

Introduction:

The present paper attempts to explore race and ethnicity in Shawn Wong's novel, American Knees. The traditional definitions of race and ethnicity are related to biological and sociological factors respectively. Race refers to a person's physical appearance, such as skin-colour, eye-colour, hair-colour, bone/jaw structure etc. Ethnicity, on the other hand, relates to cultural factors such as nationality, culture, ancestry, language and beliefs. For example, Caucasian race. The physical characteristics of Caucasians were described by M. A. MacConaill as being "light skin and eyes, narrow noses, and thin lips. Their hair is usually straight or wavy". Caucasoids are said to have the lowest degree of projection of the alveolar bones which contain the teeth, a notable size prominence of the cranium and forehead region, and a projection of the mid-facial region. A person whose appearance matches these characteristics is

said to be a Caucasian. However, there are many ethnicities within the Caucasian race e.g. Irish, Welsh, German, French, Spanish (as in the true meaning from Spain) Slovak etc. What differentiates these ethnic groups from each other is their country of origin, language they speak, cultural heritage and traditions, beliefs and rituals. It is very difficult to make a difference between ethnicity and race, simply because we tend to place them into the same definition. While the dictionary can represent each of these words to be highly similar, there are differences. Ethnicity is not just a person's race. We can say that a Caucasian is white, but that does not describe his ethnicity. If we lined up a Caucasian from Ireland, Israel and Canada, it would be difficult to discern from which country each person originates. Yet, if we give them appropriate items from their culture, it becomes easier to determine their country of origin. Ethnicity is about tradition, learned behaviour and customs.



affairs with white women. He is the only divorcee in his Chinese American family. Therefore, he suffers from an intense sense of guilt and has an equally strong desire to be known as a dutiful Chinese son. Betty and Aurora are two choices before him. Betty is a Vietnamese immigrant and she cannot escape her Vietnamese immigrant identity. Aurora is a beautiful half Japanese and half Irish photo-journalist who Raymond falls in love with. Aurora is ready to follow the footsteps of Raymond and finally acknowledge the Asian American identity. Brenda, another girl in the novel, shows her unwillingness to acknowledge an Asian American identity. Betty sticks up to her Vietnamese immigrant identity. By the end of the novel, Raymond learns that his rigid approach to Asian American identity needs some softening around the edges.

In short, this is the love story of Raymond Ding, a politically correct man who has a sense of humour which is politically incorrect and Aurora Crane, a newspaper photographer. As the novel moves forward, the story unfolds some funny scenes of social relations in multicultural America.

Race and Ethnicity:

It is psychologically and medically approved that one cannot be uprooted from ones ethnic and racial roots. Wherever the man goes, whatever he does, whatever he earns, he cannot go beyond his ethnicity and race. Raymond and Aurora come together due to their same race and ethnicity. But on the other hand Raymond feels ashamed and hesitant in the company of Gretchen because they belong to different racial, ethnic and cultural groups. The relations between Aurora and

Raymond begin with 'eye contact' in a large crowded room at Washington DC where they are the only two Asians at a party. They avoid each other because of self-doubt and insecurity but somehow they know that they are going to end up together. However, their feeling of hesitation that Americans should not point them out as Asians indicates their consciousness of being other in American society. She is younger than Raymond by ten or twelve years. Raymond fears personally that their relationship would not survive with the explanations of his failed marriage and difference in their age. This relationship no longer continues for more than two years in which Raymond behaves with her in an instructive manner which she hates. Aurora Crane is the daughter of an American born Japanese woman Norma and white father Hank who had served in Korea during the Korean War. She has inherited her father's looks and upper-Midwest culture of her childhood to 'pass' as white when she wishes.

Aurora remembers the incident of her father Hank who came to visit her when she was going to Columbia and they were walking down the street. His arm was around her waist. People were staring at them because he was so Midwest. She pointed out in their eyes that she was not his daughter but a prostitute. This approach of people towards her is irritating. She feels comfortable and safe from such blames when she is with Raymond. She is curious about the difference between Asian women and American or white women. She even tries to know from Raymond what is the difference between making love with a white woman and making love with an



Asian woman and his answer to her question is, "I'm always surprised at how much Asian women enjoy sex". Then she asks him, "When do you see me being Japanese? He answers, "When you tell me about your mother. There are things she does that are very Japanese. You do them too" (105). Here one thing is notable that Julia, Aurora's younger sister and Raymond do not feel ashamed of being Asian in general and Chinese and Japanese or whatever so in particular. But they feel it awkward or humiliating when they are mentioned as Asians especially in the company of Americans because that mention is deliberate and insulting.

Race is quite an important factor in the American society. It is a common thing that people usually observe others' behavior very keenly. Raymond discusses Aurora's question about the sex, 'what is the difference between making love with a white woman and making love with an Asian woman', with his friend Jimmy Chan, who is born in Oakland but looks like an immigrant and is the editor of the National Asian American Weekly and raises a question after listening Raymond's thoughts, "Was it her way of asking if you were sleeping around with white women now?" But Raymond thinks that she really wanted to know whether race had anything to do with making love?" (143). Perhaps this question is the root cause of their break-up. But Jimmy thinks that they are not different but it is man's perspective that is different. It is a cultural baggage we bring to bed that makes it different.

There are some questions in Raymond's mind at the beginning about Aurora, "What nationality are you?" Americans like my parents, "What are you? Do you

know? What race? Was ethnicity so hard a word to use?" (26). Both of them are in a state to solve the dilemma and get facts about each other's preferences for lovers not of their own race. (32). She wants to know the exact definitions of race and ethnicity, the history of a struggle, and the symbols of institutionalized racism (45). Aurora wonders if the differences between both of them are strictly a matter of race. Raymond thinks it is more complex. He thinks predominantly Asian San Francisco, with himself as lover and mentor, can tip the ethnic balance (40).

In one more conversation between both of them Raymond points out Aurora's double headedness in the matter of her being racist and tells her,

You are a beautiful and politically correct Asian American woman when it's convenient for you. Other times, you let things pass without comment. Men think you are beautiful, and you are quick to point out that they are being racist when it affects your identity. But you are not being responsible at other times for the race. Each time you let something pass that's generally insulting or racist about Asian people and it is not specifically directed at you. You are in a sense of 'passing' for white or at least non-Asian. (49)

Raymond, too, wonders if the differences between them are strictly a matter of race. Has he been so adamant to "teach" her simply because he cannot forget that Aurora is half white? Is he harboring some guilt for having a half-white girlfriend instead of displaying pride for having a half-Asian girlfriend? He argues with himself about race and gender, race and identity, being flimsy excuse, a cover-up, a



scapegoat for deeper problems between them.

Racism is so deeply rooted in the American society that Americans are ready to accept the person who is even half white. But they never accept one who is not white. Being half white or white is a matter of pride for them. Aurora points out Americans' attitude when she says, "They don't understand it when I say I am not white. Their defense is that I am half white" (55). American society has accepted Aurora as a part and parcel of their self because she is half white. But they are never ready to accept Raymond because he is not white. So it is colour that matters much in America and not man's feelings that fortify the human culture and the human race. Though Raymond is born, brought up and educated in America, though he has moulded his life according to the American culture and has accepted and is following the American ways of life, the Americans, still are unwilling to accept him as a part of their society. Their non-acceptance of Raymond is based on his race and ethnicity.

Marrying out of the race is a common issue in modern American society. Women are getting married out of their race. It can be noticed that they do not bother about their culture and tradition. Even they do not care for their parents' obligations. Aurora is quite conscious about it. In the conversation between Brenda and Aurora on a white woman with an Asian man, especially when he was caught getting a kiss and a hug from a white woman, Brenda says, "It is disgusting to see an Asian man with an ugly white woman". The name of that lady is Astral Anitra and she works with Raymond. She is married

and she has two children. There is always a prejudice in her mind about the race while dating with Raymond. So she is confused about her race and ethnicity. She is unable to decide whether she is half American or half Japanese. Here, a point is notable that race is more important than sex in the life of Asian Americans. On the other hand, Raymond's opinion about Asian woman is different, May be Asian women feel this race difference more than men. You can't get it out of your mind that the white guy you are in bed with an Asian woman, and that might have something to do with the attraction. (102)

As already stated, American society is race consciousness. It accepts half Americans easily and ignores their other half race and identity that happens in case of Aurora. Following conversation throws some light on this attitude. But still she has some questions in her mind about the race. While discussing on Raymond's white girlfriend Aurora says,

The woman made you feel like you belonged to your girlfriend and it did not have anything to do with race". He replies, "Yes". She further asks, "Is it an issue with us?"

"I don't know; is it?"

"It was in the beginning, but now I am not so sure".

"Can you really say there is a race consciousness one minute but not the next?"

"Was I attracted to you because it's easier for me or because it's easier for society".

"Society already accepts you, Ro. You can be with anyone and it's acceptable, in any society, anywhere."



“Brenda says you only go out with Asian women now because you’re too politically correct to do anything else and you have a job that’s too politically correct for you to have a flaw like a white wife. She further says it’s either that you have inferiority complex about dating white women, but I told her that certainly wasn’t true” (104).

From the above discussion it is quite clear that Race plays an important role in almost every act of promotion and love is not exception to it.

Another example throws some light on race discrimination when Raymond says to Brenda on Aurora’s thoughts about whites, “It’s a racist world: she needs to know how to defend herself”. She complains that Aurora called her boyfriend Paul a racist because of him. But Raymond replies that if she called him racist it is so because she must have found something like racist in him. He asks Brenda why she called him so. She replies, “Paul said something about how America’s shores are open to every kind of refugee, boat person and political asylum seeker in the world. Ro asked him if he was in favour of English--- only laws as well as immigration restrictions. When Paul paused to think about his answer, Ro jumped all over him and called him a racist”. Brenda blames Raymond, “You’ve brainwashed her into having a kind of racial paranoia”. And Raymond’s answer is, “That’s not it all! You didn’t like it because it put you in bad position- You knew Aurora was right, and she was forcing you to take a stand on the issue” (136). Bill, Aurora’s another boyfriend after Raymond, was there when Aurora made argument about Paul. He wanted to know why she said that. He asked her about it. She replied, “First of all don’t use

the term ‘Oriental’. I am not a rug. I am Asian or Asian-American. You wouldn’t call African Americans Negroes anymore” (148). Aurora became angry when she was called oriental. She feels the term insulting. Here one can easily notice that Asians are quite aware about their status in American society. Aurora represents the modern changing and progressive American culture and thoughts. On the other hand she is conscious about the social status of the Asians and Chinese in American society when she aptly says, “Don’t use the term ‘Oriental’. You wouldn’t call African Americans Negroes anymore”. In the modern American society everyone has social status and bondage of their own race and ethnicity. But one cannot make it a public issue. But one cannot say that there are no racial issues in the American society.

Though the women are getting married out of the race in the modern American life, Woodrow’s desire to marry a Chinese girl is a contrast against the background of these women. He still wants to marry a Chinese girl that indicates his sense of otherness in the society. But Raymond is selfish in this regard. The following conversation between Raymond and Aurora throws some light on Raymond’s racist nature. Both of them are discussing on Raymond’s father’s marriage with a Chinese girl. Aurora thinks that Wood has his life to live and getting married will be comfortable for him. The woman gets an opportunity for a new life too, and for that she will be grateful to his father. She will take care of him also. Raymond replies, She will bring her whole family over the first chance she gets, take him to the cleanness, and say Good-Bye, sucker”.



Aurora feels that is a selfish attitude, and it might even be racist. Raymond answers, "Racist! Selfish! I'm watching out for him". She says, "You're watching out for yourself!" (201)

Though it is a domestic matter of Raymond, he is quite conscious about race and tries to save his fortune by rejecting, though not openly, his father's marriage to a Chinese girl. The matter of race is not only related to his house but to his public life also.

Asians are always conscious of their behavior in the society. They are not natives of America. Their sense of 'otherness' obviously let them hesitate in the company of Americans. This hesitation allows them to respect the Natives. In this sense they are always careful of being polite in public places. When Jimmy and Raymond, in a restaurant, were looking if there were any empty seats nearby next to a pair with a more manageable colour combination of their skin, "Exactly" Raymond sighed, "Except we move to another seat to keep everyone from feeling ashamed, guilty or defensive" Raymond added (91). Jimmy and Raymond are race conscious but they are not racists as Native Americans are. They take care for others and keep themselves away to let the natives maintain their dignity.

Raymond wants to become an American not because he feels ashamed of being an Asian or Chinese but because his being a Chinese has become the root cause of his humiliation in the new land. His identity as a Chinese or an Asian among the Native

Americans is discriminating. This racial discrimination is humiliating not only for Raymond but for any Asian who lives either in America or in his own Asian homeland.

Conclusion:

Thus, the novel *American Knees* throws ample light on characters' awareness of Race and ethnicity and its influence on their personal as well as social life that makes them to remember their own racial and ethnic origin and their homeland and ancestors. They have a constant sense of otherness in the host nation. Further, it is seen that the ill treatment is given to Chinese Americans on account of race and ethnicity. They also face humiliation in many situations in their life. Feeling of racial and ethnic discrimination always remains in their heart.

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